

Cate Kensie Mysteries



COMPLETE SERIES
BOXED SET

NELLIE H. STEELE

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Reckoning at Punhaven Castle

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Trouble at Punhaven Castle

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CATE KENSIE MYSTERIES



NELLIE H. STEELE



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THE SECRET OF DUNHAVEN CASTLE



A CATE KENSIE MYSTERY

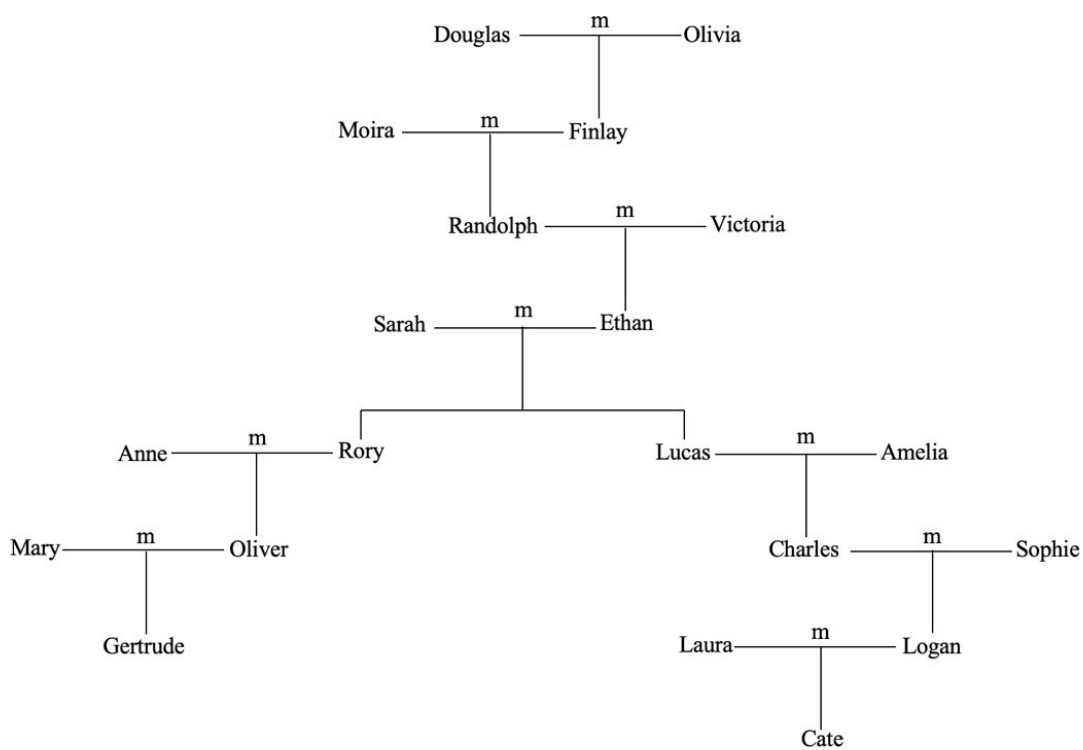
*For my mom, Stephanie
Happy Birthday!*

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Finally, a HUGE thank you to you, the reader!

MacKenzie Family Tree



CHAPTER 1



The white envelope Dr. Catherine Kensie held in her hand had the power to change her life. She ran her fingers across the smooth surface as her heart skipped a beat. She considered tearing it open to discover if the contents would save her or sink her.

The department secretary's cheery voice interrupted her rumination. "Hey, honey."

She sidled next to Cate and shoved a few pieces of mail into various professors' boxes. Her gaze lowered to the envelope in Cate's hands. "I saw that come in earlier. I was hoping you'd pick it up before you left today."

Cate stared at it again, wondering about the contents. She waved it in the air before stuffing it into the front pocket of her tote bag. She took a step toward the door. "Got it."

"You're not going to open it?" Molly asked, spinning to face her.

"Later. With Riley," she said with a tentative smile. "Right now, I've got to get to my class."

Molly waved her hand in the air. "They'll wait."

Cate chuckled as she spun and backed through the door. "On a Friday afternoon? Doubt it."

"You're right. You'd better get there before they all sneak out. Have a great weekend!"

"You too," Cate called over her shoulder as she darted toward the stairs and descended to the first floor and pushed into the waning warmth of the spring day.

The dark clouds gave way to bright sun and she squinted against it as she fumbled in her bag for her sunglasses and slid them on.

A rogue breeze rustled the newly grown leaves on the trees, splattering the remnants of the rain from them onto the sidewalks below and blowing her long brown hair across her porcelain skin. She whipped it into a makeshift bun, securing it with a hair tie from her wrist.

She shoved her hands into the back pockets of her jeans as she strolled past the neatly manicured lawn and tan buildings surrounding it.

The contents of the envelope peeking from her bag's pocket flitted through her mind followed by the dwindling funds in her bank account. With any luck, it held the answers to all her problems.

She'd find out after her class. Until then, she had a lecture that demanded her attention. She pushed through the doors into the half-empty stadium-style lecture hall and trotted down the stairs.

"Who's ready to learn about Paul Revere?"

Met with less than enthusiastic responses, Cate plowed through her lecture, ending in the fun tidbit that Paul Revere never shouted "The British are coming" during his famous ride. The students remained less than thrilled until she announced they'd stop there. The melee of twenty-somethings shoving notebooks into backpacks and scrambling for the exit drowned out any further announcements.

She sucked in a breath and shook her head as she packed her notes in her bag and left the lecture hall and campus behind for the week.

As she pulled from the parking lot with her muffler rattling, she wondered if she'd soon be leaving the campus behind forever or making Aberdeen her home.

The white envelope poking from the black bag caught her attention. Her heart pounded again and her palms turned sweaty as she considered opening it.

Thunder rumbled overhead, and she tore her eyes away from it, ducking to stare up at the black clouds gathering on the horizon as the next storm pushed into town.

She stomped on the accelerator, speeding down the tree-lined street past the picturesque homes to the nondescript block of a building she called home. "I'd better hurry so I have time to walk Riley."

She slid the car into a parking space, grabbed her bag and hurried into the building past the out-of-order elevator to the stairway to hike to her

third-floor apartment.

Her ten-pound teddy bear dog, Riley, met her as she pushed into the apartment. His feather-like tail waved in the air. She dropped her bag and scooped him into her arms, giving him a kiss on the top of his head. “I missed you too, buddy. We’d better hurry, it’s getting pretty dark out there.”

The little dog offered her a lick on the cheek as she retrieved his harness and leash from the hook near the door. She slid his gear on, grabbed her keys, and stepped into the hall.

The angry rumble of thunder overhead quickened her steps down to the tiny patch of grass outside. Wind gusted past her, ripping her hair from the awkward bun and blowing Riley’s floppy ears inside out.

She tugged her blazer around her, shivering against the sudden chill in the air. She hoped the sudden turn in weather wasn’t a harbinger of bad things to come. The letter burning a hole through her bag upstairs snuck into her mind.

She slicked a wayward lock of hair behind her ear and crossed her arms against the cold. “I got a letter from the dean, bud. Hurry up so we can read it.”

Riley glanced at her before he returned to sniffing the grass.

“Come on, Riley, there’s not much more to sniff,” she said as lightning lit the ever-darkening sky and thunder boomed again. Riley let out a grumble as he eyed the clouds before he trotted back to Cate and planted his front feet against her leg.

She lifted him up and carried him to the building. “If we get good news, I’ll buy you a house with a yard, okay?”

The dog’s dark, almond-shaped eyes sparkled up at her as she climbed the stairs again. A deserted hallway met her when she pulled open the metal door to the third floor. Her rumbling stomach pushed her to hurry despite her exhaustion from the day.

The clicking of an unlocking door echoed in the hall and before she could reach her apartment, the door diagonal from her place popped open.

Cate smiled at the gray-haired woman as she passed, hoping to escape a conversation. She couldn’t.

“Katie, oh, Katie, just the person I wanted to run into!” the woman said with a wave of her hand. Her eyes lowered to the dog in Cate’s arms and the fake smile she’d plastered on faded. “Oh, and Wiley.”

“Riley,” Cate corrected, resisting the urge to also correct her on her own name. “How are you, Mrs. Kline?”

“Oh, fine, fine. Better than him.” She poked a finger at Riley. “He barked all day long. I nearly called the police.”

Cate bit her tongue as she offered a silent prayer that she’d soon be able to move. “Sometimes he likes to bark at his toys.”

“Oh, no, dear, no. This isn’t playful barking. He’s upset. Probably frustrated being left alone all day long. You leave so early and get back so late.”

Cate kept the smile glued on her face. “Unfortunately, I don’t have much say over my schedule.”

Mrs. Kline wagged a finger at her. “Oh, now, I’m very good friends with Dr. Longmire, and he *never* had a schedule like yours.”

“Well, he was a tenured professor, so he had his selection of courses.”

“Oh, that’s right,” the woman answered with a dismissive wave of her hand, “I always forget that you’re not a real professor.”

Cate huffed out a laugh as her irritation built. “Not tenured.”

“Or tenure-tracked,” Mrs. Kline added with a derisive smile.

“That’s right.” Cate’s mind flitted to the letter in her bag. *Not yet, anyway.* “Well, I’d better be going.”

Mrs. Kline clamped a hand onto Cate’s arm. “Oh, before you go, dear...”

Cate held back a sigh.

Mrs. Kline pressed her lips together in a polite smile. “I was wondering if I could trouble you for twenty dollars. It’s just until my daughter can get to the ATM for me. I’ve run out of cash. I’ll get it back to you just as soon as she can replenish my slush fund.”

“Ah,” Cate murmured as she considered it, “I’m not...” She flicked her gaze to the woman’s face. She’d never see the money again if she gave it to her. But the woman’s daughter rarely visited her.

Cate pressed her lips together in a thin line before she nodded. “I’m not carrying cash on me, but if you’ll give me a second, I’ll grab my purse.”

She tugged her arm from the woman’s grip and stepped toward her apartment. Mrs. Kline followed her across the hall, lingering at the door as Cate unlocked it and stepped inside.

She rummaged through her bag for her wallet and pulled it open, studying the few bills inside. She grabbed two out and passed them over to

the woman.

“Here you go, Mrs. Kline. Why don’t you take forty dollars just in case your daughter doesn’t come by soon?”

“Oh, oh no, dear. I wouldn’t want to short you, but... well, I mean if you are offering.” She pulled both bills from Cate’s hand, then added, “You know I’m good for it.”

“Of course, I know you are.”

“Well, I’d better let you go. Have a good night.” Mrs. Kline disappeared into her apartment before Cate could answer.

Cate swung the door shut and flicked the lock. As she stooped to return her wallet to her bag, she spotted the envelope. Her heart skipped a beat again. Maybe soon she could escape her tiny apartment and settle into a real home.

Home. She frowned, wondering if anywhere would feel like home again. The vision of two headstones stormed across her mind. She worked to shove it away, replacing it with the image of a cute cottage with a white picket fence surrounding a spacious yard.

Riley’s cold, wet nose nudging her cheek pulled her from her daydream. “You’re right. We’ll read this after we eat.”

Cate dropped the envelope onto the entry table and stepped into her kitchen. After settling a bowl of kibble in front of her tiny pal, she pulled open the refrigerator door. Her lips puckered as she stared at the almost empty wire racks inside.

She straightened and pushed the door closed. “I should have gone to the store. Although, my bank account disagrees.”

Rising to her tiptoes, she grabbed a bowl from the cupboard and fished a box of cereal from her corner cupboard. After adding a splash of milk, she settled at the table with her meager meal.

Riley planted his feet against her leg as she chased the last few marshmallows around with her spoon.

She traced the white strip of fur stretching from his nose to the top of his head. “Okay, buddy, let’s find out if we’re moving or not.”

After washing the bowl, she forced herself to grab the letter and settle on the couch with Riley next to her. Her pulse quickened as she stared at the simple, white envelope. Her stomach leapt into her throat. Until she opened it, her fate remained a mystery. Hope remained. Once she read the words, though, the outcome was fixed.

She had to know. With a deep inhale, she flipped the envelope over and slid her finger under the flap until it popped open. Her hands shook as she pulled the letter out, unfolded it, and scanned it.

Her shoulders slumped, as did her heart, as she spotted the words “unfortunately,” “sorry,” and “regret.” She let the letter fall onto the coffee table as she sank her head into her hands. After a moment, she retrieved the letter and gave it a thorough read.

Dr. Kensie,

The dean’s office has received your request to change your current position of instructor to a tenure-tracked position along with the positive result of the department vote to retain you as permanent faculty. Unfortunately, we regret to inform you that this is not possible at this time.

We are sorry that we cannot accommodate your request and acknowledge and appreciate your work for Aberdeen College. We encourage you to continue your hard work and apply at a later date.

It was signed by the dean of the college—or rather, as she took a closer look, the signature had been stamped by her secretary.

Cate exhaled again, tears welling in her eyes. She tossed the letter down on the coffee table and reached over to stroke Riley’s fur. He gazed at her quizzically with dark eyes.

“Sorry, buddy. No house just yet.”

She fell backward into the flat couch cushions with a disgusted sigh and rubbed at the ache building in her temples. If her temporary contract wasn’t renewed soon, she’d need to find another way to earn money and fast. Despite what her department chair told her, obviously a tenure-track position was not in the cards for her at Aberdeen. She hoped at least a few summer courses were or she’d soon not have an apartment in which she could escape from the world.

Needing a distraction, she flipped on the television, settling on reruns of a sitcom.

She absentmindedly stroked the fur down Riley’s back. It soothed her as much as it soothed him. “We’ll figure something out, Riley.”

Her tired eyes started to close after a few episodes. She snapped her head up and glanced at the clock. "Close enough to bedtime for me. Let's call it a night, Riley."

The little dog roused next to her, stretching his chin up before he kicked his back legs out and opened his mouth in a wide yawn.

"Tired, buddy? Me too. And a little depressed. Maybe the fresh air will help. Come on, one last walk before bed."

Riley followed her to the front door where she slid on his harness before pulling the door open. A tall man loomed in the hall, his shadow darkening her doorstep.

Cate bounced back a step, stifling a scream.

CHAPTER 2



Riley issued a sharp bark at the stranger as Cate stumbled back a step. Her heart hammered against her ribs and her pulse raced.

She sucked in a steadying breath, swallowed hard, and forced out an apology after hushing Riley. “Oh my gosh. I’m so sorry, I didn’t see you there!”

“Not a problem.” The tall man’s posture straightened, if that was possible, and he lifted his chin, his thin lips forming a frown that didn’t match the words coming from his mouth. He stared down his aquiline nose at Cate and Riley as he smoothed out his well-tailored, black suit. “Dr. Catherine Kensie, I presume?”

Cate’s brow furrowed as she noted his British accent, and she nodded at his question. “Yeah, I’m Cate, eh, Catherine. Yes, I’m Dr. Kensie.” She scooped Riley from the floor where he continued to bark, shushing him again.

The wrinkles around the man’s mouth deepened as he studied the small pup, waiting for him to cease his yipping before he spoke. “Please allow me to introduce myself. My name is William H. Smythe, Esquire. I am an attorney with Smythe, Smith, and Smithton, LLC in London. As I stated in the letter I sent announcing my arrival, I represent the estate of Lady Gertrude MacKenzie.” He removed a business card from a well-polished silver card holder he’d dug from his pocket and passed it to Cate.

She accepted the proffered card, giving it a cursory glance as her mind attempted to piece together the situation.

“London? You’re a little far from home, aren’t you?” She chuckled, grinning at him. Her smile quickly faded as the expression on his face never changed. She licked her lips before continuing. “I’m sorry to say, I never received a letter from you.”

That statement garnered a reaction, albeit slight. The man’s eyebrows flicked upward before settling to their normal position, and his jaw clenched ever so slightly.

“My apologies if you did not receive the letter. We sent it to your business address as your personal address took a bit longer to track down. But since Lady MacKenzie insisted the matter be dealt with in a timely fashion, I took every step possible to contact you.

“I apologize for the lateness of the hour, but my flight was delayed. Given my plans to depart early tomorrow morning, I had little choice but to come to your residence.”

Cate stared blankly at the man, still unable to fathom the purpose of his visit. He returned her gaze, adding more when she failed to answer him. “As I said, I am here representing the estate of Lady Gertrude MacKenzie. May I come in to speak with you about the details in a more private setting?” He motioned to the interior of the apartment as his eyes darted around the hall.

Cate scratched her head and glanced at his card again, still clutching it in the hand that held Riley. “I’m really sorry, Mr. Smythe, but I don’t know anyone named Gertrude MacKenzie—or anyone from London, for that matter. I can’t imagine what this has to do with me.”

Riley offered another protective growl, baring his tiny teeth at the man.

“Actually, Lady MacKenzie was from Scotland. I am from London. As I’ve already stated, Dr. Kensie, this concerns Lady MacKenzie’s last will and testament. I would prefer to discuss any additional details in private.” He offered another suspicious stare around the hallway.

Down the hall, a door clicked closed quietly. Cate shot a glance toward Mrs. Kline’s apartment, recalling her “chance” encounter with the woman earlier. She narrowed her eyes at the door, imagining the woman with a glass pressed against the wood.

“Oh, umm, sure, though I don’t know of any Lady MacKenzie’s from Scotland, either. I’m still not certain what this has to do with me. Oh, or did you have a history-related question? I’ve done some consulting in the past

and am happy to help with that, if that's the nature of your question." Cate slicked a lock of hair behind her ear as she babbled nervously.

The man tapped his foot impatiently on the tattered hall rug. "Dr. Kensie, please, if you wouldn't mind, I would prefer that we discuss the business in private." He motioned again into the apartment as he glanced around the hallway.

Cate shook her head, tucking another strand of hair behind her ear and stepped aside from the door. "Oh right, yes, come in, please. Sorry, I didn't mean to keep you waiting in the hall."

She waved him inside before glancing into the hallway as she shut her door to any prying eyes. She expected Mrs. Kline would now create a fantastic tale about why Cate invited a strange man into her apartment on a Friday evening. Riley gave another protective growl as the man crossed the threshold, and Cate shushed him again.

She tilted her head toward the living room to their right. "We can head in here."

She led him into the cramped space, motioning to the couch and armchair. "Please make yourself comfortable."

Mr. Smythe lowered himself onto the worn cushion, teetering on the edge as though he hated to touch it.

Cate sank into the adjacent armchair and placed Riley on her lap. "Can you tell me what this is about now, Mr. Smythe?"

He removed several folders and a small plastic bag from his well-polished briefcase and set them on the marred coffee table.

"As I said earlier, my firm and I represent the interests of Lady Gertrude MacKenzie of Dunhaven, Scotland. Specifically, I am the executor of the late Lady MacKenzie's will."

"Yes, you mentioned that, and I still have no context for your visit. I'm not acquainted with anyone by that name. Unless you'd like a consult, I have no idea why you are here."

Mr. Smythe shuffled through the folders, tugging one from the pile. "Immediately following the death of Lady MacKenzie, I was to track down her closest living relative in order to execute the instructions within her last will and testament."

Cate's eyes darted around the room in search of more information. "O-Okay."

The man fluttered his eyelashes as though annoyed with her. “You are Lady MacKenzie’s closest living relative and, therefore, her heir.”

An amused grin crossed Cate’s lips, and she sputtered a chuckle. “What? You must be joking. No, I think you may have made a mistake. I don’t... I don’t think I have any relatives, or at least none in Scotland.”

Cate’s mind whirled at the so-called revelation. It couldn’t be real.

Mr. Smythe’s face settled into his perpetual scowl. “I’m quite certain no mistake has been made, Dr. Kensie. We will, of course, verify your identity with a DNA sample, but I am confident that will be a mere formality.

“Subject to the DNA verification, you will inherit the bulk of Lady MacKenzie’s estate, which includes her title, Dunhaven Castle, the grounds on which it resides, its contents, a sizable sum of money to maintain the estate, and one gold timepiece. One of the stipulations of the inheritance is that you must live at the estate on a permanent basis, and it is not to be sold.”

Cate’s lower lip bobbed up and down, but no sound emerged. She tried to make sense of it, but her head spun. This must be a mistake. She had no aunts or uncles, cousins, or grandparents. She didn’t have any relatives, and certainly none in Scotland.

“Uh, um, uh,” she stammered. “Castle? Is this a joke? Am I on camera?” She glanced around the room, half expecting to see someone filming this for a reality television show.

“I can assure you this is no joke,” Mr. Smythe replied, his face straight.

Cate eyed him. He didn’t look like he was joking. In fact, the man didn’t seem capable of humor.

She swallowed hard, trying to collect her thoughts. “O-okay, so, this Lady MacKenzie. She was a relative—*my* relative—and she left *me* everything she owns?”

“Outside of a few odds and ends, yes. She was a distant relative, an only child, and she never married nor had any children. You were identified as her closest living relative, to whom the bulk of the estate along with her title was left—pending a DNA verification, as I’ve already said.

“The details,” he continued matter-of-factly, “are all here in this folder, along with information about the estate and pictures for you to review.”

He flicked open the folder and produced a few photographs. “As you can see, the property is in excellent condition and has been quite well maintained.”

He shuffled through to grab another piece of paper. “Additionally, the current estimated sum is large enough to continue to maintain the estate with ease for several generations.” He pointed discreetly to a large number marked near the bottom of the page.

Cate’s eyes widened and her chin dropped to her chest.

“Is that dollars?” she said, shock lacing her voice. The number of zeroes on the estimated amount seemed sufficient to support more than a few generations in Cate’s estimation.

“No,” he said stiffly. “It’s in pounds.”

Cate winced at her own stupidity and she slid her eyes closed as her cheeks blazed with embarrassment. “Oh, right.”

Mr. Smythe rambled on with more details. “Along with the property, you’ll inherit the title carried with the estate, Countess of Dunhavenshire. And, lastly, the gold timepiece, which can only be imparted to you directly from me once your DNA has been verified. If you wouldn’t mind, I would like to collect the sample and leave you to enjoy the remainder of your evening.”

He fished a sealed cotton swab from within the plastic bag.

Cate’s forehead crinkled again, and she waved her hand in the air to stop him. “Wait, wait, wait just a second. How do I know you are legitimate and not going to use my DNA for, well, something else?”

He set his jaw, his eyebrows raising at her in an unimpressed stare. “I’m not in the habit of collecting DNA samples from nearly unemployed history professors.”

“How did you—” she began before being cut off by Mr. Smythe.

He motioned to the letter on the table. “The letter. My apologies your request didn’t work out the way you hoped, but if you wouldn’t mind, I would like to finish my job and retire for the evening.”

Thoughts spilled directly from Cate’s brain to her lips, coming out in a jumble. “Oh, sorry. I don’t mean to make this harder than it needs to be, but I just don’t... I can’t... Well, to be quite honest, Mr. Smythe, I’m in shock. I’ve never even heard of Dunhaven. No one has ever mentioned relatives in Scotland, certainly not relatives with a castle. I’m stunned that this woman left her entire estate to me.”

“While I can understand your surprise,” he said, sounding as though he’d never been surprised in his life, “I can assure you my only intention is to execute the last will and testament as specified by Lady MacKenzie. That

execution has led me to you after a lead from Lady MacKenzie herself and an extensive investigation into the MacKenzie lineage. Of course, a DNA test will confirm easily that which we already believe to be true. If you will allow me to collect the sample, I can be on my way.”

Cate pursed her lips as she parsed through his statement. A lead from Lady MacKenzie herself? How did the woman know about Cate’s existence when Cate had never known of hers? She flicked her gaze up, meeting the impatient stare of Mr. Smythe.

“Oh, right, sure, yes, of course. Gee, you must be working overtime on triple rate to collect this on a Friday night as it is.” She offered a nervous chuckle, hoping the humor eased the tension.

He ignored it again, tearing open the package containing the swab, handing it to her, and instructing her to swab the inside of her cheek. Cate handed it back, and he deposited it into a plastic vial before slipping the vial into the plastic bag. He stowed it in his briefcase and snapped it shut.

“So, I can’t get the watch of all things before my DNA is verified. That’s funny.” She chuckled at her own joke.

He gave her a stern look. “It was quite an important item to Lady MacKenzie and comes with careful stipulations to be given only to her closest living relative. So, no, you cannot.”

She pinched her lips together. This guy really had no sense of humor at all. “Of course, sorry,” she answered, feeling heat rising in her cheeks again.

She rose to her feet as he stood, setting Riley on the chair behind her.

“The DNA results should be returned within two weeks. Once verified, I will contact you again to discuss the details and finalize paperwork. Should you need to contact me, I am staying at the Marriott in Rosemont tonight and will be back in the office on Monday. You have my card with all my numbers and my email.” He thrust out his hand.

She slid her hand around his, shaking it slowly. “Okay, well, thank you, I think. And you’ll let me know either way?”

“Yes, good day.”

“Right, good day—or night, or whatever.”

She walked him to the door and closed it behind him. In a daze, she returned to the living room and sank onto the couch. Riley stared at her, cocking his head with curiosity from his perch on the armchair.

She blew out a long breath as she stared at the splay of folders still on her coffee table. “Riley, what in the world is this about? How could we possibly be inheriting a castle? It looks like we may have a bit of a mystery on our hands.”

CHAPTER 3



The image of the sprawling gothic castle stared back at her from the top of the stack in the manila folder. Cate shuffled through the papers a second time, still unable to solve the mystery of her late night visitor.

She didn't have leads. With no family to contact, tracking down information about relatives would prove difficult.

A small body moved next to her, stretching and climbing onto her shoulder to lick her cheek as she lay on her side.

"Good morning, buddy," she said with a chuckle, flicking the folder closed before she ruffled the fur on his head and kissed him.

With a yawn and a stretch, Cate rose from her bed as the sun glinted through the window.

As she tugged on her clothes after her morning shower, the conversation from the previous evening snaked through her mind.

After pulling her still damp hair into a bun, she stepped into her small closet. Light burst in the square space as she pulled the chain dangling from the bare bulb.

Cate stared at the shelf above her, shoving shoe boxes aside until a plain cardboard box appeared. She teetered on her tiptoes, inching it toward her until it nearly toppled off the shelf.

She held it at bay, but a few items toppled over to the floor. With her fingers stretched to the max and her muscles straining, she pulled the box down and set it on the floor next to the wayward contents.

She stared down at one of them, tears welling in her eyes. The grief hit her like a brick as she stared at the three smiling faces in the picture. Unwanted visions flickered in her mind, and she dropped to her knees as sadness swept through her.

A tear spilled to her cheek, and she flicked it away before it marred the photo she retrieved from the floor.

Riley wandered into the small space and climbed up to offer her a lick on the cheek. Cate shoved the emotions aside as she dumped the photo back into the box along with the other two items that had toppled to the floor.

"I'm ready to go to the park, too, buddy." She hefted the box into her arms and dumped it in the living room before she grabbed Riley's leash and harness and his favorite blue ball. With the small pup in her arms, she headed down to her car and aimed for the park by the pond.

Cate pulled into a space in the parking lot, glancing at the fiery ball rising higher into the sky. The bright sun, not obscured by clouds, promised to provide pleasant weather for this visit.

Riley leapt to the window, his tail waving back and forth as he spotted the familiar sight.

"Excited for another Saturday at the park, buddy?" Cate asked as she slipped off her seat belt.

Riley's dark almond-shaped eyes darted around, eyeing people, birds, and other dogs, and a small whine rose from his throat.

Cate scooped him up and slid from behind the wheel, carrying him to the gravel pathway leading to the large pond in the center of the park and setting him down.

With his nose glued to the ground, Riley led her down the path at a steady clip. Cate smiled down at the small dog's enthusiasm for exploring before she flicked her eyes to the scenery around her.

In the distance, the picturesque campus of Aberdeen College rose tall on the hill, augmenting the beauty of the pond and its landscaping. Today, though, it brought Cate consternation as she studied the neoclassical buildings.

The letter she received yesterday danced across her mind, and she flicked her gaze away from the campus. Her thoughts turned to the box she'd fished from the top of her closet this morning. It dampened her mood even more.

Riley's tiny feet on her leg interrupted her thoughts. He stared up at her expectantly. Despite the tears in her eyes, her lips curled into an amused grin. "Yes, I brought it."

She pulled the small blue ball from her pocket and waved it in the air. Riley danced on his hind legs, daring her to throw it.

"Ready?"

Riley responded with a small yip, and she tossed the ball into the distance. The dog bounded after it as Cate sniffled and tried to force the terrible memory of her parents' death from her mind.

As he dropped the ball at her feet and nudged it toward her, a tear escaped from the corner of her eye. She licked her lips and retrieved the ball before giving it another toss.

Memories of the phone call that had interrupted her sleep shoved into her consciousness, the shrill jangling cutting into a pleasant dream about her first day as an adjunct professor at Aberdeen College.

She'd groggily answered it, struggling to force herself awake as an unfamiliar female voice asked for Catherine Kensie.

"I'm Cate," she'd answered, her brow furrowing as she clutched at her covers. Her heart had dropped as the woman explained her affiliation with a local hospital. Her parents had been involved in a car accident. Another vehicle had smashed into theirs. It was bad. She should come right away.

She'd hastily dressed and driven to the hospital where she'd sat alone in the waiting room, wringing her hands until they were red and raw. The doctor, still in his surgical scrubs, pressed his lips together in a thin line as he sank into the chair across from her. He didn't need to speak, she'd known in an instant.

What she hadn't expected was to lose them both at the same time. Neither had made it through the life-saving surgeries they'd attempted. Both had died on the table, despite the doctors' best efforts.

She barely recalled most of the whirlwind of events that followed when she'd buried them both. She only remembered she'd hated Aberdeen from that moment forward.

Her gaze floated up to buildings of Aberdeen College rising across the pond. And now she had another reason to dislike it.

Her mind returned to the negative news she'd received yesterday as Riley collapsed in a heap at her feet. Cate settled onto the lawn next to him, giving his head a pat.

The small dog settled his chin on his front paws with a big sigh.

"That's how I feel, too," she said. "I wonder if I'll inherit that castle. If not, I don't know how much longer I can pay the bills here."

Riley glanced up at her, rolling onto his back so she could scratch his belly.

"Although, I'm sure they'll give me at least one class. Right?"

Her chirping phone pulled her attention from her rumination. She tugged it from the pocket of her leggings and toggled on the display.

A new message from her department chair, Dr. Jeffrey Goldstone, awaited her. *Hey Cate. We need to talk. It's not good.*

Cate's heart sank at the words. Maybe he was only referring to her tenure-track denial, but she had a bad feeling the news was worse.

Her thumbs hovered over the virtual keyboard before she switched off the display and shoved the phone in her pocket, deciding to answer the message later. With her mood soured, she climbed to her feet and snapped the leash onto Riley's harness.

"Come on, buddy, let's finish our walk."

They completed their loop around the pond and stopped at a roadside stand for lunch. She lingered at the shaded picnic table while Riley polished off his doggie ice cream, avoiding any obligations.

As much as she wanted to know about any connection to Dunhaven Castle, she did not want to paw through her parents' things. Nor did she want to deal with Jeff.

But she had to, she surmised as she wiped her fingers on the thin paper napkin and shoved it into her nacho tray. After collecting the trash and tossing it, she gathered Riley and returned to her car for the short trip home.

With a tuckered out Riley nestled in his favorite blanket on the couch, Cate settled in next to him. She stared at the text message from Jeff as she typed and erased a dozen different messages, finally settling on: *Sure thing. Did you need to speak with me right away? I'm available anytime this evening or tomorrow.*

She set the phone aside and pulled the box on the table closer. Did her parents know about Dunhaven Castle?

If she was truly related to someone who owned a castle, why had it never been mentioned? Perhaps it would have been had they lived longer. She dug into the box, checking her mother's jewelry box and her father's wallet. No links to Scotland or Scottish relatives were present in either.

She tugged a thick photo album from the bottom and slouched further down on the couch cushions to page through it. She scoured the images for people she couldn't identify or foreign locations. Nothing gave her any insight. Perhaps there was nothing to find, and the entire incident had been a mistake.

She tossed the items back into the cardboard container and returned it to its position on her shelf.

As she settled on the couch with a bowl of cereal, the indicator light on her phone blinked. She grabbed it, balancing the bowl on one knee as she swiped the phone open. A message from Jeff awaited her: *Nah, it can wait 'til Monday, kiddo. Enjoy your weekend!*

Annoyance crept through her and she tossed the phone unceremoniously onto the couch beside her before returning to her now-soggy cereal. Had he only intended to ruin her weekend? Or was the news worse than he was willing to share via text?

She hemmed and hawed for another five minutes over a response before she finally sent a message back: *Okay, see you Monday. Can you give me a hint at least?*

She pulled her laptop onto her lap, intent on searching for jobs as her mind filled in the blanks about Jeff's message. Budget cuts, declining enrollment, not enough classes, or some new excuse would be used for why she wasn't getting another contract.

The reason didn't matter, though, only that she'd be out of a job. And she'd have to figure out what to do about that sooner rather than later.

When her alarm screamed through the still-dark morning on Monday, she met the day with little enthusiasm. The morning rain shower didn't help her mood. She slogged through her early morning lecture on the Elizabethan era before heading to her office. A quick check of the still-empty department office confirmed that Jeff wasn't in yet for the day.

She climbed up the stairs and pushed into her small office. After plopping into the uncomfortable desk chair, she tapped at her mouse to awaken the desktop. With a glance at the reports from her U.S. History course, she turned her attention to the bright screen and clicked in the browser's search bar.

She typed "Dunhaven Castle" and sent the web crawler off on its mission. The results page populated, and she clicked on the first result. A quick scan of the few paragraphs gave her little more information than she

already possessed. The castle sat on the hill overlooking the small Highlands town of Dunhaven. Built in the late 1700s, it dominated the town's landscape ever since, remaining the largest estate in the county.

Cate stared at the now familiar picture of the estate for a moment, imagining herself roaming the halls. Could she live there? Would she move if she turned out to be the heir?

She glanced around the tiny office at the crammed bookshelves and the overflowing file cabinet, recalling the three times she'd applied to be a permanent member of the department. She'd been denied every time despite being an active faculty member.

She flicked her gaze back to the image on her screen. Maybe a move would be worth it.

She clicked back to the search results and scrolled through the page. She stopped, the pointer hovering over another result as her brow furrowed. She leaned closer to the screen before she clicked on the link.

Her browser redirected her to the sales page for a book entitled *The Mysteries of Scotland: Hauntings and Specters*.

She clicked to scan the table of contents. Her heart skipped a beat as she spotted the fifth entry. *Dunhaven Castle*.

Was the castle she may inherit haunted?

Cate scrolled through the book's preview, finding it cut off halfway through an entry about Blackmoore Castle. She wrinkled her nose as she opened a new tab and started to type another search.

A knock at her door interrupted her. She continued to type as she shouted, "Come in!"

"Got a minute?" a voice asked in a slow, southern drawl.

Heat prickled through her as she recognized Jeff's voice. Her mind snapped to the ominous weekend text message. She glanced over to find him leaning against the doorjamb in his rumpled tan suit. His dark brown eyes bore into her.

"Jeff, oh, yeah, sure, I was just entering some grades. Come on in. I didn't know you were in the office yet, or I'd have come down."

He strolled into the office, his hands shoved into his pants pockets and took a seat across from her desk. "No problem, I could use the exercise. How have you been?"

Cate minimized her search bar before she set her clasped hands on the desk. "A little on edge after your message Saturday and my letter Friday."

“Sorry if I alarmed you. Administration isn’t being very cooperative about getting you on the schedule for summer.”

Cate sucked in a breath and nodded her head. “That’s what I thought.”

“Here’s the thing, I don’t have a definite answer on anything yet. But as of right now, I don’t have you on the schedule either. I feel like I have to tell you that since we’re two weeks away from the summer semester starting.”

“Thanks, Jeff, I appreciate the heads up. Are there any classes that aren’t covered so far?”

“Oh, yeah, we have a few. They’re still making final decisions.”

Hope rose in Cate’s heart. Perhaps they’d at least have one or two to tide her over during the summer. No word on the fall semester yet, but she’d cross that bridge later.

Jeff set his ankle on his knee, wiggling his foot in the air. “Hey, I have a question for you.”

Cate flicked her gaze up to him, sliding her tightly clasped hands under the desk. “Sure.”

“We have an event coming up Saturday after next, and I need someone to cover it. There is nobody better than you, Cate. You’re a great representative for the department. You up for it?”

Cate’s forehead crinkled as she considered the request. Was there no one better than her, or hadn’t anyone else volunteered? The department considered her a great representative, yet they couldn’t offer her classes to teach or a permanent position.

Indignation bubbled in her as she wondered who would cover these events if she no longer worked there. Her dwindling bank account stopped her from declining on principle alone.

She forced a smile on her face and said, “Let me look at my calendar and get back to you.”

Jeff toyed with the tassel on his shoe, flicking his eyebrows up. “Sure. Just let me know. Like I said, we’d love to have you represent us. And I know it would go a long way in administration’s eyes with those final negotiations I’m making.”

Cate bit in the inside of her lower lip as she forced her expression to remain neutral. Would it really? She’d covered three of these earlier this semester, and they didn’t make a difference when it came to her recent tenure-track position denial.

Cate's eyebrows danced up and down for a moment as she sighed, struggling to keep her composure. "Will it? I assume you saw the letter from the dean about my tenure-tracked position request?"

"Yeah, I saw that. Tough break, kiddo. I was behind you all the way. I don't know what they were thinking. Anyway, I hope to get you something in the summer and then the fall, and you can put your request in again."

"Yeah, thanks, Jeff. I appreciate that."

He offered her a smarmy smile as he rose from the chair, flattening his tie against his tan shirt. "Hey, no problem. Let me know about this Saturday as soon as you can, okay?" He rapped his knuckles on her door jamb before he disappeared down the hall.

The polite smile faded from Cate's features, replaced by a frown. She gritted her teeth as she rose and stalked to her door, slamming it shut. She let her head fall back against it and balled her hands into fists.

She slogged back to her desk and slumped into the chair. Frustration filled her as she drummed her fingers against her thigh, pondering what to do about Jeff's most recent request.

A chime drew her attention back to her computer. She stared at the red notification indicating a new email before she clicked to open it.

Her heart sank as she read the message, welcoming a new faculty member to the campus. The message extolled the virtues of long-time adjunct, Dr. Mark Pendleton, lauding him for his contributions of teaching two courses per semester for two years and hosting a "meet the mummy" night in which he screened the movie, *The Mummy*, for undergraduates following a lecture about the film. While he remained unpublished in his field, the administration was enthusiastic that he'd publish his first scholarly article while serving at Aberdeen College.

The final line noted he joined an "already full-staffed department," but that administration would be announcing newly created classes to fill his schedule.

Cate's features settled into an unimpressed stare as she realized she'd been passed over for another faculty member with less experience in a department with less need for faculty. Her denial had nothing to do with budget cuts.

She pounded a fist onto the desk, arriving in an instant at her decision not to participate in Saturday's event. The stubborn decision may mean she'd lose her job, but she didn't care.

She opened an email, intent on sending her decision to Jeff. She pounded against the keyboard before she held down the delete key and rephrased the email. After multiple attempts, she gave up and closed the window.

Though she avoided him for the rest of the week, her irritation failed to dissipate. As she drummed her fingers against her desk the following Monday, staring once again at an empty email shell, her phone rang. She eyed the unknown number before she swiped to accept the call.

“Hello?”

“Dr. Kensie,” a voice answered her in a crisp British accent. “This is William Smythe. We spoke ten days ago regarding the estate of the late Lady Gertrude MacKenzie.”

Cate’s stomach flip-flopped. How could she forget the odd meeting? Was this phone call about to make her employment woes a thing of the past and change her entire life?

CHAPTER 4



Cate gripped the phone tighter. “Mr. Smythe. Yes, I remember.”

“The results of the DNA test are available and have been confirmed by a second party. I am back in the States. Would it be possible to meet for lunch today? I can come to you.”

Caught up in the tension of her employment situation, she’d almost forgotten the other mystery. The request dumbfounded her for a moment. “Uh, sure. Today around noon is fine. I’m at work at Aberdeen College. We can meet in the Terrier Café’s faculty lounge. It should be quiet there, and we’ll be able to talk.”

“Perfect, I will see you at noon, Dr. Kensie.”

“Great. I’ll see you then. And, oh, please, call me Cate.”

“Goodbye, Cate.” The phone clicked.

Cate ended the call and set her cell phone down on the desk as she stared blankly at it. The DNA results were in and confirmed. She assumed they confirmed that she was the heir to the MacKenzie estate. But how could that be? It made little sense.

But maybe it was the break she needed. But why was this never mentioned within the family? Did her parents not know?

It didn’t seem real. If it was, what was she going to do? The reference to the castle being haunted rattled in her mind.

She distractedly pushed through grading a few papers before she decided she could wait no longer. Her impatience drove her early to the

buffet-style cafeteria, where she paid for two meals and asked the clerk to send her guest to the faculty lounge.

She pushed into the empty space with her salad in hand and selected a table in the back corner. She picked through the leafy greens for a few moments before the doors to the area swung open.

William Smythe stood, dressed in another crisp black suit, looking out of place against a backdrop of sweatpants-clad students. His impeccably polished briefcase dangled from his slim fingers as he scanned the room, catching sight of Cate at the back. Cate waved, as though he might not see her.

He strode across the room, taking the seat across from her.

“Dr. Kensie—” he began as he settled into his chair.

“Cate, please,” Cate interrupted him. “You can help yourself to some lunch, the food here is rather good.”

“Thank you,” he said, glancing over his shoulder at the doors leading to the cafeteria. “Perhaps I’ll make a salad, if you don’t mind my doing so before we conduct our business.”

“No, not at all. Please help yourself.” Cate raised an eyebrow as he pushed through the doors into the din of the eatery, reflecting on his formal behavior. He returned a few moments later, unfurled his napkin across his lap, and took a bite of food before setting his fork down.

“Let’s get down to business,” he said flatly. “As I mentioned during our phone conversation, we have confirmed your identity through two separate DNA tests. You are the heir to the MacKenzie estate, as I expected.”

Cate straightened in her seat, still struggling to believe the news. “Mr. Smythe, I have to tell you I’m really surprised by this. No one told me anything about any Scottish relatives before.”

“I can assure you, whether or not you heard about it before, you are Lady Gertrude MacKenzie’s closest living relative and her rightful heir. As you may imagine, there are stacks of paperwork to complete. My firm will handle everything. I assume you’ll need some time to get your affairs stateside in order. Do you have an estimate on when you expect you’ll be able to move? I assume you have a valid passport, and my firm will complete any paperwork needed for you to live in Scotland.”

Cate blinked hard, her eyes widening as she considered the answer to his question. Butterflies wriggled in her stomach as she considered the huge prospect of moving to another country.

Across the table, the man stared at her, waiting for her reply as he poked at his food.

“Um,” Cate mumbled. “Y-yes, I have all of that. I just—I hadn’t considered moving. I’ll need some time to work out the details.”

The man’s features softened. “Please take all the time you need. Though I would like to confirm that you *will* take up residence at Dunhaven Castle as required by the terms of the will.”

The odd condition niggled at her, but she blurted out, “Of course.”

“Excellent. I would like to begin the paperwork on my end, if you wouldn’t mind signing the forms I have for you today.”

“Sure, absolutely. I’ll need a day or so to get my plans in order regarding the move.”

“Of course, Cate. I plan on traveling back to London this evening, but you have my contact information and my assistant will be reaching out to you. Please let us know when you have an idea so we can prepare for your arrival.”

They finished their salads while discussing a few minor details about the will before Mr. Smythe collected her signature on a number of documents.

“Did the test indicate how we are related?” Cate asked as he squared the papers and placed them into a folder before sliding it into his briefcase.

“Distant cousins. The specific details aren’t at my disposal at the moment, but rest assured Lady MacKenzie’s information about your relationship proved correct.”

So, Lady MacKenzie had known about her existence.

“Well,” he continued as he rose, “that will conclude our business for today. My assistant, Gayle, will be contacting you if she hasn’t already and she can assist with arranging details once you have dates in mind.”

“Thank you. I hope to have them for her soon.”

“I look forward to hearing from you. Good day, Cate.” He crossed the room and disappeared through the door. It closed behind him, slowly shutting out the din of the cafeteria.

Cate sat for a moment, trying to process what had just happened. It felt surreal. If the documents had not been sitting in front of her, she would have wondered whether she had dreamt the whole thing.

She remained lost in thought as she meandered across campus. The chiming of her phone barely pulled her back to reality. She checked the

display as she climbed the stairs to her office, making a mental list of things that needed to be done.

A warm email from Gayle Pearson with the subject MacKenzie Estate introduced Mr. Smythe's assistant and offered help to make any and all arrangements for her upcoming move.

The email cemented the reality she struggled to grasp. She collapsed into her desk chair and stared again at the packed shelves.

She blew out a long breath. "I'm going to need some boxes."

The next morning, she began the arduous task of packing her office. She'd cleared half the shelves when a knock sounded at the door.

"Come in!" she yelled as she stretched the packing tape over the flaps of the box.

Jeff shuffled through the door, his hands on his hips and a confused expression on his tan features. "Hey, when I said not to count on summer, kiddo, I didn't mean you had to start packing yet."

Cate rose to stand, dusting off her jeans and giving him a small laugh. "About the summer, Jeff—" she began when he interrupted her.

"Yeah, I've got great news. I managed to get you a few classes." He grinned at her.

Cate sucked in a deep breath, her gaze floating to the boxes as she opened and closed the cap on the Sharpie clutched in her hands. "Thanks, Jeff. I appreciate what you've done, but I need to decline."

Jeff screwed up his face, rubbing his neck. "Decline? Are you serious?"

Cate's popping of the marker's cap intensified as her hands turned sweaty. "Yes, I am serious. I need to decline. I've had some... developments on my end."

She found herself unable to form the words to describe her situation. *I inherited a castle and I'm moving to Scotland* sounded crazy in her head, she couldn't imagine how it would sound in spoken form.

"Developments?" he murmured, almost to himself, his finger rubbing his chin. "Were you offered another position?"

The corners of Cate's lips curled into a slight smile. "Yes, in a way, I was. Anyway, what it boils down to is I don't need the summer classes or a contract for the next academic year. I'm sorry about the late notice, Jeff. If I had known, I would have told you sooner, but I only just found out myself."

“Well, ah—” Jeff paused, at a loss for words. “Ah, I guess congratulations are in order.”

“Thank you,” Cate answered with a grin.

He slowly extended his hand to shake hers, as if trying to grasp the reality of the situation at the same time.

Jeff glanced around at the boxes on the floor, then slid his gaze up to the empty shelf. “Well, ah, it looks like you’ve got moving under control. And there’s nothing I can do to change your mind?” He flicked his gaze back to her.

“Nope, sorry. It’s too good an opportunity to pass up.” Not a lie, she mused.

“Well, ah, okay, I guess I’ll leave you to it. Good luck with... ah, well, everything.” He threw his hand out to the side before letting it slap his thigh.

“Thanks, again, Jeff.”

He shuffled to the door, grabbing the jamb and twisting to give her office one last glance. His brow furrowed as he took another look at the boxes. “You’re sure there’s nothing I can do to change your mind? The dean may reconsider—”

“Sorry, Jeff, there’s nothing.”

“Well, okay—can’t blame a guy for trying.” He rapped his fingers against the jamb before he disappeared down the hall.

A smile crept across Cate’s face, lingering there as she cleared another shelf.

By the end of the day, she had an empty office. One last final exam the following day stood between her and the Scottish countryside, plus the packing of her home. But she’d leave that until after her semester ended.

On her last day with Aberdeen College, she proctored and graded her exam before she did a final check of her space and typed up a brief resignation letter.

She signed off for the final time and glanced around. Barren shelves and an empty desk met her gaze, just as they had the day she came. After one last check of her drawers, one last glance at her shelves, and a crouch to glance under her desk, she stowed her laptop in her tote bag and pulled her office keys from her key ring.

She took the stairs down a flight to the department office. As expected, she found the door open and Molly, the department’s secretary, behind her

desk.

“Hey, Cate.”

“Hi, Molly. have my keys to return to you.” Cate set them down on the desk in front of Molly.

Molly stared at them, brow furrowed. “Keys? Are you moving to a new office? Jeff didn’t say anything.”

“No, sorry. I thought maybe you had heard from Jeff, or saw the email I sent a few minutes ago. I’ve resigned my position. I won’t be returning to Aberdeen after today.”

“What?” Molly lowered her voice and leaned toward Cate. “Is this because of the tenure situation? To be honest, I think Jeff could have done more, but I’d try to hang in there and keep pushing, honey.”

“Oh, thanks, Molly, but that’s not it entirely. I’m actually moving.”

Molly cradled her coffee cup in her hands. “Moving? To where?”

“Scotland.”

Molly choked on the sip of coffee she’d taken. “*Scotland*? Are you kidding me? What prompted this, if you don’t mind my asking? Did you get a job offer there?”

Cate twisted the truth a bit, still unwilling to say the words aloud. “Oh, I just found out I have family there.”

Molly’s eyebrows shot up, and she gave a knowing nod. “Oh, that’s great, honey. I can understand you wanting to move for your family.”

Happy with being able to dodge any further explanations, Cate offered her a pleasant smile. “So, I guess this is goodbye. I left all the current student paperwork in my office with dates marked showing when they are no longer current and can be disposed of. And again, here are my keys, so that’s it.”

“Just like you, Cate—always so organized.” She paused for a moment, waving a hand in front of her face as tears welled in her eyes. “And now, just a minute, this can’t be goodbye just yet. Let me take you to lunch.”

“Oh, you don’t have to do that, Molly.”

“Nonsense, come on. Then you can tell me all about this move to Scotland.”

“Okay, but only if it’s my treat.”

“Now, Cate—” Molly began.

“I insist, or the lunch is off.” Cate lifted her chin with a coy grin.

“Okay, okay, I give in,” Molly said, holding both hands up to admit defeat before she reached under the desk for her purse.

“Should we head up to the cafe?”

“Blah, no. Let’s go off campus for a change. How about that new Italian place that just opened on Third Street? You can try it before you leave, at least.”

“Sounds good. Do you mind if I run home and grab Riley?”

“Not at all! See you there,” Molly answered.

Cate waved a goodbye before she left Aberdeen’s campus behind for the last time. She went through her to-do list as she drove home. She’d have to donate all of her furniture, her car, and most of her household items. She’d only take her personal things, and she’d start packing those after her lunch with Molly.

After collecting Riley from her apartment, she strolled to the restaurant, securing an outdoor table near the front corner. Riley settled onto the cobblestone patio at her feet under the shade of the table. Molly appeared a few moments later, swinging her car into a parking space. She gave Cate a big wave as she climbed from behind the wheel, the sun glinting off her strawberry blonde hair.

Molly plopped into the seat across from Cate and glanced down at the small dog who wagged his tail at her. “Hi, Riley. How are you, little guy? Ready for your big move?”

The small dog cocked his head at her as she spoke.

Cate tousled his ears. “I’ve still got to pack up the apartment, including his stuff.”

Molly flipped open her menu and shot Cate a grin. “He’s too cute, Cate.”

“Thanks. I’m glad you didn’t mind me bringing him along.”

Molly waved her hand in the air as she perused the menu. “Not at all. I’m cooped up in the office all day just looking at the sunshine through the window. It’s nice to bask in it. So, what looks good to you, Cate?”

After they placed their order, Molly grabbed a slice of bread from the recently delivered basket. “So, tell me about Scotland. How did this happen? When? Where? Give me all the juicy details.”

“It was quite sudden and unexpected,” Cate said, also diving into the breadbasket. She relayed the strange tale of Mr. Smythe’s sudden arrival and unexpected news.

Molly munched on her bread slice, dipping it into the olive oil and herb blend as Cate spilled the story. Her eyebrows rose higher and higher with every statement. “Oh my gosh, I have so many questions, I don’t know where to begin. So, this guy just shows up and what? Tells you you’re inheriting some property in Scotland but only if you move there?”

“Yep.”

Molly blinked as she attempted to formulate a response, but none came.

Cate continued to fill the silence. “I had to have a DNA test to make sure I was Lady MacKenzie’s relative. I just found out a few days ago that the test showed that I was. No one ever told me about any relatives, even distant ones.”

“Wait,” Molly interrupted. “*Lady MacKenzie*? What are you inheriting—a castle or something?” She snickered at her own comment.

“Yes, that is what I’m inheriting.”

Molly slapped the table with her hand as her jaw dropped open and her eyes bulged. “Cate, are you serious?”

“Yes.” Cate pulled one of the pictures she’d grabbed earlier and slid it across the table.

Molly snatched the picture from the metal tabletop just as their food arrived. She flicked her gaze to Cate, biting her lower lip and appearing ready to burst as she waited for the waitress to depart. “Oh, Cate, please tell me you’ll let me visit.”

Cate chuckled as she pushed her gnocchi around in the pool of butter. “Of course. I’d love to have you visit.”

Molly waved her hand in the air as she sipped her soda. “I will hold you to that. I’d *love* to see Scotland, and I’d love it even more to stay in a *castle* while I’m there. Well, at least I think I would.”

Cate wrinkled her forehead, scrunching her eyebrows together as she flicked her gaze up to Molly. “You think?”

“Yeah, I’ll let you try it out first and make sure it’s not haunted.”

CHAPTER 5



Cate stared at Molly for a breath, unable to form any words. The book title listed when she'd searched Dunhaven Castle danced through her mind. "Haunted?"

Molly nodded, grabbing another piece of bread and dipping it into her pasta dish. "Yeah, haunted. You know, like in all the movies, those castles are always haunted. All those generations living there. Some of them dying there. You go make sure it's not haunted before I visit."

Cate forced a smile onto her face, dismissing the ridiculous idea of ghosts roaming the castle. "Okay, deal. Once I can verify that there are no ghosts, I'll send your invitation."

"Deal. So now it all makes sense why you are moving all of a sudden. I'd have moved too. Once I made sure it wasn't haunted, of course." Molly winked as she bit into her bread.

Cate shrugged, chasing a slippery buttered gnocchi around her dish. "I didn't ask about it being haunted. But since I didn't have any offers here, I really thought it was a blessing. It's a beautiful property. I've not made it very far with my career here. I had nothing holding me back."

Molly waved her explanation away with a shake of her head. "You don't have to explain it to me. You'd be crazy not to move regardless of your career, although, they gave you a raw deal *again*. Don't even get me started on that tenure-track denial."

Cate smiled at her in silent gratitude for her support. Molly continued, despite Cate not prompting her, "Jeff did *nothing* to help you. It serves him

right to be scrambling this late for the summer. I hope you left a big, fat hole in his summer schedule pulling out of your contract.”

Cate froze, crinkling her brow. She shook her head. “I didn’t have a contract.”

Molly narrowed her eyes, cocking her head as she stared at Cate. “Those contracts went out three weeks ago. You were listed for three classes.”

Cate’s jaw dropped open as she reached for her lemonade. “Three weeks ago?”

Molly’s shoulders slumped, and she let her fork clatter onto her plate. “Oh, don’t tell me. He didn’t offer you anything until late.”

“He told me he had a few classes for me a few days ago. That’s when I told him I was resigning.”

Molly set her jaw and rolled her eyes before she leaned forward and patted Cate’s hand. “Well, that’s divine providence if you ask me, Cate. You were *meant* to go to Scotland, and Jeff was *meant* to get stuck for playing his games. It serves him right. His games finally caught up to him.”

Cate squeezed her hand, the smile returning to her face as she glanced at the picture of the castle laying on the table. “Well, I can’t say that I’m complaining about the outcome, that’s for sure. Maybe it worked out just the way it was supposed to.”

Cate and Molly finished their lunch, chatting about Cate’s move and plans once she reached Scotland. Molly offered to help Cate with any last-minute details, but Cate declined, figuring she had things under control given her timeline.

“Well, I guess this is goodbye then,” Cate said as they stood up from the table.

“Goodbye *for now*,” Molly corrected her, wagging a finger at her. She pulled Cate into a hug, giving her an extra tight squeeze. “Promise you’ll keep in touch.”

“I promise,” Cate said. Another bittersweet moment. Cate held back the tear that threatened to escape from her eye.

“And you, Riley, have fun playing in that *huge* yard.”

Riley looked curiously at Molly.

Cate laughed as she scooped the small dog up. “I’m sure he will. Well, back to packing for me! Next time you hear from me, I’ll be in Scotland.”

“Thank you for lunch, Cate, and I can’t wait to hear that you’re settled.”

After another few moments of chitchat, the women parted ways.

Cate waddled back into her apartment, stuffed from the heavy lunch. She wrinkled her nose as she stared into her closet. “How about you pack this up, Riley?”

He tilted his head at her before he loped across the room and leapt onto the bed, settling down with his feet splayed out behind him for a nap.

“I guess I have my answer.” She followed him to the bed and plopped onto it. “Let’s start fresh in the morning.” She grabbed the remote from her night table and flicked on the television across the room on her dresser. After searching for the movie Molly had suggested about a woman living in a haunted castle, she snuggled into the covers to watch the frightening film.

* * *

After two weeks of packing, Cate stood in an empty apartment. No more items remained on her to-do list. She would start her journey to Scotland in just a few hours.

Riley sat at her feet, starting up at her. “We made a lot of good memories here, Riley. But let’s go make some new ones.”

She grabbed her packed suitcase, tucked Riley into his carrier, and left her apartment behind for the last time. The wheels of the suitcase banged their way down the stairs as she dragged it behind her to the main floor and out to the waiting taxi.

Within hours, she boarded her plane, booked in first-class by Gayle. Butterflies flitted in her stomach as she buckled her seat belt. They intensified as the plane pushed back from the gate. Her new life awaited her. She leaned over to Riley, still stuffed in his carrier and grinned. “Here we go, buddy. Next stop: London, England.”

After a layover in New York, they landed in London. The chauffeur Gayle had arranged met her outside and shuttled her to the hotel with the promise to return for her in the morning. Within the hour, she was settled in her room.

She retired early after the long flight, settling back into the pillows with Riley curled next to her.

Cate flicked off the light as she stroked his fur. “Before you know it, we’ll be home. At least, I hope so.”

She settled back into the pillows, unused to the sounds of the city streets beyond her window. The entire situation overwhelmed her, and she slept fitfully in the strange city. Her alarm screamed through a nightmare about Riley becoming lost in the halls of the castle. She awoke with a start, cuddling the small dog closer to her before she rose from her bed and dressed for the day.

The nervous butterflies kicked up again as she gathered her purse and pup and headed down to the waiting chauffeured car. Buildings and people sped by the window as they drove. London seemed enormous compared to her former small town of Aberdeen. She mentally thanked Gayle for arranging transportation so she did not have to navigate it alone.

Within forty minutes, she sat inside the luxuriously appointed offices of Smythe, Smith, and Smithton, awaiting her appointment with Mr. Smythe.

Cate waited less than a minute before a petite blonde woman hurried down the hall toward the reception area. A few tendrils of hair framed her face, with the rest pulled neatly into a French twist. Her navy-blue skirt suit featured a hemline falling just below the knee, and pumps with a fashionable but sensible heel finished off the ensemble. A pair of glasses dangled on a chain around her neck. Her clothes were as crisp as Mr. Smythe’s had been. She offered Cate a warm smile with the ability to set her at ease immediately.

She widened her smile and extended her hand as she approached. “Cate, so nice to finally meet you. I’m Gayle Pearson. And this must be little Riley.”

Cate shook her hand. “Nice to meet you, Gayle. Yes, this is Riley.”

Gayle extended her hand to allow Riley to sniff it and then gave him a gentle scratch on his head.

“Riley, can you shake hands?” Cate asked.

Riley extended his small white paw toward Gayle, who accepted it for a shake.

Gayle motioned for Cate to follow her down the hall. “What a clever little pup you are, Riley. If you’ll follow me, I’ll get you situated for your meeting with Mr. Smythe.”

Cate trailed behind her, taking the opportunity to thank her in person for making all her travel arrangements.

“Oh, it was nothing, Cate, my pleasure. I hope you are finding your stay pleasant. Everything is satisfactory with your room, I trust?”

“Oh, yes, everything is great,” Cate said as they entered a small conference room. “And thank you for the snack—it hit the spot after the long flight.”

“Wonderful to hear. May I take your coat?”

Cate set Riley on one of the thickly padded leather chairs and peeled off her jacket, handing it over. “Thank you.”

Gayle tossed it over her arm, clasping her hands together. “And can I interest you in a cup of tea?”

Cate collected Riley and eased into the high-backed chair. “Oh, no, thank you. I don’t want to put you to any trouble.”

“No trouble at all, Cate.”

“Well, then yes, if you don’t mind, I would love a cup of tea. Thank you. Something warm would be great. It’s much cooler than I’m used to here.”

“Coming right up,” Gayle said as she bustled out of the room.

Gayle returned moments later with a tray of tea, cookies, and a few dog bones. She set the tea and cookies down near Cate. “Here, this will take the chill out of you! Do you take sugar and milk, Cate?”

“Just sugar, no milk.”

“How very American of you,” Gayle replied, passing the sugar to Cate. “And, Riley, I have a special treat for you if your mummy will allow you.” She produced a bone-shaped dog biscuit.

Riley’s tail wagged furiously.

“Yes, he’s allowed, thank you,” Cate said.

Gayle fed the biscuit to Riley, who wolfed it down in a few chomps.

“And now, I will spoil you and give you a second one, whether or not your mummy likes it,” Gayle teased, handing Riley another, which he ate as quickly as the first.

Cate chuckled as Riley stared expectantly at Gayle, waiting for another. “I think you’ve made a friend for life.”

“And what a cute friend to have. If you need anything, just give me a holler. I’m just outside. Mr. Smythe will be in shortly.”

“Thank you.”

Gayle slipped out the door, pulling it slightly closed behind her.

Warmth coursed through Cate as she sipped the sweet tea. She set the cup down on its saucer when William Smythe entered the room with Gayle trailing behind him, her arms laden with folders.

He approached the table and tugged back the chair at the head of it. Gayle spread the folders out for him before leaving the room and pulling the door slightly shut again.

Mr. Smythe unbuttoned his suit jacket as he settled into the chair. “Hello, Cate, good to see you again. I hope your trip was pleasant and your accommodations agreeable.”

“Oh, yes, everything is excellent, thank you.”

With a nod, he opened the first folder. “There are several things that we need to go over and some paperwork that needs to be taken care of over the next few days. We’ll finish everything that we need to here before traveling to Scotland on Wednesday. I’ll stay on with you until Friday to finish all the details there.”

“Okay, that sounds like a plan.”

Paperwork, signatures, and legalese filled their day. The ever efficient Gayle flitted in and out, collecting forms to process immediately.

After a light lunch in the office, arranged by Gayle, they traveled to the bank housing Lady MacKenzie’s accounts to complete more paperwork. After signing the forms, they were led to a room filled with safe-deposit boxes. As the bank clerk left them alone in a private room, Mr. Smythe opened the box given to them and removed an item.

“Ah, the infamous gold timepiece,” Cate exclaimed.

“Yes,” he answered. “This is the timepiece I spoke of when we met. This was to be imparted directly to you, along with the following note stipulating specific terms that Lady MacKenzie insisted her heir follow.”

He handed her the timepiece along with a note.

Cate accepted both, turning the timepiece over in her hands as she received it. The bright lights glinted off the warm antique gold. Once a man’s pocket watch, it now hung from a long gold chain, making it a pendant. She traced the outline of two small crosses extending from the top of the piece.

Cate pressed the button to open the watch. An off-white face with black Roman numerals stared back at her. She squinted at the markings on the cover, finding a faint inscription: ALWAYS KEEP AN EYE ON YOUR TIME.

Cate furrowed her brow at the odd engraving. With the timepiece clutched in her hands, she read the note.

To my heir,

This timepiece has been passed from generation to generation in the MacKenzie family. It came through my ancestors from father to child for centuries, eventually being passed from my grandfather to my father and from my father to me. I now pass it to you. You MUST adhere to the following stipulations I set forth:

Wear the timepiece on your person at all times, and NEVER leave it unattended.

Take care to keep the timepiece in working order and always wound.

Always keep an eye on your time.

Good luck. Stay safe.

Lady Gertrude MacKenzie

Cate wrinkled her brow at the note, a shiver darting up her spine. She ran her fingers over the odd statement about keeping an eye on her time engraved on the watch's faceplate as she stared at the same words in the note. Her gaze hovered over the last two lines again. Stay safe, the note said. But stay safe from what?

With a shake of her head, she hung the timepiece around her neck as instructed and continued on with the remaining business.

Drained and overwhelmed, she slogged back to her hotel room and collapsed into bed. The next day contained more of the same, and she retired at the end of it for an early evening in, preparing for a wake-up call before the sun rose to catch an early morning train to Edinburgh.

Her alarm screamed Wednesday's arrival at an hour well before she was ready, and she met Mr. Smythe and Gayle at the train station for the first leg of the trip to Dunhaven.

With Gayle staying on to help her unpack over her first weekend in the house, her nerves settled a little. At least if there were ghosts roaming the halls, she wouldn't be alone. The truly terrifying moment would come when she spent her first night on her own in the castle.

They boarded the train and Cate settled back in her seat with Riley on her lap. The passing scenery captivated her, being so very different from the midwest where she'd grown up and stayed for most of her adult life.

Gayle smiled at her as she studied the passing landscape. "So, Cate, I understand Mr. Smythe's visit was a surprise to you."

A grin spread across Cate's face as she bobbed her head up and down. "Yes, a very big one. And not just his visit, but his news. I never knew I had a relative in Scotland."

"Really? No one ever mentioned a relative with a castle?"

Cate stroked Riley's fur as she answered. "No, no one dropped that bombshell on me until Mr. Smythe did. To be honest, I didn't know I had any relatives anywhere. After my parents passed away, I assumed I was alone in the world."

Gayle's face pinched with compassion. "I'm so sorry for your loss, Cate. And at such a young age."

Cate offered her a tight-lipped smile. "Thank you. Though it's been several years now, so I've grown accustomed to being alone."

"And all this time, you had a relative living in Scotland."

"Well, a distant relative."

"Yes, but still, it is a shame that you never got to meet Lady MacKenzie. She was an interesting woman. I'm certain you would have liked her. You remind me a lot of her. We tried to find you before she passed but were unable to locate you in time."

Cate flicked her gaze to the passing scenery again. "Yes, that is unfortunate. I would have liked to have met her. I hope it's not too much to ask, but how did she pass away?"

Gayle crossed her legs, tugging her knee toward her with her clasped hands. "She took ill suddenly and was diagnosed with an aggressive form of cancer which went undetected until it was too late. She suffered a stroke soon after finding out and passed shortly after."

"Oh, that's terrible. How sad." Cate reflected for a moment, before rekindling the conversation on a brighter topic. "Speaking of my distant relative, do you have any more information on how closely we are related from the DNA test?"

Mr. Smythe chimed in to answer this, setting his paperwork aside. "No, the analysis only confirms the relationship, but doesn't tell us any familial relationship information beyond the general. Your relationship was in the

third cousin arena. Lady MacKenzie had an address for your parents. We used it to track you down. I'm certain you can find more information at the castle about your relationship."

Gayle waved a finger in the air. "Cate, I'm thinking that your name, Kensie, is a variation of the original family name MacKenzie."

"Yes, I wondered that. I have to admit, for being a history professor, I have little to no idea of my family's history. I've been meaning to look into it, but with everything going on, I haven't yet. I plan on doing that once I get settled."

"Well, it sounds like an interesting project for a history professor," Gayle answered. "Please let me know if I can help."

"Thank you so much, Gayle. I agree it will be an interesting project."

They spent the rest of the trip making small talk until they pulled into the station. Cate's stomach rumbled as they walked to the restaurant for a quick lunch.

With full bellies, they picked up their rental car to begin the drive to Dunhaven. The town sat a few hours northwest of Edinburgh. Cate and Riley spread out in the backseat as Mr. Smythe slipped behind the wheel to make the familiar drive with Gayle serving as his navigator in the front passenger seat.

The city turned to the countryside and eventually to the Highlands as they drove north. The drive cemented the reality of the remoteness of her new home as they proceeded farther and farther away from what she was used to in terms of civilization. As the world slipped away, the possibility of ghosts became more real to her.

"Almost there," Gayle announced. Cate checked the timepiece she was wearing with a surge of pride that she had remembered to wind it this morning. They should arrive in about twenty to twenty-five minutes, according to Mr. Smythe's calculations. A surge of anticipation swept through Cate.

Within fifteen minutes, a small village appeared in the distance. Behind it, Dunhaven Castle rose high on the hill. They passed through the small town of Dunhaven moments later as Gayle detailed some of the town's local businesses.

The village receded behind them as they drove on toward the castle. The rambling structure sprawled on the high hill overlooking the town. It grew

larger and larger as they approached. Rolling green lawns with perfect landscaping surrounded it.

Gravel crunched under the tires as Mr. Smythe turned onto the driveway. Cate slid closer to the window to study her new home as they approached. Riley, sensing Cate's excitement, darted from window to window to peer out, wagging his tail and eyeing Cate as if to confirm that his reaction was appropriate.

Three people milled around the castle's entrance.

"Ah, good," Mr. Smythe said as he spotted them. "I asked the staff to meet us. They've timed it well."

"Probably got the warning call from the village," Gayle joked.

"Staff?" Cate mumbled to herself, her brow furrowing.

"Yes," Mr. Smythe replied, overhearing her comment. "Charlie and Emily Fraser. Mr. Fraser oversees most of the handiwork, landscaping, and manages the external landscaping company. Mrs. Fraser provides light cooking and house cleaning. A hired company does most of the other cleaning. Finally, Jack Reid, the estate manager is a newer addition who will take over most of the handiwork and landscaping from Mr. Fraser soon. Lady MacKenzie hired him just before passing away."

She hadn't given much thought to the castle's upkeep. It was good to know someone else had. What would it be like to have a staff?

Mr. Smythe interrupted her thoughts. He glanced at her through the rearview mirror. "May I assume that you will keep the staff on?"

Cate clamped her gaping jaw shut for a moment before answering. "Ah, yes, assuming they would like to stay on."

Gayle twisted to face her and nodded. "I think they very much would, Cate. They have been on edge that the new owner would do a clean sweep and bring in her own people. They will be relieved to find out that you are keeping them on."

"Oh, yes, no—I mean to say, I'd never do that to anyone."

As the conversation came to a close, Mr. Smythe eased the car parallel to the front entrance. The youngest of the three staff, Jack, approached the car to open the doors and begin unloading luggage. Cate scooped Riley into her arms and stepped into the crisp Scottish air.

Her gaze rose to the rambling structure in front of her. Goosebumps pocked her flesh as she swallowed hard, wondering what secrets the gothic

structure held. The words in Gertrude MacKenzie's note rattled through her mind. What was it that she needed to stay safe from?

CHAPTER 6



Eate stared up at the castle rising in front of her. She fought back a shiver as she struggled to stop dwelling on why Gertrude MacKenzie had wished her good luck and told her to stay safe.

She sucked in a deep breath and kissed the top of Riley's head as he studied her, shaking in her arms, sensing her apprehension.

"We're home, Riley. We're home," she said, a smile spreading on her face.

Generations of MacKenzies had lived here before her. Generations of her family. A sense of belonging washed over her as she imagined her relatives walking the halls of the sprawling structure.

She studied the gray-brown stone making up the castle's exterior. It spread on either side of the entrance, extending in wings jutting at various angles. Towers and turrets rose into the sky. For a moment, she wondered if she may end up lost inside its vast expanse. Perhaps that was what the warning meant.

Voices pulled her from her daydreaming. Mrs. Fraser clasped her hands stiffly in front of her as she addressed Gayle. "Yes, I had Lady MacKenzie's room made up for Dr. Kensie as Mr. Smythe directed, the nearby bedroom suite is made up for you, Ms. Pearson, and I had the blue room made up for you, as usual, Mr. Smythe."

"Perfect, thank you," Mr. Smythe answered as Jack pulled luggage from the trunk—or, as they called it here, the boot of the car.

“And I had all them boxes you sent put in the library. Lady Gertrude didn’t use that room much. I cannae understand what you meant by ‘obvious but unobtrusive space,’ so I did the best I could,” she said, her Scottish dialect on full display.

Gayle patted the woman’s arm with a warm smile. “Let’s not discuss that now. I’m sure Cate would prefer to settle in a bit before dealing with all that.”

“Oh, thank you,” Cate said, stepping forward and extending her hand. “Hi, I’m Cate, and this is Riley.” Cate motioned with her head toward the small dog in her arms.

Mr. Fraser was the first to take her hand, giving it a light shake. Next, Mrs. Fraser, with a furrowed brow and slack jaw, shook it. Jack, who had finished unloading the luggage, approached.

“Good to meet ya, Cate,” he said with a broad smile and a hard handshake that extended to her entire arm. “And a big hello to you too, Sir Riley.” He tickled the pup under his chin. Mrs. Fraser gasped at his greeting, but Riley seemed to approve, extending his neck for a full scratch.

“Well, uh, Dr. Kensie—” Mrs. Fraser began.

Cate waved her hand in the air with a smile. “Oh, please, call me Cate.”

Mrs. Fraser’s eyes widened. “Well, I’ll certainly not! You might not have the title—”

“She will inherit the title along with the estate,” Mr. Smythe said.

“Well, I shan’t be referring to you by your first name, Lady Kensie! That wouldn’t be proper, not proper at all.”

She glanced at Mr. Smythe, then Gayle. She raised her chin and rolled her shoulders back before continuing. “Now, Lady Kensie, I’d be happy to show you to your room if you’d like to freshen up after your trip. I prepared a light meal for everyone. If you’ll let me know when you’d like it served, I will have it set out for you.”

All eyes turned to Cate, and she swallowed hard, unfamiliar with the sensation of ordering a staff around. “Oh, uh, that would be great. I’d say maybe around five-thirty to eat, if that’s okay with everyone?” She phrased it as a question, shrugging her shoulders as though she wasn’t at all sure.

“That would do perfectly,” Gayle said with a nod.

“If you would point out your bags to me, I’d be ever so happy to bring them up to you,” Jack chimed in.

“Oh, the two with the luggage straps are mine. Here, I can take one with me.” Cate reached for one suitcase, triggering another gasp from Mrs. Fraser.

“Nay, lassie, I’d not have the lady of the house carrying her own bags to her room! I’d be put out on the street for it.”

Cate burst into a giggle at the statement. “The lady of the house can manage a bit of luggage, but I won’t fight you on it. It is heavy.”

They shared a laugh together as he grabbed her suitcase and tugged it behind him.

With Mrs. Fraser leading the way, they entered the castle through thick wooden doors. Cate’s eyes slid upward to take in the enormous foyer. Wooden double doors on either side of the wide space led into other rooms. Hallways jutted off in every direction. A massive, curved stairway with thick brass railings led up to a gallery-style hallway overlooking the shiny marble floor. Thick red carpeting lined the center of the white marble stairs. The scent of wood polish hung heavy in the air.

“Mr. Smythe, I trust you can find your way while I take the ladies on to their rooms.” Mrs. Fraser started toward the staircase with Cate and Gayle in tow. As they ascended it, she continued, “I had the bed you sent for the pup put into your room, Lady Kensie. I hope that was acceptable.”

Cate hurried to keep up with her. “Oh, yes, that’s great. Thank you so much. That was very thoughtful of you, Mrs. Fraser. And Riley thanks you, too.”

Cate raised Riley’s paw to wave at Mrs. Fraser in a show of approval. “You hear that, buddy? Mrs. Fraser has got you all fixed up.”

Mrs. Fraser pursed her lips together and continued down the hall, hands clasped together at her waist in front of her. Mr. Smythe disappeared from their group somewhere along the way, though Cate couldn’t say where. The maze of halls made the blue room seem extremely far from wherever hers would be.

“Ms. Pearson, here is your room,” Mrs. Fraser said, stopping outside of a doorway and motioning with her hand.

“Thank you,” Gayle said. She squeezed Cate’s forearm. “I’ll see you in a bit for some dinner.” She disappeared into the room, leaving Cate and Riley alone with Mrs. Fraser.

“The late Lady MacKenzie’s room is this way,” Mrs. Fraser said, continuing down the hall. “Mr. Smythe told me to give you that room.

Rather presumptuous of him, but I do what I'm told. If you'd like another, please let me know once you've perused the castle."

"Oh, I'm sure it's fine, Mrs. Fraser. I'm sure I'll be very happy there."

"Lady MacKenzie was, there's a fact. I suppose since it was good enough for her ladyship, Mr. Smythe reckoned it would be good enough for you, too. Here we are."

She stopped in front of a set of double doors, opening them both in one smooth motion.

Cate followed her into the room. She spun, trying to take it all in.

The sheer size of the bedroom suite made her apartment seem tiny. She stood in a sitting room. A fireplace yawned in the nearby wall. She ran her hand over the velvety fabric of the chaise lounge facing it. Ornate chairs stood against another wall. To the left and through another set of double doors, a bedroom with a large canopy bed stood. Carved wood trimmed the space. Heavy draperies adorned the large windows overlooking the rolling green landscape.

Mrs. Fraser fussed with a pillow on the settee nearest the chaise lounge. Cate swallowed and tried to pull herself back into reality, realizing Mrs. Fraser was waiting for the all-clear signal from her before leaving her alone.

"Thank you, Mrs. Fraser."

"Of course," she spat out before she spun on her heel and departed.

Cate spun to take in the entire room again. The sheer size of her bedroom suite alone proved overwhelming. She no longer wondered if she would become lost wandering the halls—she was certain of it. Absentmindedly, her hand found the timepiece around her neck. She glanced down at it.

"Who were you, Lady MacKenzie?" she muttered. "Here I am, about to live in your space, sleeping where you slept, eating where you ate, and I have no idea who you even were."

A knock at the door pulled her from her musings.

"Come in," she shouted.

"Your luggage," Jack said, dragging the two bags in through the door. "Where would you like them?"

"Oh, there's fine," Cate said, motioning toward the door. "Thanks."

"Easy enough." He wheeled them farther into the room. He hesitated a moment, shifting his weight from foot to foot. "Say, I hope I didn't offend you earlier. I tend to be a bit off-the-cuff. I put many people off. You

seemed rather laid back. I took you at your word when you introduced yourself as Cate that I could call you that.”

Cate shook her head and waved her hand as she sank onto the chaise. “Oh, no, not at all. You didn’t offend me. I prefer it if everyone calls me Cate. Maybe it’s an American thing.”

He gave her a lopsided grin. “Ah, well that’s good before I’m out on my arse.”

“I need all the help I can get, especially from getting lost. I won’t fire you because you didn’t call me Dr. Kensie. I really prefer Cate.”

“Mrs. Fraser will be horrified. The lady of the house having everyone call her Cate.” He shivered as though it was terrifying.

The dramatic display elicited a giggle from Cate. “Yeah, I noticed that. I guess Lady MacKenzie was much more formal.”

“Quite. She would have fired me on the spot if I called her lassie or even Gertrude.”

“Good thing I’m easier going, huh?”

“Quite a good thing. Well, I’ll leave you to freshen up then. M’lady,” Jack said, adding an extravagant bow.

Another chuckle escaped her. Riley sniffed at the air as she stood after he’d closed the doors behind him.

“We’re going to have fun here, Riley.”

The little dog cocked his head, looking at her curiously.

“Here, why don’t you have a proper smell around?” Cate said, setting him down on the floor. He wandered around the room, sniffing everything. Cate checked her timepiece, finding it was nearly 5 p.m. Dinner would be set out soon.

She glanced down at her outfit of leggings and a tunic, imagining the shocked expression on Mrs. Fraser’s face if she turned up to her first dinner in this ensemble. Not wanting to send the woman to an early grave, she decided to change.

She wheeled her luggage through the double doorway and into the bedroom. The bedroom rivaled the sitting room in size. She brushed the lace curtain aside, peeking out one window. Her room overlooked a side area of the well-manicured lawn.

Outside, a gravel path wound past a gazebo, ending at a small loch.

“Riley, you’re going to love this,” she said. She hoped to explore the grounds tomorrow or Friday with him.

For now, her stomach had other plans. She opened her luggage and retrieved Riley's bowl and kibble. Riley heard the morsels spilling into the bowl and raced from the sitting room for his dish. She'd find a new spot to feed him after they settled in. She left Riley eating as she pulled on a change of clothes.

She stepped into the hall after she finished with Riley in her arms, hoping she could find her way to the front door for a jaunt outside. She would rely on luck to find her way to the dining room from there.

As she wandered down the hall, studying the thick carved wood trim and passing door after endless door, Gayle popped out of her room.

"What luck," Cate exclaimed. "I was afraid I would lose my way to the front door and would die of starvation trying to find the dining room."

"No worries, Lady Cate," Gayle said, patting her arm. "I can make sure you get there. Are you taking Riley for a short walk first?"

"Yes, for a moment to stretch his legs. I planned on taking him into the dining room with us after. I'm a little reluctant to leave him alone since we just got here. You don't think it will upset Mrs. Fraser if I bring Riley, do you?" Cate winced as she glanced at Gayle.

Gayle patted her arm again. "Cate, you're a dear, but you need to remember that this is *your* home now. You will set the rules. Mrs. Fraser will deal with Riley joining us in the dining room."

Cate gave her a resolute nod as they reached the main staircase. As they descended the thickly carpeted steps, Gayle continued, "I think Mrs. Fraser is a little on edge because of her employment status."

"Her employment status?"

"Yes, it's a bit complex, but the long and short of it is that she was planning on finishing a few years with Mr. Fraser, then retiring. It was to allow Lady MacKenzie time to find a replacement. Mr. Fraser has already begun training his replacement, Jack. I think she's wondering if you'll keep her on."

"Oh, well, of course, I would, yes. I don't plan on upsetting the balance of things here."

They reached the front door and stepped outside. Gayle lowered her voice. "There is one other thing."

Cate raised an eyebrow, wrapping up in her sweater against the chill in the air. "Oh?"

Gayle trained her eyes on Riley as he sniffed around the lawn. “I shouldn’t discuss it, but there was talk with Lady MacKenzie about changing her will. There is a cottage on the estate where Mr. and Mrs. Fraser live. She had planned to bequeath it to them as a retirement gift for their years of service. She passed away before we could draw up the final papers.”

Cate let the information settle in her brain. How terrible for the older couple, she ruminated. No wonder Mrs. Fraser had been on edge. “That would be very upsetting. I would be happy to honor that agreement. Perhaps I should speak with Mr. Smythe about it?”

“Well, the decision is yours, Cate, but I’m certain the Frasers would appreciate it.”

“Thank you, Gayle, for the heads up. I want to fit in here. I don’t want to make anyone’s life worse.”

“With an attitude like that, you won’t.”

Cate scooped Riley into her arms, and they pushed through the front door into the castle. “Lead the way to the dining room, and I will try to memorize this route.”

Gayle veered to the left, entering a wide hall. Landscape paintings hung on the green wallpaper above the mahogany chair rail. She pushed through a set of wooden doors halfway down the hall.

Cate circled the massive table, capable of seating more people than she knew. Serving dishes sat on the sideboard. She set Riley down near the head of the table, sliding into one of the heavy wooden chairs.

Bright red strawberries and shredded chicken topped fresh leafy greens. Cashews halves dotted the lettuce. A light drizzle of a red wine vinaigrette coated the top.

The meal provided an acute change to Cate’s normal diet of sandwiches and cereal. With cooking like this, she’d be sad to see Mrs. Fraser retire.

As they were leaving the dining room, Mrs. Fraser appeared in the hall. “Ahem, excuse me, Lady Kensie?”

Cate stopped short, spinning to face her. “Yes, Mrs. Fraser?”

“I have a few things to go over with you before morning, if it’s a good time?”

“Ah, sure.”

“I wasn’t sure what you preferred for breakfast and when you would like it served.”

“Oh, um,” Cate hesitated, glancing at Gayle. Gayle gave Cate an encouraging nod. “Well, if it works for everyone’s schedule, I think at 7 a.m. would be appropriate for breakfast, and whatever you usually make is just fine.”

Gayle offered an encouraging nod.

Mrs. Fraser clasped her hands in front of her, standing rail straight. “I make oatmeal most mornings. I will have it ready at 7 a.m., if that’s acceptable.”

“Yes, that would be perfect. Thank you so much, Mrs. Fraser. And thank you for dinner, it was delicious.”

“You’re very welcome, Lady Kensie. Sleep well.”

The long day of travel left everyone drained. After Cate retired to her suite, however, she found the excitement of her new surroundings too stimulating to allow her to relax. She sat with Riley on the chaise, contemplating the events of the day. She planned her next few days, hoping to finish her unpacking and explore the castle. After settling in, she promised herself she’d track down the exact nature of her relationship with Lady MacKenzie.

As her mind settled, she collected Riley in favor of stretching out in bed. She eyed the bed before getting into it. It gave new meaning to the term “climb into bed.” She nestled in, pulling the covers up to her shoulders.

With a sigh, she closed her eyes and sucked in a deep breath. Her eyes popped open moments later. Despite the long trip, she found herself wide awake.

A small whine emanated from the floor next to her. She flicked on the light and leaned over. Riley lay in his fluffy bed near her nightstand.

“Can’t sleep either, huh, buddy?”

Riley squinted back at her in the bright light, offering another whine.

“Okay, okay, how about we share the bed tonight? That may help both of us.”

Cate slipped out from under the sheets and scooped up the little dog, bed and all, and set him on top of her bed. She nestled close to him after climbing under the sheets again. She stroked the fur on his head. He gave another big sigh and laid his head down, content to be closer to Cate.

“I wish this helped me fall right to sleep,” Cate mused.

Cate continued to lie awake for another forty-five minutes, her mind too stimulated by her surroundings to relax into sleep. After almost an hour, she began to doze off. She startled awake, gasping in a breath as she stared at a shifting shadow in the corner. Cate squinted into the darkness, wondering if her first ghost was making an appearance.

CHAPTER 7



Cate narrowed her eyes at the shifting form. A white wisp floated in the corner, twisting and turning, changing shape as it moved. She sucked in a deep breath, her eyes wide. Blood rushed into her ears, and her limbs turned to jelly.

Was this the thing she needed to “stay safe” from? Was this the reason behind Gertrude MacKenzie’s warnings?

Cate stiffened her muscles to stop her trembling as her eyes adjusted. She crawled to the edge of the bed, clutching the bedpost as she studied the motion.

After a moment, she sat back on her heels, breathing out a sigh of relief as the ghost turned out to be a lace curtain fluttering from a partially open window.

She slid from her bed, tiptoeing across the cold hardwood to the window. She tugged it shut, securing it before she hurried back to bed and pulled the covers over her.

Despite the benign cause of the so-called ghost, she lay in her bed with the silk duvet pulled to her chin, eyeing the corner suspiciously.

She drifted off to sleep, tossing and turning restlessly for the remainder of the night.

As the alarm sounded the next morning, announcing her first full day in Scotland, she yawned and stretched. In a half sleepwalk, she got herself dressed and took Riley out in the fresh Scottish air for a quick walk before heading in for breakfast.

Today, Cate was determined to learn how to navigate within the castle. As a history professor, she possessed a working knowledge of homes built in this period and how they had been modified to modernize.

With a new confidence, she wound through the halls to the dining room. From there, she scoured for the passage to the kitchen.

“Let’s see if we can lend a hand in the kitchen, Riley.” she said, carrying the small dog with her.

She descended a narrow set of service stairs, finding a long hallway at the bottom. Faint voices floated from the large room at the end of the hall, which she figured must be the kitchen. By the sounds of the voices, Jack and Mr. Fraser were keeping Mrs. Fraser company as she prepared breakfast.

As Cate ambled down the hallway, the voices became less faint. She was soon able to make out their conversation.

“—cannae believe that they could find no closer relative to Lady MacKenzie,” Mrs. Fraser said.

Jack’s voice answered her. “Oh, I think she’s a bit of all right.”

“Call me Cate,” Mrs. Fraser mimicked. “Now we’ve got a typical crass American running Dunhaven Castle. I say if Lady MacKenzie knew, she’d be turning in her grave.”

“Ah, come on now, Mrs. Fraser,” Jack answered again. “She’s not *that* bad—and a bonnie lass if I ever saw one.”

Mrs. Fraser harrumphed. “She wouldn’t know the first thing about being a lady, I can tell you that.”

Cate bit her lower lip. Apparently, the old adage about eavesdropping was true. Her lips formed a frown as she realized this transition would not be as easy as she anticipated.

She spun on her heel, retreating to the stairway and up to the dining room. The room remained empty when she arrived. As she settled into her chair, Mr. Smythe arrived, followed by Gayle moments later.

Mrs. Fraser entered as if on cue, carrying a coffee pot. She poured Mr. Smythe and Gayle steaming cups of the aromatic liquid after offering one to Cate.

“Oh, I’m sorry, Lady Kensie, can I bring you something else?” Mrs. Fraser asked.

“No, thank you, just water.”

After delivering the beverage, Mrs. Fraser set breakfast on the sideboard, leaving them to enjoy their meal.

The morning would be filled with more paperwork for Mr. Smythe, as he filed any forms required locally. As he stood to leave, Cate joined him, requesting a moment of his time.

Mr. Smythe led her to the library, a room Cate hadn't explored yet. She found it just as grand as the other parts of the castle. Bookshelves extended two stories above her head, with a gallery-style hallway around the top for access. A spiral staircase in the corner of the room provided access to the second level.

Cate stepped to the oversized leather chairs grouped near the fireplace, rubbing a hand against the supple leather. She glanced at the wall of floor-to-ceiling windows and past the thick tartan draperies framing each window at the garden full of blooms.

"Thanks for all your work so far. I was hoping to request one additional thing," she said as Mr. Smythe pushed the doors closed behind him.

"Of course."

"It's come to my attention that Lady MacKenzie, before her death, had intended to bequeath the cottage that Mr. and Mrs. Fraser are living in to them for their retirement, but that she did not have the changes to her will completed prior to her passing away."

Mr. Smythe shoved one hand into his pocket. "Yes, that is all correct, Cate."

"I'd like to follow through on her wishes and transfer the property to Mr. and Mrs. Fraser. My arrival is already upending lives. And I have no intention to renege on something promised."

Mr. Smythe offered a curt nod. "Yes, that's very considerate. I can take care of the paperwork when I return to London. I'll send it on to you here for signatures."

A smile spread across Cate's face. "That would be perfect. Thank you so much."

"My pleasure. Was there anything else?"

"No, that's all, thanks."

"Then I will be on my way," Mr. Smythe said. He strode from the room, pulling the doors shut behind him again.

Cate took another glance around the library, eyeing the large desk overlooking the garden. It would be the perfect place for her to work.

Stacks of boxes stood in the back corner. She approached them, recognizing her own handwriting.

"I guess I know where to start," she murmured to herself.

While she would have preferred to roam around her new home exploring, she'd rather have Gayle's help to unpack than tackle it alone after the woman left.

She returned to the dining room to collect Gayle, finding her cuddling Riley as though he were her grandbaby in her arms. She rubbed his belly as she cooed over him. Riley lapped it up.

Cate laughed as she eyed the scene. "I see you've discovered the way to Riley's heart. Treats and belly rubs."

"Yes, I have," Gayle said, concentrating on Riley. "And telling him how cute he is."

Riley cocked his head as she said the "c" word.

"Oh, he loves to be fussed over," Cate answered.

After a few more strokes, Gayle said, "Well, little one, it's time for your mummy and me to begin work. Would you like to explore the castle with us?"

"He'd like to explore the castle, yard, and anywhere else he's allowed." Cate waved a finger toward the library she'd just come from. "Mrs. Fraser put the boxes I sent in the library. We can begin there by sorting through where they need to be in the castle."

"Would you like to take a tour of the lived-in part of the castle so you have a better idea of where your things may best fit?"

The plan allowed her to avoid unpacking and explore some of the castle, so she agreed in a heartbeat. As Gayle stood, Mrs. Fraser pushed into the dining room to collect dishes.

"I beg your pardon, Lady Kensie, I was hoping to have another word with you before you set off for the day."

"Of course," Cate said.

Gayle gathered Riley into her arms, whispering that she would meet Cate in the library before leaving the two women alone to speak.

Mrs. Fraser stiffened as the doors closed behind Gayle and sniffed. "Yes, ma'am, I hope you dinnae see this as out of line, but I was always one to talk straight. I wanted to speak with you about our employment status. Mine and Mr. Fraser's. I'm not sure what Mr. Smythe may have explained to you, but we intended on retiring soon after finding suitable replacements.

Mr. Fraser has found his in young Jack. I wasn't sure if you were keeping us on, though."

"Of course, Mrs. Fraser. I don't mind at all. I would be most grateful to you both if you'd stay on as you had intended."

Mrs. Fraser drew her lips into a thin line and gave Cate a curt nod.

"Thank you, Lady Kensie." She turned her attention to clearing dishes.

Apprehension still hung heavy between them. Cate guessed it had to do with the status of the couple's home. Perhaps now was the best moment to tackle the situation.

Cate swallowed hard and found her voice to speak up. "Oh, Mrs. Fraser?"

The woman dropped the dishes back to the table and stood at attention. "Yes?"

"It came to my attention that Lady MacKenzie intended to transfer ownership of the cottage that you and Mr. Fraser live in to you. I spoke with Mr. Smythe this morning about making sure those wishes are still carried out."

"Oh!" The woman's jaw gaped open, her lower lip bobbing up and down as she sought more words. A faint smile crossed her face, fleeting but still there. "I-I..." She stammered as she searched for words. "Well, I don't know what to say. Thank you, it is very much appreciated."

"You don't have to say anything. Those were Lady MacKenzie's wishes, and I intend to respect them."

"Well, if you say so. It's no small thing. No small thing at all and means very much to Mr. Fraser and me."

Cate gave her a nod and a warm smile.

"Well, Lady—" she paused. "Lady Cate, I suppose I should let you get on with your business. If you need any help with your boxes, let me know, and I'll get Jack after it to help." With that, the woman began clearing dishes, her air of duty settling back in.

Cate smiled as she departed from the dining room. It seemed she had turned a corner with the woman. At least she hoped the use of her first name indicated a new understanding.

As she pushed into the library, she found Gayle eyeing the boxes.

Gayle shot her a glance before returning her gaze to the stack. "Well, it doesn't look like there are too many boxes here. You travel light. We can finish this before I leave! It appears this stack is all marked clothing. We

may want to enlist the help of that strapping young man, Jack, to carry these to the bedroom.”

“Yes, I agree. I lugged those all by myself to the post office. I don’t have any desire to heft them around this place.”

“Well, why don’t we take the grand tour first before we dive into that? On our way, if we come across Jack, we can ask him to move the boxes.”

“Sounds like a plan, Gayle.”

“Let’s start on the first floor, then move to the second?”

Cate and Gayle spent the next hour going from room to room of the used portion of the castle with Riley trailing behind. The little guy started to tire as they explored the second floor, so Cate carried him, setting him down occasionally when he wanted to get a good smell. The castle proved to be magnificent, with each room more beautiful than the next.

Several wings were closed off, and Cate peeked into them, deciding to explore them later.

“I feel like someone should pinch me and wake me from this dream,” Cate said as they pushed back into the library.

“All you’d end up with is a bruise if you did that, Cate,” Gayle quipped.

“I’d half expect to end up back in my apartment, to be honest with you. This is quite a change for me.”

“I can imagine, but I’m sure you will take it in stride. You’re a MacKenzie woman, Cate. They’re a tough breed.”

Cate pondered for a moment. “Wow. That is the first time I’ve thought about that. I guess, in some small way, I am a MacKenzie. It is nice to have a sense of belonging again. You know, it’s funny, but I have such a homey feeling here. I never had that in Aberdeen.”

Gayle smiled, then sighed. “Well, I’ll bet what will *really* give you a sense of belonging would be to have your things put in their places. As much as I hate to stop admiring your new home, it might be time to roll up our sleeves and do some work.”

They entered the library and Cate eyed the stack of boxes, her shoulders slumping. “Ugh, you may be right. Let me see if I can find Jack and have him carry the clothes to the bedroom, then we can unpack the other boxes.”

“Okay, I’ll meet you in the library. I can take Riley if you’d like.”

“Okay, thanks.” Cate handed the little pup to Gayle, and they went their separate ways.

With a little help from Mrs. Fraser, Cate found Jack working outside and enlisted his help in moving her things. Jack began hauling boxes to the bedroom as Gayle and Cate unpacked the others.

“These are books,” Cate said. “We won’t have to go far to find a spot for them.”

“You have a lot of shelf space to work with, so this should be an easy task.”

Cate and Gayle spent the next several hours unpacking boxes from the library and finding places for the items. They took a brief break to eat the sandwiches that Mrs. Fraser provided them for lunch. She had delivered them on a tray complete with a side of potato chips and a pickle.

“Wow, you got on her good side, Cate,” Gayle said, raising her eyebrows at the meal.

“Oh, yes, I spoke with her this morning about staying on and about giving her the cottage as Lady MacKenzie wanted. I think it eased her mind.”

“I’ll say—and it went a long way to ease my rumbling stomach thanks to her lunch delivery. I am famished.”

“Me too. I’m starving after all this work.”

They chatted as they lunched, but dove right back into the unpacking after Gayle jested that if she sat much longer, she’d never go back to work. Around half-past four, they finished all the boxes in the library.

“Well,” Cate said, checking the timepiece that hung around her neck, “no sense in starting anything else now. Let’s break for the day and start tomorrow.”

Gayle agreed, and they both returned to their rooms to freshen up before dinner.

Cate slogged through the doors and collapsed onto the chaise. Exhaustion coursed through every muscle, and her eyes threatened to close. She hoped to sleep better tonight.

After a few minutes, she forced herself from the chaise to change for dinner. A glimpse into the mirror startled her.

CHAPTER 8



Cate gaped at the ghastly sight in the mirror. She stared with wide eyes at the gruesome display, wincing.

“What a sight,” she exclaimed to Riley.

Her disheveled ponytail escaped from its hair tie at every angle. A black smudge decorated her cheek. Her mascara smeared below her eyes when she had wiped away a bead of sweat.

She worked on making herself presentable before she headed downstairs to the dining room. There she found Mr. Smythe waiting for her. Gayle arrived a few moments later.

“The execution of Lady MacKenzie’s will has been completed,” he began as they found their seats. “You are officially the new Countess of Dunhavenshire and the new owner of Dunhaven Castle, its grounds, and its contents.”

As he finished his statement, Mrs. Fraser entered the room carrying three full champagne flutes and a bottle of what remained of the bubbly liquid.

“I thought we could have a toast to celebrate the occasion,” Mr. Smythe said with a smile.

Cate marveled at the sight. It was the first smile she’d ever seen from him.

“Oh, how lovely.” Gayle said.

Mrs. Fraser made her way around the table as everyone selected a flute.

“Oh, before we toast,” Cate said, “Mrs. Fraser, won’t you get a glass and join us? Also, Mr. Fraser and Jack if they are close?”

Mrs. Fraser’s eyebrows raised, but she answered in stride, “I would be honored, Lady Cate.” The woman disappeared and returned with Mr. Fraser and Jack in tow and three additional glasses. She poured a small amount into each.

When everyone had a glass in hand, Mr. Smythe stood, raised his, and said, “To the new Countess of Dunhavenshire and mistress of Dunhaven Castle. May you enjoy many happy years here.”

Tears pricked Cate’s eyes. She wondered if the sleepless night was making her more emotional than she usually was or if the change in location had that profound of an effect on her.

She smiled and blinked away the tears. “Thank you.”

Everyone raised their glass to Cate before taking a sip. Mr. Smythe regained his seat and thanked Mrs. Fraser for the well-timed delivery.

Mrs. Fraser disappeared with her tray to retrieve the meal. Mr. Fraser finished his glass of champagne and headed after her—as did Jack, after congratulating Cate on her new ownership.

After dinner, Mrs. Fraser served a Scottish Berry Brulee, a special dessert she’d made for the occasion. Following the lovely treat, Mr. Smythe excused himself to pack for his early morning departure.

Cate and Gayle opted to spend a bit more time chatting in the main sitting room before retiring. After about an hour of conversation, Cate yawned.

“Sorry,” she said, “it’s not you. I didn’t sleep well last night. Too much excitement, I think.”

“Oh no, I hope you sleep better tonight. Perhaps we should both retire. I’m getting tired myself from all that work we did,” Gayle said.

“I hope so, too. Well, why don’t we call it a night? I just need to take Riley out one more time. That is, if I can wake him.”

Riley lounged in Cate’s lap where he had curled up after dinner. Light snoring announced his relaxation.

Gayle laughed. “Tuckered out, buddy? You did some hard work today watching us unpack.”

Riley’s eyes opened to slits and he slid them sideways to peek at Gayle. With a sigh, he closed them as though he was too tired to even respond.

“Come on, lazy bones,” Cate said, poking him gently to rouse him from his slumber. It earned her nothing but another weary sigh.

“I bet you’d get up for a treat,” Cate said.

Riley’s eyes opened wide, and he bounded to his feet.

Gayle chuckled. “Wow, that got him up. Well, I’ll leave you two to it. I’m heading up. See you in the morning. I hope you sleep well tonight.”

“Thanks, Gayle. Good night.”

* * *

The sun rose over the moors as Cate stretched and yawned. No ghosts had kept her awake the night before.

The dining table was lonelier without Mr. Smythe, who had departed before breakfast. Before his departure, he’d left a note for Cate stating he would send the paperwork for the cottage by the end of next week. The man ran entirely on efficiency.

Given Gayle’s unpacking plan, Cate started to wonder if maybe his work ethic was contagious. Gayle aimed to finish all the unpacking today; she ushered Cate straight from breakfast to her bedroom to tackle the stack of boxes.

“I may have too many clothes,” Cate said as she pulled open another box of cardigans.

“Impossible,” Gayle answered, stacking another box of riding boots in the closet.

Gayle happened upon Riley’s toys, using the box as a diversion from work. She played tug-of-war with the pup, fighting with him over a stuffed moose which he loved.

“He’s so cute, Cate,” she said as Riley tugged his moose away from her grip, prancing to the fireplace to gnaw on it.

Cate smiled after the little dog. “He’s my whole world. I adopted him after my parents died when I needed a friend the most.”

Gayle pushed herself to stand, emptying a few more toys into Riley’s toy bin. “And you bonded right away, I’m sure.”

Cate pulled another rumpled sweater from the box and refolded it. “I saw him through the window of the pet shelter I always walked past on my way to the store. He hadn’t been there the day before. I adopted him on the

spot. Of course, I then had to move into a pet friendly apartment, but the trade-off was worth it.”

“I can imagine. I don’t have any pets myself, but I’m always tempted to get a dog.”

“Well, if you do, he’ll be welcome here. I’m sure Riley would enjoy playing with a friend.”

After a lunch delivered by Mrs. Fraser, Gayle marveled that Cate had packed all this herself and had it all delivered to the post office on her own.

“Oh, believe me, I paid for it the next day.”

“I’ll bet. That’s a lot of work for one person. I’m glad I can be here to help you on this end at least.”

“I appreciate all the help you’ve been.”

“Oh, it’s nothing. It’s not every day I get to stay in a castle, so it’s my pleasure,” Gayle said. She pulled open another box, hesitating a moment as she stared at the contents. She lifted a photo from inside. “Oh, Cate, is this picture of you and your parents?”

Cate peered over her shoulder. “Yes, that’s us at my college graduation.” She pulled the picture from Gayle’s fingers and stared at it for a moment before placing it back into the box. Tears threatened to appear as the familiar wave of sadness swept over her, more pronounced today than before. She stood in a Scottish castle. She’d never have the opportunity to share this with her parents. Had they been aware of its existence?

“Cate, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to open it. I thought it was clothes.”

“It’s okay,” Cate said, shaking the memory from her mind. “I’m used to it. It just struck me how crazy the situation is. I’m here in a castle of a family somehow related to mine. I was wondering if my parents knew about this place. If they did, they never mentioned it to me.”

Gayle gave her a consoling smile.

Cate stuffed the lid back on the box. “Anyway, you can just put this box in the back of the closet. It’s just a few of my parents’ things that I kept after they died. If you want to see something more interesting related to my parents, check out that box there.” Cate pointed to the box that had been underneath the one she was carrying to the closet.

Gayle opened it and pulled out a few items. Her brow furrowed as she stared at the odd collection.

“This is a collection of items that my dad brought back for me from his trips to the museum. Wherever he traveled, he’d bring back some unique

trinket. I kept every one of them. My mom would help me put together fact cards for them after he brought them back. See this one here, it's an Egyptian cartouche. And," Cate said, digging in the box, "here is my little fact card that I wrote when I was about nine."

Gayle studied the object and the card, written in blue ink and decorated in colored pencil and marker with Egyptian hieroglyphs. "Oh, how cute, Cate. You really had quite the unique childhood, didn't you?"

"Yes, I did. And I loved every minute of it. While most of my schoolmates were playing hopscotch, I was pretending to find artifacts in the museum's storeroom."

"So, you didn't mind the long hours at the museum? Didn't long to play dolls with your friends?"

"No, I have always been an introvert, so I enjoyed the time alone with my artifacts. I learned a lot there, too. I would spend lots of time with the other museum workers learning about what they did or helping them with small jobs."

"Who knew you'd grow up to live in a museum, right?"

"I know. This place kind of reminds me of my childhood. I think that's why I immediately felt so at home."

"And soon we'll have you unpacked, so you can enjoy it as your new home."

Cate smiled in agreement. They finished the rest of the boxes, ending about an hour before dinner as they had the day before.

After freshening up, a less taxing affair than it had been the day before, Cate and Gayle met for dinner. Both ladies missed Mr. Smythe's quiet demeanor.

With all the work done, they discussed their plans for the weekend. They explored the estate's grounds on Saturday. Riley frolicked through the massive grassy areas and played fetch with Gayle. It was like living in a park with a museum on the grounds, Cate thought.

As Sunday came to a close, Cate, Riley, and Gayle enjoyed one final walk around the grounds together. Cate dreaded Gayle's departure with every passing moment. While she was used to living alone, she had been enjoying the company of having other people with her. She also wasn't certain how she'd feel staying in the castle alone.

Dinner, at least for Cate, was dampened a little because it was Gayle's last dinner at the castle.

Jack had been enlisted to drive Gayle to Edinburgh to catch the train. Since it would be a long day, Gayle retired early. Cate opted to stay up a little longer, lounging on the chaise with Riley. She occupied her thoughts with all the things she wanted to begin tomorrow on her first day alone in the castle.

When she finally retired, she stared up at the ceiling, unable to fall asleep. She drummed her fingers against the pale blue silk duvet. After an hour, she climbed from her bed and wandered into the sitting room.

Shadowy blobs filled the space, and she flicked on the light to banish any lurking shadows. She plopped onto the chaise, lying back against the velvet material. As she lounged, the light next to her flickered.

Cate sat straighter, staring at it for a moment. It glowed steadily, and she eased back into the cushion.

But then the light flickered again, and her muscles tensed. Her breathing sped up and her pulse quickened. She stared up at the shade until the flickering ceased. She eyed the lamp warily as she eased back again.

As she settled onto the chaise, kicking her feet up, the room plunged into darkness.

Cate stiffened, sitting up straight and waiting for her eyes to adjust. She blindly felt her way to the lamp and clicked the switch. It did not light. She fiddled with the bulb and tried again. Nothing.

She forced herself to remain calm, shuffling to the door and peeking into the hallway beyond. She swallowed hard as she stared down the long, dark hall.

“Gayle?” she called into the darkness.

She tied her robe tighter around her and raised her chin as she stepped into the hall. She inched down it, her eyes wide, searching all the dark corners. With her fingers tracing the wall, she made her way around a corner and into a new hall.

“Gayle?” she tried again.

No answer. Perhaps she was soundly asleep.

Closed doors lined the dark space, lit only by the moonlight streaming through the window at the end. Cate wandered down the hall, turning another corner and finding a set of stairs leading down.

She descended to a back hallway, spotting the closed off wing at the end of the long hall she spilled into.

“I should have brought a flashlight,” she lamented to herself as she crept past the shadowy blobs filling the walls.

She wound around, finding the foyer and retracing her earlier steps to the library. She used the moonlight to make her way to the heavy desk and searched the drawers for a flashlight. She found nothing but matches. She shoved them into her robe’s pocket.

“Okay, half the battle,” she murmured as she spun to scan the room. “Now, can I find a candle?”

With her hands outstretched, she wandered across the room, bumping into the leather chair near the fireplace and stubbing her toe. She hopped around on one foot as she cursed the darkness.

With her fingers guiding her along the form of the supple leather chair, she felt her way toward the bookcases. She touched wood and dropped to her knees, searching for the handle of the cubby at the bottom of the bookshelf.

She found the round wooden pull and tugged on it. In the dim light, she felt around inside the small cupboard. Her hand struck cold metal. She wrapped her fingers around it and pulled it out.

The smell of wax wafted past her nostrils and a smile tugged at the corner of her lips. With a shaky hand, she pulled the matches from her pocket and struck one.

The flame flared to life, providing temporary light. She held it to the wick of one of the partially burned candles in the candelabra, lighting it. Quickly, she lit the other two before waving the flame out. A wisp of smoke rose in the air as Cate laid the burnt match on the fireplace bricks and stood with the candelabra raised high in the air.

She crept out of the library and toward the foyer, glancing up the large staircase. “Gayle?”

With no response received, she continued through the halls, wandering in search of her guest or a fuse box.

She descended the stairs to the servants’ area, roaming down the hall toward the kitchen.

A figure darted out from the pantry. Cate froze, her candles flickering in a slight breeze. She stared wide-eyed at the fuzzy form clad in white. She held her breath as her heart pounded against her ribs, and her legs wobbled under her as she stared at the specter.

CHAPTER 9



Cate's muscles tensed and she struggled to stop the candelabra from wobbling in her hands. The flames flickered as her hands trembled.

Her breathing turned ragged as she squinted at the white form in the distance.

A voice called to her, but she barely heard it over the blood rushing through her ears.

"Cate," the voice said again. A bright light shone into her eyes. She squinted against it, shielding her face with her hand.

"Cate," the voice said again. She recognized it as Gayle's warm, pleasant tone.

"Gayle," she said, breathing a sigh of relief and pressing a hand to her chest.

The woman's white robe swished around her as she strode down the hall, lowering the flashlight she held. "The power went out."

"Yes, I know," Cate answered. "I tried calling for you, but I thought maybe you'd slept through it, and I didn't want to wake you."

"No," Gayle answered, "I was down here helping myself to a cup of tea when it went off. I was just retrieving a flashlight from the pantry and heading for the panel."

She grabbed Cate's arm and tugged her forward. "Come on, I'll show you where it is in case you ever need it."

Cate blew out the flames on the candelabra and set it in the pantry before they continued down the hall. "Does this happen often?"

“Not really,” Gayle said. “Though often enough that you may like to know where the panel is. Gertrude complained about it happening every so often, but it wasn’t a weekly occurrence.”

“That’s good to know.”

Gayle guided her to the fuse box. “This one services the main castle. There are others in each wing, though since no one uses those, you won’t have to worry about that unless you plan to reopen them.”

“Good to know,” Cate said with a nod as Gayle swung the metal door open. It creaked on its hinges, revealing a massive grid of fuses and switches.

“Looks like it’s the main that clicked off. Silly thing.” Gayle swung a large handle to the opposite side. The hum of electricity filled the air, and lights popped on in the nearby kitchen. She closed the creaky panel door and dusted her hands. “There we are.”

“Lucky you were here when that happened,” Cate said. “I’m not too proud to admit I would have probably been afraid.”

Gayle offered her a warm smile and a pat on the arm. “I think that’s natural in a new house. Especially one of this size.”

Cate offered an appreciative smile at her easy manner.

“Now, how about joining me for that tea before you head back to bed? With all the excitement, it may help.” Gayle wrapped her arm around Cate’s and led her toward the kitchen.

They chatted over a hot cup of tea, laughing about Cate’s assumption that Gayle was a ghost before returning to bed. Riley still snored when Cate returned, never having budged from the nest in which he’d buried himself earlier.

Despite the late night, Cate arose early to see Gayle off. As Jack loaded her luggage into the boot, they said their goodbyes.

Gayle pulled her into a warm embrace. “I’m just an email away if you need anything.”

“Thanks, Gayle. I really appreciate all your help.”

Gayle gave her a wave as she slid into the passenger’s seat. The car disappeared down the drive in a cloud of dust. When it was no longer visible, Cate twisted to study the castle’s exterior.

The castle loomed over Cate as she stared up at its bricks, painted yellow by the early morning sun. Her tour with Gayle had been far from

extensive, and she'd cataloged a list of rooms she'd like to explore in more detail. In particular, she hoped to find resources to map out her family tree.

"Well, Riley, it's just you and me now, kid. Let's do some exploring."

She stepped into the expansive foyer, glancing around as she selected her starting point.

"Where shall we start?" Cate asked Riley.

She scanned the many halls leading off the marble entryway floor. Two wings had been added to the castle at a later date. Perhaps she'd explore one of those. Despite the lengths taken to match the finishes in the original castle, the subtle differences in the craftsmanship betrayed the different completion years.

Disappointment filled Cate as she wandered through the first-floor rooms. She regretted never having had the chance to meet her predecessor. The woman seemed to have possessed an exceptional aptitude to maintain the estate, its contents, and keep the castle up to date while maintaining its centuries-old charm. She hoped she could fill her shoes.

Riley, his nose to the ground, led her toward the sitting room that they had used the past several evenings. The generously sized room centered around a massive fireplace. A grouping of furniture, including a burgundy velvet couch detailed with carved wooden trim, a coffee table, and a few matching armchairs huddled around the fireplace.

Cate ran her fingers along the heavy burgundy draperies that garlanded the windows. Thick enough to block out any light when drawn, Cate assumed they were also used to keep out cold drafts in the winter weather. Paintings adorned the walls—some of people, others of landscape scenes. An avid fan of this style of art, Cate imagined spending hours enjoying the artwork in the castle alone.

Riley sniffed around the room for a few more moments before curling up on the large area rug near the fireplace.

"Tired already?" Cate joked. "You have a rest while I explore the rest of the room."

She ran her hands along the cherrywood writing desk against the wall, imagining centuries of MacKenzies finishing correspondence at it. She sank into the burgundy upholstered chair, rubbing her hands along the intricately carved arms, a smile curling the corners of her mouth upward. Her eyes floated up to the painting of a tranquil landscape.

She wrapped her fingers around the chair's arms, afraid if she let go, she'd find out it wasn't real. What a change from her cramped apartment.

She recalled the threadbare armchair there. The one she'd sat in when she'd received the news of her inheritance. It wouldn't fit in this space, she thought, as she scanned the room's other pieces.

She pulled her cell phone from her pocket and snapped a few pictures, intending to send them to Molly.

She spent an hour exploring the room, then another three hours exploring the other rooms on the main floor, including the smaller study, the large library, the dining room, a solarium, a tea room, and a portrait hall.

The portrait hall's many paintings captivated her interest and spawned a new project. As she studied the portrait of one Randolph MacKenzie, Cate decided to write a book about the castle's history.

After a thorough tour of the first floor, Cate headed downstairs to explore the servants' area. She stepped into the pantry Gayle had been in the night before, spotting the flashlight she'd used near the entryway on the shelf.

She crossed the hall, marveling at the size of the storage area for the dishes and silver. The large square room, with three walls covered in wooden shelves, made her kitchen look small.

She wandered down the hall and into the kitchen. Mrs. Fraser bustled around the space with a dish towel slung over her shoulder. She cracked the oven door open and peered inside before giving whatever baked inside a satisfied nod and closing the door. She spun to continue her work when she caught sight of Cate.

She grabbed her chest, her eyes wide. "Oh, Lady Cate. You startled me. Whatever are you and little Riley doing below decks?"

Riley wandered to the butcher block prep area, balancing on his hind legs as his nose sniffed in the air at the juicy piece of uncooked meat lying on the surface.

Cate winced as she scooped Riley from the floor. "Oh, sorry, Mrs. Fraser, I didn't mean to. I was just exploring a little."

Mrs. Fraser wiped her hands on the dish towel as she screwed up her face. "Exploring? Down here? There's not much down here, Lady Cate. Is there something that I can help you with?"

"No, not at all. The servants' area is just as impressive as the upstairs from a historian's perspective. It's fascinating how they built these homes

and how they were run.”

Mrs. Fraser glanced around her workspace, her eyes settling on the beef slab on the prep counter. “I dinnae see what would be of interest in the kitchen other than the food. And speaking of food, I’ve nearly got lunch prepared if you’d like to head to the dining room, or perhaps take it in the sitting room or library?”

Cate bit her lower lip and lifted a shoulder. “Actually, if you wouldn’t mind, I had hoped to eat lunch down here with you. I’d like to get to know everyone.”

Mrs. Fraser’s jaw flapped open as she drew her chin back. She wiggled a finger at the kitchen floor. “You want to eat here? At the servant’s table? In the kitchen?”

Cate shrugged again and gave her another tentative smile. “Yes. Well, if you don’t mind. If you’d prefer to eat alone, I would understand.”

“Well—” Mrs. Fraser glanced around the room as if she was searching for a reason to decline the request. After recovering, she answered, “I don’t mind. I doubt Mr. Fraser or Jack would mind, so please make yourself at home.”

Cate took a seat, balancing Riley on her lap while Mrs. Fraser set the table. Mr. Fraser and Jack pushed through the door minutes later.

“Joining us for lunch today, m’lady?” Jack asked.

Riley leapt from Cate’s lap and raced toward the tall Scot. He patted him on the head before washing his hands at the sink.

“Yes, I’d like to get to know everyone—if no one minds, that is.”

With no objections, Cate kept her seat, using the meal to inquire about each of her staff members. The daughter of one of the maids, Mrs. Fraser had grown up on the estate, living at Dunhaven Castle her entire life and staying on to work there. Mr. Fraser had grown up in the town of Dunhaven too, and he had worked on the estate since he was a young. Jack also hailed from Dunhaven. After doing some traveling as a younger man, he settled back in his hometown. With Jack as estate manager, Mr. Fraser was finishing out the last few years of his career before he retired.

After thanking them for their hospitality and Mrs. Fraser for the lunch, she climbed up the stairs to explore the bedrooms and suites.

On the second floor, she found several potential sources of information for her research and ancestor search. At the very least, her findings would

provide her with several hours of entertainment. Several trunks littered a storage area of a bedroom containing journals, old letters, and clothing.

She spent the entire afternoon going through the upstairs, leaving herself just enough time to freshen up before dinner. With a tray in the library, Cate lounged in a leather armchair with her meal and a book.

As she slouched in the generous seat, she scanned the room. She imagined rain pattering against the massive windows and a roaring fire in the fireplace. She pulled her legs up onto the chair, her socks slipping on the soft leather. This would provide an excellent space for her research and for relaxation.

After a bit of reading, Cate carried Riley up to her suite. She set him on the bed as she pulled on her pajamas. She stared at the bed, suddenly feeling wide awake. She recognized the reason. This would mark her first night alone in the castle.

With a wrinkled nose, she climbed into bed and slipped under the covers, settling in next to Riley. She lay in bed, listening to the silence of the massive castle and cursing Molly for sending her that list of haunted castle movies, all of which she'd watched. Despite the sense of belonging that she felt immediately when she arrived, she couldn't deny the spooky atmosphere of the moonlit halls.

She squeezed the gold timepiece in her palm as her eyes flitted around the room, using it to check the time occasionally, watching as the night passed slowly. As her eyes slid shut, she rubbed the smooth, cool metal surface with her thumb like a serenity stone.

The motion soothed her, and she began to nod off as the time crept past midnight.

A loud ticking noise startled her awake shortly after she nodded off. Cate snapped her eyes open, searching for the source of the noise.

She glanced down at the timepiece still clutched in her hand. The ticking seemed to emanate from it. It quieted as she opened the face and stared at the second hand, which crept ever so slowly around the face.

Cate shook the device. The second hand continued to crawl around the circle. She tried winding the watch, but it had no effect.

She stared at the long shadows cast across the floor by the moonlight streaming through the lace curtain. "Great. Not even a week with the family heirloom before I've broken it."

She collapsed back into her pillows, wondering if anyone in the area serviced watches. As her head hit the pillow, another noise broke the silence. She bolted upright, her ears straining to listen.

Light tinkling music filled the air. She swallowed hard as one thought permeated her mind. Who was playing music in an empty castle?

CHAPTER 10



The music continued to fill the air as Cate gripped the covers tightly. Too afraid to move, she sat in her bed, stunned for another moment, her jaw gaping open and her brow furrowed. She must be imagining it. No one else was in the castle outside of her and Riley. And she hadn't left any music playing.

The sound continued. Cate bit her lower lip, steeling her nerves as she dangled her feet over the bed's edge. After slipping her feet into her slippers, she tiptoed across the room. She squinted back at the bed, searching for Riley. The soft noise didn't seem to be bothering him. He hadn't moved from wherever he'd buried himself, nestled deep in the covers.

She crept into her sitting room, inching her way across the dimly lit space to the doors. The music increased in volume, ending in a crescendo.

Cate raced the final few feet to the doors and flung them open. She stepped into the hall, straining to listen. Nothing.

She stood there, eyes darting around the darkness for any sign of life. She considered searching the castle, but the incident had unnerved her, and she hurried back to the safety of her suite.

Molly's words rattled around in her mind as she climbed back into her bed. Was her castle haunted? How else could she explain the music she'd heard playing?

After thirty minutes of tossing and turning, she wondered if she'd dreamt the incident. Her thumb caressed the timepiece around her neck as

she concluded she must have dozed off and conjured the incident in her mind.

A lazy Riley wandered up the bed and collapsed in the crook of her arm as she dozed off, her dreams filled with the ghosts of those she had encountered in the portrait gallery.

A drowsy Cate pulled herself from bed the next morning, regretting her midnight romp and subsequent obsessing over it. She rolled her eyes at her silly behavior—creeping through the castle halls in search of phantom music. She'd dreamt the entire thing. She must have.

As she pulled on her boots, she recalled still hearing the music when she'd risen from her bed. Had she imagined that, too? It hadn't disturbed Riley, and she knew the little pup had to have more sensitive ears than she did.

Maybe she couldn't write the incident off.

The timepiece provided an even more perplexing conundrum. Last night, it slowed almost to a stop. She thought she had broken it. This morning, it was keeping time just fine. Ticking away as though nothing happened. At least she didn't need to call a repairman, so she could cross that off her list.

She dragged herself for a morning walk with Riley, a plan he approved of with a kiss on her cheek.

Wrapped in his new tartan coat, Riley ventured into the morning air. Heavy fog surrounded the castle, and Cate snuggled deeper into her jacket. There was something romantic about the way the mist clung to the moors surrounding the castle. She enjoyed the muted scenery around her before the sun began to burn off the morning fog.

Riley frolicked through the grassy knolls. He pranced around the estate as though he was the lord of the manor. She smiled at his happy wandering. Riley had warmed to their new surroundings as quickly as she had. And he seemed to be less disturbed by the strange goings-on.

She spent most of the morning exploring the outdoors. Her property seemed endless. She settled onto the still-wet grass near the loch, enjoying the summer sun as Riley collapsed in a heap after his big morning. The leaves on the large tree rustled in the slight breeze as she leaned against the rough bark, gazing out over the rippling pond.

After lunch, she settled into one of the big leather armchairs in the library with a mystery novel she'd found on the shelves. The engaging plot

couldn't hold her interest, though, and after an hour of reading, Cate's mind began to wander to the events of the previous night.

She stared down at the timepiece hanging around her neck. Its warm gold contrasted against her dark blue tunic. She lifted it from the fabric and stared at it before popping the face open. It ticked away in perfect time.

In the middle of the night, she swore it had been slow. Her nose wrinkled as she stared into space. She also swore she'd heard music coming from somewhere in the castle.

She ruled out her theory that she had dreamt it all. She had been fully awake. The music lasted several minutes, enough time for her to climb out of bed and walk around searching for the source.

She stared down at the book in her lap. A dark-haired heroine in a flowing gown ran from a rambling castle, her hair blowing and her face a mask of fear. Perhaps she'd read too many gothic novels. Or her subconscious was reacting to Molly's teasing about haunted Scottish castles.

She glanced down at the timepiece again. It still ticked the time away perfectly.

After a few more moments of pondering, she rose from her chair, intent on searching downstairs for anything that could have produced the mysterious music. She needed a break from reading. Her lack of sleep threatened to make her doze off in the chair. If that happened, she would never sleep again tonight.

Lounging on the floor nearby, Riley lifted his head.

"Want to explore, Riley?" she asked. In response, Riley let his head sink back onto the carpet, too tired from his morning excursion to explore anything. "All right, all right, I'll carry you."

She lifted the small pup into her arms. He let his head drop over her arm, his floppy ears dangling in the air. Cate chuckled at his position. "You're so lazy."

The little dog didn't react, letting his eyes slide shut as she carried him around the house. "The truth is, Riley, I'm afraid to go alone. You don't seem to be bothered by the ghosts, but I am."

Apart from her bedroom suite, the most familiar room to her was the library. Nothing existed there to produce the music. She wandered through the halls, searching the other rooms on this floor. She found nothing. In the tea room, she found an old gramophone, but it was only decorative. After a

thorough investigation of it, she failed to produce any music from the device. The likelihood that it had sprung to life in the middle of the night and played music was low.

She found a Victrola in the small study, but the plug, lying across the burgundy carpet feet from a wall plug meant it couldn't have produced the noise. She shoved the plug into the wall and switched on the unit. Nothing but a clicking sounded as no record sat on the turntable.

She returned to the library and laid Riley on the rug to resume his nap. Even the dog knew the search was a fool's errand. She sighed as she eased back into her chair, now ready to chalk the experience up to being overtired and overstimulated by her surroundings.

All homes had their own set of sounds and idiosyncrasies that one must get used to. She must have heard some noise, the wind or bells outside, which sounded like music. The explanation far from satisfied her, but it would have to do for now.

She flipped her book open to where she'd left off, just as Mrs. Fraser arrived with her dinner.

"Any good?" the woman inquired, flicking a finger toward the book.

"I'm really not certain," Cate answered as she slid it onto the coffee table. "I haven't read more than a few pages."

"Well, I'm certain you'll have some time this evening."

Cate smiled as she tugged the tray onto her lap. The aroma of tomato basil soup wafted to her nostrils and made her stomach rumble. "This looks delicious."

"I hope you enjoy it. If you have any meal preferences, just let me know. I aim to please."

Cate shook her head as she stirred the croutons around in the reddish liquid. "I'm not very picky. At home, I'd eat cereal for dinner."

Mrs. Fraser's face blanched at the idea. "Well, you'll not eat cereal here. Not if I have anything to say about it."

"I'd venture to say given the meals I've had in the last week, my diet has vastly improved."

Mrs. Fraser raised her chin, a satisfied smile crossing her lips. "And I'll be sure to leave you a dinner for your Sunday meal. I'll not have you eating cereal, even on my day off."

"Oh, Mrs. Fraser, no. You don't have to do extra work. Your day off is your day off."

“Nonsense. I’ll always leave a meal made up for you in the refrigerator. You’ll just have to heat it.”

“I—”

Mrs. Fraser wagged a finger at her. “I’ll not be told no. I’ll leave it there, and if you dinnae eat it, that’s up to you.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll eat it.”

Mrs. Fraser gave her a curt nod. “Now, is there anything else I can get you?”

Cate glanced down at the meal. The soup paired with a perfectly browned grilled cheese sandwich and a sliced pickle looked complete. “No, I don’t think so.”

“Enjoy your meal, Lady Cate.”

Cate raised her hand before the woman strode from the room. “Oh, actually, I did have a question for you.”

Mrs. Fraser raised her eyebrows to prompt her to continue.

“Did Lady MacKenzie ever mention hearing music at night? Or bells or anything?”

Mrs. Fraser’s brow furrowed as her eyes darted around. “Music? Nay. Why?”

Cate shook her head and waved the question away. “Oh, I thought I heard something last night. I figured maybe something was left on or maybe a local church sounded their bells or something.”

“Nay, the church wouldn’t sound the bells in the middle of the night.”

Cate shrugged and returned to stirring her soup. “Must have been my imagination.”

“Likely just the groanings of an old house.”

“Yes, you’re probably right. Thanks, Mrs. Fraser. I hope you enjoy your dinner, too.”

Mrs. Fraser smiled and nodded at her before she strode from the room, pulling the doors partially shut behind her.

Cate retrieved the novel from the coffee table, setting it on the large square arm to read while she ate dinner. She hoped to push the incident from her mind and let the book consume her thoughts. Instead, the damsel, a governess at an English country home with a frightening reputation, encountered strange event after strange event.

Cate found herself suspiciously eyeing the dark corners of the room as she tugged her cardigan tighter around her. As the woman slinked through

the castle halls in search of the source of phantom music, Cate snapped the book closed.

“No good?” Mrs. Fraser asked as she strode into the room.

Cate jumped in the chair, the silverware in the empty bowl rattling around as it bobbed against her thighs.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to frighten you.”

Cate steadied the tray and passed it off to the woman. “It’s okay. I’m used to living alone, that’s all.”

Mrs. Fraser slid the tray onto her arm and glanced at the book again. “I dare say you’ll be too afraid to sleep after reading that book.”

Cate chuckled at her assessment and nodded. “Yes, I just read a scary passage and decided to take a break.”

“Well, just remember, it’s all fiction. There’re no such things as ghosts.”

“You’re right.”

“Have a good night, Lady Cate.” With a nod, Mrs. Fraser tottered from the room, tray in hand.

Silence fell over the castle again as the Frasers and Jack departed for their respective homes, leaving Cate alone for the night.

With a wary glance around the room, she slouched lower into her chair and returned to her book.

“Just fiction,” she reminded herself.

An eerie pall hung over her. Her conversation with Molly sprang into her thoughts again. She pushed it aside, trying not to give in to her building panic. Mrs. Fraser didn’t believe in ghosts. She didn’t believe in ghosts. At least, that’s what she told herself.

Her eyes grew heavy as she read. She let her head collapse back into the soft leather behind her. Her head lolled to the side. As it dropped, she jerked herself awake. Drowsy, it took her a moment to wake up.

She sucked in a deep breath as movement caught her attention. She whipped her head toward it. One of the heavy draperies swayed back and forth.

Cate forced herself to relax.

“Probably just a draft,” she murmured to herself. The windows were old. They probably leaked. Though no cool air wafted across her skin, Cate sighed and ignored it. The last thing she needed was another unnerving incident right before bed.

The drape continued to move, shifting direction in a larger motion. If this large of a movement was coming from a drafty window, Cate was sure she would feel a draft.

She would need to investigate. There had to be an explanation.

Cate rose from the chair, swallowing hard and steeling her nerves. With a deep breath, she inched toward the moving curtain. It stopped moving as soon as she took a step. Whatever unseen force had been at work suddenly halted. Had it felt her presence? Was it now gone?

Her heart beat hard in her chest, and her pulse quickened as she stared at the curtain. It hung motionless. After several tense moments, her pulse slowed. She narrowed her eyes as she eased back toward the chair's supple leather seat.

Before she sat down, the drape whipped wildly again. Cate bolted upright, her heart rising into her throat. She stumbled backward, smacking into the chair as she tried to skirt around it.

There was no gust of wind. And no drafty window could produce this.

With another hard swallow, Cate squared her shoulders and raised her chin. She had to learn what force caused this. She pushed herself to take one step forward—then another, and another, and another.

She steadied herself a safe distance from the curtain and reached for it. As her fingers grazed the fabric, Cate's eyes widened as the source of the movement revealed itself.

CHAPTER 11



Cate stared with her jaw agape at the flailing curtain before a black and white face peeked from under the tartan fabric. Cate's shoulder slumped, and she clutched her chest in relief.

"RILEY!" she exclaimed. "You scared me half to death."

In her dazed state after dozing off, she'd failed to notice Riley wasn't still asleep in his spot on the rug. She raced over to the little dog and scooped him up, ruffling the fur on his head. He gave her an appreciative kiss on the cheek.

"I think I've been watching too many spooky movies and reading too many gothic novels. That's enough excitement for one night, buddy. Let's head to bed before I scare myself again. Or you do."

As Cate slid between the sheets, she glanced around the room. What odd experience would disturb her sleep tonight? She'd not had a restful night's sleep since she arrived. She slouched down and switched off the light.

Despite the unexpected incident with Riley, exhaustion set in and she slept soundly through the night. The next several days passed without incident. She began to settle into life, chalking up her odd experiences to her own nerves.

She started to fall into a routine, and castle life became normal. Her sense of belonging grew with each passing day as she became more familiar with her familial home.

The paperwork arrived from Mr. Smythe to transfer the cottage from her ownership to the Fraser's, along with instructions on signing them and sending them back. They celebrated with a small cake after Jack delivered them to the courier in town.

At the end of the week, she received an email from Gayle asking how her first week in her new home went. She responded that she was getting along well, omitting her two scares, fearing it may paint her as a foolish girl giving in to ghost stories. Already fading from her memory, she chalked them up to being overstimulated.

Cate filled her new free time with novels and research into her family and the castle's history. She started with the resources at the castle. During her exploration, she's stumbled upon several journals and photo albums. Even if they explained nothing about her family or the castle's history, they could provide an afternoon of entertainment that didn't involve a governess lurking around a creepy castle.

Alone in the castle on Sunday, she spent the day inside. Gray clouds darkened the skies. A chilly wind gusted from the north, and rain pelted the windows. The weather added to the haunted ambiance of the castle.

Cate busied herself exploring some of the materials she had found. With several photo albums tucked under her arm, she carried a warm cup of tea to her sitting room. After nestling under a heavy blanket with Riley on her chaise, she pulled one of the large photo albums onto her lap. The album contained pictures from the early twentieth century. While she learned little from them, she stared at each of them, wondering what life was like in the bygone era.

She picked up a second album and paged through it. With photos from the more recent past, this album contained some pictures of Lady Gertrude MacKenzie. The images of her benefactor fascinated her as she slowly paged through the book. Pictures of Gertrude as a small child filled the early pages. Halfway through, the images showed Gertrude as a young woman. With the labels below each photograph, Cate identified Gertrude's mother, Mary, and her father, Oliver.

She grabbed a sheet of paper and jotted them down, drawing a tiny family tree. As she stared at the three names, she wrote her own, drawing a line between her and Gertrude and punctuating it with a question mark.

"Cousins, but how?" she murmured.

When Cate turned the page again, a new face stared out at her. A child who looked to be about six years old stood outside the castle with Gertrude. She focused on the caption at the bottom. A gasp escaped her as she read it. Riley popped his head up at Cate's expression of surprise, trying to determine the reason behind it.

Below the photo, the caption read *Lady Gertrude with Cousin Logan MacKenzie*.

The small boy's name caught her eye. Logan MacKenzie. Logan was her father's name, though his last name was Kensie. What were the chances Gertrude had another relative named Logan? She tried to recall Mr. Smythe's statement about Gertrude having her parents' address. Had they known each other?

"Logan MacKenzie?" she said aloud. "Riley, maybe this is my dad."

She stared for another minute at the picture. Could this boy, standing outside of the castle with Gertrude, have been her father as a child? If it was, had he forgotten this visit because of his young age? Coming to a castle didn't seem like something you would forget, even at the tender age of six, but it may have happened.

With renewed interest, Cate examined the album further, finding more pictures of the boy in various rooms of the castle. On another page, Cate found a picture of the boy with his parents. She read their names: *Charles and Sophie MacKenzie*. Her grandparents' names were Charles and Sophie Kensie. It couldn't be a coincidence.

Had her grandparents changed their last name, or had there been some miscommunication on their paperwork when they moved to the U.S.? If it was the latter, why was the story never told? And if it was the former, what prompted them to change their name?

Cate had more questions than answers. She thought her parents had never mentioned family because there was no family to mention. All she was told was that her grandparents moved to the United States when her father had been a small boy. Her grandparents passed away before her birth, so she didn't have much information about them. Her parents didn't have any photos of them, so she couldn't tell if the people in the picture were younger versions of her grandparents or not.

She hoped to find more information, confused yet intrigued by this turn of events. She paged through the rest of the album, but she found no other

clues. No other pictures of Logan MacKenzie or her grandparents were included in the album.

Cate set the book aside, intending to keep it in her sitting room to study again. She went through the others she brought up with her, but found no further traces of family visits from the people she suspected may be the Kensies.

As interesting as she found the other pictures, Cate's mind dwelled on the image of the small boy that she presumed was her father. She hoped to find more information in some other journals or photo albums in the castle.

The following morning, she dug through the other photo albums she'd found. Riley nudged her as she spread out on the floor of her sitting room with the photos.

"Sorry, buddy, I promise we'll go later, but you know how I am when I get my mind on something. I'm like you with a bone." Cate winked at him.

Cate spent hours poring over the photo albums but found no additional information. Frustrated, Cate took a break and went for her walk with Riley to clear her head. When she returned to the castle, she paged through the photo album with the pictures of Logan MacKenzie. She studied the images, but it was impossible to tell if this was her father. There seemed to be a resemblance, but that could be said for many pictures of children.

Cate closed the album with a sigh. Staring at the same photos again gave her no new information. Her questions continued to be left unanswered. But she was convinced this must be her father. The chances of another Logan with parents named Charles and Sophie related to the MacKenzies had to be small.

"What do you think, Riley? Is this Grandpa Kensie in his younger years?"

The dog gave her no definitive answer.

Cate gave up for the evening.

Over the next few days, she attempted to track down more information. She called the local church to inquire about birth records. They had none for her father or grandfather. On the off-chance that the relationship existed on her mother's side, she inquired about her mother, her mother's parents, or her grandmother on her father's side. They had no information on any of them.

She jabbed at her phone's display to end the call, tossing it on the desk as she bit her lower lip. With no information locally, she'd have to search

elsewhere.

She wandered to the portrait gallery to study the names on the brass plaques under each portrait. Heavy wooden frames housed the likenesses of the MacKenzies that preceded her, limned behind by the red walls and gold trim. She stared up at the portrait of Douglas MacKenzie, the castle's builder. His blue eyes, much like her own, stared back. At least she knew they had one ancestor in common, even if went as far back as the 1700s.

She moved down the line to the next portrait, wondering if she was related to Finlay MacKenzie. She wandered around the room, eyeing each portrait, finding resemblances between herself and the subject. Her eyebrow arched as she stared up at the portrait of Gertrude.

In the corner, a large wooden stand housed a closed bible. Cate flicked it open, wondering when it had been printed. A family tree spread across the inside cover.

She found Gertrude and her parents, Oliver and Mary. She traced her finger up to their parents and across to find any relatives that could have led to her side of the family. A large ink stain obliterated any additional information about Oliver's generation.

Cate tried to glean any small details from underneath the ink by holding the book in every possible position, but she was unable to see what was under the inkblot. Someone's carelessness had obscured any information.

With a sigh, she snapped the book shut, concluding she'd need to change strategies. With no information in the castle or locally, she'd need to expand her search. Perhaps finding out when the name change occurred would be a prudent first step.

She returned to the library and pulled her laptop closer to her as she sank onto the desk chair. A quick search of all the major ancestry sites showed scans of immigration paperwork detailing her grandparents' move from England to the United States. The paperwork showed the surname Kensie.

Cate slumped in the chair and stared out over the roses blooming beyond the window. They'd been the Kensies when they'd moved, at least.

She leaned forward again and tapped at the keyboard, searching for birth records for her father and grandparents. She found nothing accessible in the UK databases. She slouched in the chair again, tapping the desk with her pencil as she considered her next move.

Perhaps Gayle could help. She pulled the laptop closer and typed an email asking about how they'd tracked her down.

Mrs. Fraser tottered into the room with a lunch tray as Cate closed her laptop. "Well, have you found anything out about yourself?"

"Afraid not," Cate answered. "I hope to have better news soon."

"I almost forgot to tell you, Lady Cate—I packed all Lady MacKenzie's personal belongings away and put them in the tower room. That was the best place so that they wouldn't be in your way, but you could access them. Well, what wasn't donated according to her wishes. I dinnae think you've been through those boxes yet, and I dinnae know if anything there would help you, but I thought I'd mention it. Even if it doesn't help, most of her personal items were there. I just packed everything up for you to go over whenever you have the chance."

"Oh, thank you, Mrs. Fraser. I'll take a look this afternoon."

Cate ate her lunch quickly, determined to spend her afternoon with the new stash of potential clues. After she finished lunch, she checked her email. Gayle, efficient as ever, had already responded to her enquiry.

Dear Cate,

Lady MacKenzie had given us information about a branch of the family in the United States. She knew your father's name and had an old address of his we used to track down his current status and, eventually, to find you. I'm sorry we don't have more information than that. Lady MacKenzie assured us you were the closest relative to her. Good luck with your search, and please let me know if I can be of any further assistance.

On another note, it sounds like you are settling in well. Castle life suits you.

Best, Gayle

As Mr. Smythe had mentioned, Lady MacKenzie was aware of the other branch of the family. She even had an address for Cate's father. But was her father aware of his family in Scotland? With a sigh, she realized she may never have an answer to that question.

But she had a new treasure trove to search through in the tower.

"Let's explore something new," she said, as she gathered Riley into her arms. Cate grabbed the bone Mrs. Fraser had provided Riley with earlier and began the climb to the tower.

She circled around the many stairs leading upward to the room perched at the top.

With Riley settled in the corner happily gnawing on the bone, Cate eyed the stack of boxes. Lady MacKenzie had accumulated many things during her life at Dunhaven. She had her work cut out for her. With this number of cardboard containers, it may take her more than the afternoon to finish.

“No time like the present,” she mumbled to herself. She picked a stack and dove into the first box.

Cate sifted through the possessions, finding nothing helpful to her heritage mystery. What she did find were many interesting items that told her a bit about who Gertrude MacKenzie was; there were a few decorative items that had adorned her dressing space, some perfumes, lotions, and other personal things.

One box remained in the first stack. She pulled it open, finding a large wooden jewelry box inside. Music filled the air as she flipped it open. Notes and letters spilled from the inside. Cate scanned several of these, finding typical keepsakes: a note from Gertrude’s mother on her twentieth birthday and a card she received from her mother prior to the woman’s death. Cate carefully set them aside and reached into the box for the next item. As she opened the folded note, several pictures fell out.

Cate shuffled through the photos. Lady Gertrude stood in front of the Statue of Liberty in the first. The date on the photo read 1975. In the second, Times Square created the backdrop for a smiling Gertrude. The White House was featured in the third. As Cate flipped to the fourth photo, she froze.

This time, there was no mistaking her father, now appearing close to his thirties. He stood in the middle of the picture between two women, a grin on his face. Cate’s mother stood on one side of him, and on the other side was none other than Lady Gertrude MacKenzie. The caption read *Visiting Cousin Logan and his new wife*.

Cate sat in stunned silence for several minutes. Lady Gertrude MacKenzie visited her father as an adult. And her father certainly met and mingled with Lady MacKenzie. But he had never mentioned her. Cate could not figure out why.

From the time she was a child, her parents told her she had no living relatives. Both her parents had been only children, so there was no close family, nor any other relatives. Her father never mentioned a visit from a Scottish cousin who lived in a castle, nor that she was still alive and was Cate’s closest living family.

Cate climbed to her feet as she contemplated the find. The timepiece swung around her neck and she grasped it. Her thumb rubbed against the cool metal as she paced the floor.

A loud ticking echoed. She glanced down at the timepiece in her hands and snapped it open, finding the second hand crawling along the face. This time she wasn't half-asleep, and she wasn't imagining things. Something was wrong with the watch. She would need to have it serviced. Judging by the time, Gayle would be out of the office. She'd ask her tomorrow for a recommendation for a repairman.

Cate returned her attention to the picture still clutched in her hand. The discovery that her father knew Lady MacKenzie, had met her as an adult, and was very much aware of their relationship surprised her. Why would her father keep something like this from her? Was there some family feud? It would explain the inkblot in the family bible.

Perhaps it wasn't just carelessness; perhaps it was a deliberate blotting out of a branch of the family that was no longer welcome at the castle. But then why bequeath the castle to her? Lady MacKenzie was aware that Cate's side of the family was her closest relatives. If there had been a rift in the family, why not pass the property to someone else?

Cate wandered to the window across the room as thoughts paraded through her mind. A steady rain fell from the sky. Her eyebrow arched as she studied the wet window, recalling the forecast had predicted steady sunshine.

She spun away from the window, stopping abruptly as she turned. Across the room, the door, which she had left open, was now closed.

Cate squashed her eyebrows together as she strode to it and twisted the knob. The door did not budge. She spun the knob again, jimmying the door in the jamb. It held fast.

Her pulse quickened as she tried a third time, ramming her shoulder into the wood in an attempt to shove the door open. It did not move.

Cate backed a few steps away from the door and stared at it. She was trapped. Someone had locked her in the tower room.

CHAPTER 12



Cate stared at the closed door for another moment before she tried it again. It would not budge. She pounded against the wood, calling for help. No one answered.

She didn't expect them to. No one knew where she was, and no one would be looking for her until dinnertime. Perhaps then someone would figure it out and come searching for her.

She spun on her heel and paced across the room. The timepiece bounced against her sweater. She grabbed the chain to steady it, sliding her hand down to hold the gold watch.

The broken gold watch, she reminded herself. Her heart sank as she realized it had broken. On top of the notion that her family had been blotted out of the family bible, she'd now inherited the castle and destroyed a precious heirloom.

Her thumb rubbed the face, and she stared down at it.

Her jaw dropped open as she found it ticking away at normal speed. She screwed up her face, certain it had just been malfunctioning. She'd have to have it looked at. Something must be wrong with it.

She'd email Gayle about a repairman. If she ever escaped from the tower room. She turned back toward the door and froze again. It hung open, the stone stairs beyond it in full view.

Cate raced to the doorway and stared down the spiral steps. No footsteps sounded on them. Had someone unlocked the door?

"Hello?" she called, her voice echoing off the stone walls.

No one answered. She frowned as she stood dumbfounded in the room. The door had been stuck fast moments ago. She twisted and stared at the belongings scattered on the floor. She had no desire to remain in this room any longer, even to clean them up.

Perhaps she'd try again tomorrow.

She collected Riley, napping in the corner next to his discarded bone, and hurried from the room. As she spiraled down the stairs, she glanced out the tall tower window. Bright sunshine lit the rolling hills. The storm, it seemed, had passed rather quickly.

She descended to the lowest level of the castle, making her way to the kitchen. Mrs. Fraser bustled around the room, putting the final touches on her dinner tray. Cate knocked against the jamb.

"Oh, Lady Cate, I was just about to bring this up to you."

Cate smiled at her. "Thanks, I can take it up. I just was wondering if you were near the tower a few minutes ago. The one you put Lady MacKenzie's things in."

Mrs. Fraser wiped her hands on her apron after settling a slice of pie onto a plate and loading it onto the tray. "Nay, I wasn't."

Cate set Riley on the floor and grabbed the tray's handles. "Oh, okay."

"Is everything all right, Lady Cate?"

"Yes, I was in the tower going through some of Lady MacKenzie's things and the door got shut and I couldn't get it open."

Mrs. Fraser arched an eyebrow. "Ah, well, such is the way in these old places. Likely swelled and got stuck."

"You're probably right."

"You may want to prop it open next time, just in case."

Cate nodded at her as she lifted the laden tray. "Good idea. Thanks, Mrs. Fraser."

"Just a moment, Lady Cate. I'll take the tray."

Cate lifted the tray a bit higher. "I've got it."

"Maybe so, but you shouldn't be carrying your own tray about." Mrs. Fraser waved at her in a signal to pass the tray over.

"Nonsense, Mrs. Fraser. I'm perfectly capable. Enjoy your dinner." Cate spun, calling Riley with her.

She climbed the stairs and settled in the library. Questions filled her mind as she ate. The more she searched, the less answers she found. She needed a break, and soon.

She hoped to start solving her problems by fixing the timepiece. Gayle would be out of the office for the evening, so she'd send her an email the following morning.

As planned, Cate started her day by sending an email to Gayle, explaining the odd behavior the timepiece displayed and asking for a recommendation of a repairman.

After sending the email, Cate made her way to the kitchen before breakfast. Mrs. Fraser bustled around the space, preparing the meal. "Good morning, Mrs. Fraser."

"Good morning, Lady Cate. How was your night?"

Cate wandered to the oatmeal cooking on the stove and gave it a stir. "Good, thanks."

"I can do that, Lady Cate," Mrs. Fraser said, eyeing her nervously.

"I've got it," Cate said with a smile, twirling the wooden spoon around in the pot.

Mrs. Fraser gave her a tight-lipped smile, her eyebrow arching as she busied herself sliding a tray of cookies into the oven. "Did you find anything of interest in those boxes yesterday?"

"Yes. I found a picture of my father with Lady MacKenzie. She had visited him shortly after he married my mother. I had never known."

Mrs. Fraser adjusted the oven temperature before reaching into a cupboard for bowls. "Really? Well, I'm glad you found something to help you."

Cate let the spoon rest against the side of the pot. "Mrs. Fraser, you grew up here, right?"

"Been here since my birth, yes."

"Do you remember anything being discussed about my family? Or my grandparents visiting?"

Mrs. Fraser paused for a moment as she shook raisins into a serving dish. "Nay, I cannae say I've heard anything about your family. When Lady MacKenzie was ill, Mr. Fraser and I wondered what would become of the place since there didn't seem to be a relative in sight to take it over. We didn't even know if there was a relative out there."

Cate frowned at the response. Another dead end. "I see. I thought you may have heard something being here all your life."

Mrs. Fraser shook a generous helping of brown sugar into a serving bowl before setting it on Cate's tray. "Nay, I've not heard a whisper of

anything about your side. Never met your grandparents or your parents and never heard of you, Lady Cate, until Mr. Smythe told us he'd located the new owner."

Cate cocked a hip and stuck her hand on it. "Well, it was worth a shot. I may have questions I will never have answers to."

Mrs. Fraser sidled next to her and gave the oatmeal a final stir before ladling a hearty helping into a bowl. "You mean your father never told you about any of this?"

"Not a word. I never knew I had a relative. I wish I did. I would have liked to have met her. She seemed like a very interesting person—someone I would have liked."

Mrs. Fraser nodded as she set the bowl on Cate's tray. "Aye, Lady Cate, she was—and very kind, too; the picture of grace. You're not much different from her, to be honest. Well, that's your breakfast ready. Anything else I can do for you?"

"No, no, that's all. I'll carry it up myself, thanks, Mrs. Fraser. Come on, Riley," Cate called the little dog to follow her.

She settled in the library with her tray. As she stirred the brown sugar into the oatmeal, she decided to move her focus to her writing project. The inquiries about her heritage had stalled, and while she wasn't giving up, she needed a break from the constant dead ends.

After polishing off the warm meal, she opted to postpone work in favor of spending a summer morning with Riley outside. As they rounded the corner, they ran into Jack. With a ladder propped against a large birch tree, he hacked at a few wayward branches.

"Well, if it isn't Lady Cate and Sir Riley. Good morning to you!" he yelled from his perch as he climbed down.

"Good morning, Jack. How are you today?"

"Ah, I cannae complain, lassie. I'm alive and breathing this beautiful Scottish air," he said, giving Riley a scratch under his chin. "And how are you and the good Sir Riley this morning?"

Cate buried her hands in the pockets of her jacket. "Good, thanks. Although, this beautiful Scottish air is just a bit on the chilly side for me."

Jack collected a few of the cut branches and tossed them into a pile. "Chilly? Ahhhh, lassie, this is nice, warm weather. If you think this is chilly, you've not seen anything yet."

Cate grabbed a few of the fallen limbs, tossing them on top of Jack's pile. "Ha! Well, I'm not freezing, but Aberdeen was a lot warmer than this at this time of the year."

"Not considering moving back for all that warmth, are you?"

She dusted her hands off. "Never! I'm made of tougher stuff than that, you know."

"There's the spirit, lassie, there's the spirit. Well, I better get on with this before Mr. Fraser catches me idling my time away talking about the weather, but if there's anything I can help you with, you let me know."

"Thanks," Cate said. She took a step away before she turned back. "Actually, I could use your help with something."

Jack stepped back off the ladder. "Name it, Cate."

"Well, I'd like to go into town, and I was wondering if you had a morning to spare this week to drive me in. I'm not sure that I trust myself to drive on the right side of the road yet."

"Ah, well, good thing you're asking me because we drive on the left side of the road," Jack said, with a wink.

Cate rolled her eyes and shook her head. "Very funny. I mean that I don't know if I'll drive on the correct side of the road."

"Well, I can definitely help you with that, lassie. I'd be happy to take you into town any morning that you want, just name it."

"How's tomorrow morning?" Cate asked. "The cleaning service is coming in so it's a nice day to be out of the castle."

"Tomorrow morning is fine with me. Shall we leave around nine? I dare say you'll not find much open before then."

"Nine sounds great. I'll see you then."

* * *

After a quick morning walk to the loch the following morning, Cate left Riley with his favorite ball, tucked away in her bedroom suite, and met Jack at the front of the castle to head into town.

Jack opened the car door for her. "I hope we have enough time to tour the entire town. We may need a second day."

"I'll bet. I heard there's a grocery store and everything."

“Well, you heard right, lassie. There’s a small grocer and a pub,” Jack answered as he slid in behind the wheel. He aimed the car toward Dunhaven, the gravel crunching under the tires as they pulled away from the castle.

“Ah, but my real interest is in the town’s library.”

Jack pulled his lips back in a wince as he pulled onto the road. “The library? Ack, you’re kidding me? All this fuss for the library?”

Cate glanced out her window at the nearby farms. “The library, yep.”

“You’ve got a whole library here in the castle. But you want to go to Dunhaven’s library?”

“I was hoping they might have some information on the castle that we don’t.”

Jack turned onto the street leading through town. “New research project, eh? Well, right-o, then, let’s get you to the library. If you want to get wild and crazy, we can visit the bookstore and even a church.”

“Very funny. I’ve already called the church, and they had no information. Maybe we could check out the pub after, though?”

Jack jabbed a finger in her direction before slapping his hand against the wheel. “Now, you’re talking, lassie, now you’re talking. At least we’ve got something to look forward to!”

Buildings filled in on either side of them as they entered the town. While smaller than Aberdeen, Jack exaggerated about its tiny size. It had much more to offer than just a library, a pub, and a few churches. Cate found it to be the perfect small town.

Jack dropped Cate off in front of the library, telling her he planned to run to the hardware store and would meet her at the library afterward.

Cate pushed through the doors into the small library. The scent of aging books filled the air in the quiet space. A young woman behind the circulation desk greeted her. Cate smiled and whispered a hello to the girl as she approached the desk.

“Hello, ma’am, something I can help you with?” the girl asked.

“Yes, hello, I’m Dr. Cate Kensie. I’m the new owner of Dunhaven Castle. I was wondering if you had any information on it, perhaps old building plans or anything they might have filed with the municipality? Maybe any articles or texts written about it by locals?”

“Oh, hello, Dr. Kensie. Let me see if the librarian can help you. I’m not sure what we have.”

“Oh, great, thank you.”

The young woman disappeared into a small office behind the circulation desk. After a moment, an older woman appeared through the doorway.

“Hello, Dr. Kensie. A pleasure to meet you,” she began, in a deep Scottish brogue. “I’m Mrs. Isla Campbell, the librarian. Within our private archives, we have some things that may interest you. I also know that we have the book *The Mysteries of Scotland*, in which the castle is mentioned, if you’d like to see that?”

Cate recalled the title of the book from her search in Aberdeen College’s library. She’d finally be able to read the reason it had been included. “That sounds great. Thank you so much.”

The woman led Cate to a back room, which appeared to double as a storage room. Cate set her tote bag down on the floor near a small carrel while the librarian pulled several materials from the shelves.

She left Cate to study the materials while she went in search of the book she’d mentioned earlier. They included a copy of the plans for the castle when it had been modernized and plans for the added wings, along with a few other historical records involving the castle’s building and operation. One of the reports noted the castle served as a recovery space for officers after the First World War.

As Cate perused the documents, the librarian slid a book onto the desk before disappearing again. She picked up the thick tome. In gold letters, the title gleamed on top of an image of a crumbling castle. She flipped the book over, scanning the blurb. It indicated that the book contained ghost stories from various areas, homes, and castles across Scotland. Cate checked the index for a reference to Dunhaven Castle, then thumbed to the indicated page. She found a short entry detailing the reason for including Dunhaven Castle in the book.

Dunhaven Castle, located just outside of the town of Dunhaven in northwestern Scotland, has long been the site of mysterious occurrences. During its construction, one worker died on the site in a freak accident with falling bricks, while another disappeared without a trace. Following the construction, those working at the castle insisted that the ghosts of those who met their demise on the property or who had never been seen or heard from again haunted its halls. Many of those working in the castle often left, some of them in the middle of the night, unable to continue working in the home after experiencing random sights and sounds at various times of the

day or night. The castle's owners, the MacKenzie family, were often left without servants at short notice.

Stories of these phantom occurrences were not confined to only those who worked at the castle after its construction. Visitors to the home and other workers have continued to tell tales of occurrences, all bearing a resemblance to the original tales from early servants: phantom sights and sounds presenting at all hours of the day and night. Visitors and workers at the castle tell tales of being woken from their sleep to hear music coming from nowhere or to hear conversations from people that were never to be found. They tell stories of seeing people roaming the halls that disappeared when followed. All those that experienced some form of manifestation at the castle, when asked, have indicated that they believe it to be haunted by the ghosts of those that gave their lives in her construction.

Throughout the history of the castle, the MacKenzie family has refused to comment on the stories about the castle. The current occupant was contacted for comment during the writing of this book; no response was received.

Cate bit her lower lip as she read the entry. Others had reported phantom music in the castle. When Cate had explored the place in the middle of the night, it was because she had heard music. Had she experienced the same phenomenon as the others? Maybe Molly was right and her new home was haunted.

CHAPTER 13



Cate's limbs turned to jelly, and her pulse raced as a moment of panic washed over her. She scanned the words on the page again. They detailed similar experiences to the ones she'd had. Was her new home haunted?

She shook her head, refusing to give in to the notion. The castle was *not* haunted. What a ridiculous idea. Molly had been joking when she had said that. Ghosts were not real.

The book was sensationalizing a few strange occurrences—probably to drive tourism, Cate mused. And it was easy to sell the tale of a haunted castle. There was no shortage of stories about the topic.

Cate snapped the book closed and set it aside, focusing on the other materials that the librarian had provided her. She glanced at the time. Jack would be here shortly, she wouldn't have time to take any notes.

She glanced at the collection before gathering them into her arms, leaving behind the book. She wanted to study them in depth at home. She would ask the librarian if she could borrow them. As she ambled to the circulation desk, her arms laden with documents, Jack pushed through the library doors.

The girl behind the desk smiled at Cate. "Did you find everything you were looking for?"

Cate splayed the materials on the counter. "Yes, the librarian helped me to find everything that I needed. I'd like to take a more thorough look at these materials. Is it possible for me to take them home?"

“Ah, those are in the private collection, I’m not sure—” the assistant began.

“Oh, I’ll be very careful with them.”

The girl bit her lower lip, shooting a glance at the librarian’s closed door. “Um, well, I’m just not sure. I don’t think we’re supposed to allow these to leave, and the librarian has stepped out, so I’m not sure I can help.”

Jack leaned over the desk toward the assistant and chimed into the conversation. “Why, don’t you know who you’re talking to, lassie? This is the world-renowned Dr. Cate Kensie. Are you going to be the reason she can’t complete her research? Why, she might make our little hamlet famous one day. Of course, if we’re not famous we can all blame you, I suppose.”

Her face turned a bright shade of red. The assistant seemed flustered. Cate couldn’t blame her. Jack was a rather good-looking man. He reminded her of a younger version of a certain Scottish actor whose name was escaping her at the moment.

“Well,” she stammered, grinning at Jack then turning to Cate, “I suppose if you’re a historian, it won’t hurt. Let me just mark down what you’re taking and you can be on your way.”

“Thank you, it’s much appreciated. And like I said, I’ll be careful and have them back before anyone misses them.”

The assistant made a short list of what Cate was taking, smiled, and wished her a good day. Cate gathered the materials and followed Jack out the door. After storing her treasures in the car, they made their way to the pub for lunch.

With their order placed, Jack began their conversation by asking, “So, it’s a bit warmer where you came from, eh?”

Cate sipped at her ale. “Yes, it’s been no-coat weather for weeks where I came from.”

“So, were you prepared for our weather? Have you been here before?”

“No, I’ve never been to Scotland. But I searched it on a weather app before coming, so I guess I was as prepared as I could be.”

Jack lifted his beer to his lips. “Never been, eh? Well, at least you’ve done things right for your first trip.”

“I have?”

He set the stein down on the table, licking the foam from his lips. “Sure. The right way to do things is to come to Scotland for the first time after you’ve inherited a castle.”

“Oh, right. That’s what I thought everyone did, so I just followed suit.”

Jack leaned toward her, clasping his hands on the table. “What do you think of your new home? Do you like it here?”

Cate sucked in a breath as she considered her answer. “Well, I’ve only been here two weeks, so it’s early to judge, but on the whole, I do like it. I already feel much more at home here than I ever did in Aberdeen. And I went from living in an apartment with three rooms, to living in a castle, so I can’t complain. I assume you like it here since you came back?”

Jack nodded as the waitress slid his bangers and mash in front of him before delivering the fish and chips to Cate. “Sure, I mean, it’s home. I traveled a bit, worked on a fishing boat for a while, but when my father passed away, I came back and continued the Reid tradition: taking over his job on the estate. He died of a heart attack, and I decided it was time to come home and fulfill my duties here. You know, keep an eye on my grandfather and so on.”

Cate picked up a piping hot fry. “Oh, I’m sorry to hear that, Jack. Your dad worked at Dunhaven, too?”

Jack cut into one of the sausages on his plate. “Aye, that he did, lassie. There’s always been a Reid as the estate manager for as long as any of us can remember. My grandfather before my father, and his father before him, and on and on back through the line.”

“Oh, wow, I hadn’t realized that. I’m sure you know more about that place than I do.”

“I don’t know about that, Cate the historian, but I spent a lot of time there while growing up.” He jabbed a finger at the timepiece dangling from Cate’s neck. “I remember that watch you’ve got on always being around Lady MacKenzie’s neck. Funny how you remember things like that, eh?”

“Oh,” Cate said, grabbing the watch, “yes, apparently, it was important to her. She left me a handwritten note as part of the inheritance, telling me I needed to wear it at all times. I thought it was odd, but I guess it was just really important to her.”

“Must have been.”

Cate sighed as she bit into another fry. “Which makes me feel even worse.”

Jack scooped gravy-laden mashed potatoes onto his fork. “You lost me, Lady Cate, feel worse about what?”

Cate stared down at the gold timepiece. “Oh, I think I may have broken the watch.”

Jack feigned shock. “Oh, broken it? You Americans, riding roughshod over everything. How did you do that, drop it from the turret?”

Cate shrugged as she pushed a piece of fish around on her plate. “No idea. But it keeps slowing down, sometimes it seems almost to stop. Then it starts up again as if nothing was wrong. I need to have it looked at.”

“My grandfather could take a look if you’d like. He’s not a genuine watchmaker, but he’s good with those kinds of things. He might have some experience with it from when he worked there.”

“Oh, that would be great. I asked Gayle about someone, but I haven’t checked to see if she recommended anyone or not.”

Jack shoved a forkful of mashed potatoes into his mouth. “I’m sure he could peek at it after lunch if you don’t mind an extra stop?”

“Not at all. I’d like to make sure it works properly. I’d feel terrible if anything happened to it on my watch, no pun intended. It has been in the family for so long.”

They spent the remainder of the meal discussing places each of them had traveled.

After lunch, they made the short trip to Jack’s grandfather’s house, a charming cottage on the outskirts of town. After thanking the man for agreeing to look at the watch, Cate handed it over.

The elderly man carefully held it in his hands and studied it. “I can remember this watch from when I was a young man on the estate.”

“Jack mentioned that you worked there. And his father, too.”

Stanley wagged a finger at her as he showed her into the living room. “Aye, lassie, there’s always been a Reid on that estate. It’s tradition. Wouldn’t seem right without us.”

“Well, I’m glad to have Jack there.”

“Now let me see to this watch. Think you may have broken it, do you, lassie? Let me take a look.” The man collapsed into a desk chair across the space. A large magnifying glass was clamped onto the desk’s edge. A jeweler’s toolkit lay open in front of him.

He carefully opened the timepiece with jeweler’s pliers. Holding it with reverence, he eyed the inside.

“Now, come on over here, Jackie. Take a look at the inside, and I’ll show you some important parts.”

Cate shoved her hands into the pocket of her cardigan. “I was telling Jack, it seems to slow suddenly, almost to a stop, and it ticks very loudly when it does that. Then, it will just start back up again as if nothing was wrong with it.”

Stanley peered over his reading glasses and nodded at her. “You hit the nail on the head with that last one, lassie.”

Cate furrowed her brow, cocking her head to the side. “I’m sorry, I don’t understand. What did I do?”

Stanley climbed to his feet and handed the timepiece back to her. “You were right—nothing is wrong with it.”

Cate stared at it for a moment before sliding the chain over her head. “Are you sure? It seems to slow almost to a stop. It’s done it a few times now. That can’t be normal.”

“I assure you, it’s right as rain, this watch.”

Cate furrowed her brow. “I trust your experience, Mr. Reid, but would it still be prudent to have a watchmaker look at it, just to make sure it’s in tip-top shape?”

She winced, hoping she didn’t offend him.

“Nay, I’d not recommend that, lassie. Not at all.”

“Really? May I ask why?” Whether he felt it was needed or not, what would be the problem with having a second pair of eyes look at it?

“It’s quite an expensive piece. An antique, in fact. I’d not let it out of my sight. Lady MacKenzie was never without it. I’m sure that’s why.”

“Did she ever have it serviced, I mean, that you know of?”

Stanley shook his head, tugging at his white beard with his fingers. “Nay, she never did. If anything needed fixing, I took care of it. She would have trusted no one outside of the estate to care for the watch.”

“Hmm. That’s interesting. Well, thanks so much for looking. I’m glad to know I haven’t broken it at least.”

A broad grin spread across his face. “You’re welcome, lassie. I’m happy to help.”

“Well, we’ll be on our way, then,” Cate said.

Jack said his goodbyes to his grandfather, giving the elderly man a clap on the back and half a hug. Cate thanked the elderly man again before leaving and making her way to the car with Jack.

“Well,” Jack said as they climbed into the car, “at least you’ve got the official word that you haven’t broken it.”

“Yeah, that’s a relief. I’ve not ruined my inheritance only a few weeks in.”

Cate remained quiet for the short trip back to the castle. Her mind dwelled on the conversation with Stanley Reid. She wondered if he was certain of his diagnosis. Her thoughts centered on how adamant he was about not having the watch serviced. It seemed strange. Did he not want his lack of experience to show if there was something wrong with the watch? Or was he worried about the piece being stolen or damaged? Either way, it seemed odd. Surely there were professional jewelers who could be trusted. Perhaps Gayle would have an answer.

When they arrived back on the estate, Cate thanked Jack for taking her into town. He helped her carry her bounty from the town’s library into the castle’s library.

She decided to look at the files later, preferring a walk with Riley before dinner. Before heading out, she checked her email to see if there was a response from Gayle, and found one waiting for her.

Dear Cate,

To our knowledge, Lady MacKenzie never had the watch serviced at any outside locations. I don’t believe either of us (meaning myself and Mr. Smythe) ever knew of any issues that she had with the timepiece. Mr. Smythe did indicate that she usually trusted Mr. Stanley Reid (Jack Reid’s grandfather) with mechanical work and suggested that you check with him if you believe the timepiece may be malfunctioning.

I hope you continue to adapt to your new surroundings with ease and find Scottish country life charming. If you need anything else, please do not hesitate to reach out.

Best,

Gayle

Cate frowned at her computer. So, Lady MacKenzie had never had trouble with the watch. And she trusted Jack’s grandfather to maintain it. It was another vote of confidence in Jack’s grandfather as a watch repairman. And no suggestions to take it to an experienced jeweler. It seemed rather

odd, but she guessed they had much more experience than she in these matters. Perhaps the watch was so valuable that even they did not trust it to leave Cate's care. Vowing to be extra careful with the piece from now on, Cate went in search of Riley for his pre-dinner walk of the estate with her.

Cate and Riley enjoyed a quiet and uneventful evening after their walk and dinner. Cate curled up with some old photo albums. When her chin hit her chest, she decided to head to bed.

As she crawled under the covers, though, a sense of unease filled her. The words from the library book's entry danced through her mind. Music that came from nowhere. Voices floating in the halls with no source. Specters. Ghosts.

Cate swallowed hard as she pulled the covers up to her chin and stared into the moonlit room. Molly's words rattled through her head. What she'd intended to be a joke, may turn out to be a warning.

CHAPTER 14



Cate shivered as the clock turned midnight. She'd not managed to fall asleep yet, unable to close her eyes without popping them open in seconds. The words of the book rang in her mind.

She shoved back the covers and climbed from her bed, tiptoeing to the doors of her suite and peering into the hall. Did ghosts roam up and down them? Would ghostly music play again?

With a sigh, she closed the door, her fingers hovering on the key in the keyhole. Perhaps she should lock it. Would that matter? Could ghosts go through doors?

Cate rolled her eyes at herself and hurried back to her bed, crawling under the covers again. She stared up at the ceiling, still too afraid to close her eyes.

"Cate," she said aloud, "you're being ridiculous. There are no such things as ghosts."

Her affirmation, even when voiced aloud, did little to settle her nerves. She sat up, her eyes scanning the dark corners for movement.

She climbed out of bed again and paced the room, checking the corners for spirits. Expanding her pacing area, she made her way around the sitting room. There was nothing there either, as she well knew, despite her paranoia. Still unable to sleep, she made her way around the castle. Perhaps the walk would tire her out enough to sleep.

She wandered through the massive hallways. Moonlight drenched everything in an eerie glow. It did little to ease her fear. Cate forced her

mind to appreciate the beauty in what she saw. She wandered in and out of rooms, trying to take in details, forcing her mind to focus on mundane things rather than allowing it to go at lightning speed to ghost stories.

In one bedroom closet, Cate found a box of personal belongings. Cate sifted through the items. Among the personal effects, she found several journals. With her inner historian triggered, she gathered them up with a giddy smile. Ghost stories were shoved to the far corners of her mind as excitement over personal journals from an occupant of the castle rose to the forefront.

She settled on her chaise and paged through, her heart leaping at the handwritten pages. Stifling a yawn, she pulled one onto her lap to read. As she settled back on the chaise, her eyelids grew heavy.

She preferred to savor the experience and enjoy each entry, so she set the journal aside and returned to her bedroom. As she crawled into bed, Riley lifted his head to acknowledge her return, settling back into the covers with a big sigh.

She fell asleep in minutes, her concern about ghosts finally relieved by her new discovery.

As her alarm woke her the following morning, a smile filled her face as she stretched, excitement over the journals still coursing through her. She jumped out of bed and dressed for the day. As she passed through her sitting room, she admired her new discovery.

She filled her morning hours taking notes on the library materials she'd borrowed, saving the journals for her evening reading. She hoped they would be a far better choice than the gothic haunted castle novels.

In the afternoon, a quick investigation of the closet where she'd found the journals led her to a few framed photographs. She eyed the pictures, recognizing the face in them as Mary MacKenzie, Gertrude's mother.

Mary may have known her grandparents. She wondered if she'd find a reference to them in the journals. As she checked her email before dinner, her cell phone jangled, buzzing across the desk.

She swiped to answer the unknown number.

"Lady Cate?" the Scottish voice asked.

"Yes, this is Cate."

"Oh, I'm so glad I got a hold of you. This is Isla Campbell, the librarian."

Cate leaned back in her chair, twirling her pen in her hand. “Hi, Mrs. Campbell, what can I do for you?”

“I’m calling because there’s been a terrible mistake made.”

“Oh?”

The woman continued, breathless. “Yes, you see, Amy, our assistant, allowed you to take those materials I shared with you from the library yesterday. I’m so sorry, but those are not to leave the library.”

Cate stared at the stack of documents on the desk. “I’ve been very careful with them.”

Mrs. Campbell chuckled, though Cate detected a hint of derision. “I’m certain you have been, though, really they shouldn’t have been taken from the library. I really must ask that you bring them back as soon as possible.”

Cate raised her eyebrows as she stared at the heap of records she’d yet to dive into. “I can bring them back tomorrow morning if that works.”

“That would be most appreciated. Thank you, Lady Cate.”

“You’re welcome, and I’m very sorry about the mix up.”

“As long as they’re returned tomorrow, it will be right as rain. Have a good night, Lady Cate.”

The line clicked and Cate pulled the phone away from her ear, staring at the pile of documents ruefully. She’d need to take any notes on them tonight.

She arose early and finished her last-minute notes on the library’s collection before she loaded the materials into the car, deciding to be adventurous and drive herself into town.

She loaded Riley into the car and made the short trip to town, easing into a parking space near the center of town. She returned the materials to the library, thanking the librarian again for the information.

“I appreciate the opportunity to study the documents. I’ve got stacks of notes on them.”

“I’m glad you found them helpful,” Mrs. Campbell said, studying them as though they’d been ruined.

“I think you’ll find everything in the same shape it was when I took it. I was very careful.”

Mrs. Campbell arched an eyebrow as she sifted through the documents. “Document preservation is best left to librarians.”

Cate puckered her lips at the statement, resisting the urge to roll her eyes. “Well, in any case, thank you.” She tapped the desk before she left the

library.

She collected Riley from the car to explore the town. The new smells entertained Riley, and he enjoyed the attention he received from the local townspeople. Cate found many charming shops that she was sure she would enjoy exploring over and over. Most shop owners were dog-friendly, so she took her time browsing.

The vast majority were curious to meet her since she was the new owner of the largest property in town and American.

She ducked into a shop selling postcards with pictures of Dunhaven Castle. An older man, his hair graying, stood behind a counter near the register. He nodded and smiled as she entered with Riley.

“Well, hello, little fellow,” the man said.

Riley glanced up at him, his nose sniffing. “I’ve got a wee bone here for you if you’d like.”

“I think he’d like it very much,” Cate answered.

The man skirted around the counter and fed a bone to Riley. He chomped on it, downing it in seconds.

Cate stuck her hand out. “Hi, I’m Cate.”

The man grabbed her hand and shook it. “Harry MacArthur. Are you visiting?”

“No,” Cate answered as Riley begged for another treat. “I’ve just moved here.”

“Just moved here?” The man arched an eyebrow as realization dawned on him. “You’re— You must be Cate Kensie, the new owner of the castle.”

“That’s right. Word travels fast around here, huh?”

“You don’t say. Especially when you own a castle. Everyone’s curious.”

Cate shrugged as Harry fed Riley another bone. “There’s not much to know, I’m afraid.”

“Oh, I doubt that. So, how are you finding Scottish life? Have you explored the castle?”

Cate nodded as she lifted Riley into her arms. “Yes, I have. It’s a big change from my life in the States, but I’m enjoying it.”

“I’ll bet,” Harry said with a grin. “I hope you’re settling in well. And the stories don’t bother you much. Everyone’s got a tale about that place. But don’t listen to them. You just go by your own experiences.”

Cate licked her lips as the odd experiences she’d had flitted across her mind. She forced a smile onto her lips and nodded. They chatted for a few

more minutes before Cate purchased three postcards and a porcelain dog figurine.

As she slid back into the car, she dug a pen from her purse and pulled the postcards from the bag. On the first, she wrote a thank you to Gayle for helping her unpack and settle in. She referenced the porcelain dog figurine, stating it was a thank you gift. On the second, she penned a short note to her former neighbor, Mrs. Kline, fulfilling her promise to write and passing along her best wishes. On the final postcard, she jotted a note to Molly, telling her the move had gone well and extending an invitation to visit.

After a trip to the post office to mail the postcards and package the dog for mailing, she returned to the castle in time for dinner.

After her full day, she drifted to sleep quickly. She awoke early the following day as thunder rumbled overhead. Lightning tore through the sky, and a soaking rain pelted the ground and windows.

Cate sipped her hot chocolate as she stared out at the gray sky. The shop owner's words rang in her mind as she shuffled through the darkened halls. Scenes from haunted castle movies flashed through her mind. There was always a storm right before someone spotted a ghost.

Cate wrinkled her nose, glad she wasn't alone in the castle. She retrieved the family bible from the portrait gallery and returned to her sitting room, curling on the chaise in front of a roaring fire built by Mr. Fraser. The flames leapt in the large fireplace, keeping the chill of the rainy day at bay.

Riley curled on the rug in front of the warm fire. Cate smiled at him before turning her attention to the journals she'd found.

She pulled the journal on the top of the stack onto her lap. A quick glance through it showed no markings or dates. She hoped to read the journals in order, if possible.

She paged through them, hoping to find dates or numbers. Her brow furrowed as she flipped through the first one. Several pages appeared to be missing from each journal, torn from the books.

Cate wrinkled her nose at the marred book. With any luck, the main ideas were intact and she could find some details about her family.

Cate observed the handwriting in some books was messier than in others. Was the person aging or writing hurriedly? She tried to use this to piece together an order but wasn't able to. Giving up on creating an order,

she closed them all except the first one she picked up and set them aside. She began to read the first page.

... heard the soft music as if it were floating on the air up the stairs. It was nice to hear the sounds of life in the castle again, no matter how strange. I stood at the top of the stairs with my eyes closed, enjoying the sounds of the music. I imagined all the people below in elegant gowns of their time period, dancing impeccably, laughing, drinking, enjoying. I thought of sneaking down to have a peek, but I still have not brought myself to explore during these events.

Cate set the book aside in favor of a sip of hot chocolate, as she mulled over the entry. The entry seemed to describe a party being held at the castle. Strangely, the lady of the house did not attend.

Perhaps these journals were not Mary MacKenzie's, or maybe she wrote them at a young age and wasn't talking about Dunhaven at all, but rather her family home. She didn't know much about any of her predecessors, so it was possible that Mary MacKenzie also came from a wealthy family who would have hosted such parties. As a young child, she wouldn't have been in attendance.

Cate imagined Mary as a small child longing to go to her parents' ball, standing at the top of a grand staircase, listening to the music play, watching for a glimpse of the ladies in their elegant gowns as they passed by.

Perhaps these journals were older than she realized, coming from a childhood version of Mary. She studied the first entry. It didn't look like a child's handwriting, although Cate couldn't be sure. Penmanship was a different matter in the era when Mary was a child, so it was comprehensible that this could have been the writing of someone around the age of ten. If these were her childhood journals, not only would it be interesting to see things from a child's perspective in a different era, but that may also explain the torn-out pages. Perhaps they were failed attempts at making an entry or those that showed poor penmanship, inkblots, or something else careless that a child may have done. Maybe an older Mary reread her journals and tore out things she didn't want to remember—childish thoughts that she regretted later.

Cate caressed the leather on the outside of the journal, fascinated by reading someone's innermost thoughts. Even if they didn't provide her with information about her own family, they would be interesting from a historical perspective.

Cate set the journal aside, intending to collect more information on Mary before continuing. She grabbed her laptop, a pen, and a notepad. The appeal of another sip of hot chocolate was too strong for her, and she lay back on the chaise for an extra moment, enjoying the snack. The fire gave the room a warm coziness despite its size.

Rain still fell steadily from the gray sky outside her window. She watched it fall as she took another bite of one of the cookies Mrs. Fraser had left her. She spent another few moments enjoying the snack and the dreary weather, her thoughts slipping to the great ball Mary spoke of in her journal.

She bit her lower lip as she imagined women in fancy gowns swirling around the room, laughing, enjoying each other's company. What a different life they must have led, Cate thought, both because of the time period and their upper-class lifestyle. Things had changed quite a bit in the almost one hundred-odd years since Mary was a child.

Cate tried to imagine a world without computers—lacking instant access to information and other people—where the written word was the most common form of communication and of recording thoughts. How different life must have been—perhaps simpler in some ways, despite the absence of modern conveniences.

Cate finished her cookie and the rest of her hot chocolate, then forced herself off the chaise to get her materials. She began by noting the dates of birth years and death years for Mary from the family bible, and her maiden name, Campbell, to give some context to when she may have written the journals. Using her laptop, Cate navigated to one of the online ancestry records sites and began searching for any information she could find on Mary MacKenzie née Campbell. She pieced together that Mary had two sisters and one brother. The third of four children, she had been born into an affluent family, but one that did not have any titles associated with their family legacy. She was twenty-four years old when she married Oliver, who was ten years her senior.

She reread the first partial entry. It could, indeed, discuss a party held by Mary's parents. She closed her laptop, preparing to read more of the

journals when Mrs. Fraser appeared, carrying her lunch tray.

“I hope you don’t mind, but I took it upon myself to bring your lunch up to you. Figured you were all nice and cozy here, so why move yourself just for lunch?”

Cate stretched her feet under her blanket. “Thanks, Mrs. Fraser, I appreciate that. I am cozy. Although, I think you may spoil me.”

“Well, there isn’t a lady in the world that doesn’t deserve some spoiling now and again.”

Cate smiled at her as she finished clearing the dishes from her morning’s snack and bustled out of the room. She finished her lunch and roused Riley from a nap for a quick trip outside.

The rain continued to pour from the skies. His little tartan raincoat spared him the drenching he’d have received from the soaking rain, but despite remaining mostly dry, Riley offered the sky a suspicious glance as thunder rumbled overhead.

Even in the poor weather, though, Cate admired the beauty of the Scottish countryside. Mist clung to the hillsides, shrouding them as if with fluffy blankets. The surroundings made it obvious why stories of hauntings were bandied about; the setting couldn’t be more perfect for it, Cate thought as the thunder grumbled overhead and the fog surrounded the neighboring countryside. It even shrouded part of the castle.

After hanging their wet things in the servants’ entrance, Cate made her way to the bedroom closet where she’d discovered the journals. She searched the box for additional pages, hoping the torn-out paper would be inside. She found nothing and slogged back to her room, disappointed but hopeful the pages that remained would reveal some information.

She settled onto her chaise in front of the roaring fire, cuddled under a blanket. Riley climbed onto the chaise, curling himself in the crook of her legs for a nap. Cate patted his head as he used her calf for a pillow.

She picked up the journal again, giving the first entry a quick reread. Something about it seemed odd to her, but she couldn’t put her finger on it.

The next entry detailed a similar experience. Mary wrote about the buzz of having guests in the house. Again, Mary noted that she tried to “stay out of sight” and “take everything in.” Not uncommon for a child in a large estate during the era of “children should be seen and not heard.” Still, it appeared Mary was on the verge of adulthood or a very mature child. She

wrote as though she were much older than a youngster who would have been unwelcome at parties and other household events.

Cate began to wonder if perhaps this was why the writing seemed so odd to her. She read the next entry to see if it gave her impression more credence.

... stood in front of me, staring. I can still recall my heart pounding against my ribs as I stared back. I now understand full well why the haunting rumors persist. I, myself, have now experienced...

Her eyes widened at the statement, and her heart skipped a beat. What did the partial entry hint at? It sounded as though Mary had experienced a ghost sighting. She swallowed hard, becoming more convinced that her new home was filled with the ghosts of the past.

CHAPTER 15



A shiver ran up Cate's spine as she reread the entry that seemed to detail Mary's encounter with a ghost. She said she understood the haunting rumors.

Cate lifted her eyes from the page and stared at the dancing flames in the fireplace. Could she live here if the house was haunted? If she couldn't, she had nowhere else to go. Maybe the ghosts wouldn't be difficult to share the castle with, she ruminated.

She sucked in a deep breath, reminding herself that the entries were likely made by a childhood version of Mary. Perhaps her parents' home had been rumored to be haunted. Perhaps it was a fantastical tale from an impressionable child.

She turned the page to read the next entry, hoping to glean more details about the encounter.

... strange to think I could meet my husband as a young man or child or at least see him once again. The very thought gives me goose pimples and the feeling as though someone has walked over my grave. As inviting as it seems, it is terribly dangerous. I can see why my husband

The page ended. Cate turned to the next page, but the entry did not continue. It appeared several pages were torn out, and then another entry

appeared, which seemed to be unrelated to this one. Cate set the book down, confused by what she just read. Mary MacKenzie had referenced her husband. There was no mention of encounters with ghosts.

“Well, that’s odd, Riley,” Cate said aloud to the dog. “Looks like this entry was made by Mary as an adult after her marriage. So, the encounter she had was here. Why is she not attending events in her own home?” The pup didn’t offer any answers.

Granted, entries were missing, but there weren’t even close to enough pages removed to have grown from a childhood Mary to an adult one, so the entire journal had to be from Mary as an adult, Cate surmised.

Her uneasiness returned as she realized Mary’s “encounter” occurred within the halls of Dunhaven Castle. Something was odd, though. She couldn’t understand why if Mary was an adult, married or otherwise, she wasn’t attending parties within either her parents’ home or her husband’s.

If the parties had been in her husband’s home, Mary would have played an integral role in hosting the event, even if the couple did not live at the castle yet. If it were the former, her parents would have paraded Mary among the guests with her primary goal having been to secure a suitable suitor and a successful match for marriage. Why would Mary have been hiding upstairs, not able to bring herself to sneak even a glance at the event?

Perhaps Mary was ill, Cate ruminated. However, if she was physically ill, most likely the party would have been postponed. If it hadn’t been, she would have attended it, ill or not. Women of that era were informed that they should not take ill often, as it may displease their husbands.

If she was mentally ill, that was quite a different story—but there didn’t seem to be any signs of mental instability in the writings. Outside of the ghost sighting, anyway. Perhaps that was why several pages were missing, though, Cate thought. Perhaps Mary was unstable and had ripped pages from the diary—or someone else had—and only left the ones that sounded sane.

She stared at the stack of leather journals. Maybe she would know more when she read all the journals. Perhaps there would be a clue in one of them to point her toward what may have happened to either the journals or Mary.

Cate checked her watch. About an hour and a half remained before dinner. She read a few more brief entries, finishing the first journal over the course of the hour. As interesting as it was, it gave her no more clues about

what was happening. It covered more of the same experiences, or rather snippets of experiences.

Mary discussed a few parties she attended, and a little about raising her daughter after her husband's death. It gave Cate a little more context knowing that Mary was writing after her husband's death, but the mystery of why she avoided social events in the castle deepened. As did the "encounter" that led her to understand the rumors about the castle.

Cate dumped the journal on the stack, stood, and stretched. The rain had slowed to a drizzle. She gathered Riley to take him for a walk before dinner. Her mind went over and over the words she'd read but came to no new conclusions. She hoped that the remaining journals would shed more light on the matter and planned to read another during her dinner.

After heading back inside, she found both Mr. and Mrs. Fraser in her sitting room when she arrived. Mr. Fraser was tending to the fire again while Mrs. Fraser arranged the blanket on the chaise, her tray of food placed on the edge.

"How are you enjoying this beautiful Scottish weather we're having?" Mr. Fraser said, adding some logs to the fire.

"It's a nice day to stay in," Cate answered.

"That it is," Mrs. Fraser agreed. "Is there anything else you'll be needing?"

"No, that's all, thanks. Why don't you two go home early and get settled in? This weather is terrible, and I don't want anyone out in it on my account."

Mr. and Mrs. Fraser exchanged glances.

"Well," Mrs. Fraser hedged. "I'd like to finish the dishes from dinner, and I'm sure Mr. Fraser would like to add some logs to the fire before we leave for the night."

Cate waved away the concern as she pulled the blanket over her. "Oh, don't worry about that, Mrs. Fraser. I'm capable of washing a dish or two, and I can add some logs if we get cold enough. Please go home and get out of this dreary weather."

"Well, I guess if you insist, Lady Cate. Then we'll see you tomorrow morning."

"I do insist," Cate said. "See you tomorrow."

With that, they left Cate to her dinner. She settled in with the second journal from the stack, hoping to find some answers. After reading about

half, Cate was no closer to learning the truth about anything. Again, the entries were vague and brief. Several pages were missing, leaving nothing more than snippets or fragments.

Cate glanced through the other three journals again. All had pages removed. She sighed, realizing they likely contained more of the same. She considered diving into the third journal but remembered her promise to Mrs. Fraser. With a glance at her empty dish, she figured she better take care of the dishes before she did anything else.

With her tray in hand, she headed downstairs to the kitchen, expecting to find a few dishes from the dinner preparation waiting in the sink to be washed. Instead, a sparkling clean sink met her gaze as she entered the room. All dishes were cleaned, dried, and put away. Cate shook her head. Mrs. Fraser had cleaned everything, leaving Cate with only her own dishes and utensils to wash.

It was quick work since she had so little to do. She washed, dried, and returned everything to its appropriate place. She tidied up the kitchen a bit, so it looked as though she had never been there, hoping Mrs. Fraser would appreciate that, then wound through the halls back to her sitting room.

With the fire dying out, she threw a few small logs on top and poked them around with the poker before plopping back onto the chaise and cuddling under a blanket with Riley. She picked up the third journal and began to read. About halfway through the journal, frustration set in. She'd learned nothing and only become more concerned about the supposed haunting in the castle. She spent a restless night worried about ghosts again.

A foggy mist enveloped the castle the next morning. Looking out the windows was like looking through a veil of fabric that had been stretched from the sky to the horizon. The cool and damp weather kept Cate inside for most of the day, only venturing out to take Riley for brief walks.

With no desire to dive back into the journals, she spent some time exploring other bedrooms. In a closet, she found trunks filled with clothes. A glance through the other items revealed a few handwritten letters. She pulled them from the trunk and settled on the floor to read them.

Her thumb found the timepiece and rubbed it as she scanned the words on the page. Soon, the familiar loud, slow ticking filled the closet. Cate huffed in annoyance as she popped open the face.

The second hand barely moved. She grabbed her phone to record a video of the strange behavior. Perhaps seeing the odd behavior would help

Mr. Reid diagnose the problem. As she swiped to unlock the phone, Cate noticed the large letters on the lock screen: NO SERVICE.

She crinkled her brow. What was wrong with her cell service? Even with the spotty signal she had been getting in the Scottish countryside, she had not experienced much of an issue anywhere in the castle or on the property.

Cate switched her camera app to video mode and aimed the camera at the watch.

“As you can see,” she said as the video recorded, “the seconds are ticking by on the video but not on the watch. It’s definitely slower than it should be. And no matter what I do—” Cate balanced the phone and began to shimmy the watch a bit, then wind it again. “—it doesn’t help. See?” She aimed the camera back on the watch after bobbling the phone to wind it. “Still slow. Then, sooner or later, it’s back to normal like nothing was wrong.”

She swiped the watch face to clear the fingerprints and continued to film when, abruptly, the watch started to tick faster and faster until it began to keep perfect time again.

“See what I mean?” Cate narrated. “Now it’s back to normal. I don’t get it.”

She let the video run a few more seconds so they could see that the watch was now keeping perfect time, then shut it off.

She’d send the video to Jack once she had a signal. She climbed to her feet, ready to wander the castle in search of a signal. As she stood, she spotted the three bars on the top of her phone’s display. Odd. Cate had never moved, yet the signal, not there moments ago, was now extremely strong.

The crinkle on her brow deepened. Were the two incidents related? Was there some kind of electromagnetic disturbance that affected both the watch and her cell phone? Or maybe the signal was just intermittent within the closet.

With a shake of her head, she attached the video to a text with a note describing it and asking him to show it to his grandfather whenever he got a chance. Perhaps he would have some answers that would explain this.

Cate switched off her phone’s display, returning to her exploration of the trunks.

She tugged open another trunk and pulled out the first dress. Satiny, ruby-red fabric swirled around her feet as she held it up to her and glanced down at it.

“These must have been quite the feat to get into,” she said to herself.

She tugged a blue dress from the trunk. Plainer than the red dress, it must have been worn during the day. She set it aside and tugged a pink and white dress from the bottom.

“What do you think, Riley?” she asked the small dog, holding up the pink and white dress against her body.

Riley cocked his head to the side as she spun around the room, holding the fabric against her.

“Do I look pretty?”

Riley’s dark almond-shaped eyes sparkled at her.

“Should I try it on so you can see?”

Cate giggled a bit while she slipped her clothes off and the dress on, feeling like a child trying on her mother’s clothes. She did her best to fasten the dress in the back, appreciating why most women needed a lady’s maid to assist them with dressing.

The weight of the fabric hung heavy around her ankles. She tried to swirl in it, finding it more awkward than she expected.

A sheet hid a full-length mirror in the back of the closet. Cate tugged the white cover off, sending a plume of dust into the air. She stepped toward the glass, eyeing her reflection. With both hands, she pulled her hair up to complete her centuries-old look. She gazed at herself for another minute, wondering what her life would have been like in this era.

She caught sight of the pocket watch dangling around her neck and grabbed it. Her thumb rubbed the smooth surface as she wondered who walked the castle halls in the 1850s and who may have worn this dress.

After a moment of daydreaming, her mind snapped back to reality.

“Well, Riley,” she said, swinging around in the dress, “what do you think of the full effect?”

She focused on the spot Riley had lain in moments ago, finding it empty. The smile disappeared from her face.

“Riley! Riley!” Cate called out a few times but saw no sign of the small pup. She checked around the trunks and other items in the closet. She searched the small space. She found no sign of him.

“RILEY!” she called louder. “RILEY, COME!”

Still nothing. It was unusual for Riley not to listen when she called him. Cate bit her lower lip, wondering if he may have wandered off.

She widened her search to the bedroom. Again, she saw no sign of Riley. She called out a few more times as she scanned the room, but he didn't respond. Her concern for the small dog grew. She feared he might have gotten himself lost or trapped. Living in a place this size, it could take them days to find him, if not longer. Panic set in. He was her entire life; she would be heartbroken if something happened to him.

She bit her lower lip as her knees began to wobble. Tears welled in her eyes. She fought to calm herself and think logically. He couldn't have disappeared. He had to be somewhere. She double-checked the closet again, then the bedroom. She stepped into the hall, glancing up and down, trying to decide which way to go first. She spotted no signs of the little dog.

The heaviness of the dress made it difficult for her to move around, but her worry over Riley stopped her from changing first. Cate called down the hall in both directions. She saw nothing. Most of the doors were closed, so he couldn't have gotten into those rooms.

Cate wondered if he'd made his way back to their bedroom. She tried to run, finding it awkward in the piles of fabric that surrounded her. Picking up her skirts to the best of her abilities, she hurried down the hall, making her way to her suite. She glanced inside, finding it empty.

She raced through the sitting room and scanned the bedroom. She found it empty. Panic made her limbs turn rubbery. She sucked in a shaky breath, her stomach turning over with worry.

Cate sank onto the bed, a tear falling from to her cheek. "Riley," she croaked. "Where are you?"

CHAPTER 16



Cate clutched at her midriff as she sniffled, panic turning her stomach as worry over Riley coursed through her. She flicked away a tear that fell to her cheek as she glanced around the room.

Riley was missing. So was his bed, she noticed. She hadn't moved it, but it was not there. Perhaps Mrs. Fraser moved it while cleaning.

She shook her head as she forced herself to stand, the weight of the heavy fabric from the dress weighing her down as she walked. She had to find the little pup. She had to keep searching.

Cate retraced her steps to the other bedroom. This time, she traipsed down the hall in the opposite direction, making her way to the main staircase. She would check there, and then perhaps enlist help.

Mrs. Fraser crossed the marble floor of the entryway as Cate arrived at the top of the stairs.

Cate raced toward the railing, her breathing heavy from the effort and the upset. "Oh, Mrs. Fraser! Mrs. Fraser!"

The woman glanced over her shoulder. Cate's brow scrunched, and she pulled her chin back to her chest. It wasn't Mrs. Fraser. Instead, a younger woman returned Cate's gaze.

Cate shook her head, pressing a hand against her chest as she recovered, bypassing any pleasantries in her panic to find Riley. "Oh, I'm sorry, I thought you were Mrs. Fraser. I'm looking for my dog, Riley. Have you seen him?"

Receiving no response, she continued, “Could you find Mrs. Fraser and ask her to help me look?”

At the bottom of the stairs, the girl’s eyes widened, and the color drained from her face. Her mouth gaped open, and she trembled all over. Abruptly, the girl spun and fled from the room.

Cate wrinkled her forehead. Was she running to tell Mrs. Fraser? She had made it sound urgent, but not that urgent.

Her eyes fell to the centuries-old dress she still wore. No wonder the girl had reacted that way. The poor girl assumed she had seen a ghost.

With a shake of her head, Cate turned to make her way back down the hall to the bedroom he’d disappeared from, intent on finding the little dog. As she walked, she wondered who the woman was and why she was in the castle. Perhaps Mrs. Fraser found her replacement and was training her—but she had mentioned nothing to Cate, which seemed odd.

She pushed the thought aside, entering the closet. She’d deal with that mystery later. Right now, she had to find Riley. She checked the timepiece to determine how long he had been missing.

She slowed to a stop, her face pinching with exasperation. “Seriously? Again?”

The timepiece had almost stopped again.

“Useless. I have no idea how long he’s been gone.” She shook the watch in frustration before she squeezed her eyes closed.

She snapped them open and gave the watch a rub in apology. “It’s not your fault.”

As if on cue, the watch started to tick faster and faster, until it returned to normal.

She breathed a sigh of relief. “At least one thing is sorted. Okay, Cate, think. He’s a little dog. Just calm down, he couldn’t have gotten far.”

She spun to face the closet door, intent on retracing her steps. Her jaw dropped and relief washed over her. Riley sat on the floor behind a large trunk.

“RILEY!” Cate cried, rushing over to scoop up the small dog. “I thought I had lost you! Where have you been?”

Cate hugged him close, kissing the top of his little head. A few tears of relief escaped from her eyes and rolled down her cheeks. Riley gave her an appreciative lap on her face for all the attention, not understanding Cate’s exasperation.

Cate collapsed onto the floor with the dog in her arms and blew out a sigh of relief. She took an extra moment to hold him close, still wondering where he could have gone. It appeared he had been in the closet the entire time.

“We better go tell Mrs. Fraser that we found you, Riley.” Cate stood up, feeling the weight of the dress. “Oh, I better change my clothes first, though.”

As she unfastened the dress, she caught sight of herself in the mirror. Her makeup was smudged from shedding a few tears. She’d better clean up before visiting Mrs. Fraser. She finished changing and gathered Riley into her arms, hurrying to her bedroom.

She stopped dead as she entered, spotting Riley’s bed in its normal spot. It hadn’t been there moments ago when she’d searched for him. Then again, she had been certain Riley had been missing, when he had been in the closet the entire time.

She fixed her smeared makeup and headed downstairs, Riley in tow, to speak with Mrs. Fraser. She found the woman preparing lunch. The younger woman she’d ran into in the foyer was nowhere in sight.

“You can call off the emergency, Mrs. Fraser. I found Riley.”

Mrs. Fraser glanced up from her work, a confused expression on her face. “Emergency?”

“Yes, didn’t the other girl tell you? I thought I lost Riley, but I found him, thankfully.” She waved the little pup’s paw in the air.

“Other girl?” Mrs. Fraser asked.

“The other girl. I saw her in the entry hall. I told her to come and get you to help find Riley. She ran down the hall. Did she not tell you?”

“I’m the only one in the place, Lady Cate. No cleaning service here today, and both men are outside.”

Cate’s heart skipped a bit as she stood speechless. She struggled to get the word “what” out to Mrs. Fraser.

“I thought—” she stammered, “I thought maybe you hired your replacement and were training her?”

Mrs. Fraser wiped her hands on her apron and shook her head. “Nay, I haven’t hired a replacement to train, Lady Cate. As far as I know, we’re the only ones here.”

Cate firmed her jaw. “Mrs. Fraser, I saw a woman standing right at the bottom of the stairs. She was wearing a long black dress and a white

apron.”

Mrs. Fraser stared at her with a furrowed brow. “Long black dress and white apron?”

“Yes. I *saw* her, no mistaking it. She stood right there in front of me, and I spoke to her.”

“Did she speak to you?”

Cate considered it for a moment. “Well, no, but I didn’t imagine her.”

Mrs. Fraser went back to her work without a word, folding a napkin and placing it on Cate’s tray.

Cate pursed her lips, her knees feeling wobbly again. “I can’t believe I’m actually going to say this but... do you think she could have been a... a ghost?”

Cate stood speechless as her mind whirled from the question she’d just posed. Had she seen a ghost? What else could explain the oddly dressed woman in the foyer.

Mrs. Fraser snapped her gaze up to Cate, a sharp laugh escaping her lips. “A ghost? Lady Cate, you don’t believe that nonsense, do you?”

Cate wandered to the table and sank into a chair. “Well, no. I mean, I didn’t, but I read in a book from the library that many people have claimed this castle is haunted. I never believed in that stuff either, but how else can I explain the woman who was standing there—dressed oddly, now that I think about it? But she was there, plain as day.”

Mrs. Fraser continued to chuckle. “She didn’t disappear in a puff of smoke or float down the hall, did she?”

Cate’s shoulders slumped, and she rubbed Riley’s back. “No, no she didn’t do any of that. I don’t mean a storybook ghost. What if she was a spirit trapped in this castle? How else do you explain what I saw?”

Mrs. Fraser covered her still amused grin with a hand. “I’m sorry to poke fun, Lady Cate, but I dare say it was your imagination running wild after having those silly tales planted in your head.”

Cate lowered her eyes to the floor, considering the woman’s words. “So, Lady MacKenzie never mentioned anything strange happening? No ‘hauntings’ when she lived here?”

The woman shook her head as she spread a leaf of lettuce on top of a slice of turkey. “Nay, Lady Cate, no hauntings—and Lady MacKenzie would have driven you right out of the castle with that talk. She hated those nasty rumors that the castle was haunted by people who died building it. I

remember they contacted her before they wrote that bloody book. She wouldn't even return that man's call. She was so furious about that rumor."

Cate pondered that information. Why would Lady MacKenzie be so adamant against any rumors of hauntings? Perhaps it was just one of those things that stuck in her craw.

Either way, Cate couldn't deny what she saw. Then again, perhaps it was her overactive imagination. She was half-panicked from having lost Riley, who ended up not being lost at all.

Maybe her mind was playing tricks on her. She wasn't sure of anything anymore. Riley was there the entire time, but she had been sure he was gone. Was she sure the maid was there? Maybe she was letting her imagination run wild.

Mrs. Fraser wiped her hands on her apron again. "Time for your lunch, Lady Cate. Did you want it in the dining room or the library?"

The announcement pulled Cate from her ruminating. "Um, I think I'll take it in the library, thank you. Here, I can carry it up there." Cate set Riley down on the floor to take the tray.

"If you'd like. Thanks."

Cate turned to leave the kitchen, calling Riley to follow behind her.

"Oh, ah, Lady Cate?" Mrs. Fraser called.

Cate spun back to face her. "Yes?"

Mrs. Fraser offered her a reassuring smile. "I'm sure it was just your imagination earlier. I'll bet you were just tired and worried about Riley. I'm sure there's nothing to it."

"You're probably right, Mrs. Fraser. Thanks."

Cate carried her lunch to the library. She gathered her notes and notepad to create a plan for her book.

Despite her best intentions, she couldn't keep her mind focused on research after the odd occurrence. The encounter with her "ghost" ran through her mind again and again. She picked the encounter apart, detail by detail. The girl never spoke, to her memory. However, she did act as though she saw Cate. Her dress seemed strange, old-fashioned, as if it were from another era. Cate wondered if she imagined it, but she couldn't believe her mind could create something so lifelike.

After lunch, Cate returned her tray to the kitchen. On her way back, she explored the area where the girl had been standing. She scanned the entryway for any sign of the maid. She didn't know what she expected to

find, but she looked for anything to lend credibility to what she witnessed. Nothing gave her any sign that anyone had been there earlier.

She climbed the main staircase. She surveyed where she had spotted the woman. She closed her eyes, trying to recall all the details. It couldn't have been her imagination, she decided. So, what was it she had experienced? She didn't believe in hauntings, but she had no other explanation for it.

As she pondered it, her phone chirped. She found a new text message from Jack. He had shown the video to his grandfather while running some errands in town. His grandfather said the watch, despite the behavior in the video, was functioning as it should and everything on the inside appeared to be shipshape. He didn't think it was anything to worry about and suggested keeping it wound daily but nothing beyond that. He called the anomaly a tic of the mechanism—pun intended.

Cate puckered her lips at the frustrating response. The watch couldn't be working properly. Yet she had no reason to distrust Jack's grandfather's opinion. Perhaps it was, as he called it, a tic the watch had developed. It never seemed to last long. Cate would continue to monitor it or see if she could reproduce it, but decided not to have it looked at further, as suggested by both Gayle and Mr. Reid.

She texted a thank you to Jack and returned to staring at nothing in an attempt to determine if she was going crazy or if she had really seen a ghost. Was this what Mary had mentioned in her journal entry? Had she seen a phantom maid roaming the halls?

Perhaps it even explained the missing pages in the journals. It sounded as though Lady MacKenzie didn't care for that talk. Perhaps the entire family was sensitive to it, and thus never mentioned it. Or perhaps Gertrude MacKenzie tried to remove all references her mother made to it by tearing out the journal pages that cited it.

After a few more minutes of pondering, Cate gave up. She'd solve nothing this way. She returned to the library to continue her work. Before resuming to study her notes, she took out her laptop and hunted down anything she could find on the web that discussed hauntings at the castle. Other than some conjecture on discussion boards and a few random posts on the author of *The Mysteries of Scotland's* page, nothing existed.

She toyed with the idea of emailing Molly and telling her she may have been right about the castle being haunted. She decided against it; she was

afraid Molly might think she was becoming a mad eccentric after only a few weeks in the castle.

She bit her lower lip as she forced herself to return to her work, making a copy of the family tree to annotate. She also noted her discovery of Mary's journals and a few love letters from another era, addressed to someone named Victoria.

Cate searched the family tree, discovering a Victoria living in the 1800s, married to Randolph MacKenzie.

As she continued her work, her mind returned to the mystery of the slowing timepiece and the lost cell phone service. Could she reproduce the issue?

She slouched in her chair, her pen tapping her lips. Could she reproduce the ghost? Perhaps she could hold a séance. She watched enough of the campy 1960s soap opera, *Dark Shadows*, to know the basic tenets.

A chuckle erupted from her lips as she imagined her, Mr. and Mrs. Fraser, and Jack sitting around a table, hands touching in a circle, calling out to the ghosts of the past to hear and answer them.

She shook her head at the silly idea. But it did little to take away the fact that she'd seen a girl dressed in clothes from another era in her foyer.

The ideas lingered in her mind as she readied for bed. She slipped between the sheets, pulling the covers up to her chin as she stared into the corners, awaiting the appearance of a ghostly maid.

As the time ticked by, Cate rose from her bed to stare out over the moonlit landscape. It did little to ease her nerves. She wandered to the sitting room and slouched into her chaise.

She couldn't shake the encounter she'd experienced. She grabbed Mary's journal and reread the short snippet detailing Mary's encounter. She bit her lower lip, wondering if any ghosts roamed the halls at this very moment.

With a hard swallow, Cate grabbed her cell phone, toggled on the flashlight, and wandered through the halls. She ended up in the closet where she'd lost Riley.

Dresses still lay haphazardly where she'd left them when she'd panicked earlier. She shoved her phone into her robe pocket and carefully folded the dresses, placing them into the trunk again.

When she finished, she turned and scanned the dark space, lit by moonlight from the bedroom beyond. Where had Riley been hiding when

she'd lost him? Had he crawled under one of the dresses? Why hadn't he come out when she'd called?

Her thumb rubbed the timepiece around her neck as she struggled to understand where he may have hidden and why he didn't respond.

She gave up on solving the mystery and wandered into the moonlit bedroom. She strode into the hall beyond, hesitating as she glanced toward the foyer. Her legs turned to jelly as she wondered if a ghost roamed the halls.

She bit her lower lip, turning away from her bedroom and heading toward the main staircase. As she approached the hall leading to the castle's front, voices floated from around the corner.

Cate swallowed hard, freezing in place, her flesh pocked with goosebumps. Her shaky breathing made it hard for her to hear the words, which sounded like whispers.

She stood motionless, quaking in her fluffy slippers as the whispers grew louder, approaching her location. Her eyes went wide as she realized she wasn't alone in the castle. Someone, living or dead, shared the space with her.

CHAPTER 17



Eate stood frozen in the hall as the hushed whispers came closer. She licked her trembling lower lip as she sucked in shaky breaths. A chill ran up her spine, and her stomach turned over.

Who was in the castle? She considered calling out. Perhaps Jack or one of the Frasers had returned. But her fear rendered her mute. Instead, she spun and raced through the halls away from the whispers, her heart pounding hard against her ribs.

She pressed herself into a dark corner near the windows overlooking the moonlit back rose gardens. Her ears strained for any sounds of voices. She wrapped her fingers around the timepiece swinging from her sprint and held it tight, her thumb rubbing it.

Only silence met her ears as she pressed against the cold stone walls, her limbs still shaking. After several minutes, her breathing slowed, and her heart rate returned to normal.

She inched her way along the wall and peered into the hall she'd sprinted down moments ago. She spotted nothing. No people. No ghosts. Not even a wisp of smoke.

She crept down the hall toward the foyer, straining her ears. She paused at the corner, peeking around it into an empty hall. With a lick of her lips, she stepped into the corridor and tiptoed toward the foyer.

She arrived at the top of the stairs, glancing at the moonlit marble floor below her. No sounds.

What had she heard moments ago? Had someone been here? A gust of wind whipped past, whistling as it bent the trees outside. Perhaps that had been the source. Had the wind sounded like whispers?

She swallowed hard, wondering if she'd encountered a ghost as she shuffled back to her bedroom suite. Her fingers lingered on the key again, wondering if she should lock the door. She hadn't seen a soul on her way back and hadn't heard any voices. Perhaps she'd imagined it.

She wandered to her bed, choosing to leave the door unlocked, and climbed in next to Riley. The little dog lifted his head and stared at her for a moment before he settled back into the covers.

Whatever she'd heard hadn't disturbed Riley. Perhaps it was just her imagination running wild.

She awoke the next morning convinced she'd imagined the voices. She climbed from her bed, determined to make some progress on one of the many lingering mysteries.

She settled at the library desk after breakfast and grabbed a blank sheet of paper. She titled columns across the top, listing each thread that she was exploring: *MacKenzie Family History/Dunhaven Castle History; My connection to MacKenzies; Temperamental Watch; Possible Haunting.*

She wrinkled her nose at the last one, but if she could determine the source of the odd phenomena she'd been experiencing, it would go a long way to settling her nerves. In each column, she jotted down any information she already had about the subject.

With building plans, a family tree, and a variety of firsthand sources, she had a wealth of information listed in her first column.

She couldn't add as much information to the second. Dead ends had met her every attempt to find information about her heritage. Perhaps her grandfather, Charles Kensie, had been born Charles MacKenzie. Maybe Gayle could help her track down birth certificates.

In the third column, Cate jotted down all the instances in which she'd witnessed the watch slowing down. She also noted the lack of cell phone service in the last incident.

She stared at the last column with a frown, loathe to detail any information in it. With a sigh, she put pen to paper, jotting down the book's entry, Mary's journal snippet, the phantom maid, and the voices she'd heard.

She tapped her pen against the paper as she eyed the weak evidence about the hauntings. There could be many explanations for each, none of which were ghosts.

She shoved the paper aside and pulled her laptop toward her, sending a quick email to Gayle.

Hi Gayle, I hope you are doing well. I dropped something in the post for you earlier this week. I hope you receive it soon and like it.

I had another question for you. As I try to trace my ancestry back to the MacKenzies, I found that I need more information about my great-grandparents. Do you know the best way to find birth records? Specifically, I'm looking for the birth records of my grandfather so I can identify his parents. I'm not sure where my grandfather was born, but his name was Charles Kensie or perhaps Charles MacKenzie. I'm not sure, but I'm working off the premise that our last name was changed from MacKenzie to Kensie sometime before they immigrated to the US.

Any help that you can provide would be much appreciated.

Thank you, Cate

Cate closed her laptop and stared at the note sheet, deciding to dive into more information on the castle's history. She stared at the stack of books she'd amassed over the last few days before pulling one from the stack and flipping it open.

In the course of a few morning hours, Cate read several entries about Scottish culture throughout some major periods of history. Mrs. Fraser arrived with a tray of lunch just as Cate finished a book discussing the culture surrounding the building of Scottish castles.

"Thank you so much, Mrs. Fraser. Perfect timing."

"Learning a lot, Lady Cate?"

Cate dropped the book onto the pile and rose to her feet, stretching. "I think so. It's a new area of study for me. My focus was American History in graduate school. There's a lot I have to learn."

Mrs. Fraser eyed the stack as she slid the tray onto the coffee table. "With all these books, it almost looks like you're back in school."

“Yes, it does.”

“Well, I’ll leave you to your work.”

Cate eased into the leather chair with a tentative glance at the woman. “Oh, before you go, did Lady MacKenzie ever mention the wind making strange noises in the castle?”

Mrs. Fraser clasped her hands in front of her as she furrowed her brow. “Wind?” She turned her lips down in a frown as she shook her head. “Nay, not that I recall, though the winds kick up something terrible in these moors. So, I dare say you’ll hear it howling on occasion.”

Cate nodded, tugging her napkin onto her lap. “I think I heard it last night.”

Mrs. Fraser waved a hand at her, a smile spreading across her face. “Oh, yes, the bean-nighe were howling last night.”

“Bean-nighe?” Cate questioned.

“The Washing Woman.”

Cate wrinkled her brow.

“A banshee. A ghost.”

Cate’s jaw dropped open. Had it been a ghost?

Mrs. Fraser waved a hand in the air as she chuckled. “Oh, Lady Cate, I’m only joking. It was just the wind howling. It was whipping around terribly last night. Mr. Fraser and young Jack had a bit of cleaning up to do this morning with the limbs.”

Cate smiled and nodded. “Right, yes, the wind. I’ll bet that’s what I heard then. Thanks again, Mrs. Fraser.”

As the woman slipped from the room, Cate stared at the growing pile of notes she had created. She spent her lunch rereading and organizing them. After a walk with Riley, she left him napping in the library, closing the door firmly behind her to avoid any incidents of him wandering off. She made her way to the bedroom closet to retrieve the handwritten letters she’d found.

She pulled the letters from the trunk and settled on the floor with her back pressed against the wall as she scanned them.

The familiar sound of slow ticking filled the air. She opened the face of the watch. Again, the second hand crept around in a circle.

With the timepiece in one hand, she grabbed her cell phone with the other. It read NO SERVICE in large white letters on the lock screen.

“Ah-ha!” Cate exclaimed. “No signal and a slow watch. Now, if I move around, can I get my signal back?”

She climbed to her feet and made her way to her bedroom where she had a regular signal. She hurried along, hoping to make it before the watch returned to normal. For the duration of her walk, the phone read NO SERVICE.

As she entered the bedroom, the phone still read NO SERVICE. She walked around a bit, focusing on the phone and watch, but still never recovered service. The watch still ticked slowly.

Cate sat on the chaise, trying to figure it out. She opened her phone and thumbed through a few apps, nothing would connect. Turning her attention to the watch, she stared at its slowly ticking hands. She was no closer to the truth despite having made a tenuous connection between these two events.

With a sigh, she retraced her steps back to the bedroom closet. Her cell phone never regained its signal. She set the phone aside and stared into space as she pondered the incident. Her thumb rhythmically rubbed the watch.

The ticking accelerated. The second hand returned to its normal speed. She grabbed her phone and checked the signal. Within seconds of the second hand returning to normal speed, the phone’s signal returned.

The incidents had to be connected, she concluded. But she had no clue how or why. Perhaps Jack would have an idea. She’d mention it to him the next time she spoke to him. In the meantime, she thought she should add this event to her note sheet to keep track of everything.

Cate left the letters behind, hurrying to the library to jot down the event. Riley lifted his head to acknowledge her return.

“Another weird watch event, buddy,” she told him.

After adding it to her note sheet, she texted Jack, telling him that the watch had slowed down again, and she noticed it happened at the same time as her cell phone lost service. She asked if he had any thoughts about it, questioning if there could be some interference affecting both the watch and her phone.

After sending the text, she checked her email, finding a new message from Gayle.

Dear Cate, I so look forward to receiving your package. I am positive that I will like whatever you have sent, and thank you so

much for thinking of me (although you didn't need to send anything, I was happy to help).

Regarding the information about your grandfather's birth, let me see what I can track down for you and get back to you. Please give me about a week and I'll give you an update.

*Best,
Gayle*

Cate smiled at the email, appreciative of Gayle's help. As she finished reading the email, her cell phone chirped. An incoming message from Jack appeared: *Some kind of EMP? I can run it past my grandfather. Let's talk tmw?*

Cate considered the idea that it could be an electromagnetic pulse, or EMP, causing the watch to malfunction, texting back: *No idea, maybe something like that, although nothing else seems to be affected. Talk tmw.*

After sending the text, Cate did a quick Internet search on things that affect cell phone services. She ruled out a few obvious items, like a jamming device, but many discussions of what affected service were over her head. She gave up and closed her laptop. She would have to wait to discuss it further with Jack. Maybe once the two of them put their heads together, they would figure it out.

A small pair of feet massaged her leg. She glanced down, finding Riley's dark almond-shaped eyes staring up at her.

"Okay, buddy, you've been cooped up for most of the day. Let's go for a long walk before dinner, okay?"

Riley responded by wagging his tail at her in approval. Cate gathered the little dog into her arms and headed toward the door.

They ran into Jack gathering fallen limbs from the windstorm near the edge of the property.

"Lady Cate, coatless today, eh? Adjusting to the weather?"

Cate stared up at the bright sunshine, shielding her eyes. "It's a bright sunny day, so I left the coat inside."

"I sent a text to my grandfather about your watch problem. We couldn't come up with anything. The watch is old. He didn't think there would be any parts in common with a cell phone."

“I tried to look around on the Internet earlier, but I saw nothing that made sense.”

“Maybe it was a coincidence?”

“Possibly, but that’s the second time it’s happened, and when I walked around, I had no cell service, even where I usually have it. That’s the strange thing. As soon as the watch started keeping normal time again, my service came back almost immediately.”

Jack rubbed his chin after tossing branches into a cart attached to a small tractor. “That is strange, but still possibly a coincidence. I can’t figure out anything that would affect both. Sorry I don’t have a better answer.”

“No, it’s okay. I don’t either. Nothing makes sense, so maybe it is just a coincidence. Maybe I’m reading more into it than there is.”

Jack grabbed a few more wayward branches as he spoke. “It does seem odd, but nothing’s clicking for me on how they’re related.”

“Well, I’ll let you know if it happens again, or if there’s anything else I notice that can shed more light on what’s going on. I know your grandfather said everything was functioning properly, but there’s something strange going on—or that watch has a strange tic, no pun intended.”

“Yeah, let me know. My grandfather took care of a lot on the estate, so if he says nothing is wrong, I’d believe him. But I agree it is a strange tic. Pun intended.” He gave her a belly laugh as he tossed the sticks into his cart.

“Okay, will do.”

“Oh, before you go, let me toss a branch here for Riley. I’ve barely spoken to the lad. I think he’s insulted.”

Riley eyed Jack, his eyes gleaming as Jack brandished a stick.

“Yes, you’d better. He’ll be highly insulted if you don’t.”

“Can’t insult the master of the house. I might lose my job.”

Cate laughed as Jack tossed the branch away and Riley chased after it. “Okay, see you later.”

“Good day, Cate.”

After finishing their walk, filled with more stick tosses, Cate returned to the library to continue her notes toward a first chapter in her book about the castle. She turned her attention to Mary’s fourth journal as the afternoon hours waned. Missing pages like all the others, it provided a frustrating read.

She polished it off in one sitting, finding no more information about ghosts or her father or grandparents.

With an annoyed sigh, she tossed the journal away and stared at the last remaining book. She pulled it onto her lap and settled in to read more partial stories about house parties and grand balls.

Halfway through the read, Cate stumbled upon a page thicker than the others. After a careful examination, it seemed two pages were stuck together. She squinted at the edge, just able to make out the thin line of two separate pages. It appeared as though they may have been wet, and dried stuck together.

She rubbed the corners, trying to see if the pages would loosen, but they did not. She tried to get the edge of her fingernail between them but made little progress. Concerned that she would tear the sheets and ruin the pages, she decided against pushing harder than this.

She leaned back, pondering the problem. She had studied document preservation and restoration, and she had even done some as a child with one of her mother's coworkers. Most times these situations were lost causes, but there were some tricks that one could try if the document was not too important to risk damage.

She recalled a similar situation at the museum. An industrious worker told her that steam could sometimes do the trick, then demonstrated on a few stuck onion paper pages. She grabbed the book and headed to the kitchen. If she was lucky, a little steam could solve her issue and loosen the pages without destroying their contents.

Mrs. Fraser bustled around the kitchen, readying for dinner as Cate strode into the room.

The woman jumped, her eyes wide as she spotted Cate. "Lady Cate, did you need something?"

"I do, but not what you might think. Could you point me toward a pot to boil some water?"

"Aye, but may I ask what you plan on boiling?"

"Just water. I need some steam. I've got this journal—" Cate waved the journal in her hand. "And there are a few stuck pages. I'd like to see if I can get them unstuck with a little steam."

Mrs. Fraser tugged a pot from a cupboard and began filling it with water before putting it on the stove to heat. "Do you suppose it will work?"

“I don’t know, but I hope so. I’ve never tried this before myself, but I have seen it work in the past. I’m hoping it works on this since the pages are not glossy or thick.”

The water began to boil, creating plumes of steam floating up. Cate carefully held the journal to allow the steam to hit the pages, but not close enough to be splashed by the boiling water. She moved the book around in an almost circular motion, trying to coat the pages with the steam while allowing no part to become too damp.

After a bit of work, Cate removed the book from the steam and tried the pages.

Mrs. Fraser peered over her shoulder with her eyebrows raised. “Any luck?”

With a frown, Cate answered, “Nope, not yet, still stuck. I’ve got to be careful not to tear it, too. I’ll try more steam.”

Cate moved the book over the steam again, wondering if she’d ever get to read the words hidden between the two stuck pages. She couldn’t help but feel they may be telling given the amount redacted from the journal.

They may even help solve one of her mysteries. Would she ever have the chance to read the contents?

CHAPTER 18



Mrs. Fraser peered over Cate's shoulder as she waved the book over the steam, testing the pages every few seconds. After her fifth attempt, her muscles stiffened. An edge of one page curled away from the other.

"HA!" Cate shouted.

Mrs. Fraser craned her neck to stare at the source of Cate's enthusiasm. "Did it work?"

"Yes, I think so. I've just got the edge, but if I'm careful, I think I can get it," Cate said between clenched teeth, as though admitting any success may jinx her efforts. Inch by inch, Cate slowly peeled the pages back. Finally, she pulled them apart.

"There." She breathed a sigh of relief. "Got it."

Mrs. Fraser clapped her hands after turning the stove off. "Hey, good work, Lady Cate. I have to admit, I cannae believe that worked."

A smile spread across Cate's face. "Thanks, I'm glad it worked. It's always a gamble. Now, I just need to let these pages dry, and I should be able to read them."

"Will you be having your dinner in your sitting room to continue reading?"

"Yes, I will, thank you. I'll try to dry this off now with my hairdryer."

Mrs. Fraser nodded as she emptied the pot into the sink. "Okay, Lady Cate, I'll bring your tray to you when it's ready."

"Thanks. Oh, here, let me dry that before I go."

Mrs. Fraser whipped a towel from her shoulder and waved Cate from the kitchen. "No need, don't fuss with that, Lady Cate. I've got it."

Excited that her trick worked, Cate hurried back to her room to dry the pages. A few minutes on low heat with the blow dryer and the pages were soon dry enough to read. She returned to her sitting room as Mrs. Fraser brought in her tray with her dinner.

"Did you get it dry?"

"I did. I was just about to read it. Perfect timing with dinner."

"Happy reading, Lady Cate," Mrs. Fraser said as she left the room, pulling the double doors slightly closed.

Cate sat down, taking a few bites of dinner before diving into the exposed entry, finally able to read an entry that was longer than a page. Refreshing herself on the previous page's entry she read.

As I continue these excursions, I cannot help but feel the...

The unveiled page continued the sentence.

... tremendous responsibility to pass along to Gertrude. I can scarcely wrap my head around it sometimes, yet I cannot deny the proof right in front of my eyes. Since my husband has passed the timepiece to me, a mere caretaker of the awesome object, I have struggled to comprehend the enormity of the responsibility that has been given to me and that I will pass to Gertrude.

I have documented what I have learned so far and plan to keep a complete record, which Gertrude will surely need to destroy after gleaning any information that she can from my writings. It is the only way I can pass a complete record to her. While this task was thrust upon me because of the direst of circumstances, I vow to do all I can to make it easier...

The page ended. The remaining pages were torn away, leaving another incomplete record. What little remained on those pages still left Cate stunned. Mary created the journals to establish a record for Gertrude. What

it was a record of, Cate did not know. All that she read seemed to have been meaningless descriptions of parties, get-togethers, and other castle happenings. It didn't seem to be earth-shattering information. Yet Mary seemed to think it was significant enough to be documented. Phrases and words like "tremendous responsibility," "enormity," "awesome object," and "direst of circumstances" lent gravity and importance to the writing. Yet what Cate had read did not seem important in the least. Maybe the torn out pages included the important information.

She scanned the entry again. Mary also specifically mentioned the timepiece that now hung around Cate's neck. This object seemed to be of immense importance to Gertrude and Mary. The words about Gertrude destroying the journals echoed in Cate's head, too. Could this explain the missing pages? Perhaps Gertrude destroyed the journals or the relevant parts that tied the entries together in any meaningful way. Had these pages been left because they were stuck together?

Cate turned to Riley and said, "What in the world is *this* about, buddy? Rather mysterious way to refer to this old timepiece, huh?"

Cate wondered what in the world was so special about it, and what enormous truth Gertrude was protecting by destroying the journal pages? She eyed the timepiece, willing it to share its secrets. Sighing, she realized she could learn nothing from it.

Were the journal entries somehow connected to the slowing of the timepiece? Was there some meaning behind that? Or was Mary just mentally unstable and took to writing fanciful stories in her journals? If that was the case, why did Gertrude destroy so much of the books?

Cate finished her meal, reading the rest of the journal. She gleaned no more relevant or useful information.

* * *

The words from the journal rang in her mind as she attempted to sleep. Mary considered whatever she was referring to in the journal to be a huge responsibility. And someone, perhaps Gertrude, as suggested in the hidden entry, thought it important enough to conceal. Cate stared at the timepiece she held in her hands. Apparently, this was a vital piece of the puzzle, but how did it fit? What was its importance?

With a deep inhale, she let her hand holding the timepiece fall to her chest, rubbing it as thoughts raced through her mind. It wasn't long after she let it rest against her that she heard the now-familiar loud ticking and slowing of the watch. She bolted upright in bed, opening the timepiece. The second hand crawled again. As Cate stared at it, an idea struck her. She rubbed the watch again. The second hand sped up until the timepiece kept perfect time.

Cate's brow furrowed. Was it possible she was causing the watch to malfunction? Could friction from the rubbing cause it to slow? That didn't explain the loss of cell phone signal, but it could explain the malfunctioning timepiece. Perhaps no one else in the family had trouble with it because no one else in the family had developed the habit of rubbing the watch like Cate had.

Cate pondered it for a moment. She wanted to try again to see if her theory was correct, but she was afraid she might damage the watch. Perhaps it was best left untried until she ran her theory past Jack and his grandfather. She would text him in the morning. Cate relaxed back into her bed, determined to go to sleep. After a bit of a struggle, she drifted off to sleep, dreaming again about the past occupants of the castle.

She sent Jack a text early the next morning: *I may have a theory about the watch, meet for lunch to talk?*

As she waited for a response, she scanned her notes, deciding the next logical step would be to gather information from locals. She opened her laptop and searched for the local historical society's information, finding the town's librarian, Mrs. Isla Campbell, listed as president.

She navigated to the library's website and dialed the number listed, asking for Mrs. Campbell.

"Isla Campbell," the woman answered after the call was transferred to her.

"Mrs. Campbell, hi, Cate Kensie here."

"Oh, Lady Cate, how are you? Settling in well, I trust?"

Cate tapped her pen on the desk. "Yes, I am. I'm actually doing a bit of research into the castle, as you know, and I hoped to meet with you about it."

"With me?"

"Yes. I saw that you were listed as the town's historical society president, and I thought you'd be a fantastic resource. Do you have some

time to spare?”

“You’ve come to the right place, Lady Cate. I have *loads* of information. And, of course, I’d make the time.”

“Great. When’s the next opening in your schedule?”

“Could you come down today? Say, in about thirty minutes?”

“Absolutely, that would be perfect. Thank you.”

“Of course, Lady Cate. I’ll see you soon.”

Cate jabbed at the phone to end the call before gathering her notes, a pen, and a blank notebook. She gathered Riley and stepped into the cool, cloudy weather.

As she slid in behind the wheel of her car, her phone chirped with a message from Jack: *In town on errands, won’t be back for lunch. Later?*

Cate texted back: *Heading to town for a meeting, meet at pub for lunch?*

Before she fired the engine, her phone chimed again. Jack responded: *Deal! Noon?*

She answered with an affirmative and fired the engine, easing off the brake and heading for town.

After cracking a few windows, she left the car behind in a space near the library and headed inside. The assistant behind the desk glared at her as she approached. Cate offered her a penitent smile. The librarian emerged from her office, allowing Cate to bypass the circulation desk and avoid the angry assistant.

She waved her around the desk. “Lady Cate, a pleasure to see you again. Please, come into my office.”

“Hello, Mrs. Campbell, nice to see you again, too. Thank you for meeting with me so quickly.”

Cate followed to a small and dimly lit space filled with boxes of books and other library paraphernalia. The librarian motioned to a chair opposite the desk. Cate eased into it and tugged a notebook and pen from her bag.

Mrs. Campbell settled in behind the wooden desk, folding her hands on the top and leaning forward. “Well, Lady Cate, I’m very excited to be of some assistance to you. I understand from your call that you’re doing research into the castle’s history?”

Cate dug a recorder from her tote and waved it in the air. “Yes, that’s right. Do you mind if I record our conversation?”

“Oh, no, not at all.”

“Thanks.” Cate clicked the button to record. “I have been doing some research into Dunhaven Castle. It’s of great interest to me as a historian and the new owner. I’d like to get a better sense of its history from anyone who may have lived in the area and who knows of any information or sources of information. I believed you would be a great starting point since, as the town’s librarian, you’re the historical society president.”

“Oh,” Mrs. Campbell began, coyly, “well, I’m not sure I’d call myself a historian per se, but yes, I’m the historical society president, so I’ve got a lot of information.”

“Then you’ll be a great starting place. So,” Cate said, turning to her notes, “I’ve got the basics of who, what, where, when, and why with the castle. I was hoping you would share some less objective details about the castle. For example, local stories that have been passed along about why particular things were done or anything else that might be connected?”

Mrs. Campbell leaned back, her chair squeaking, and raised an eyebrow. “Oh, you mean the, ah, legends?”

“Yes, if there are legends, I’d love to hear them. They are exactly what would be a perfect addition to my book.”

“Well,” Mrs. Campbell began, settling into her chair with a cat-who-caught-the-canary look, “you have heard about the hauntings, haven’t you?”

“I read a short blurb about it in the book you provided on my last visit, yes.”

“Of course, I didn’t say anything when we first met. I didn’t want to ruin your experience in your new home. I don’t believe in such things, but —” She paused. “There have been, eh, stories.”

She paused again, narrowing her eyes at Cate. The woman appeared to be enjoying the suspense. Cate fed into her excitement. “Stories? Please go on.”

“Yes, stories, tales, legends. Of spirits, ghosts, terrors in the night, phantom sounds, shrieks, and screams of the dead but not gone.” She waved her hands dramatically. “Some say they were ghosts of the builders. Someone was murdered during construction, you know. Others say various spirits of staff who died on the estate come back to haunt their employers long after they were put in their graves.”

“Any description of those spirits? What they looked like? Where they appeared?” Cate glanced up from her note-taking to study the woman.

Mrs. Campbell raised her eyebrow at Cate again. “Any particular form you’d like more information about? You haven’t had a run-in with any of the dearly departed, have you, Lady Cate?”

She offered her a devilish grin. Cate swallowed hard, her odd experiences flitting through her mind. Perhaps those legends were true. Perhaps there were ghosts at Dunhaven Castle.

Cate forced a smile on her face as she considered her response. Should she tell her about the phantom maid she’d spotted in the foyer?

CHAPTER 19



Cate stared at the woman as she considered her question.

“No,” she answered flatly. Cate wasn’t sure what “run-in” she’d had when she encountered the maid in the entryway, but she wasn’t going to admit it to Mrs. Campbell. At least, not yet.

Mrs. Campbell leaned back and shrugged. “Well, there is the tale of the young man who disappeared during the construction. He is rumored to roam the halls, with various sightings across the estate from the gardens to the castle’s interior. He’s described as a tall, dark-haired figure in tattered clothes with a menacing expression. Then there are tales of phantom maids appearing all over the place, endlessly bustling around, continuing their household chores long after their deaths.”

Cate stiffened, her pen freezing in place as she discussed the phantom maid.

The woman continued, ignoring Cate’s reaction, “And of course, there’re the tales of those who have lived there. Those who have been sent screaming into the night when they are awoken by ghastly howls, screams, and shrieks that seem to come from all directions at once.”

“Interesting,” Cate commented as she jotted down notes. “Do you think there’s any truth in these tales?”

Mrs. Campbell frowned and shook her head. “Oh, not me. I don’t believe in such rubbish, but that doesn’t stop the tales from circulating, of course.”

“Or from being printed in books,” Cate quipped. “Speaking of, I noticed in that book that Lady MacKenzie chose not to comment when contacted by the author. Do you know the reason for that?”

“Lady MacKenzie despised the talk of the ghosts and goblins haunting the castle. My guess is primarily because it was her family home. She took a lot of pride in the place, as she should have, and it bothered her to hear people talk negatively about her family home.”

“Was that common for all the MacKenzies or just Lady Gertrude?”

Mrs. Campbell offered another shrug. “I’m not sure. I think Lady Gertrude was more of a recluse, particularly toward the end of her life, than her father was, for example. Those who knew him described Lord MacKenzie as a very personable and outgoing sort.”

“Did she take after her mother?”

“Again, without personal knowledge, my understanding is no. The previous Lady MacKenzie was known as gracious and friendly.”

“Hmm, very interesting. Any interesting tales about any of the residents?”

A smirk crossed the woman’s face, and she leaned forward, placing her clasped hands on the desk. “Well, there is a tale about Lord Randolph MacKenzie. I think he was the third proprietor of the castle.”

“Yes?”

“Well, he traveled extensively. The rumor was, he brought back a girl from one of his travels. He kept her locked in the tower room and used her to fulfill some of his more base desires.” With another wiggle of her eyebrows, she offered Cate a coy smile.

Cate summarized the story in her notes, doubting any of it would prove true. “Another interesting tidbit.”

“So,” Mrs. Campbell said, lifting her chin to peer over Cate’s notepad, “will you be able to use anything I’ve said in your book?”

Cate scribbled a few more notes before flipping the book shut. “Oh, yes, you’ve been very helpful.”

“Oh, excellent. I’m so glad I’ve been of help. And how exciting that some small part of what I’ve said may end up in a book one day. Is there anything else I can help with?”

She shoved the notebook and pen into her tote bag. “Not right now. If I think of anything, though, I’ll contact you to follow up as I begin writing.”

“Oh, please, feel free. I’m happy to provide you with anything else that might help fill in gaps.”

“Well, thank you so much for your time, Mrs. Campbell. I’m sure I’ll be in touch,” Cate said as she stood.

Mrs. Campbell rose with her. “Of course, of course. I’m happy to help, and please don’t hesitate to contact me if you need more.”

Cate extended her hand to shake Mrs. Campbell’s and told her that she would find her own way out. Exiting the office, Cate skirted around the circulation desk, with the library assistant still giving her the evil eye, and headed for the door.

She had about thirty minutes before she planned to meet Jack for lunch, so she collected Riley from the car for a short walk around town. He enjoyed visiting some of his favorite shop owners, and he appreciated getting treats from them even more. Before heading to the pub for lunch, Cate settled him back in the car for an early afternoon nap.

“You wait for me here, buddy. I’m going to meet our pal, Jack, for lunch.” Riley acknowledged the mention of Jack’s name with a wag of his tail. “I’ll tell him you said hello.”

She found Jack already waiting in a booth at the pub. He waved her over.

“Thanks for meeting me,” she said as she sat down. “Riley says hi.”

“No problem. I’m dying to hear your theory about the watch. Oh, and tell the little laddie that I say hello, too, and I look forward to another game of fetch very soon.”

Before they could discuss anything further, the waitress arrived at the table to take their order.

Jack stared at her, his face wrinkled with confusion. “Fish and chips again? Really?”

“It’s good and I’m not very adventurous, I guess.”

This generated a hearty laugh from Jack. “Oh, right, this coming from the lassie who moved to a new country and castle sight unseen.”

Cate shook her head as she unfurled her napkin. “Not true. Mr. Smythe showed me pictures so I saw it.” She punctuated her statement by sticking her tongue out at him.

“Ah, you’re right, not very adventurous moving to a new country when you saw pictures.” He laughed again. “Okay, down to business. What’s your theory on the watch?”

Cate leaned forward across the table and grinned. "One word: friction."

"Friction? Care to elaborate?"

"Yes, friction. I've developed this kind of habit of rubbing the watch in my hand. I think the friction from my fingers may affect it. It happened again last night just after I was rubbing the watch. When I think back, I believe every time it's happened it has been when I've been handling the watch like that. Here, let me show you."

Cate grabbed the watch and began rubbing it. Nothing happened. She frowned and tried again. Again, nothing.

She gave a disgusted sigh. "This is what I was doing last night, and when I rubbed it again, the watch sped up and went back to perfect time."

"Are you sure it wasn't just a coincidence?"

"I thought of that but, from what I remember, it's typically happened when I've been rubbing the watch."

Jack flicked his gaze to the working timepiece. "Except now."

"Except now, yes," she said, trying again. "Except now."

Jack leaned back, slouching in his seat. "I'll run it past my grandfather and see what he says. Assuming, though, that you've got something here—maybe it worked last night because it built up all day with friction—how does that explain the mobile signal loss?"

Cate bit her lower lip as her forehead crinkled in thought. "That's the only piece that doesn't fit into this scenario. I don't know. But maybe I'm on to something, even if this isn't exactly it. You could be right. Maybe it's a build-up. Although, it's happened earlier in the day, too, so that wouldn't fit well there."

"Well," Jack said as the waitress returned with their food, "perhaps we're moving in the right direction. Keep tabs on it. For now, though, let's enjoy our meal."

After lunch, Cate returned to the castle with Riley, planning on taking him for a long walk after he had been cooped up in the car for most of the morning. While she walked, she pondered the situation with the watch. She thought she had been on to something with the friction idea, and she had been disappointed when she wasn't able to reproduce the phenomenon at lunch. She frowned down at the watch. She wasn't doing very well on any of her mysteries since moving to the castle.

At least she had gotten some good information for her book. She focused her thoughts on her conversation with Mrs. Campbell. Much of

what she told her would add a good deal to the book. It was interesting to interweave historical facts with accounts from people who had grown up with legends and lore.

Cate started piecing together how she would pepper in the quotes from Mrs. Campbell with the topics in her book. She could gather quotes from a few other people too, like Mrs. Fraser and Jack's grandfather. Both had a lifetime of experience with the estate and would be excellent sources to interview. She was sure there would be others from the town who would be interested in giving her some information—perhaps members of the historical society.

She resolved to ask Jack if his grandfather would mind doing an interview for the book. As she walked, another idea formed, and she decided to email the author of *The Mysteries of Scotland* to see what details he could provide about Dunhaven Castle.

As the path turned her back toward the castle, Cate contemplated some other sources that she planned to use in her text. It reminded her that she still needed to finish reading through the letters she had found in one of the bedroom closets and to continue to look through the castle for additional personal sources that could augment the facts she had gathered already.

Upon returning to the castle, she opened her laptop and searched for information on how to contact the author of the book that mentioned Dunhaven Castle. It didn't take long to find the author's webpage and information on contacting him. Cate opened a blank email and typed a brief message, introducing herself and requesting from him any information about sources he used in putting together the entry on Dunhaven Castle in his book. She stated that she was requesting the information since she was researching the estate. She did not mention that she was the new owner, not wishing to be asked to provide a quote for his next book or blog post.

After sending the email, Cate scanned the list of new emails that appeared in her inbox. Most of them were junk, but there was an email from Gayle with the subject: THANK YOU!

She opened it and read.

Dear Cate, THANK YOU so much for the thoughtful gift. I love the little porcelain dog figure. I have him (I assume it's a him) set on my desk. He reminded me of Riley, so I named him Wiley after the funny

story you told me about your neighbor's insistence on calling him by the incorrect name. Each day, I will look at him and think of you and Riley. I hope you are doing well and enjoying castle life.

By the way, I hope to have some information for you soon about the birth records for your grandfather.

*Best,
Gayle*

Cate smiled at the email, glad that Gayle enjoyed receiving the small figurine and finding it amusing that she had named it Wiley. Her mind wandered to the other two postcards she'd sent, wondering how those from her old life were fairing.

She glanced back at the screen, spotting the email from Gayle. In the few minutes that she had before dinner, she typed a quick answer back telling Gayle that she was glad she liked the figurine and that she loved the name.

She just finished the email when Mrs. Fraser appeared with a tray of dinner.

"Thank you so much, Mrs. Fraser," Cate said as she stood and strode to the armchair near the fireplace. "Oh, before you go, I hoped to ask a favor of you."

"Ask away, Lady Cate."

Cate eased into the chair and pulled her napkin onto her lap. "I was wondering if you'd let me interview you sometime for my book on Dunhaven Castle. Since you've been here all your life, I suspect you have some great insight into the castle and how it's changed over the years. I'd love to have some personal accounts and a few quotes for the book I'm working on from someone with as much knowledge as you."

Mrs. Fraser pointed a finger at her chest, her eyebrows raising. "Me? Well, I don't know how much use I'll end up being for you, but I would be happy to help if I can."

"Oh, great. Thank you. Would you have some time tomorrow morning after breakfast?"

"Well, I can make the time whenever you'd like to do it."

"I don't want to inconvenience you, if that's not the best time."

"Nay, that's a fine time."

“Okay, great. We’ll plan to do it then, Mrs. Fraser. Thanks again.”

Cate admired the sunrise from her bedroom window, eager to complete her interview with Mrs. Fraser. After breakfast, she took her tray to the kitchen and assisted Mrs. Fraser with cleanup, as much as the woman would allow.

As they sat down with steaming cups of tea, Cate brandished her recorder, asking if she could record the conversation, and after receiving an affirmative from Mrs. Fraser, she clicked the recorder on.

Cate flipped open her notebook and uncapped her pen. “So, Mrs. Fraser, you’ve been on the estate your whole life, correct?”

“Yes, I was born here, daughter of a maid and groundskeeper. Lived my whole life on this estate.”

“You must have a great deal of knowledge of the place and its inhabitants, I assume?”

Mrs. Fraser lifted her chin with pride. “I know the castle inside and out. Know every hallway and backstair, every nook and cranny. Now, I didn’t have much contact with the people, being a child. But when I got older and took on a position here, I got to know their habits and preferences. I started here when Lady Mary was still overseeing the household, and of course, I was here for Lady Gertrude’s entire time as mistress of Dunhaven Castle.”

Cate asked some specific questions about each, asking Mrs. Fraser to provide some details on their habits and preferences, how the two women differed, and how the estate changed in the years that Mrs. Fraser had been there.

Emily Fraser provided a wealth of knowledge on the inner workings of the castle and how it had changed over the years. Her interview took almost two hours, with Cate getting several pages of excellent information to add to her book. At the close of the interview, she thanked Mrs. Fraser again, telling her she provided so much information she was certain to have enough for an entire chapter. The news stunned the woman, and she admitted she was happy to provide enough information to be quoted in a book.

Cate gathered her things, discussing a potential interview with Mr. Fraser on a rainy day. She departed from the kitchen and headed upstairs to retrieve the old letters of Victoria MacKenzie for her next piece of research.

Along the way, she checked on Riley, finding him contentedly napping on the chaise lounge in her sitting room. She eased the door closed and

headed for the bedroom closet. She settled in amongst the boxes and trunks, grabbing the handful of letters to read.

She read through the love letters from Randolph MacKenzie to his future wife, Victoria. The difference in discourse between men and women during courtship in the distant past as compared to today was fascinating. Apparently, the young suitor had been quite taken by the young woman's beauty and wrote her several poems about it, sending them along with his official wishes to court her. It was like reading a real-life romance novel, and Cate found she couldn't tear herself away.

Given the language in the letter, she found it hard to believe the man had kept a woman locked in the tower. He seemed thoroughly in love with his wife.

About a third of the way through her reading, the familiar loud tick of the timepiece resounded, and Cate found the second hand creeping around the face. She tried to remember if she had been rubbing it and concluded that she likely had been.

This time, she hoped to show Jack exactly what the watch was doing, and they could both test her theory that friction was responsible for slowing down and speeding up the watch. Cate picked up her phone as she left the closet, intent on texting Jack to find his location. She hoped that she could locate him quickly. She pressed the button to toggle the display on only to be greeted with white lettering that read NO SERVICE.

Cate groaned. Not only was it impossible to text Jack, but if the cell signal was in any way related to the slowing of the watch, her friction idea just went up in smoke. She gave up on piecing it together and concentrated on finding Jack, hurrying from the room and down the hall. She peered out the windows in search of the groundskeeper.

Window after window passed, but Cate caught no glimpse of Jack. With a frustrated sigh, she hurried around the corner, peering through windows which overlooked the back garden. She spotted a tall figure working and stepped to the window, knocking rapidly on the glass.

Attracted by the noise, the man spun to glance up at the windows. Cate swallowed hard, stumbling back a step. It wasn't Jack. It was a man she had never seen before.

She swallowed hard and approached the window again as the man returned to his work. Cate studied him. He was dressed curiously, and the

equipment he used looked like a peculiar choice, considering the tools she had seen Mr. Fraser and Jack using.

She glanced at the watch again. It still ran slow and a check of her phone showed no service. Her goal had been to find Jack and show him the watch in its slowed state. If she found him, she could also ask him about the man in the back garden.

She continued down the hall, not spotting Jack anywhere. She clutched at the watch bouncing against her chest as she retraced her steps and peered again through a few windows, finding him nowhere.

With a sigh, she popped open the face of the timepiece. To her amazement, the watch ticked away at normal speed. She had just rubbed it, she realized. It couldn't be coincidence. Too bad she couldn't have demonstrated it for Jack.

She glanced at her cell phone, finding it now had a signal. The two occurrences must be related. But then her theory made little sense.

Frustrated, she shoved the phone in her pocket and took a step down the hall. She glanced out the window overlooking the rose bushes and stopped dead.

Jack trimmed a rose bush just outside the glass. Tools and clippers were spread around him. It looked as though he had been there quite a while.

Cate wondered if she could have missed him when she hurried past the windows. She couldn't see how she had.

She knocked at the window and pushed it open. Jack twisted, spotting her at the window.

"M'lady!" he shouted. "Why doth though beckon from the window?"

Cate shook her head, but his extravagant bow elicited a chuckle. "Very funny. I beckon from the window because I've been looking for you."

"That sounds ominous."

"Did you just get here? I went past just a few minutes earlier and didn't see you. That thing happened with the watch again. I wanted to show you."

"I've been here for over two hours. And I can tell you it's true: every rose really does have its thorn. Maybe even two or three of them."

Cate's brow furrowed in confusion. She couldn't have missed him. But where had he been when she walked past moments ago?

"Everything okay, Cate?" he hollered when she didn't respond for a moment.

“Ah, yes, I think so. It’s just that, well, I just came past, and I could have sworn you were not here.”

Jack looked equally confused. “I promise I’ve been here for about two hours. Haven’t left.”

“No, I believe you, but I’m surprised I could have missed you. Hey, speaking of working, did Mr. Fraser hire some extra help for the garden trimming?”

“Extra help?” He furrowed his brow, placing his hands on his hips.

“Yes, I saw a man a few yards down working outside the garden. I was wondering who he was.”

“Ah.” He glanced around, rubbing the back of his neck. “There’s no one else working with us today that I know of. If he hired someone, he didn’t mention it to me, and I haven’t seen anyone all day.”

A chill ran up Cate’s spine. Had she just spotted yet another ghost roaming the estate?

CHAPTER 20



Cate stood frozen at the window as she processed the information. Her knees wobbled underneath her. No one else was on the estate. So, who had she just spotted moments ago working in her garden?

“You okay, Cate?” Jack shouted from the garden below.

She licked her lips and forced a smile onto her face. “Yes, I’m okay. I’ll let you get back to your roses.”

“I believe they’re *your* roses, Lady Cate.” He gave a salute to her as he returned to his trimming.

Cate shut the window, hovering a moment more as she stared out of it. How had she missed Jack moments ago? She shifted angles, studying another view. There was no way she wouldn’t have spotted him. But he hadn’t been there.

What had been there was another man. She lingered another moment before heading back to her room. Was she losing her mind?

Riley bounded off the chaise as she pushed into the room, prancing over to her with his tail wagging. She scooped him up, shoving aside the unexplainable events. “Did you have a nice nap, Riley? Ready for a little walk before lunch?”

Riley’s tail wagged furiously, and he lapped Cate’s face appreciatively when she mentioned a walk.

Despite the outing and the online shopping she did afterward, tension mounted as the evening hours approached. Cate lounged in the library’s armchair, trying to focus her attention on a mystery novel.

She rubbed at the back of her neck as she let the book drop into her lap for the umpteenth time. Her unease grew with every moment. She suspiciously eyed every dark corner, expecting a ghost to come popping out at any second. With the recent ongoingings at the castle, she began to question her own sanity.

She crawled into bed at one in the morning, hoping a few hours of sleep would settle her mind.

The rest did little to ease her tension. She swung her legs over the side of the bed as the sun peeked over the horizon with heavy eyelids. She still eyed the dark corners suspiciously as she tugged on her robe, deciding to spend the day in town away from the castle.

After breakfast and a long walk, Cate loaded Riley into the car and headed for town. Warm sunshine shone on the buildings as they wandered along the streets. She ducked into the shop she'd bought the postcards from on her last trip.

"Good morning, Harry."

A broad smile crossed the man's face, and he waved from behind the counter. "Well, good morning, Lady Cate. And little Riley, too."

Riley stared expectantly, waiting for a treat that Harry quickly produced. "I'm glad to see you. How are you today?"

"I'm good, thanks. How are you?"

"Cannae complain. I've got my wife helping me today, just a minute. I want you to meet her." He held up a finger, twisting his head to the back storage area. "Helen! HELEN!"

"Yeah? What is it?" a voice answered.

"Come out here and meet Lady Cate," he called back.

Helen appeared in the doorway, dusting her hands off.

"Cate?" she asked, then spotted Cate standing near the counter.

Harry waved a hand at Cate. "Aye, Lady Cate—the newest MacKenzie, our new castle owner."

"Oh, Lady Cate," Helen said, making her way over with a smile.

Cate stuck her hand out to the woman. "Hi Helen, I'm Cate, and this is Riley."

"Hello, nice to meet you. I've heard about you from Harry and Isla. I'm a member of the historical club, too."

"Oh, great. I was hoping to stop by one of your meetings to discuss the castle with the group. I'm writing a book on its history, and it would be

great to get some stories about it from the folks here.”

Helen swept a lock of her auburn hair from her forehead. “I’m sure you’d be welcome at a meeting. You should speak with Isla about when the best time might be. There are definitely stories about that place, that’s for certain.”

“Yes, Mrs. Campbell was telling me some of those stories. About the hauntings and so on.”

Helen nodded at her as she shoved her hands into her apron pockets. “Those tales have been told around this town long as I can remember. After listening to some of them, I’d venture to say you’re quite a brave girl, Lady Cate.”

Cate furrowed her brow. “Brave?”

“You’d not catch me in that castle all alone at night, there’s a fact.”

Cate lifted Riley into her arms, stroking his fur. “So, you think there’s something to the stories?”

Helen crossed her arms, giving a shrug. “Well, I cannae say if they’re true or not, but I can say I dinnae think they just came from nothing. Something happened up there at that castle to cause such a stir of tales in the village.”

“I’d guess much of the stories are embellished upon.”

“Even still, you’d not get me alone up there.” Helen gave an emphatic shake of her head.

Harry waved his hands in the air. “Now, Helen, stop filling that poor girl’s head with tales.”

“Nothing she hasn’t heard before, sounds like,” Helen retorted.

“No sense in stirring her up more. The poor child doesn’t want to hear about how she’s sharing her new home with ghosts. She’ll barely be able to walk around without checking every shadow after you’re done.”

Helen waved her hand at him as though she didn’t agree, but changed the subject. “How are you settling into your new home?”

“Very well, thank you. It was quite a change for both of us,” she said, motioning to Riley.

“You’re from the States, right?”

“Yep, born and raised. I’d never even traveled outside of the country before I moved here, so it was quite a change. I’m still getting used to it.”

Helen looped her arm around her husband’s. “Well, welcome to you. I hope you find Scotland as charming as we do.”

“Thank you. I am finding it very charming. Everyone has been extremely welcoming to me. I’m very grateful. Well, I’ll let you get back to your day. I just wanted to stop in and say hello.”

“Thanks for stopping by, Lady Cate,” Harry said, offering Riley another treat before he left.

Cate waved a goodbye from the door. “Nice seeing you again, Harry, and it was nice meeting you, Helen. I hope to see you soon at a historical club meeting.”

“Nice meeting you too, Lady Cate.”

Cate left the shop, wondering if she would ever get used to being called Lady Cate, and continued down the sidewalk, stopping to visit several other shops and returning to the castle just before lunch. After lunch, she spent the day outside, enjoying the warm sunshine, walking and playing with Riley, or lounging on the lawn by the loch and reading a book while Riley napped in the sunshine. Anything to avoid the castle halls.

On her way back to the castle in the late afternoon, Cate caught sight of Jack frowning at one of the rose bushes. She called a hello from across the lawn.

“Hello, Cate,” Jack answered as she reached him. “And hello to you, too, Sir Riley.” He patted the dog on the head as Riley stood with his front legs planted on Jack’s leg.

“You don’t look happy.”

“I’m not. This little lad isn’t doing so well.” Jack showed her the shriveled leaves on the plant. “I was trying to determine what might be wrong with it. I might have to call in reinforcements. My grandfather might have a better idea than I.”

“Oh, speaking of,” Cate answered. “I was hoping to interview him for my book. Since he’s lived here and worked on the estate, I think he would have a great wealth of knowledge about it. If he’s coming to look at the rose bush, would you mind asking him for me?”

“I’m sure he’d be happy to talk for as long as you’d like about the castle. Maybe even longer than you’d like,” he said with a laugh. “He’s probably got loads of information to share. He’s out of town, so I’ll ask as soon as he’s back.”

“I’ll bet, that’s why he’s a perfect source for my book.”

Jack pointed a finger at Cate. “Say, speaking of people at the castle, did you track down that extra helper you saw yesterday?”

Cate frowned, studying the sick rose bush instead of Jack. "Uh, no."

"Now you don't look happy, Cate."

Cate hesitated, unsure if she wanted to discuss her experience. It was the second time she had seen a person on the estate that no one else had seen. She avoided eye contact, afraid she'd sound crazy.

Jack leaned forward to catch her eye. "Cate, is everything okay?"

"I think so."

Riley leapt onto his hind legs, scratching at Jack's leg.

He leaned over to tousle the little dog's fur. "You think so? You don't sound so sure."

Cate watched Jack absentmindedly petting Riley as they spoke. The little dog seemed attached to him. Riley trusted him, so Cate decided she would, too.

"It's just that this is the second person I've seen on this estate that no one else has seen, and no one else but the Frasers, you, and I have been on the estate."

"The second time?"

"Yes, I saw a woman in the entry hall. I spoke to her, but Mrs. Fraser said there was no one else in the castle when I asked her about it."

"Hmm," Jack said.

Cate stared at him with pleading eyes. "I'm not crazy. And I didn't think I believed in ghosts, but I'm wondering about those tales floating around town about this place."

"I don't think you're crazy, Cate. And I certainly don't believe those tales from town. Those people like to talk, that's all. It's Scotland. Everyone's got a haunted something or other in their back pocket around here. It's just idle chatter. Don't let it get into your head."

"But then how do you explain what I saw? If they're not ghosts, am I really going crazy? What other explanation is there?"

He put his hands on her shoulders, staring into her eyes. "Cate, you've just moved from another country into a giant castle. I'm sure your nerves are on edge and your imagination is just playing tricks on you. You're primed to see something."

Cate bit her lower lip, unconvinced, but willing to accept the explanation for now. "You're right, it's probably an overactive imagination combined with the unfamiliar setting. Plus, it can be kind of spooky here at night."

“Yeah, I’ll bet, but I wouldn’t know for sure. I’m too afraid to be here at night.” Jack shivered as he shot a glance at the castle.

Cate offered him an unimpressed stare. “Funny. You should be afraid during the day, that’s when I see all my ghosts.”

She scooped Riley into her arms. “Well, time to get Riley his dinner. I’ll leave you to your sick rose. I hope it’s okay.”

Jack tickled the little dog’s chin. “Okay, Cate. Enjoy your dinner, Sir Riley.”

Cate waved and strolled back to the castle, pondering Jack’s statements. He was right. It was her overactive imagination, coupled with some sleepless nights. It had to be. She probably just imagined she saw someone. At least, that was what she would keep telling herself.

The first rays of morning light painted the night sky with bright streaks of orange as Cate awoke. As she admired the sunrise through her bedroom window, she glanced down at the watch. Another mystery that had her questioning everything.

“What is your secret?” she asked it.

Impulsively, she rubbed the face. The timepiece ticked loudly, the second hand slowing to a near stop. The rubbing *must* be doing it somehow. What else could affect it?

She stared at the second hand as it ticked ever so slowly. She counted the seconds between its movement. Fifteen seconds between every tick.

A woman’s voice echoed in the hallway. Cate bolted upright. It was only 5:30 a.m., and Mrs. Fraser never arrived before six. She swung her legs over the side of the bed, wondering if something was wrong. She glanced down at the slowly ticking watch dangling around her neck. She swiped at the face, and it picked up speed. After a moment, it returned to its normal time keeping.

She pulled on her slippers and tugged on her robe, hurrying to the doors of her suite. She pulled the door open and scanned the empty hall. She wandered out a few steps, peering around.

“Mrs. Fraser?” she called. She received no response.

“MRS. FRASER?” she yelled again, straining her ears. Nothing.

With a shrug, she returned to her room and dressed for the day before gathering Riley for his morning walk.

She pushed into the kitchen through the back door. “Good morning, Mrs. Fraser, how are you?” Cate asked.

Mrs. Fraser shoved a tray of cookies into the oven. “Good morning, Lady Cate. I’m doing well, how are you?”

“I’m good, thanks. I can’t wait to eat one of those cookies. Is everything okay?”

Mrs. Fraser wiped her hands on her apron before she gave the oatmeal a stir. “Okay? What would be amiss?”

“I don’t know, but you were here so early this morning, I thought something might be wrong.”

Mrs. Fraser glanced up from pouring the raisins into a bowl, confusion on her face. “Early? I was here just after six—my usual time.”

Cate sealed the package shut as she set it on the counter. “You weren’t here around five-thirty this morning?”

“Nay, I wasn’t here that early.”

Cate’s stomach flip-flopped as she realized she hadn’t heard Mrs. Fraser’s voice in the hall earlier.

CHAPTER 21



Cate collapsed onto a chair, her face blanching as Mrs. Fraser answered her. Blood rushed into her ears, and her stomach somersaulted.

She'd clearly heard a woman's voice in the hall this morning. If it hadn't been Mrs. Fraser's voice, whose was it?

Mrs. Fraser stirred the oatmeal, frowning at Cate's reaction. "Is everything okay, Lady Cate?"

Cate closed her gaping jaw and swallowed hard, forcing herself to stand and smile. "Yes, I must have been hearing things."

Mrs. Fraser tugged open a drawer and set a ladle on the counter. "Oh, I don't doubt that. I'll bet the castle has a whole host of noises you'll discover. Well, I'll have your breakfast ready soon."

"Thanks, Mrs. Fraser." Cate scooped Riley into her arms and wandered from the kitchen, remaining unconvinced that the sound she heard was the random groaning of the castle.

It was a woman's voice. While Mrs. Fraser's explanation was far more logical, it didn't fit with what she'd heard.

After breakfast, Cate took Riley for a long morning walk around the grounds. As they toured the gardens, Riley suddenly bolted around a set of bushes, disappearing from sight. Cate rushed to keep up with him, rounding the row of shrubs to discover the reason for Riley's sudden excitement.

She found Riley, his tail wagging furiously, enjoying a game of tug-of-war with Jack and a stick. With his keen sense of smell, he must have sniffed out Jack and raced over to say hello.

Jack waved at her as he tugged against the branch. “Ah, good morning, Cate. I thought Sir Riley had let himself out for a walk.”

Cate closed the distance between them. “No, but he’s faster at dodging bushes than I am.”

“I’ll bet he is, and he’s not too shabby at tug-of-war either. He’s got quite the grip, this little one has.” Jack gave a hard tug against Riley’s grip.

Riley adjusted his bite and yanked on the stick, backing farther away from Jack. With a mighty tug, he wrangled it from Jack’s grip. He pranced back to Cate, the stick extending from both sides of his mouth.

Jack climbed to his feet. “You win, big guy, you win.” He faced Cate. “And how are you today?”

Cate shrugged and forced a smile as she stared out over the scenery. “I’m fine.”

“Haven’t seen any ghosts today, have you?”

She rolled her eyes and shot him a glance. “No, I haven’t seen any ghosts today, thank you. But I made the watch slow down again *and* speed up. It has to have something to do with friction.”

Jack rubbed at his chin. “Rubbing it? But that didn’t work last time.”

“No, but it did this morning. It reacted *both* times I rubbed it. It can’t be a coincidence.”

Jack wagged a finger at the pendant. “Try it again now.”

“Okay.” Cate grabbed hold of the gold timepiece, popping it open and rubbing the face. Nothing happened. Cate frowned at it. “Come on you.”

Jack arched an eyebrow and grinned. “Talking to watches? *Now* I think you’re crazy, Cate.”

Cate’s shoulder slumped as she tried twice more. “It just worked. It wasn’t more than two hours ago. This is so frustrating.” She flung her arms in the air.

“Maybe it doesn’t like me. Maybe it’s shy. Did you lose your mobile signal again when it happened?”

Cate sighed as she let the timepiece flop against her tunic. “I don’t know. I didn’t check. I thought I heard Mrs. Fraser talking in the hall, so I got the watch back up to speed and went to see what she wanted.”

“What did she want?”

“Nothing—she wasn’t there. When I asked her about it this morning, she said she wasn’t in the castle.”

Jack pursed his lips, his hands on his hips and a concerned expression on his features.

Cate shot him a glance and shook her head. “I’m *not* crazy.”

“I didn’t say you were, but I’m a little concerned that someone might have been in the castle.”

Cate’s stomach flip-flopped and warmth rushed over her. “Who would have been there, and why?”

Jack pointed a finger at her. “That’s the million-pound question. Whoever it may have been, I can’t imagine they were up to anything good at 5:30 a.m. in someone else’s home.”

A chill shot up Cate’s spine. In all her preoccupation with haunted castles and ghosts, she had failed to consider that she may be seeing and hearing real, living people wandering the estate. The rambling castle provided the perfect hiding place. Another person could live inside and she’d never know it.

She bit her lower lip as she held back a shiver. “Okay, that’s creepy on a different level, but that would make sense with some things I’ve been experiencing. But again, why?”

Jack crossed his arms, waving a hand in the air as he ticked off reasons. “I can come up with a million reasons: a free place to live, hiding out from someone, trying to scare the new owner—who knows? But I’m getting concerned that maybe it’s not your overactive imagination and your big move.”

“Do you think I should call the police?”

Jack shook his head. “We don’t have proof of anything. Do you mind if I look around?”

“Not at all. I’d feel better if you did, in fact. And I’d like to help. I want to see with my own eyes that no one is here.”

“Okay, let’s check it out, top to bottom. If your ghost is in there and alive, we’ll find them.”

They headed for the castle with Riley in tow. Jack suggested starting at the bottom floor and working their way up.

They wandered down to the servants’ area for a thorough search. With no evidence of anyone having been in the castle there, they moved to the main level.

“Where did you see that woman?” Jack inquired as they climbed the stairs.

Cate led him to the foyer, heading to the spot at the bottom of the stairs. “She was right here. She came from that way and was walking toward the library.” Cate pointed toward the sitting room across the space.

Jack rubbed his chin as he studied the marble floor. “Okay, let’s take a look, particularly in the closed off wing. Though, I always keep it locked, so I’d be surprised if we find anything.”

They searched through each room on the floor, looking for anything disturbed or evidence of anyone’s presence in the castle, but they found none.

“Not sure if I feel better or worse that we haven’t found anything yet,” Cate said as they finished looking in the last room.

They climbed the stairs to the next floor. “Hopefully we’ll find something definitive by the time we’re done searching so that you can rest easier.”

“I’m sure we can rule out my bedroom, unless they are living under my bed and I don’t know it.”

Jack wiggled his eyebrows with a laugh as they reached the landing. “I certainly hope they aren’t.”

They searched every corner and closet upstairs for signs of an intruder. They climbed to the towers, unlocking the doors and making a sweep of each space. The search turned up nothing.

With one bedroom left, Cate assumed they’d wasted hours and come to no new conclusions.

“One bedroom left,” Jack said as he thumbed toward the door.

Cate shambled next to him, tired and frustrated. “Yes, and I doubt anyone is in there. I’ve been in and out of that room dozens of times. I would have seen something.”

“Let’s check it out just to be sure.”

With a shrug and a sigh, Cate agreed. “Okay, sure.”

Jack pushed into the bedroom, scanning the space.

Cate crossed the room and pulled open the door to the walk-in closet, stepping inside. “I’ll check in here.”

She glanced around. Everything was as she had left it. No signs of anyone.

“I don’t see anything,” she called, “but this is one place this watch loves to do its trick. Maybe it’ll work here and you can finally see it!”

She rubbed the watch, and this time, it worked as she expected, slowing down to a crawl.

“HA!” she exclaimed, “I was right. Come and see.”

She grinned at the watch, then glanced at the door, waiting for Jack. He didn’t come in.

“Jack!” she called.

There was no answer.

“JACK!” she yelled louder. She received no response.

She strode to the door and popped her head into the bedroom.

“Jack?” she repeated as she scanned the room. It was empty. No Jack. No Riley.

Where could he have gone? Cate frowned as she wondered what had happened to her search companions.

She stepped back inside the closet, scanning the space. Had she missed him and the little dog? She’d done it before.

She scanned the area, checking behind trunks and the mirror. She found nothing. With a sigh, she stared down at the slowly ticking watch, rubbing its face. It ticked faster, speeding up to normal speed.

She scoffed at its behavior, wondering if Jack may be correct about it being shy. She spun and took a step toward the door when she collided with Jack. He caught her just as she stumbled backward, almost falling over a trunk.

He stared at her wide-eyed. “Cate, where have you been?”

Cate drew her chin to her chest, an incredulous look on her face. “Where have I been? Where have *you* been?” She poked a finger in his direction.

His jaw dropped and he pointed at himself, his face scrunched in bewilderment. “I’ve been right here the whole time. I called and called you, but you didn’t answer. I looked in the closet and you weren’t here.”

Cate narrowed her eyes at his statement. “I heard nothing. I called and called *you* and you didn’t answer. I looked in the bedroom and back in here, and both you and Riley were gone.”

The two stood for a moment in stunned silence, trying to make sense of what had just happened.

Cate fluttered her eyelashes as an idea flitted across her mind. “Do me a favor. I’d like to test something. Go out and close the door, wait about ten

seconds, then open it and see if I'm here. Then close the door and wait another few seconds before opening it again."

Jack's expression betrayed his confusion. "Cate, what are you talking about?"

"Just trust me. Try it."

He cocked his head and shrugged. "You're the boss."

He wandered to the bedroom and closed the door behind him, leaving Cate alone in the closet. She began counting in her head to ten as she rubbed the watch. It slowed down to a crawl. She waited for the door to open as she got to the ten-second mark. Nothing happened.

Before she could start her second count, voices interrupted her. She raced to the door and flung it open. She found no one there. Heat washed over her as she stared at the empty room.

The bedroom door stood open. She wrinkled her brow at it. It had been closed before. Did Jack leave? He must have. Why?

She crossed to the open door, peering into the empty hallway.

"Jack?" she called down the hall. She got no answer. She listened for any sounds. She had heard voices only moments ago. Had Jack taken Riley outside? Was the little pup ill?

She wandered down the hall, peering out the windows. She spotted no one.

A stairway led down. She hovered at the top and called down it, her voice echoing off the stone walls. "Jack?"

Again, no answer. Where could they be?

She shook her head as she wandered back to the bedroom, checking for signs of Jack and Riley. Faced with an empty room, she trudged to the closet and searched inside. Empty. She pulled the door shut, checking behind it. Nothing.

She grabbed the watch dangling around her neck and rubbed it. It returned to normal speed, as expected. She turned to continue her search for Riley and Jack when the door popped open.

She stumbled back a step as Jack stepped through into the closet. "Please tell me this is the first time you've opened that door."

Jack furrowed his brow, glancing around the closet. "This is the second time I've opened the door. The first time you weren't here. Cate, where did you go? Is there a secret passage in here?"

Cate swallowed hard. The words made no sense as they came out of her mouth, even to her. “I don’t know where I went, but I think it has something to do with this watch.”

“You don’t know where you went? What could it possibly have to do with the watch?”

“I was standing here in the closet, but the door never opened. I heard voices. I assumed it was you and opened the door myself, but no one was there. I walked all over searching for you and Riley, but I couldn’t find you.”

“What?” Jack laughed, his brow furrowed. “Cate, are you playing a prank on me? Come on, where is the secret passage or secret panel?” He peered around the room.

Cate’s face blanched as she stared at him. “I’m not joking. I wish there was a secret passage, but there isn’t—or, if there is, I don’t know about it. You two were not here.”

Jack put his hands on his hips, shaking his head. “Cate, I can’t believe that.”

“I’m not sure I want to believe it either, but it’s the truth. I didn’t see you, and the only thing that changed was this watch’s speed.”

Jack stood speechless, his lower lip bobbing up and down as he searched for an answer. “I don’t know what to say. I can’t think of a relevant question to ask. I don’t understand any of this.”

Cate ran her fingers through her hair. “Me either—but I can think of one question to ask.”

“What’s that?”

She looked him dead in the eye, a worried expression on her features. “If you didn’t see me here, where was I?”

CHAPTER 22



Cate sank to sit on a trunk as a wave of nausea passed over her. Jack hadn't seen her moments ago when she'd been standing in the closet, then wandering through the bedroom and hall. And she hadn't seen Jack. Where had she been?

Jack rubbed his neck, shaking his head. "None of this makes any sense to me, Cate. If you never left, where were you? You weren't here."

"None of it makes any sense, you're right. Are you sure you didn't miss me?" Cate glanced up at him, hope filling her eyes.

Jack gave her a look. "Cate, there's no missing you. You're standing here plain as day in front of me. I didn't miss you."

"Is it possible that there is some mechanism that moves this closet? Perhaps there is a secret passage or panel that we aren't aware of that interacts with the watch."

Jack glanced around the room, studying the walls. "Okay, but the closet looked the same just minus you. So, an identical space must be replacing it. And if we're moving, what mechanism is so quiet that no one would hear it? And how could the watch control it?"

"I don't know, but something strange is going on."

Jack rubbed his chin. "That's the only thing we know for sure: something strange is going on. Damn. A fine time for my grandfather to be traveling. He'd be the perfect person to ask."

Cate let out a shaky breath, drawing Jack's attention back to her. "Cate, are you okay? You're white as a sheet."

“Yeah, well, I mean other than me disappearing with no explanation, I’m okay. I just don’t know what to think anymore.”

“Well, until we know what to think, it might be best that you’re not fiddling with this watch. We don’t want you disappearing for good.”

A wave of panic swept over Cate. “Maybe you’re right. We do not understand what it’s doing or where I’m going. Maybe I shouldn’t mess with it.”

“I’m not even sure you should keep coming to this closet. It may be something similar to what you suggested earlier being triggered by something we don’t know of.”

“Good point.” Cate stood up to leave but sank right back down onto the trunk when her wobbly knees gave way.

Jack thrust out his hands to steady her. “Whoa, you okay, Cate?”

“Yes, just a little woozy. I think I’m letting my fear of the unknown get to me a little too much. I’m sure there’s a reasonable explanation for this.”

“Maybe you should lie down.”

Cate considered declining, but her rolling stomach said otherwise. An eerie pall hung over her and she couldn’t shake it. With her breakfast threatening to rise up in her throat, she nodded her head in agreement. “Maybe you’re right.”

Jack wrapped an arm around her shoulders. “Here, let me help you to your room.”

She struggled to her feet, unsteady at first, then, with Jack’s aid, made her way to her room. Riley trailed behind, his tail lowered as he sensed Cate’s anxiety.

Jack placed the little dog on the bed as Cate slid under the covers. Riley raced to her side, curling tightly against her.

“I’ll tell Mrs. Fraser that you’re not feeling well and to bring your lunch here.”

Cate traced the outline of the silk comforter. “Thanks.”

“Don’t worry, Cate, I’m sure there is a reasonable explanation. We’ll figure it out.”

Cate forced herself to make eye contact with him and nodded, a weak smile on her face. As he disappeared, she let her head sink back into the pillows, her hand stroking the fur down Riley’s back to relax them both.

She sucked in a few deep breaths, trying to clear her mind, but she found it impossible to push the thoughts of what happened from her mind.

Jack's words echoed in her head. *You weren't there, Cate, you weren't there.*

The terrifying experience still disconcerted her. Where had she been? Wherever she was, Jack and Riley weren't. Had she crossed over to some spirit realm? Nothing made sense.

Riley stared up at her, still unsettled by her strange behavior.

"It's okay, Riley. I'm fine. At least, I think I'm fine. I don't know which way is up anymore."

She thought of her "disappearance," of little Riley left behind, searching and not being able to find her. Dizziness swept over her again at the notion.

Footsteps sounded in her sitting room. She bolted upright, startled by the noise. She held her breath until she heard Mrs. Fraser call out, "Just me coming in, Lady Cate. I've got your lunch."

Cate silently scolded herself for being so silly. Of course, it was Mrs. Fraser. "Come in, Mrs. Fraser," she called back.

Mrs. Fraser pushed the door to the bedroom open, carrying a tray. "Well, what's this about you being sick?"

Cate waved it away. "Oh, it's nothing serious. I just felt a bit woozy—probably too little sleep or something."

Mrs. Fraser set the tray down on Cate's lap. "Well, lucky for you, I was making some of my famous chicken soup. It's just what you need for whatever ails you. And I brought a bone up for Riley, too, to keep him occupied while you rest. Now here, lean forward and let me straighten your pillows."

"Oh, that's unnecessary, Mrs. Fraser. Thank you so much for the soup and the bone for Riley."

Mrs. Fraser waved her forward. "Come on, don't make me ask twice."

Cate shimmied forward, allowing her to fluff and straighten the pillows. "Leave it to a man to just dump you off in bed and not bother to get you settled. There we are, that should do. Now you just sit back and enjoy your soup. I'll be back to check on you later."

Before leaving, Mrs. Fraser set the bone down on the floor and settled Riley with it.

Cate pushed the noodles, chicken, and carrots around in the bowl as she stared at it. The delicious scent of chicken noodle soup wafted past her nose. She forced a little broth down, understanding why people referred to the soup as famous.

She glanced over the bed at Riley gnawing on his bone. It seemed he was enjoying Mrs. Fraser's lunch, too.

She managed to finish the entire bowl of soup. Her stomach settled as she set the tray aside. Her mind settled, too. She couldn't have disappeared. People didn't just disappear and reappear. A plausible explanation existed. She just needed to find it.

Mrs. Fraser returned just as Cate was climbing out of bed. "What's this? Up already?"

Cate straightened the covers on her bed. "Yes, I feel much better. Your chicken soup does work for whatever ails you. I was going to bring the tray down on my way to the library."

Mrs. Fraser pulled them down as Cate finished and waved her back into bed. "Nay, I won't have it—back to bed with you."

"But I feel fine," Cate whined.

Mrs. Fraser wagged her finger at her and pointed to the bed. "You need rest. Young Jack says you were white as a sheet—could barely keep to your feet when he brought you in here. I'd say you still look a mite too pale for my taste. Now back to bed."

Cate glanced across the room into the full-length mirror, arching an eyebrow at her pale skin. "I always look too pale for my taste. Besides, I can't just sit here, I need something to do, at least. I'll get my laptop and my notes and then I'll get back into bed, I promise."

"I'll have none of that. You'll not be running around the place ill on my watch. I'll send young Jack with it or fetch it myself."

Cate sighed, realizing she wouldn't win the battle, and climbed back into bed.

Mrs. Fraser pulled the covers up over her, turning them back to rest on her lap. "There we are. Now I'll send up a plate of cookies for you. Got to keep your strength up."

As Mrs. Fraser bustled from the room, Cate had to admit the treatment wasn't too bad. She hadn't had anyone worry over her strength for a long while, and she had been dying to try the cookies.

"Thanks, Mrs. Fraser," she called.

She drummed her fingers against the duvet as she waited in bed for her laptop and other research materials. Jack appeared in the doorway a few minutes later, his arms laden with materials.

He slid a plate of cookies onto the bedside table. “I’ve got cookies, a laptop, and a folder marked ‘Castle research.’ Did I get everything?”

Cate accepted the proffered materials with a smile. “Yep, you got everything. Sorry, but Mrs. Fraser wouldn’t permit me to get out of bed to get it myself.”

“I heard. The old toughie has forbidden you to leave your bed. Sorry, that’s my fault. I’ll admit I was worried, and I told her you were awfully pale. You look better now, though.”

“I feel better. I think I just panicked. There must be a reasonable explanation.”

“Well, we don’t have to solve it today. I’m with Mrs. Fraser on this one. Take the day to rest.”

“With everyone fussing over me, I’ll be back to normal in no time.”

Jack glanced at the materials spread across the bed. “There’s the spirit. Is there anything else you need?”

“No, I think this is everything, thank you.”

“You’re welcome, Cate. If you need anything, just call.” He tousled the fur on Riley’s head before he strode from the room.

Left alone, Cate opened her laptop first to check her email. She found three emails waiting for her amidst the junk mail: one from Gayle, one from Molly, and one from the author of *The Mysteries of Scotland*. She opened Molly’s first.

Cate—OMG!!! I just got your postcard. I’m glad to hear that you’re doing so well. Is the joint haunted or not? I posted your postcard in the department office for everyone to see. Don’t be surprised if you get a few emails from people asking to visit. I’ll be the first, can I visit yet? LOL

Enjoy your new adventure!

Molly

Cate chuckled at the exuberant email, pressing the reply button and sending a brief answer telling her she could visit anytime she’d like. She side-stepped the haunting question, now not sure if she could send an honest and dismissive answer.

Cate moved on to the email from Preston Scott, the author of *The Mysteries of Scotland*.

Good day, Cate. Lovely to hear from one of my esteemed readers, and thank you for your inquiry. I gathered the information for my stories from visiting the local towns themselves and speaking with residents. Many castles have tales to tell, and many of those living near them love to tell those tales. I find this a most effective way to gather information (and fun, too!).

Good luck with your research project. I wish you all the best with your book. If you need a critique, I would be happy to provide one for you.

*My highest regards,
P. Scott*

Cate rolled her eyes at the non-answer and moved on to Gayle's email.

Hello Cate, I hope you are doing well. I have the information that you requested about your grandfather. We searched the records to find the birth certificate for both your grandfather, Charles, and your father, Logan. I had digital scans sent, and I attached them to this email.

As you can see, your grandfather was born in Scotland as Charles MacKenzie to Lucas and Amelia MacKenzie (additional information including dates are in the attachment). Your father was born in Dublin, Ireland to Charles and Sophie MacKenzie.

Your grandparents' name changed (deliberately or not) from MacKenzie to Kensie when they emigrated to the States.

I hope this information helps you in your search, and if I can be of any further assistance, again, please reach out.

*Best,
Gayle*

Cate bit her lower lip as she grinned at the information. She dug through her folder for her family tree. She scanned the tree for the names listed in Gayle's email. Lucas MacKenzie, Cate's great-grandfather was the brother of Rory MacKenzie, Gertrude's grandfather. Her grandfather and Gertrude's father were cousins. This made Cate and Gertrude second cousins-once removed.

Cate filled in the remaining piece of the family tree that had been covered by the inkblot. The stain had obliterated her grandparents and anyone in their line.

With one mystery solved, Cate eased back into the pillows. She'd established her relationship to Gertrude.

She crossed the question off her summary sheet with a smile. The only questions that remained in this column revolved around why she had never known about these relatives and why the family's surname had changed. She may never know those answers, she realized, but she took satisfaction in gaining some information.

She pulled her laptop onto her lap and sent Gayle a reply.

Dear Gayle, Thank you so much for providing the information. It helped immensely with my research. Using the information that you sent, I filled in the family tree that I have been working on and determined my relationship with Gertrude (second cousins once removed).

I now have a sense of how we fit into the family puzzle, although I don't know why the surname was changed and this side of the family was never mentioned.

Again, thank you for your help. I hope you are doing well. Please send my regards to Mr. Smythe. I hope you can find some time to visit in the summer so I can thank you in person. Riley and I would love to have you back with us at the castle.

Cate

P.S. Riley and I are doing great. He has made a new friend in Jack. He loves to play fetch with him.

She shoved the laptop to the side and studied her summary sheet. Her mind snapped back to the mystery unraveling around the timepiece and the events of this morning. She frowned as she recalled the unnerving experience.

She nibbled on the corner of a cookie, finding even its rich, buttery flavor could not distract her from the eerie sensation hanging over her.

She tossed the note sheet aside and pulled her research notes from within the folder, spreading them across the bed. She started a proposed table of contents for her book but found herself unable to get past the third chapter.

She tapped her pencil against the almost-blank page as her mind whirled from her disappearance to the odd encounters she'd experienced. She forced herself to continue working until Mrs. Fraser bustled through the door with her dinner tray.

Cate shoved her materials aside to clear a spot for the tray.

Mrs. Fraser slid it onto her lap. "I hope you're managing to rest amid all that work."

Cate tidied her papers and stuffed them into the folder. "I'm trying to distract myself."

"Well, put that distraction aside and eat your dinner. And you, Riley, come with me, I will take you out to do your business." Mrs. Fraser gathered the little pup into her arms.

"Oh, no, Mrs. Fraser, that's too much. I can take him."

"I'll not have you roaming around the estate in your condition when you could take ill at any moment."

"I'm not *that* ill. I'm not even sick. Honest."

Mrs. Fraser jostled the little dog in her arms. "You just concentrate on eating your dinner and saving your strength."

She spun to leave the room, Riley in tow. "Now, little pup, I will not take you on any long and luxurious walk like your mum, but at least you'll get some fresh air and the chance to do your duties. Come along, little fellow, let's let Lady Cate have her dinner in peace, and I'll give you a nice dinner downstairs."

Cate smiled at the conversation, pleased that Riley was in good hands. She glanced down at the tray on her lap, finding another cup of chicken soup, a soft-boiled egg, and a bowl of tapioca.

Mrs. Fraser returned with Riley as she polished off the bowl of warm tapioca. "Here he is, all walked and fed and happy."

She eyed Cate's dishes. "Glad to see you got everything down. Protein is what you need."

Cate handed the tray off to her. "Thank you, it was delicious as always. And thank you again for taking care of Riley, I appreciate it."

"My pleasure. Now, we'll stay overnight. That way, we'll be here if you need anything."

Cate shook her head adamantly. "Oh, no, now, Mrs. Fraser, that's where I draw the line. I will not have you staying overnight here and putting yourself out. I'm *fine*."

Mrs. Fraser propped the tray on her hip. "Suppose you get ill again and need something?"

"If I'm that sick, I can call you. I've got your number right here on my phone. I'll keep it right here by my bed all night and call if I need anything."

"Now, I'll not have this. Mr. Fraser and I and young Jack are all staying here. Between your being sick and Jack wondering if there's someone roaming around this place, we're not about to leave you here alone."

Relief coursed through her at the idea of not being alone in the castle, and she gave in. "Thank you, Mrs. Fraser, I appreciate that."

Cate smiled at her as she disappeared from the room. Her smile faded as she went over the events she'd experienced since she'd arrived. She'd found herself locked in the tower room. Mrs. Fraser had known she was there.

She'd seen a woman in the foyer. Mrs. Fraser insisted they were alone. She'd seen a man in the garden, but Jack said no one was on the estate. She'd heard voices and Mrs. Fraser assured her it was only the wind. She'd disappeared, according to Jack.

A ghastly notion danced across Cate's tired mind. Were her new staff members gaslighting her?

CHAPTER 23



The idea floated around in Cate's mind as she worried she'd made a huge mistake allowing them to stay at the castle. She didn't know the Frasers or Jack that well. Were they setting her up?

Cate shook her head. How could they make the timepiece react to her touch? And besides, why would they do it? What would they gain? Even if they shipped her off to a mental institution, they wouldn't inherit any money or the castle.

She tugged her laptop onto her lap as she chided herself for her paranoia. They had no motive. She tugged Riley from the floor onto the bed. He settled next to her as she browsed through a few movies, selecting a comedy to stream, hoping it lifted her spirits.

Doors opened and closed in the hall as Jack and the Frasers retired for the evening. She settled back in the pillows, happy not to be alone in the castle. If her staff wasn't doing this to her, it meant something else was going on. And whatever it was, she preferred not to face it alone.

Despite the distraction the movie provided, as soon as Cate put away her laptop and attempted to sleep, she found her mind preoccupied with the mystery of the timepiece. She tossed and turned as one question burned in her mind: where was she when Jack opened that closet door?

Cate palmed the timepiece, staring at it as she lay in bed. She kicked off the covers and paced the floor, settling on the windowsill to stare out at the moonlit grounds cast in a white blanket.

She rose from her perch and paced around her sitting room, settling on her chaise for a bit before rising to her feet again and peeking into the hallway. Nothing moved. The Frasers and Jack were likely asleep.

She tiptoed down the hall, winding around to the bedroom where she'd disappeared. She scrutinized every inch of the walls, doorways, doors, and woodwork—any surface that may conceal a mechanism for moving the room or opening a passage. She considered the dimensions of the room. Did it conceal a secret passage? Though difficult to detect, the room dimensions would reveal the fact that a passage existed to a trained eye.

She found no evidence of that. The dimensions of the room and its closet didn't seem to suggest that there were any hidden spaces.

Cate sank onto the bed, narrowing her eyes at the closet. Her mind wandered through question after question. If she slowed the watch again, would she disappear from existence? Would she find her staff asleep in their beds in her altered state? Was she losing her mind?

She stared at the watch in her hands, pondering if she should try to slow it again. Jack's warning echoed in her mind. *Until we know what to think, it might be best that you're not fiddling with this watch. We don't want you disappearing for good.*

He had a point. She didn't know what was happening, and it could be dangerous. What if she ended up stuck in the netherworld or wherever she was going? She quit for the night, shuffling back to her room. It was almost 2 a.m. when she crawled into bed and drifted off to a restless sleep.

She woke up a few hours later in a cold sweat having dreamt of disappearing into a spirit realm, where no one could see or hear her. She screamed to people who continued about their daily business as though she wasn't there. But no one could help her.

After the nightmare, she had little interest in going back to sleep. Despite not being real, it struck terror into her heart. She cuddled Riley closer to her, as though contact with him would tether her to this world.

She crawled from her bed just after five in the morning and headed to her chaise, waiting for the sun to rise and banish her fears.

Her mind wandered to the timepiece repeatedly. She flipped on the lamp next to the chaise, squinting in the blinding light. As her eyes adjusted, she caught sight of Mary's journals. She grabbed the top book and paged through to the longest entry she'd read from the stuck pages.

She reread it piece by piece, trying to glean any information. *As I continue these excursions, I cannot help but feel the tremendous responsibility to pass along to Gertrude*, the entry began.

Was Mary's reference to the "excursions" a reference to wherever Cate was going when the watch slowed? She referred to the timepiece, calling it an "awesome object" for which she was a mere caretaker, then she discussed an enormous responsibility that she must pass along to Gertrude. None of this pointed to what was happening when Cate disappeared earlier, but they all had to be connected.

Cate snapped the journal shut and tossed it on the table. She was missing something, but she couldn't put her finger on what. She wandered to her bedroom, finding Riley still sleeping. She slid her research folder off the nightstand and crept back to the sitting room, freeing a page to jot down a few notes.

She wrote, to her best recollection, when and where the watch had slowed, including details such as what she had been doing when it slowed, what happened between the watch slowing and speeding up, and anything else relevant that she could remember.

She also noted the times she tried to slow the watch and it had not slowed. With only a few data points, she wasn't sure it would help, but it did appear that the timepiece only slowed inside the castle. Perhaps she should try the watch again outside and see what happened.

She noted that, according to Jack, she had "disappeared" the last time she slowed the watch, despite her never having moved—at least not to her knowledge. She also noted that twice before when the watch had been slow, she had seen what she thought to be "people" on the estate. She used the term loosely, since she had no evidence that anyone else had been on the estate. And it seemed that these people, or whatever they were, could see and hear her since both of them reacted to either the sight of her or a noise she had made.

Odd, they could see and hear her, but Jack couldn't.

As she reflected on the information, a quiet knock sounded at her door.

"Yes?" she called out.

The door creaked open a slit, and Mrs. Fraser peeked in. "Out of bed already, Lady Cate? Did you sleep? How are you feeling?"

Cate set the notes aside. "I feel much better. Although, I'm afraid I didn't sleep much. Did you and Mr. Fraser sleep well?"

“Aye, we both slept well. Too bad you didn’t sleep. I’ll have your breakfast up to you soon. You stay here and rest.”

“If you don’t mind, I’d like to have breakfast with everyone this morning. I’m tired of my own company.”

“We’d be glad to have you, Lady Cate.”

“Great, I’ll be down soon.”

Cate rose from her chaise to dress for the day and walk Riley.

She met everyone in the kitchen for breakfast just as Mrs. Fraser was setting the table. “Well, good morning again, Lady Cate.” Mrs. Fraser said.

Cate sank into a chair at the table. “Good morning, everyone. I hope you slept well. Thank you all for staying last night.”

“Good morning, Lady Cate,” Mr. Fraser said.

Jack rocked on his chair as he shot her a grin. “Good morning, Lady Cate. I hear you’ll be gracing us with your presence this fine morning. Did you sleep well?”

“I didn’t sleep very well, but I was glad everyone was here when I couldn’t sleep.”

The foursome made light conversation over breakfast, providing a nice, but fleeting distraction for Cate.

She lingered in the kitchen as Mr. Fraser and Jack pushed through the door into the summer day to work.

Cate pulled a few dishes from the sink to dry them.

“You don’t need to help, Lady Cate, I can do it.”

She swiped a dish towel inside a pot. “I’d like to if you don’t mind. I’d like the company.”

“Well, if it’s company you’re after, you don’t have to do dishes to get it. Why don’t I make you a nice cuppa you can sip on, and we can chitchat? Oh—” Mrs. Fraser paused. “That would be a cup of tea to you, Lady Cate.”

“Oh, I’d appreciate some tea, but I can make it while you take care of those dishes.” Cate started to fill the kettle Mrs. Fraser kept on the stove. “Would you like a cup as well?”

“Yes, please,” Mrs. Fraser answered, already readying two cups with tea bags and setting out sugar and milk. Mrs. Fraser finished the breakfast cleanup just as the kettle boiled.

“You timed that well,” Cate said, pouring the steaming water into each cup.

Mrs. Fraser untied her apron and tossed it over the back of a chair. “Usually do. I never miss my morning cuppa. Couldn’t get through a day without it.”

Cate smiled at her as she carried the steaming cups over to the table, surprised Mrs. Fraser let her do that much. Mrs. Fraser arranged a plate of cookies from a tin.

“Are these the cookies you sent up for me yesterday? Those were excellent.”

Mrs. Fraser dunked a shortbread into her tea after stirring in milk. “Indeed they are, Lady Cate. Perfect cookie with tea if you want my opinion.”

Cate tapped her cup with her fingertips. “Do you bake often?”

“I do. I find it a good pastime, and a tasty one, too.”

Cate chuckled at the joke. “Well, you are good at it, Mrs. Fraser.”

“Thank you, Lady Cate.”

“I don’t bake much myself. I’m not good in the kitchen. Once in home ec class, I burned—”

“Lady Cate, sorry to interrupt, but I know the reason you want a distraction is that you’ve been experiencing some strange things on the estate. As much as I’d like to talk about baking, I’d like to find out why young Jack was so concerned about someone being on the estate.”

Cate chewed her lower lip, her mind also dwelling on the subject despite her babbling. “Oh, yes, well, I mentioned to him I’ve seen a few people around the estate, and I think he became concerned that it was more than my mind playing tricks on me.”

“People around the estate? You mean that maid?”

“Yes, her and the man working in the back garden. And the other morning, I heard a woman’s voice in the hallway before anyone was here.”

“I understand you both searched but found nothing yesterday?”

Cate nodded as she sipped her tea. “Yes, we checked everywhere but found no evidence of anyone in the castle.”

Mrs. Fraser pulled another cookie onto her saucer. “The cleaning company has mentioned nothing to me about seeing anything unusual. But you just experienced a major life change. Every place has its own quirks, and the castle is quite large and full of them. Give yourself some time to adjust, Lady Cate.”

Cate nodded, then tried to change the subject. “Mrs. Fraser, do you know why this timepiece was so important to Lady MacKenzie? Or if it has any special significance?”

“None that I know of. I recall that she wore it around her neck all the time—never saw her without it. Beyond that, I don’t know. I assumed it was just an heirloom.”

“Hmm, I found a passage in Mary MacKenzie’s journal—the one I had to steam to read—and it mentioned the timepiece. She called it an ‘awesome object,’ so I was wondering what was so special about it.”

Mrs. Fraser nibbled on the corner of her cookie for a moment before answering. “Maybe on account of it being so old? It’s my understanding that it’s been a family heirloom for generations, almost dating back to the building of the castle, I think.”

“Maybe,” Cate said as she finished her tea. “I think I’ll take Riley for a nice long walk. Thank you for the tea and conversation, Mrs. Fraser.”

“You’re most welcome, Lady Cate. Oh, and Lady Cate?”

“Yes?” Cate said, turning back toward her after collecting Riley.

“Try not to worry too much about it. I’m sure it’s nothing.”

Cate smiled at the woman’s kind attempt to be reassuring. But deep down, she knew it wasn’t nothing. The thought that her staff may be involved flitted across her mind again.

Cate spent the morning outside, playing ball with Riley and visiting the loch. But it did little to distract her thoughts from the mystery. She stared at the ripples in the pond, wondering what dark secret the beautiful landscape hid.

She grasped the timepiece in her hands, studying it. She rubbed the face. Nothing happened. She tried a second time with the same result.

More evidence that it only happened inside the castle.

She collapsed back in the grass and gazed at the fluffy white clouds as they rolled by against the blue sky. She’d established the timepiece did not slow outside. She needed to test it inside again.

Was that wise? Jack would say no, but her curiosity overcame most of her fear. With her confidence bolstered by her own nosiness, she gathered a yawning Riley into her arms to return to the castle.

The little dog stretched in her arms and relaxed. “Oh boy, Riley, you are getting lazy. Castle life suits you.”

She started back on the path toward the castle, passing through the back gardens where Jack trimmed another row of bushes.

“Good morning, again,” she said as she approached.

“Good morning, again. And what do we have here? Sir Riley too tired to walk?” Jack gave him a scratch under the chin as the little dog opened his eyes to slits.

“I’m afraid I tired him out playing ball this morning.”

“I’d have thought he’d have you tired out after your sleepless night. For what it’s worth, I heard nothing last night.”

“Neither did I,” Cate began. “I’m not surprised, though. I think all those incidents are connected to the watch. I made some notes this morning, and if I’m correct, I encountered people on the property when the watch was slow. I tried it again this morning out here by the loch, but it didn’t react. So that’s the third time that I’ve tried the watch outside of the castle and it didn’t slow. I’d say that means that it only works in the castle itself. What it’s doing I don’t know, but—”

Jack interrupted her. “You tried it again this morning? I thought we agreed that you wouldn’t mess around with that until we learned more about it.”

Cate wrinkled her nose, pulling her lips into a frown. “How are we going to learn anything about it unless we test it?”

“Cate, this is not a good idea until we determine what’s going on, which may never happen. But yesterday you disappeared. You were not there. It’s not wise to keep fooling around with something so strange. What if you get trapped somewhere and we can’t find you?”

Cate puckered her lips, irritated by Jack’s lecture. “Well, I hope we have some answers soon.”

“Me too,” Jack agreed. “Until then, do nothing.”

Cate forced a smile on her face and waved a goodbye. “Well, I better be heading back. I’ll talk to you later.”

Cate strolled toward the castle, glad to leave the conversation behind. Jack’s scolding had not convinced her that doing nothing was the right approach. The watch didn’t seem to cause any ill effects on anyone else who had worn it through all these generations. Lady MacKenzie wore it last and lived to a ripe old age, dying of an aggressive cancer and stroke—not from disappearing.

As she stepped onto the marble floor of the foyer, she convinced herself to experiment with the timepiece after her lunch, hoping it would not be her undoing.

She sped through her meal in nervous anticipation of her experiment. She waffled between calling it off and pressing on. As she polished off her salad, she decided to risk it.

She thanked Mrs. Fraser for lunch when she came to collect the tray, then headed back to her sitting room to leave a note, just in case. She left Riley in the library. She hated to do it, but she didn't want the worry of losing him again or having him become trapped. She took a deep breath as she looked at him sleeping before closing the doors to the library.

In her sitting room, she took out a sheet of paper and, with a shaky hand, scrawled a note explaining that she had tried to recreate the phenomenon that she and Jack had experienced yesterday. She also told the reader where to find Riley, just in case. She propped the note against the lamp on the table and stood, steeling her nerves. She swiped her sweaty palms down her leggings as she strode to the bedroom and entered the closet. With a pounding heart, she picked up the pendant, pausing a moment before continuing.

"Here goes nothing," she said, rubbing the watch until she heard the familiar loud ticking and witnessed the second hand slow.

She waited until it slowed to a crawl, then she unlatched the closet door, peering into the room. This time, she had a plan. She would observe as much as she could to make a record to study later.

At first glance, nothing stood out as different. She pushed her mind to remember every detail of the room. The furniture sat in the same places. Was that the same bedspread? Maybe. Was there a lamp missing? She wasn't sure.

She wondered if Jack or either of the Frasers could see her if they had been in the room. She strode to the mirror and gazed at her own reflection. She still looked the same. She waved to herself in the mirror. At least she still existed somewhere.

Her experiment had worked, for better or worse. She considered ending it, but instead, she ambled to the bedroom door and cracked it open, peeking into the hall.

It didn't look much different. She took a few tentative steps out into it.

She crept down the length, her ears straining for any noise. She approached the intersection with another hall of bedrooms. Voices sounded from around the corner. She pressed against the wall and peered around the edge.

Two women approached her. Cate ducked back for a moment, then risked another glance.

The women appeared to be in old-fashioned maid uniforms: black long-sleeved, floor-length dresses covered by a white apron. Each of them had their hair pulled into a bun.

Cate held her breath, afraid of giving herself away. What was she witnessing? The women laughed as they approached her.

One said, "I dare say we better not be late again with her ladyship's tea. She was so cross I thought that the vein in her neck would pop."

"I wish all I had to worry about was me teatime," the other woman answered.

"If we're not on time, she might have to spend another second with her own child, lest Nanny not take him away fast enough."

The two women giggled.

Cate retreated down the hall, sneaking back into the bedroom. She eased the door closed and pressed her ear against it. Her heart rose to her throat. The two women chattered away as they passed the door. She breathed a sigh of relief as they continued without stopping. She was about to retreat to the closet and return the watch to its normal speed, when a new voice bellowed down the hall.

"EDNA! LORNA! Are we to idle our day away with chitchat and giggling like two schoolgirls? Have we no work to be done?"

Cate heard no response after a short pause. The woman's voice boomed again. "Then we had better get to it, hadn't we?"

Another moment passed, but no other voices spoke. She figured she had pressed her luck far enough. She rubbed the watch, intending to return home from wherever she was.

Nothing happened.

CHAPTER 24



Cate's heart skipped a beat and panic washed over her as the second hand crept around the watch face. Her pulse raced, and her breathing turned ragged. Her knees wobbled, threatening to give out as she tried again, rubbing the timepiece's face.

Nothing happened.

Panic built inside her, and she gnawed her lower lip as tears welled in her eyes. She'd been warned, and she still chose to do something reckless. How could she have been so irresponsible?

Her thoughts turned to the note she left. She imagined Mrs. Fraser finding it, asking Jack about it. She pictured Jack's reaction and all of them trying to find her; but she was gone, perhaps forever.

She pictured poor little Riley, roaming the castle in search of Cate, never able to find her. Mrs. Fraser doing her best to console the poor little pup, but not succeeding.

Cate wandered to the bed and sank onto it. She'd pushed her luck one too many times. The watch had never slowed when Jack was around. Why couldn't it have failed again before she became stuck?

Her brow crinkled as she recalled previous failed attempts. Then it struck her. Some of her previous tests of the watch had not worked on other parts of the estate. Perhaps it didn't work in this area either. Maybe she needed to be in a specific spot. She knew at least one spot where it had always worked in the past.

Hope filled her as she hurried to the closet. She pushed the door shut behind her, closed her eyes, and with a silent prayer, rubbed the watch. She opened her eyes to slits and glanced at the watch's face. Her heart leapt as the second hand sped up. She placed a hand over her clenched stomach, enjoying a measure of relief. Within moments, the second hand ticked normally.

Cate yanked open the closet door and raced into the hall, down the main stairs, and into the library. She ripped open the doors and scanned the room. Riley lay sprawled in the same spot she had left him. She rushed over and scooped him up. A startled Riley wriggled before giving Cate a big lick on her cheek.

"I'm happy to see you too, buddy," she said as she ambled down the hall toward the stairs leading to the kitchen. She peered in. Mrs. Fraser stood at the sink, washing the lunch dishes.

"Mrs. Fraser?" she murmured.

"Oh!" The woman jumped, grabbing her chest, and spun to face her. "Dear Lady Cate, I wish you wouldn't go about startling me so. You creep up so silently, I never realize you're there. Did you need something?"

Relief washed over her. Mrs. Fraser could still see her. She hadn't disappeared. Everything appeared to be back to normal. She resisted her urge to fling her arms around the woman in a giant hug.

"Lady Cate? Everything all right? What do you need?" Mrs. Fraser said when Cate did not answer.

"Oh, um, yes." Cate's mind shot forward, searching for a reason for her visit. She only wanted to make sure that everything had returned to normal; she didn't need anything. Cate tried to call to mind something she could ask for. "Um, do you have any more cookies? My sweet tooth is bugging me for an after-lunch snack."

"Of course," Mrs. Fraser said, taking the tin down from a shelf. "You should have told me you wanted them when you finished lunch, and I could have brought them up to you."

"Oh, well, I just got the craving now," Cate fibbed. "I wasn't thinking about it after lunch."

"Well, that's rather fast. You just finished your lunch a few minutes ago."

Cate cocked her head. It'd been at least twenty minutes since her lunch. "What?"

“I say I just saw you not five minutes ago. Your cravings come fast.”

“Really? Has it only been a few minutes?” Cate’s forehead wrinkled as she considered the statement. It must have been longer than that. She calculated the timeline in her head. Between checking on Riley, writing the note, traveling to the bedroom closet, spending at least fifteen to twenty minutes wherever she went—it must have been over five minutes. She checked her watch. It read a few minutes past the time it had been when she slowed the watch.

“Yes, girl, it’s only been a few minutes. Do you want some milk or tea with them?” Mrs. Fraser handed her a plate with four cookies on it.

“No, thanks. Just these, thank you, again.”

Confused, Cate took the cookies and Riley back up to her sitting room. There the note sat, undisturbed. She picked it up, recalling writing it with a shaky hand, and crumpled it up into a ball. Cate picked up her note sheet and began adding to the information already there. She tried to be as detailed as possible, writing everything she witnessed.

She wrote a few tentative conclusions and additional questions. Thus far, the watch always worked in the closet. It also worked in a few other places in the castle. Did other places exist where it always worked? Those she encountered did not look like they lived in this era.

The new information that she collected from her daring experiment satisfied her. She figured that was enough excitement for one day, though, so she didn’t plan to do it again, despite the remaining unanswered questions. She marked today as a win.

Her watch read a few minutes past two. She still had plenty of time before dinner to work on her book research.

Retrieving all her materials and her laptop, she spread everything around her in the sitting room, pushing a coffee table aside and planting herself cross-legged on the area rug. Riley ventured over, excited to spot Cate on his level, and climbed into the space between her legs to curl up for another nap.

Cate picked up where she had left off before dinner the day before, continuing to fill in information on potential chapters, raise new questions, and pinpoint where she needed to fill in additional material. She concluded that she had accomplished enough after working for two hours and took a now restless Riley out for another walk before dinner.

She returned to the kitchen, cookie plate in hand, and thanked Mrs. Fraser again for the delicious cookies.

“Heading out for a walk with Riley?” Mrs. Fraser asked her.

“Yes, just a quick one before dinner.”

“Have fun, Riley. And you too, Lady Cate. Oh, Lady Cate, before you go—would you like us to stay the night again? It seems like you’re feeling better, but if you don’t feel quite at home yet and want someone around at night, we’re happy to stay. I just want to make the arrangements.”

Cate no longer felt afraid of disappearing, and she didn’t believe any grifters were hiding on the estate. Although she couldn’t be certain about what was going on, she didn’t feel as though it would bring her any harm. Perhaps she was viewing a window into a spirit realm, and if this were the case, she didn’t believe spirits could hurt her. They didn’t seem to have harmed any of her ancestors. No matter what the explanation was, after her post-lunch adventure, she sensed she was likely safe unless she used the watch again.

“I’ll be fine, Mrs. Fraser, but thank you so much for offering.”

“My pleasure, Lady Cate.”

She hovered in the doorway, extending an open invitation. “Oh, if it’s ever easier for you to stay the night, Mrs. Fraser, please do so. You are welcome anytime. You don’t need to ask, just let me know you’ll be staying so no one is startled in the middle of the night.”

“Thank you, Lady Cate. I shall do that if we find it easier to stay, perhaps in bad weather or the like.”

Cate smiled at her as she pushed the door open. “Great.”

Riley bounded out into the yard, racing over to greet Jack and Mr. Fraser. She wanted to share her afternoon adventure with Jack, but with Mr. Fraser nearby, she preferred not to. She also didn’t want to hear any lectures about experimenting with the timepiece. She waved and continued to the loch with Riley.

During her dinner, which she took in the library while watching a few episodes of a favorite program on her laptop, she got a text from Jack: *u ok? Mrs. F said you didn’t need us to stay, r u sure?*

Cate answered: *I’m sure. I don’t think anyone is on the property, I should be fine. Thanks.*

Jack returned the text: *Ok, if you’re sure. Text if you need anything.*

Cate answered a simple “will do” and continued eating her meal. As night approached, though, she second-guessed her choice in sending everyone home. The castle could be spooky at night, and the idea of disappearing into a spirit realm proved frightening.

She retired to her sitting room, content to settle there with Riley before bed and watch a movie. As she relaxed on the chaise, her mind focused on the day’s events and on the watch. Despite the movie playing on her laptop, she couldn’t help but wonder about the scene she had witnessed after it slowed. What did it all mean?

She wondered if she should try the watch again. She had presumed once was enough for the day, but now, alone in the castle, with her mind wandering from notion to notion, she considered another experiment.

Impulsively, she rubbed it. Nothing happened. Cate sighed. It didn’t appear to work in her sitting room either. The closet was the only place she was certain it worked.

She drummed her fingers on her laptop before she fished her note sheet from under her pen. It had worked a few times in her bedroom. Would it work again?

With the movie still playing next to a sleeping Riley, she tiptoed to her bedroom. Perched on the edge of the bed, Cate considered what she was about to do. She wondered if she should leave another note just in case or perhaps wait until daytime when others were on the estate.

She licked her lips, deciding not to wait. With a shaky hand, she rubbed the watch. The second hand slowed to a crawl. She sucked in a deep breath and glanced around. Nothing seemed different.

She considered bringing the watch back to normal speed since she had proved her point that it worked in the bedroom, but her inquisitive nature pushed her to take at least a brief look around.

She strode to the sitting room. Two major differences struck her. Both Riley and her laptop were missing. Wherever she was, Riley was not. A momentary pang of panic settled on her. Losing Riley was upsetting, but she remembered she had “lost” Riley once before. She had found him in the same spot she’d left him after the watch returned to normal speed.

She considered returning, wanting to be sure she was right about Riley, but instead, she pressed on to do more investigating.

She crept out of her bedroom and down the hall, trying to note any differences, but she failed to notice any. Wary of who or what she might

encounter, she snuck around the castle, reluctant to run into anyone.

The halls seemed deserted. She crept down the main staircase, worried she may not hear someone approaching over the pounding of her own heart. She reached the marble floor. Voices came from the nearby sitting room. She crept toward the doors and peered in through the small crack between the doors.

Inside, several people milled around—some sitting, some standing near the massive fireplace. They all wore some form of evening wear and chatted over drinks. Their clothing looked out of place, seeming to come from another era. Cate shifted around, trying for a better view. With the limited field of vision, she identified them as fashions popular in the 1920s. Odd, Cate reflected. This didn't match at all what she had seen earlier.

The scene intrigued her, but her nervousness drove her to retreat. She spun on her heel and inched back toward the stairs.

She stepped onto the first stair, twisting back toward the sitting room doors.

Why were these people dressed so differently from the ones she had seen this afternoon? Who were they, and where was she?

She climbed up the stairs, lost in thought. Halfway up the staircase, a loud voice interrupted her musings. "Oi, what do you think you're doing there, miss? Who are you?"

Cate froze, her knees going weak and her pulse racing. She swallowed hard as she spun to face the voice. A man, a butler or footman by his dress, stared at her with a stern look, his hands on his hips. In an instant, she learned the answer to one of her questions. Wherever she was, the people could see her.

He approached from the far side of the entryway, striding toward the stairs with wide steps. Cate hesitated as she wavered between two choices. She could stay and explain or make a run for it. While he was still at a distance, Cate chose the latter, leaping up the stairs two at a time rather than face him. She cursed her impulsiveness as she ran down the hallway toward her room. Heavy footfalls raced behind her. The man shouted for help from anyone within earshot.

Cate barreled down the hall, skidding into her sitting room and pushing the doors shut, locking them behind her. Out of breath, she went to the bedroom, not bothering to shut the doors this time. She hoped that the first set of doors bought her enough time to get home. She rubbed the watch, and

the second hand started to pick up speed. Men shouted in the hallway. The sound of doors opening and closing reached her ears. They approached her bedroom.

She closed her eyes and held tight to the pendant.

CHAPTER 25



Shouting voices approached, closer and closer to her location. She wondered if she could hide somewhere. She vetted explanations she could use if they caught her. With her eyes still closed, she strained to listen to the noises of the nearby rooms being searched.

In an instant, the voices changed. They no longer shouted. No doors opened and closed. The new voices emanated from somewhere much closer than the hallway. Cate snapped her eyes open, searching for a hiding spot.

Something seemed familiar about these voices, Cate realized as her eyes darted around the room in search of a place to hide. Finding nowhere obvious, Cate opted for under the bed. She crouched on the floor, lifting the bed skirt when she realized to whom the voices belonged.

Relief washed over her, and she sunk her head into her hands as she knelt on the floor.

“Cate, you silly girl.”

The voices belonged to two famous actors arguing on-screen about who would do the dishes. In her panic, she had forgotten the romantic comedy still playing on her laptop.

Confident that she was safe and alone in the castle, Cate ambled to the sitting room doors. Her laptop sat on the chaise where she’d left it, and little Riley lay next to it, curled in a ball, fast asleep. She stared at the pup for a few moments as her heart rate slowed and her limbs stopped feeling like jelly.

She sucked in a few deep breaths as she recovered and shuffled to the chaise, cuddling Riley into her arms and letting him settle back to sleep on her lap.

She left the movie playing, finding it a comforting background noise as she annotated her note sheet regarding her latest adventure. She noted that this time the people wore clothing from a different era than in her previous experiences. Also, one of them interacted with her, reprimanding her, and eventually following her when she did not respond.

After jotting down everything that she remembered, exhaustion set in. The burst of adrenaline after being caught and the run through the castle had left her spent.

She closed her laptop and gathered Riley into her arms, carrying him to her bedroom. She crawled into bed next to him, dozing off within moments.

When she awoke the next morning, she wondered if she dreamt it all. She tried to recall all the details from her evening experience. In her first waking moments, they had been hazy, and she almost concluded it never happened. But upon climbing out of bed and gathering her notes from the side table of the chaise lounge, she found the experience detailed in them. She wasn't dreaming when she wrote the notes, nor was she detailing a dream.

She studied the information on the sheet. She'd encountered people that looked from their clothing to be from around 1850. The group she'd spotted last night appeared to be from the 1920s. Why did she encounter people from two different time periods?

She stared at the information, teasing it apart. Two differences existed: time of day and location of the room where she'd slowed the watch.

She cocked her head as she tried to make sense of the data. She tapped her pen against the notepad before she wrote two words in capital letters at the bottom of the paper: TIME TRAVEL???!!!

She set the sheet down and went about her morning routine, but the words rattled around in her mind. Was she experiencing time travel? Was that even possible? That would explain the people dressed in clothes from a different era. At first, she conjectured she was seeing a spirit realm where ghosts of the past still carried out their daily duties. But with the discovery of seeing several people from yet another time period, she no longer supposed that explanation made sense. Cate's thoughts on the subject

ranged from a small measure of certainty to sheer disbelief that she was even considering this.

Even if she was correct, unanswered questions and unexplainable things abounded. She could barely count this as an explanation. Cate's mind was abuzz with so many queries and thoughts that she couldn't concentrate on anything.

As she slouched in her leather armchair in the library, she glanced down at her little dog. "What do you say, Riley? Is time travel even possible?"

The little dog cocked his head as though considering the inquiry.

"You aren't giving much feedback, are you?" Cate said. "I might have to enlist the help of someone else on this one. What do you say, little guy? Should I tell Jack or not? Do you think he'll have me committed?"

At the mention of Jack's name, Riley sprang to his feet and raced to Cate, tail wagging intensely.

She smiled at his enthusiasm. "I have my answer. You trust him, don't you, Riley? Well, that's good enough for me. I'll tell him and see what he says."

Cate opted for another long walk to the loch with Riley to gather her thoughts and with the hope of running into Jack. After only a few steps down the path, she found him.

"Got a minute?" she asked. She hoped she could find the words to tell him her theory.

"I always have a minute for Lady Cate and Sir Riley," Jack answered.

Cate shoved her shaking hands into her pockets. "Mind taking a walk with us?"

"Sure," Jack said, setting down his trimmers. "Everything okay, Cate?"

"Yes, everything is okay. I... Well..." Cate stammered, searching for the right words to begin.

Jack stopped walking. "Cate, what is it?"

"Well," Cate began again, kicking the gravel around as she studied the ground.

"Yeah, I got that part," Jack joked to lighten the mood.

"The thing is—" Cate danced around the subject, second-guessing sharing the information. After a pause, she said, "I used the watch again, twice. I have a theory. A crazy theory but still a theory. And I'm not positive, but—"

Jack's jaw dropped open, and he ran his fingers through his dark hair. "What? Twice? Cate, you promised."

"We won't get any information if we don't look for any."

"I can ask my grandfather when he gets back. He might have some information. He's worked here a long time."

"But if he can't help, we have nothing."

Jack rubbed the back of his neck before shooting a glance at Cate. "What if something happens to you while you're experimenting with this? Then we've really got nothing, and no Cate either."

Cate frowned at the last statement. "But that's just it. I think I know what the watch is doing."

He sighed, his displeasure apparent from the frown on his face, but he scrunched his eyebrows and waved a hand in the air. "Okay, I'll bite. What do you think it's doing?"

"Two words," Cate exclaimed. "Time travel."

Jack stared at her for a moment. "Time travel. Time travel? Cate, are you being serious?"

Cate wrinkled her nose at his reaction. "Yes, I'm being serious. It sounds crazy, but just listen to what happened when I tried it yesterday."

He slid his hands to his hips and puckered his lips as he considered it. "Okay, I'm not okay with you trying this out, but since you already did, I'd like to hear why you presume you are time traveling."

"Okay," Cate said, a smile forming on her lips. "Well, yesterday afternoon, after lunch, I decided that I would try the watch. I was responsible and left a note, just in case. I went to the closet—the one I disappeared from—I rubbed the watch, and it slowed down. I started by looking around the closet and bedroom, but nothing looked different to me. So, I ventured into the hallway. I made my way to where the hall branches off and spotted two women walking down the hall, talking. They were dressed like chambermaids, not present-day maids. From what I glimpsed of them, I'd put their clothes around the 1850s, give or take a little."

Cate continued rambling about her experience at lightning speed, "I didn't want them to see me, so I snuck back to the bedroom and waited 'til they passed by. Then I heard someone else talking to them, I caught their names, and I wrote them down in my notes. I figure I can check the records to see if they worked here in the past. Anyway, I didn't stick around after that. Well, I did, only because I forgot that the watch only works in certain

areas. I tried to come back from the bedroom, and it didn't work. I panicked. But then I remembered it worked in the closet, so I went back there and voila. It worked, I was back, and only a few minutes had passed. Mrs. Fraser said she saw me only minutes before I tried it. When I tried it last night—"

Jack waved his hands in the air, his face pinching in confusion. "Whoa, whoa, Cate, slow down. I need a moment to process what you've told me. You think you saw maids from the 1850s walking around the castle, then you couldn't get 'back,' but then you did. My head is spinning."

"No," Cate said, "I don't *think* I saw them. I saw them, Jack—plain as I see you standing in front of me."

Jack frowned at the statement.

Cate crossed her arms. "You think I'm crazy."

"I don't know what to think, Cate," he said with a huff. "But, no, I don't think you're crazy."

Relief washed over Cate. "I did see them, and they weren't mists or vapors or random shapes. They were plain as day—people walking and talking."

"And when you tried again last night, did you see the same people?"

"No. That's where things get interesting. I remembered that the watch always slowed down for me in my bedroom. So, I tried it there. No one was in the bedroom or sitting room, but my laptop and Riley were both gone. I took a walk around the castle to investigate and—"

Jack scrubbed his face with his hands. "You took a walk around the castle to investigate? Cate. You do not know where or when or whatever you are, and you're gallivanting around like you're at the local fair."

She shrugged. "I was careful, for the most part."

"What's that mean?"

"I heard people in the sitting room. I peeked in, and several people were there. But they weren't dressed like they were from the 1850s, they were dressed like they were from the 1920s."

"Now you're in the 1920s? With different people?"

"Yes, they were different people, and yes, I'd put the year somewhere in the twenties based on the clothes they were wearing. Who says being a history professor never paid off, right?"

Jack cocked his head with a nod. "Funny, yes, seems right handy to identify the era you're time traveling to."

Cate dismissed his sarcasm with a wave of her hand. “Well, anyway, I didn’t stick around—you know, to be safe and all. I was heading back up to the bedroom, but someone spotted me, a footman, I think. I raced to the bedroom and set the watch back to normal speed, and there I was, back in my bedroom in this time.”

Jack’s jaw dropped. “You got caught?”

“No, I didn’t get caught—I ran away and escaped,” Cate corrected.

“Oh, right, my mistake... someone spotted you, somewhere in some time, but you ran away and escaped. Sorry. I’m just envisioning the next time when maybe you can’t run away.”

Cate scowled. “Well, let’s hope that doesn’t happen. Anyway—”

“So, there will be a next time?”

“Well—” Cate wasn’t sure how to answer the question. It was true they didn’t have solid information and were only working from theories. But theories needed testing. Even if it wasn’t only a theory, she’d still want to investigate. Immersing herself in the past would be an appealing proposition for any historian. What better way to discover the past? It would be akin to doing an immersion when mastering a new language.

Jack lifted his eyebrows at her as he awaited an answer.

She raised her gaze from the gravel below and shrugged. “Yes, I guess, is the long and short answer.”

Jack rubbed the back of his neck as he shuffled along the path. “Oh, Cate, I know I must sound like a broken record, but I don’t think you should mess around with this stuff until we know what’s going on—and maybe not even then. What if you get caught or stuck or whatever can happen when you play with that watch? You’re a nice lassie, Cate. I don’t want anything to happen to you.”

“I appreciate that. I do, but—”

“But you’ve no intention of listening?”

“If I’m really time traveling, how exciting is that? It’s an opportunity you can’t pass up, right?”

“That’s a big if, Cate. You’re talking as though you’re sure that’s what’s happening.”

“Okay, point taken, we’re not sure. But I strongly suspect I’m right. Nothing else makes sense. I mean, at first, I hypothesized seeing a spirit world or something. But two different spirit worlds? That theory doesn’t fit anymore.”

“Yeah, time travel makes way more sense than spirit worlds, although I missed the part where time travel made any sense.”

“Funny,” Cate groaned.

They reached the loch and settled on its banks. Cate stared out over the scenery. It seemed their conversation had ended. Neither of them were able to make any further conjecture, and both of them were at opposite ends about whether they should test the watch.

They sat for a few moments, each lost in their own thoughts.

Breaking the silence, Jack said, “My grandfather is coming back at the end of the week. Can you at least not experiment any more with that until we can talk to him?”

Cate considered it. It was only two days. While she was anxious to learn more, maybe she should wait. Her encounter with the footman last night was still unsettling; perhaps she shouldn’t be taking any more chances at the moment. Still, she knew herself well. If she promised she’d regret it.

“If you just saw how it worked, I think you’d—” she began.

Jack leaned back on his hands, stretching his legs out in front of him. “I’m not sure I want to see how it works. It’s bizarre, even if your explanation is correct. It’s downright scary if you ask me.”

“But, I think if you tried it you’d see that it’s—” she started again.

“Cate.”

“I just think—”

“Caaaate.”

She wrinkled her nose, crossing her arms. “This could be the greatest discovery of all mankind, and you don’t want to even discover how it works.”

“We don’t know *what* it is. Can’t you wait two short days?”

“It’s possible your grandfather won’t know anything.”

“Or he’ll have us fitted for straitjackets.”

“Just let me show you once how it works, and you can decide how dangerous it is for yourself.”

“I feel like if I don’t agree, you’re just going to do it on your own, anyway.”

Cate reflected for a moment. “Probably.”

Jack scoffed, picking up a fallen leaf and tossing it away. “As much as I don’t want to do this, I’d rather not have you do it alone.”

“So you’ll do it?” Cate clasped her hands together under her chin.

“Well, Lady Cate, since you’re twisting my arm, I suppose I will.”

Cate grinned. “Meet me in the library after lunch.”

The morning dragged by for Cate. After Jack returned to his landscaping, she spent a good bit of time with Riley, playing and enjoying the morning, before heading back to the castle. With two hours still left before lunch, Cate tried to fill her time with research, but she found her mind too distracted.

After what seemed an eternity, Mrs. Fraser appeared in the library with lunch. She had little appetite, but Cate forced most of her lunch down.

Mrs. Fraser came to collect her tray, and within a few minutes of her departure, a knock sounded at the library door.

“Come in!” Cate yelled.

Jack pushed the door open. “Reporting for duty,” he said as he came through the door, saluting.

“You will NOT be disappointed. Come on,” Cate exclaimed, hurrying out. “Well, at least, I hope not.”

“I hope I’m still around not to be.”

Cate shot him a glance over her shoulder as she hurried to the stairs.

“Sorry, bad joke,” he said. “Just making sure you really want to do this.”

She chuckled at his reluctance as they climbed the stairs. “Out of the two of us, I don’t expect it’s *me* who doesn’t want to do it.”

“Okay, I’ll admit this is not the greatest idea I’ve ever heard, but I’d rather you not mess around with this stuff alone.”

They arrived at the bedroom door, and Cate burst through. “Come on.”

She headed straight for the closet.

“Close the door,” she instructed. “Okay, here we go.”

She held the timepiece and rubbed it. Taking a deep breath, she waited for it to slow. Smiling, she glanced up at Jack, starting to speak to him. Before she could, he disappeared right in front of her eyes.

CHAPTER 26



Cate stood alone in the closet, her heart pounding. Where was Jack?
“Jack?”

No answer.

She glanced down at the timepiece in her hands. It had completed its circuit and was now scarcely ticking. She speculated that he must have stayed in their own time. She rubbed the pendant again. The second hand sped up.

When it approached its normal speed, Jack reappeared in front of her.

He grabbed hold of her, his eyes wide. “Cate!”

“Jack! Sorry, I’m not sure what I was thinking. I lost you when the watch slowed. I don’t know why I assumed we’d just both go. Perhaps we both need to touch the watch? Let’s try that.”

Jack’s face bordered on horrified. “Cate, you just disappeared in front of my eyes. One minute you were here, the next you were gone. Sorry, I need a minute. I mean, I realize you disappeared once before, but not right in front of my eyes. That was... weird.”

Undeterred, Cate responded, “Here, try holding on to the watch with me. Maybe then I won’t disappear.”

Jack placed a shaky hand on the timepiece with Cate’s, wrapping her hand in his.

“Okay, now rub it,” Cate instructed.

Their thumbs moved in unison, and the second hand began to slow. Within seconds, the timepiece was hardly ticking at all.

Both she and Jack stood in the closet. "You made it."

"I did, I guess," he said, pressing his hands on his body in a few places, as if checking to make sure it was still there.

Cate grinned and headed for the closet door. "Wanna look around?"

"Do I have a choice?"

"Nope, come on. We won't stay long, but see if you notice anything different." She inched open the closet door, peeking out to make sure no one was in the bedroom.

Spotting no one, she pushed the door all the way open. "I didn't recognize much difference in this room. Only that the lamps were missing, which makes sense if we are in the 1800s."

Jack nodded in agreement without vocalizing a response.

"Okay, let's check the hall." Cate pressed her ear to the door for a moment. Satisfied, she unlatched it and nudged it open, glancing up and down the hall. She spotted no one and tiptoed into the hallway, motioning Jack to follow her.

"Let's head toward the front stairs," she whispered.

Jack nodded, and they crept down the hallway. They rounded the corner. Cate whispered that she had seen the maids there the day before. She was about to take another step down the hall when Jack grabbed her arm, pulling her back around the corner. He pressed a finger to his lips, motioning her to be quiet.

His reasoning became apparent as voices floated down the hall. She peered around the corner. Three women strode down the hall. Two of them were the maids she came across yesterday. The third woman was not a maid. Cate guessed by her dress and keys dangling around her waist that she was the housekeeper.

She ducked back around the corner and signaled Jack to look. He glanced around the corner then nodded back to Cate to demonstrate that he saw them. He motioned to her to signal they should return to the bedroom. She nodded in agreement, and they crept down the hall and back into the bedroom. Jack eased the door shut as the voices continued to approach their location.

They froze, standing stock still inside the doorway as the group of women turned the corner and passed their door. The staff seemed to be discussing a cleaning schedule while the owners were away visiting

relatives in London. They passed by the bedroom, continuing down the hall, with the housekeeper giving a long list of orders.

The voices faded down the hall. Jack breathed a sigh of relief, collapsing against the door.

“Should we head back?” Cate asked.

“Yes, please. That’s enough excitement for one day.”

Cate took a step toward the closet, then stopped without warning and turned toward him, saying, “This is where I was yesterday when I couldn’t get the watch to work—”

Jack waved her forward. “Let’s talk about this after we’re back.”

“Oh, right, okay.”

They stepped into the closet and closed the door behind them. She held the timepiece up, and Jack put his hand over hers, rubbing the face with their thumbs together. The second hand returned to normal ticking.

Cate grinned up at him. “Okay, that should be it. I told you. Those people are real. Do you believe me now?”

“I witnessed it with my own eyes, but I still can’t say I believe it.”

Cate’s smile broadened. “Amazing, isn’t it? Encountering people who shaped the history of this castle. It’s every historian’s dream.”

Jack swallowed hard, stalking around the room as he rubbed his neck. “I’m not sure I would call it a dream.”

“There isn’t an historian alive who wouldn’t give anything for five minutes in a room with some of the biggest influencers in history.”

Jack stopped his walking and put his hands on his hips. “There must be a reason no one knows about this, Cate. I don’t think we should use this thing or tell anyone about it. Maybe my grandfather will have some information.”

“Okay, okay, I promise not to use it. I feel better knowing someone else experienced this. Now I’m sure I’m not crazy.”

“Oh, I experienced it, all right. You’re not crazy. Or if you are, so am I.”

“Mass hysteria? I don’t think that’s the case here.”

“How are you so excited about this? That’s enough excitement for me for the day. Time for me to put my own shape on the castle starting with those bushes.”

“Okay, yes, you’re right. And I’ve got to document that experience.”

“Okay, Cate. And you promise, no more ‘trips,’ right?”

“This time I promise. Scouts honor,” she said, holding up three fingers.

Cate and Jack parted ways. Cate headed downstairs to an office filled with family records. She searched through book after book until she found one from the 1850s. After several tedious hours, she stumbled across two maids named Lorna and Edna. A smile spread across her face as the find added fuel to her theory.

* * *

Cate awoke to a rainy, miserable Saturday. The cool, damp weather kept her inside. She planned to spend the day wrapped in a blanket binge-watching a few movies. As she stretched out on her chaise, her phone chirped to life.

The lock screen showed a text from Jack: *My grandfather is home, meet for dinner?*

Cate's mind buzzed with excitement. Perhaps now she would get some answers. She texted back: *Sure... where?*

Jack answered: *He said at the castle, if that's ok?*

Cate considered it for a moment. Given the weather, she had given Mrs. Fraser the rest of the day off, figuring she could fend for herself. She regretted the choice now since she was having company for dinner. She was a horrible cook. But she wanted answers, and she was willing to cook dinner to get them if she had to. She answered: *Yes, that will work. No promises on dinner... I'm a terrible cook :P*

Jack answered: *See you around 4? I can cook... you two can talk*

She answered: *Deal... I'd politely decline and cook myself but no one wants to eat my cooking*

Jack answered with an emoticon of a tongue sticking out. Cate settled back in the chaise. She still had a few hours to kill before they met, so she played a few of the movies she had selected. The hope that she might have answers to her questions overwhelmed her mind, and she found herself a ball of nerves all day, checking the time every five minutes. A few times, Cate wondered if she had accidentally slowed the timepiece because time seemed to be standing still.

After what felt like an eternity, her clock read 3:30 p.m. Cate had enough time for a quick walk with Riley. She arrived back at the castle a few minutes before Jack and his grandfather arrived. She was still shaking

off her soaked raincoat and removing Riley's sodden jacket when there was a knock on the heavy brass door knocker that hung on the front door.

Cate pulled the heavy door open. "Lady Cate." Jack bowed theatrically. He held a bag of groceries in his hands.

"Come in and get dry," Cate said. "Good to see you again, Mr. Reid, and thank you for coming."

"It sure is wet out there. How are you enjoying our lovely weather, Sir Riley?" Jack asked, bending over to give the small dog a scratch under his chin.

"He doesn't mind the rain so much—he's all boy. But he hates storms."

Jack jiggled the groceries in his arms. "Shall we head to the kitchen?"

Cate motioned for them to follow her. "Sure, and thank you again for offering to cook."

"I was worried you'd cook cereal for dinner."

"Oh, come on, I'm not *that* bad. I'd have opted for peanut butter and jelly at least!"

Jack shot a glance at his grandfather over his shoulder. "Oh boy, I wish I hadn't offered. We missed out, Pap."

Mr. Reid trailed behind them, offering Cate a grin. "I'd have taken anything this pretty lassie fed me. I'm not picky."

"Thank you. How was your trip?" she asked as they descended the stairs.

"Great. Nice to get away."

Cate asked where he had traveled and some general questions about his trip as they settled at the table. Jack bustled around the kitchen, gathering materials for his meal like a professional. Cate offered to help, but he refused, suggesting, instead, that she plow into her interview questions.

Cate glanced up at the elder Mr. Reid. "Well, thanks for coming. I'm not sure if Jack mentioned it, but I'm putting together materials to write a book about the castle's history, and I figured you might be a good source of information. So, I'd like to ask you a few questions if you don't mind."

Jack seasoned his pot of stew with salt before adjusting the temperature on the stove. "Aww, come on, Cate, skip to the juicy stuff. Ask him about the theory you have about that watch of yours."

Cate shot Jack a glance. "I wasn't going to lead with that, but okay. I guess the real reason I wanted to talk to you—not that the other reason isn't legit, it is—but, well, I mentioned to you before that the watch was slowing

down. You looked at it and told me nothing was wrong with it, and I now agree because I deduced the watch should operate that way.” Cate stammered around, trying to find the words to make her theory sound less crazy.

Mr. Reid continued to stare at her as she spoke without offering much response, which made Cate more nervous.

She continued to babble, “Well, what I mean to say is, Jack mentioned to you that I hypothesized friction-induced it because I developed a habit, a tic... no pun intended—” She laughed nervously. “—of rubbing it, and I postulated that maybe somehow that messed with the internal workings. But now my theory is it’s not just some random event, but that it’s the watch’s purpose...”

“Oh, for heaven’s sake, Cate,” Jack interrupted her. “She thinks she’s time traveling by slowing the watch down, Pap. Ever heard of anything like that?”

Color rose in Cate’s cheeks as she shot a demure glance at the older man. “Yes, that’s what I concluded. That’s my theory. Nothing else made sense, but I kept seeing random people dressed in old-fashioned clothing when the watch was slow. Am I just going crazy?”

Mr. Reid chuckled, a wide grin on his bearded face. “So, you figured it out, young lassie? Good for you. Lady MacKenzie didn’t know if you’d be bright enough to catch on to it. She didn’t leave you with many clues—wondered if the secret might be best left to die with her since she couldn’t tell you herself. Said if you were clever, you’d figure out the secret. She had faith that if anyone could solve it, a MacKenzie could.”

Cate’s mouth dropped open. She wasn’t sure if she felt relieved or not. Her theory was correct, but hearing that was more of a shock than she had prepared for.

“Wait a minute,” Jack said, collapsing into a chair next to Cate, “she’s *right*?”

Cate snapped back to reality. “*Hey*. You saw it, too. You agreed with my theory.”

“Well, it’s a shock to hear that we were actually time traveling.”

“We?” Jack’s grandfather raised an eyebrow. “Well, you’re off to a right start, I’d say.”

“Yes,” Cate answered. “We tried it together. Well, after a total fail when I disappeared for a few seconds without him.”

“Like I said, you’re off to a good start. You figured out quite a lot, Lady Cate.” Mr. Reid nodded his head.

“I’m just shocked that I was right. I mean, I was convinced of my theory, but how has this been such a well-kept secret?”

“Ah, good question. The family never speaks of this secret to anyone outside of themselves. And whatever Reid is working on the estate.”

Jack’s grandfather continued, “Long ago when the castle was built, the new owners detected what they called anomalies. This led to the rumors of the castle being haunted. And the builder, Douglas MacKenzie—you’ve no doubt come across his name during your research—was the curious sort. He, along with his construction manager and later estate manager, Jamie Reid, my ancestor, spent countless hours studying these anomalies. Almost drove them crazy, but after some work, Douglas devised a mechanism that could interact with what he termed ‘rips’ in the ‘fabric of time.’ He, along with Jamie, built the watch with this mechanism and used their invention as an instrument to control these rips.

“The secret has been passed from generation to generation. Always passed verbally, never written. You understand, if the wrong person discovered it, it could lead to disaster. The preceding caretaker always passed the secret to their heir. This time was different since no one knew what you’d be like, and no one could find you before Lady MacKenzie passed. She tasked me with guarding the secret until we were sure you’d be able to take on the responsibility.”

“So,” Cate began. “Wow, I’m sorry, I need a minute. I have so many questions. I just... I can’t believe it. I mean I’ve done it—I’ve time traveled—but I still can’t believe it.”

Jack continued making dinner but chimed in from across the kitchen. “You and I both. It’s still surprising, even after experiencing the phenomenon for myself.”

“Lady MacKenzie knew. Did her mother, Mary, also know?”

“Aye, lassie. I worked on the estate when Lord MacKenzie passed and left the responsibility to Lady Mary since Lady Gertrude was too young.”

Cate nodded. That explained the journals. Mary’s adventures weren’t parties that she hosted—they were events at the castle in different eras. It also explained why pages were missing from the journals. Anything Mary wrote regarding the watch had to be destroyed so that the secret was not recorded anywhere.

“You mentioned not knowing if I’d be suitable to take on the responsibility? Then the secret could have died with Gertrude?”

“Aye, as I mentioned, it’s quite a responsibility, and Gertrude would have rather seen the secret die with her than fall into the wrong hands. Not that she doubted you, but never having met you, and not knowing anything about you, well, I guess she erred on the side of caution. You can imagine the repercussions if this fell into the hands of someone who would exploit it for their own gain.”

Cate reflected for a moment. “Yes, I can see your point. I found some journals Mary kept from when she had inherited the watch, and while they were redacted, she described the secret in the same way: as a responsibility. I see it as a gift. What historian wouldn’t love to immerse themselves in a different era? The learning potential is unlimited.”

“You’re eager, I see, but you must temper your eagerness with caution. You must be careful with this ‘gift,’ Cate. You don’t always understand the repercussions of changing too much in the past. You must follow the rules that have been passed through the generations. Striking a balance and following those rules are the responsibility that both Mary and Gertrude spoke of.”

“I see your point, again. I guess my enthusiasm got ahead of me.”

“Aye, it can be exciting, but you have to be careful. Got to consider what you’re doing before you start changing things. Caution like that requires a cool head and a steady hand,” Mr. Reid warned her.

Silence fell over them for a moment while Cate collected her thoughts. “Do you know how many ‘rips’ exist?”

“I’m not sure if we ever had an exact count. The rips exist in different places throughout the castle. Different rips connect to different times. Lady Gertrude disliked traveling, unlike her mother. If I remember, Lady Mary identified at least four spots.”

“Do you remember where they are?”

“Aye, one of them in the bedroom Lady Gertrude stayed in, one of them in the bedroom down the hall, another in the downstairs office—that’s a tricky one since you never know who might be in there—and the fourth she found exists in another bedroom they call the Blue Room.”

Cate fell silent for a moment, mulling over her questions.

“There may be more, but those were the ones she identified. Her husband took ill and passed her the watch and the secret with little

information. Oh, that reminds me there's a hallway that seems to work in any time to return. Handy to remember in case of an emergency. It's the one that looks out on the back garden."

"So my theory was correct. The watch only triggers in certain locations and each location leads to a different time."

"Aye, correct, lassie."

"And you said the secret is passed down in *both* the MacKenzie and Reid families?" Cate asked.

"Yes. The Reids' duty is always to protect this secret right along with the MacKenzies. It was a pact made between Douglas and Jamie."

"So, you helped Mary and Gertrude protect the secret?"

"Aye, lassie. Took many a trip with Lady Mary back in my younger days. As I said, Lady Gertrude was not a fan of traveling as much as her mother." He turned to Jack who was seasoning a pot of whatever steamed on the stove. "Now, I'm officially passing the mantle to you, lad. The secret is now yours and Cate's, and it's up to you to protect it—and Cate."

"Thanks, Pap, I have my work cut out with this one," he said, nodding toward her.

Cate twisted to face him. "Hey, I'm not *that* bad. He's been doing a good job so far. So, only the three of us know?"

"That's right, lassie."

"Mr. and Mrs. Fraser?"

"Charlie and Emily? Nay. I dare say she might faint dead away if she found out."

Cate laughed at this joke, although she agreed that might be the exact reaction from Mrs. Fraser.

"That reminds me," Cate said, "once I 'traveled' back, and when I came back, Mrs. Fraser said she'd just seen me. But I was gone for at least fifteen to twenty minutes. Does that make sense?"

"Aye, and a good observation on your part. When you travel, the time where you're from almost stands still. That's why the watch is slow. The watch keeps time from YOUR time. Now, I said *almost*. We calculated the ratio to be about fifteen minutes in the past to one minute here. Tempting as it may be to spend a lot of time in the past, you must remember that you can't go disappearing from your own time for too long. People will wonder."

“Always keep an eye on *your* time. It’s the inscription on the watch, and it was in Lady Gertrude’s note. Now it makes sense.”

“Aye, lassie, that’s right. The warning from Douglas MacKenzie himself. Had the phrase engraved on that watch to remind everyone.”

Cate’s thoughts absorbed her for a few moments as she tried to piece together the puzzle, when another query struck her.

“On a different note, do you know why my family branch became estranged? I found a family bible with an inkblot over my branch of the family. As you mentioned, I wasn’t easy to find. I found evidence that Gertrude visited my parents before my birth, but then it seems like all contact was cut off.”

“I cannae help you there, lassie. Lady Gertrude never mentioned it—never discussed your side. She knew your family, but not exactly where to find you. Only had an old address for your father. I got the impression that your grandparents moved and changed their names around the time a spot of trouble cropped up. The castle’s secret was almost discovered. Perhaps they moved to protect your family from being sought by any undesirable people. My guess is Lady Gertrude stayed away after your birth just to keep your family safe.”

“That makes sense and seems reasonable. This is a lot to digest, but thank you for the information. This is incredible.”

“I’m sure you’re still reeling. No doubt you’ll have more questions. When you do, I’ll be here to help you as best I can,” Mr. Reid said, smiling at her.

Jack delivered full bowls of what he called his “famous stew.” Cate had to admit, the meal smelled delicious. “Well, there you have it, Lady Cate. Your theory was right, mystery solved! Now you can relax.”

“Relax? My mind is whirling with the possibilities. Do you like history, Jack?” Cate asked.

“Oh, boy,” Jack groaned. “You sure you don’t want your old job back, Pap?”

“Oh, come on, Jack. The adventures are just beginning,” she said, a gleam of mischief in her eye.

* * *

THE END

MURDER AT DUNHAVEN CASTLE



A CATE KENSIE MYSTERY

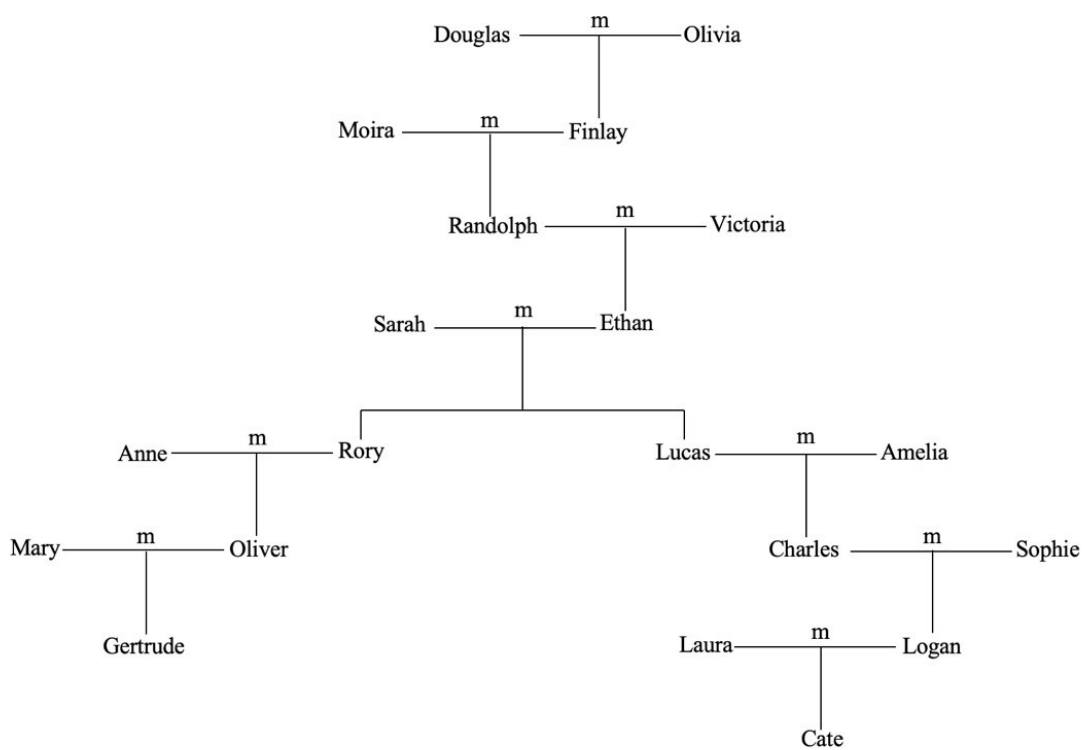
In loving memory of Catherine Steele HuWalt

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MacKenzie Family Tree



CHAPTER 1



Murder. The word rattled around in Lady Catherine Kensie's mind as she sat on the banks of the loch with Riley, her beloved black and white dog. Dunhaven Castle reflected in the ripples of the pond. Cate studied it, still finding it hard to believe it was her home.

A home that held a life-changing secret. One she had never expected when she'd learned of her surprise inheritance: a small fortune and a Scottish castle. A *haunted* Scottish castle, according to the rumors.

She'd almost believed those rumors when she'd moved here, leaving behind her quiet life as a college professor teaching history at a local college. She chuckled as she recalled her first few encounters with the supposed specters.

What was presumed to be ghosts turned out to be an incredible discovery. The castle walls housed an anomaly, allowing the wearer of one particularly gold timepiece to slip into other eras.

Cate stared down at the watch dangling from the gold chain around her neck. It provided her with an incredible opportunity, as well as a few scares.

She glanced over her shoulder at the stone walls rising high above her. Her eyes focused on one of the tower rooms. Now she wondered if the castle held another secret. A murderous one.

"Ahoy there, Lady Cate!" a voice with a Scottish accent called from behind her.

Cate twisted to eye her estate manager and only member of her staff aware of the castle's secret, Jack Reid, strolling down the path toward her.

“Hello, Jack.”

Jack settled on the bank next to her, scratching Riley’s chin. “And hello to you too, good Sir Riley. Lost in thought over your research there, Cate?”

Cate stared at the ripples in the loch. “I was just thinking about my journey.”

“Your journey? You mean your time traveling journeys?”

Cate shot him a glance before returning her gaze to the rippling waters. “No. Reflecting on how different my life is now compared to the beginning of the year.”

“Ah, yes, from mild-mannered professor to Scottish Countess. You’ve really come up in the world, Lady Cate.”

“Yes, and not just any Scottish Countess, but a time-traveling one.”

Jack wrapped his arms around his knees as he leaned forward. “You are way fonder of the time-traveling stuff than I am, Cate. If it were all the same to me, I’d stay right here in my present time.”

Cate clapped a hand on his shoulder. “Yes, I realize that, but unfortunately, it’s your solemn duty to make sure I’m safe and so is this secret. And that includes not only wherever I go, but WHENever.”

“Don’t remind me. You’re too adventurous for your own good, m’lady.”

Cate forced her thought from the past to the future. “Speaking of adventurous, how are things looking for the costume ball?”

“Everything will be right as rain for the ball. Mr. Fraser and I will have the gardens closest to the house in tip-top shape for the guests to enjoy.”

Cate slicked a lock of hair behind her ear as the cool Scottish breeze blew it across her cheek. “Oh good! I can’t believe it’s only a month away!”

Jack wrinkled his nose, turning his gaze to the loch. “I can’t believe we have another month. Another month listening to Mrs. Fraser chew my ear off about her costume. I tell you I’ve never seen that woman so tickled about something as when she learned you wanted her to attend as your guest and not have to do all the cooking for it.”

Cate stood with a chuckle and dusted herself off. “I’m glad she is enjoying her new role. Sorry that you aren’t! Well, speaking of the ball, I better go attend to a few details for that. I have an appointment with Mrs. Campbell to go over some items.”

Jack climbed to his feet. “Okay, Cate. Enjoy the rest of your day.”

Cate scooped the small dog off the ground and nestled him in her arms for the return trip to the castle. “Thanks!”

As she pushed through the kitchen door, Mrs. Fraser, her housekeeper and cook, informed her Mrs. Campbell already awaited her in the sitting room.

Cate glanced at her timepiece. "Am I late?"

Mrs. Fraser wiped her hands against her apron and shook her head, a frown on her lips. "Nay, Lady Cate. She's early, 'bout a half hour early, too. If you ask me, that woman is insufferable, always showing up and poking around as if she's welcome anytime. Dinnae she realize people have other things to do? Bless your soul for helping her with this ball, Lady Cate. Although, if I may say so, I am excited for it."

Cate smiled at her enthusiasm as a grin spread across her housekeeper's face. "I'm glad you are, Mrs. Fraser. Jack told me about your discussions with him regarding your costume."

Mrs. Fraser arched an eyebrow as she pulled a bowl of cookie dough from the refrigerator. "Giving away my secrets, is he?"

"He hasn't given away any secrets, just that you're excited over your costume, which you won't have the opportunity to wear if I don't finish these details with Mrs. Campbell."

"Best be off with you then! Oh, why dinnae you leave the little pup here while you meet with her? I've got a nice bone for him."

"Oh, he'll love that. Okay, Riley, you stay here. Mrs. Fraser has a nice bone for you, buddy. Be a good boy for her, okay?" Cate gave the pup a scratch on his head and left the kitchen, making her way up to the main floor's sitting room.

Cate pushed into the large space with its thick tartan draperies and heavy wooden furniture. Mrs. Campbell perched on the edge of the blue loveseat, materials spread around her.

She smiled at her as she crossed the room. "Mrs. Campbell, what a pleasure to see you again."

"Lady Cate," the woman said, rising from her seat and adjusting her smart skirt suit, "thank you for meeting with me. Pardon my early arrival, but I was concerned the details may take longer to work out than we expect."

"No problem. I was just settling Riley in after a long walk."

"Of course," Mrs. Campbell answered as Cate motioned for them to sit. "And how is the little pet? Adjusting all right to Scottish country life?"

"Oh, yes, he loves it here. And so do I."

“Well, we certainly enjoy having you here, Lady Cate. Everyone I’ve spoken to is thrilled to be attending. It will be a lovely way for everyone to get to know the newest owner.”

Cate forced a smile onto her face and swallowed hard. As an introvert, she was not as thrilled, but the “Ghosts of the Past”-themed Halloween ball seemed like a fun idea and would be a fantastic fundraiser for the local historical society.

“After your predecessor became a recluse,” Mrs. Campbell continued, “I all but gave up on the idea of hosting this type of event at our most prominent attraction, but with your arrival, I’m thrilled to pull it together.”

“Well, I think it sounds like a very fun evening you have planned.”

Mrs. Campbell giggled as she tugged a few papers from a folder. “I certainly think so. Shall we get down to business?”

They spent the next two hours discussing catering menus, entertainment and décor. The details seemed endless.

Cate stood and stretched after the tedious meeting as Mrs. Campbell shoved fabric samples into her tote.

“Of course, we’ll need to meet again in two weeks and then schedule several more as the day approaches, just to be sure we have everything nailed down,” Mrs. Campbell said as they strode to the front door.

“Yes, well, you have kept a very close eye on all the details, Mrs. Campbell. You’ve done an incredible job in putting this together.”

“Oh, oh, why thank you, Lady Cate. Well, this is quite an undertaking for our little historical society and I do want it to be a success. I’d love to make it an annual event, I trust you wouldn’t object to that if all goes well?”

Cate held back a groan at the idea, though she couldn’t fault her for wanting to capitalize on the town’s biggest asset. She found herself nodding and smiling as the woman continued to let her thoughts spill out.

“Or even a series of events. Oh!” She grabbed Cate’s arm, staring into space as though an idea just struck her on the head. “Christmas with Lady Cate. Oh yes, what a magical idea. Perhaps that’s a winner too!”

Cate patted her hand. “Let’s see how successful this event is and take it from there.”

Mrs. Campbell stepped into the bright sunshine, fiddling with her sunglasses. “Right, of course. Well, thank you for meeting with me. I’ll be in touch!”

“Bye!” Cate called after her.

She pushed the door closed and returned to the sitting room, dropping onto the couch with a sigh. The details of the meeting left her drained. She flung an arm over her eyes as she wondered what possessed her to agree to this.

“Is the ninny gone?” Mrs. Fraser said, breaking her from her daze.

Cate pulled her arm away, chuckling. “Yes, she’s gone.”

“Has she exhausted you or do you have a few minutes to go over a few details about your upcoming house party?”

Cate pushed off the sofa, giving her back another stretch. “I always have time for you, Mrs. Fraser. Let’s walk down to the kitchen, then I can retrieve Riley, too. I bet he enjoyed his bone.”

“Oh, he did, Lady Cate, he did. Chewed on it almost the whole time he was down there. Now,” Mrs. Fraser said as they walked, “I wanted to make sure I’ve got the timetable right so I can plan menus for everything and everyone. Ms. Williams is the first to arrive, and she’s coming in on the Saturday before the party and staying on until the second Monday. She’ll be here for dinner Saturday evening, staying the week and leaving after breakfast the following Monday, right?”

“Yes, that’s right. Molly will be visiting for just over a week,” Cate answered, confirming the arrival of Molly Williams, the department secretary from Cate’s old teaching department at Aberdeen College. Much like an older sister to her, Cate eagerly awaited Molly’s visit.

When invited, Molly replied with a “heck yeah” adding “when am I ever going to get the chance to go to a costume ball in a castle.” Now single following a surprise divorce, Molly said it was the perfect time for her to travel to “get her mind off of things.”

Mrs. Fraser continued her catalog of guests as they descended the stairs. “Then, Ms. Pearson is traveling in on Monday and will be here in time for dinner and staying on until the following Monday, same as Ms. Williams.”

“Right, Gayle is coming two days after Molly and leaving at the same time as Molly.”

“And last but certainly not least, Mr. Smythe will arrive on Wednesday, here for dinner in the evening and leaving with the ladies on Monday morning after breakfast.”

“You’ve got it!” Cate answered as they approached the kitchen.

“And the bedroom arrangements we already spoke about are suitable with you?”

Cate sank into a chair at the kitchen table, flicking a gaze to Riley who gnawed on his bone near the warmth generated from the ovens. "Yes, that sounds perfect, Mrs. Fraser, thank you. Also, I hoped you and Mr. Fraser would stay Friday evening after the ball so you don't have to return home late. I realize your cottage is close but staying may be more convenient. And on Saturday morning, we can help ourselves to a cold breakfast, so you won't need to prepare anything."

Mrs. Fraser offered a shrug before balling a tea towel. She pushed open the door and fluttered it outside to clean it of any crumbs. "Well, I'm happy to prepare food, but if you are certain that will suffice, I'll have some fruit and such prepared the day before and put into the fridge for everyone the next morning."

She straightened and frowned. "Funny, I never imagined Mr. Smythe enjoying a party, he doesn't seem the type. I realize he was a friend of Lady Gertrude's but they never did more than have a nightcap."

"I know what you mean," Cate said as she considered her good-hearted, but straight-laced attorney. "And that would be perfect, Mrs. Fraser, thank you, again."

She pushed her hands against her thighs as she rose from the table. "Well, Mr. Riley, how did you like your bone?" The smile disappeared from her face as she glanced around the kitchen, not spotting the little pup. "Riley?"

"Strange, he was here chewing on that bone when we came in."

"Riley! Come, Riley! Oh, he's here somewhere, Mrs. Fraser. Probably hiding away with his bone so we don't take it from him."

They searched the kitchen but did not find him.

Cate called down the hall leading from the room. "Perhaps he wandered into one of the other rooms."

They both moseyed down the hall, searching in each room. Neither of them found the little pup.

"I don't expect he could have gotten upstairs, the door at the top is closed," Mrs. Fraser said.

"No, we must have missed him somewhere."

They returned to the kitchen, glancing around the space again. A noise sounded from across the room.

Mrs. Fraser held a finger up. "Did you hear that?"

They strained their ears to listen.

Cate nodded. "Yes. Riley? Riley! Is that you? Where are you?"

The little dog issued a whine.

"That's him, all right. Riley?" Cate called as she wandered around the room.

Another whine.

She approached the door leading outside. "Sounds like it's coming from over here. Riley?"

Yet another whimper sounded and a scratching noise.

Cate cocked her head. "Is he outside?"

She pushed the door open. The small dog sat outside, his white fur smudged with dirt. He leapt to his feet and trotted into the kitchen.

Cate stuck her hand on her hip. "Where have you been, mister?"

Mrs. Fraser pressed a hand to her chest, her face wrinkled with worry. "Oh my word, Lady Cate, I'm so sorry, he must have gotten out of the door when I was shaking the crumbs off the towel.

She turned to the small pup, her hands on her hips. "Where were you? You had your Mum and me worried sick. And look at the mess you've gotten yourself into. Now come here and I'll clean you off."

Mrs. Fraser wet a rag and bent down to clean his fur.

"Oh, here I can do it. I'm sure he was fine, most likely ran out with his bone to show Jack. The little imp gets away from me, also. As soon as he gets a whiff of Jack, he runs off to see him."

"Nay, Lady Cate, he got dirty on my watch, and I'll clean him off," she said, wiping the smudges from his fur. "There we are, good as new. Now don't you go running off on me again!" She wagged her finger at him.

Cate lifted him into her arms and tousled the fur on his head. "You'd do well to listen to her, Riley. And look, you've lost your bone somewhere. Oh, Riley, what are we going to do with you?"

The little dog gave her a yip. "Yes, I know, feed you your dinner. I guess all your romping around made you hungry."

Cate shook some kibble into his bowl before diving in on her own meal, readied by Mrs. Fraser. After a long walk to enjoy the red, purple, and gold sunset painting the moors, she curled up in the library with a folder containing information about the castle's unique history from Mrs. Campbell.

She slid the first page from the stack of photocopied newspaper articles. Her mind wound back to the mystery she'd pondered over while sitting on

the banks of the loch earlier as she studied the headline: MURDER AT
DUNHAVEN CASTLE.

CHAPTER 2



With a shiver, Cate chewed her lower lip as lightning tore through the sky while she re-read the sordid tale of murder at a Halloween ball hosted over a century before. Thunder rumbled in the morning sky as Cate arched an eyebrow at the gory details in the article she'd perused the evening before. Gray clouds rushed overhead, bringing a gloomy day to the highlands. Rain pelted the thick glass windows, still audible despite the thick, blue tartan drapes.

She nestled further into her blanket, curling her legs to her chest as she lounged on her sitting room's chaise.

Riley laid on the cream and blue area rug in front of the roaring fire, gnawing on another bone courtesy of Mrs. Fraser, content to stay indoors as Cate researched the castle's past.

Mrs. Campbell had warned her before passing the article along about Randolph MacKenzie's roughish reputation, but she'd never imagined this. From her research into the castle's history, she learned that he'd been born in 1827, the son of Finlay and Moira MacKenzie, and had inherited the castle in 1854 upon his father's death.

He'd married Victoria Winston four years prior and the two had produced a male heir, Ethan, born in early 1856. Renowned for her beauty, Victoria had captured the hearts of many, but Randolph's dogged pursuance wooed her into marriage and a life at Dunhaven.

Cate recalled the love letters she'd read when she first arrived at the castle from Randolph to his future wife. The language included in them

hinted at the strong feelings Randolph had for the woman.

Cate had been surprised by Mrs. Campbell's tale that he'd brought back a girl from his travels abroad and locked her in the tower to attend to his baser instincts. But given the articles included in the folder, perhaps she'd been wrong.

She grabbed a notepad and pen as she scanned the article for a third time. The subtitle below the scandalous headline read "Footman to MacKenzie family found dead on the estate."

The scant article provided few details beyond the headline. Written days after the grisly discovery, the investigation remained in its infancy.

The article explained that a guest at the estate's Halloween Ball discovered the body of a young footman named Andrew Forsythe at the foot of one of the turrets. He'd fallen from a window three stories above.

However, the fall had not been the cause of his death. Instead, his skull had been crushed with a blunt object. The man sustained several other injuries prior to his post-mortem fall including bruises and scratches. The murder occurred in 1856 on October 31, All Hallows' Eve.

Cate shivered at the last detail before shuffling to the next article in the packet. This one detailed a stunning break in the case. During their investigation, police arrived at the castle, intent on searching it for the murder weapon when then-proprietor, Randolph MacKenzie, confessed to the crime. When questioned about motive, he stated he'd killed the man in a fit of jealous, drunken rage over what he perceived to be too intimate a glance at his beloved Victoria on the footman's behalf.

Investigators were stunned by the sudden turn of events, particularly since Lord MacKenzie had provided a solid alibi on the night of the murder. It had been corroborated by others.

Despite thorough questioning about the inconsistency, Randolph maintained his guilt, stating his original story was a lie but his conscience could no longer bear the guilt.

Cate glanced through the remaining articles detailing the short trial that followed the confession, the sentencing and eventual fallout. The judge sentenced Randolph to the death penalty, an almost unheard-of ruling at the time for a man of his position.

Victoria was left to raise her infant son alone, becoming a recluse until her death.

Cate sat back, studying her notes from the articles. She bit her lower lip, considering the information. Something didn't add up.

The impression she'd formed from reading the intimate letters from Randolph to Victoria didn't fit the descriptions of the man as a raving murderer.

She gathered the folder into her arms and patted Riley on the head as she darted to the door. "Be right back, buddy. I need a second opinion."

She wandered through the halls, navigating downstairs to the ballroom.

Jack stood near a ladder, unboxing lightbulbs.

"Lady Cate!" he said, as she rounded the corner and approached him. "And how are you today?"

She hid the folder behind her back, offering him a demure smile. "I'm good, how are you?"

"Well, I was fine, but you've got that mischievous look in your eye so I'm betting I won't be in a few minutes."

Cate frowned at him. "I have no such look."

He arched an eyebrow at her as he tossed a box into the trash bag at his feet. "No? Then what's that behind your back? Just some random paperwork that you happen to be carrying about?"

"Just a few articles about a former castle owner. I just wanted to get your impression on it."

"My impression, huh?" he said, eyeing her as he accepted the folder from her. He flicked it open and scanned the articles.

"Well?" she questioned as he closed the folder.

"My impression is this Randolph fellow got in a jealous rage and killed someone. Then he couldn't live with the guilt, confessed and they sentenced him to death."

Cate frowned again. "Really? It doesn't strike you as odd?"

Jack shrugged his shoulders as he tugged another lightbulb from within the package. "No? Perhaps he was a hothead or maybe his wife was having an affair. I don't find it that strange."

Cate placed the folder down, her finger rubbing her chin. "It doesn't make sense. It's all too convenient. He has an alibi then out of the blue he confesses? He leaves his beloved wife to raise his infant son alone while he rots in prison awaiting the death penalty. Why would he do that? He would have gotten away with murder by just letting his alibi stand."

“Possibly someone threatened to tell, or he didn’t expect someone in his position would get that kind of sentence. Could be any number of things, who knows?”

Cate twisted to face him, jabbing a finger in the air. “Well, Randolph knows and perhaps a few others.”

“Cate...” Jack began.

“I’m just saying maybe something else was going on there and we should check into it.”

“Caaaaaaaate,” Jack chided.

“And we have the capability to check into it. The year in the article was one of the access points that your grandfather told us about.”

Jack let his head fall between his shoulders. “CATE! Are you kidding me?”

“Come on, Jack! My ancestor was accused of murder and was put to death. What if he was innocent?”

Jack counted his points off on his fingers. “First, he confessed, he wasn’t accused of it. And second, what if he wasn’t? You’re willing to risk our lives to find out if he’s innocent?”

Cate screwed up her face. “How are we risking our lives, Jack? All I’m suggesting is that we go back and take a peek around, perhaps prevent a murder, perhaps save an innocent man’s life.”

Jack wagged a finger at her. “Do you remember, Cate, the conversation we shared with my grandfather about not changing history when we first learned about this? Because I do. What if we change history so much that one or both of us disappear? We shouldn’t be messing around with this stuff.”

“I won’t do anything that will jeopardize our lives.”

“That’s the point, Cate. You don’t know what tiny thing you might do that would jeopardize our lives, there’s a butterfly effect.”

Cate flung her arms out. “Where is your sense of adventure?”

“My sense of adventure? My sense of adventure is ordering something other than the fish and chips at the pub. Not romping around in other time periods solving murders.”

She cocked her head at him. “So, you agree the murder needs to be solved.”

Jack rolled his eyes, a playful grin on his features. “Bah, Cate. I won’t win this argument, will I?”

“Probably not. Let’s just look around at least. We have a month before the murder. We’ll see who the players are and if anything seems amiss.”

“Only that, huh?”

“Hey, I’d go myself but it’s against the rules.”

Jack rolled his eyes as he stepped up on the ladder. “Wonderful, now you’re concerned with the rules. I guess that’s something at least, you’re obeying one rule. Okay, okay. So, when do you want to go?”

Cate studied the air as she considered it. “Hmm. Well, it’s September twenty-sixth, we have a little over one month before the murder. How about Sunday? Perhaps we can take a quick peek around while most everyone in the household is at church? Get the lay of the land before we move on to trying to figure out what happened?”

“Sunday it is, I guess.”

“Excellent! Glad you agree!”

“Oh, I far from agree, I’m a conscientious objector, but I’ll do it, if only to be sure I stop you from erasing some vital part of history by accident.”

Cate rolled her eyes at him as she laughed. As a former history professor, she’d not be so cavalier as to erase a vital part of history. “You’re so dramatic.”

“Says the person who suspects a centuries-old murder, that has been solved, I might add, has some dark secret lurking in it that still needs to be solved.”

“We shall see,” Cate said. “I’ll get everything ready for Sunday! I’ll let you get back to your work.”

This time Jack rolled his eyes at her. “Fantastic, on both counts.”

Cate pressed her folder to her chest, spun on her heel and wandered away, a smile on her lips. With any luck, they’d soon find out if her ancestor was a murderer.

She climbed the massive staircase across from the front door and wove through the halls to the portrait gallery. She tugged open the heavy gold-trimmed doors and slipped inside, flicking the switch limned against the red wallpaper.

Light bloomed overhead from a series of crystal chandeliers, brightening the large hall. The portraits of the former proprietors of Dunhaven Castle hung around the room.

Cate wandered to the painting of the castle’s builder, Douglas, staring up at his sapphire blue eyes. She shared that feature, as did most of the

MacKenzies. When he built the castle, did he expect it to house a murderer? Did he imagine his own grandson would be convicted of the crime?

Cate stared up at his likeness for another moment before she wandered down the line, passing the portraits of Randolph's parents before arriving at his painting.

She read the brass nameplate emblazoned with his name before she flicked her gaze upward. With unruly, dark curls topping a chiseled face, he appeared roguishly handsome. His sapphire blue eyes stared from underneath thick, bushy eyebrows.

She glanced at the portrait next to his. Victoria MacKenzie, Randolph's beloved wife and the supposed reason for the murder, stared back with dark eyes. Poised and confident, her full lips curled into a friendly smile. Her delicate features in her heart-shaped face would still be considered a gold-standard for beauty today.

Had her beauty elicited attention, unwanted or otherwise, from one Andrew Forsythe?

Cate stared up at Randolph's portrait again. "What was your story, Randolph?" she asked him.

His unmoving blue eyes stared back, providing no answers. She considered the facts again, staring at the gold chair rail that rimmed the room. Randolph MacKenzie had an alibi. Several servants had spoken with him during the time of the murder. He couldn't have done it.

He'd claimed they'd lied on his behalf. Had they? Was her ancestor a murderer? Cate shook her head. No, she couldn't believe that. She couldn't believe she'd descended from a killer.

A frown settled on her lips as she flicked her gaze back to Randolph. But what if she was wrong? Were they making a huge mistake confronting a man with a murderous rage? Would this decision cost them their lives?

CHAPTER 3



Cate shambled back to her room, lost in thought. She second-guessed her decision to return to the turbulent time. If she was wrong, they could end up in grave danger.

Still, she had to know if Randolph committed the crime or not. Something didn't make sense in the story and she was determined to prove it.

She spent the next few days making plans for their trip to 1856. She dug period-appropriate clothing from within the trunks she'd found near Victoria's love letters. She also researched as much of the family and the household as she could, making as many notes as possible about who lived there, how they fit into the family and other basic background information. She hoped to get through at least their initial visit without running into anyone, but just in case, it was better to be prepared.

She texted Jack, suggesting it may be a good idea to go over her findings before they traveled back together. He responded with a straight face emoji but suggested they include his grandfather in case he could shed any light on the situation and suggested they meet over dinner the next evening.

Cate filled the rest of her day with checking items off her to-do list for the upcoming Halloween party, finding her mind flitting to another Halloween ball held over a century earlier. Would they find out what happened that night?

Using the ruse of discussing estate business, Cate, Jack and Stanley, Jack's grandfather, met Saturday evening over dinner provided by Mrs. Fraser. She even provided Riley with another bone to replace the one he had lost.

Jack handed it to him, playfully tugging at it until Riley pulled it from his hands. "She's all yours, Riley. You're one tough little mutt!"

"Perhaps in his mind you owe him one since he lost his last one running around the yard searching for you."

Jack flicked his eyebrows up "Oh?"

"Yes," Cate answered. "Mrs. Fraser gave him one while I met with Mrs. Campbell. He disappeared with it, and we found him outside the door without his bone. He must have run out looking for you and lost his bone during his search. Did he ever find you?"

"Thursday? No, I was inside that day. I never saw him."

"Hmm, that's right. Funny he didn't realize you were in here. Oh well, at least he's got his replacement, he's happy," Cate said as they watched Riley settle on the floor, chewing his bone.

She turned her attention to the older man in the room. "It's nice to see you again, Mr. Reid."

He grinned at her. "It's always a pleasure to see you too, lassie!"

"Has Jack brought you up to speed on my request?"

"Aye. I told him all about your insane plan," Jack answered before his grandfather.

Cate shook her head at him as she poked at her stew with her fork. "It's not insane!"

She turned back to the elder Mr. Reid. "We were hoping you might have some information for us about that time period. Did you and either Mary or Gertrude travel back to that time?"

Jack waved a hand in the air. "Now, wait a minute, lassie, I want to discuss some estate business with you before you dive into this discussion and lose all sense of reality."

Cate frowned, but gave in. Since their dinner was under the ruse of estate business, Jack reviewed some estate business first to ensure their ploy was grounded in truth.

"Okay, that's done," Cate said. "Now let's move on to the fun stuff."

Jack frowned at her as he stuffed papers into the folder. "That was the fun stuff."

“Only you consider bills and business ‘fun stuff’ and not time travel.”

Jack picked up his fork, stabbing a piece of beef. “Only you consider going back to a time when people died of typhoid in their mid-thirties and indoor plumbing was nonexistent ‘fun stuff.’”

Cate jabbed a finger at him. “Hey, consider this though, if you were estate manager back then you’d have one less thing to worry about!”

Stanley chuckled at their bickering. “You two make quite the pair, don’t you?”

“Speaking of estate managers, I guess besides your ancestors, we may run into some of ours, huh?” Jack inquired.

Cate flipped open a folder containing the information she had amassed on the topic. “Yes. I charted your family tree. Your great-great-great-grandfather, Malcolm Reid, was the estate manager under Randolph MacKenzie. It would be him we’d have the chance to meet. Malcolm and Randolph grew up together before Malcom became Randolph’s estate manager.”

She pulled out a small drawing of a family tree and placed it in front of him.

Jack perused the drawing. “Wow, look at you with our family tree! Take a look, Pap! She’s got us all mapped out.”

“Aye, she has,” Stanley answered. “And it looks about right to me. Well done, Lady Cate, well done!”

Cate beamed. “It took a little work, but I was able to track everything down through household documents and some information that you gave me, Mr. Reid. You are a wealth of information!”

“Yeah, he is,” Jack agreed. “If I’m lucky he’ll even have enough to stave off your crazy plan.”

“Crazy plan?” Jack’s grandfather questioned.

“Yeah, Pap, Cate’s got another one of her brilliant ideas to time travel.”

Mr. Reid glanced in the air, a smile on his face. “Ah, time traveling, what a rush that was.”

Jack waved a hand at him. “Bah, don’t feed into her, you’ll only make her worse.”

“So, tell me this crazy plan you’ve got, Lady Cate!” Mr. Reid said.

“Isla Campbell gave me a few articles from around the year 1856, one of the time periods that we can travel to, which makes them intriguing to

begin with. But what makes them even more intriguing is the tale of murder that I read.”

He nodded at the statement as he sipped at his ale. “Oh, aye, you mean the murder of that servant by Lord MacKenzie.”

Cate pointed a finger at him. “Right. That’s the story I mean, but I’m not convinced Lord MacKenzie murdered that man. Hence my desire to time travel. I want to investigate.”

“You think he’s innocent?” Mr. Reid asked.

“That she does, Pap, and she’s dead set on proving it, too.”

“What makes you think that, lassie?”

Cate shrugged, pushing a carrot around in the stew juice. “A hunch. It doesn’t add up. He first says he’s innocent, he has a solid alibi, then out of the blue and in a complete reversal. He confesses to the murder and is sentenced to prison, leaving behind his infant son and beloved wife. It just doesn’t make sense.”

Jack’s grandfather considered the information.

“Well?” Jack prodded.

The older man shrugged. “Well, she’s got a point.”

Jack screwed up his face. “Hey, whose side are you on?”

He grinned at his grandson, poking at a carrot. “I’ve been the voice of reason long enough, laddie, I’m retired! Now I can voice my opinion. And the lassie has a point.”

“Isn’t it more probable that old Randolph’s guilt got to him, and he confessed rather than live with it?” Jack questioned.

“What about his alibi?”

“Someone lied to protect him?” Jack answered in the form of a question.

Cate raised her eyebrows as she wiped her hands on her napkin. “More than one someone, several people saw him.”

“It’s not inconceivable,” Jack said.

Cate rolled her eyes at him. “I guess we’ll find out.”

Jack shot his grandfather a pleading glance. The older man shrugged his shoulders at him. “It’s your show now, Jackie. Yours and Cate’s.”

Jack sighed, rolling his eyes. “Some help you are.”

“Do you know anything else about this story, Mr. Reid?” Cate queried.

Stanley Reid glanced into the air above him, as if searching for an answer. “Not much more than you summarized earlier. Lady Mary and I

traveled to that time. They had many a great party on the estate before Randolph's trouble. Lady Victoria was quite the entertainer! I don't know any facts about this though, we didn't speak with Randolph about it, nor did we do any investigating of our own."

Cate wiggled her eyebrows at Jack. "Well, it looks like it's up to us to do some investigating!"

Jack shrugged his shoulders at her, shoving his tray to the side. "Guess I'm not talking you out of it, huh?"

"Nope."

He glanced at his grandfather, poking his fork in the man's direction. "And I guess you're not going to talk any sense into her?"

The older man burst into laughter. "To quote the lady, 'nope.'"

Jack held up his hands in defeat. "Ahhhh, well okay then, let's get on with the history lesson so I know the players. Malcolm was the estate manager for Randolph MacKenzie, you said?"

Cate pushed her tray aside, pulling her research materials closer. "Right, and Randolph was the son of Finlay and Moira MacKenzie, grandson of Douglas, who built the castle and discovered the time travel anomaly. The concept was probably still novel to them."

"Anything that we should know about Randolph except that he's a crazy murderer?"

Cate batted him playfully. "Hey! That's my ancestor you're slandering there! And, yes, Randolph had quite the reputation before the murder."

Jack sipped at his ale. "How so?"

"Womanizer," Mr. Reid chimed in.

"Yes, according to Mrs. Campbell, Randolph garnered quite the reputation. He spent a good bit of time overseas and the rumor was that he brought home a young woman with him. The rumor is he kept her in the tower room to satisfy his 'more base desires' in the words of Mrs. Campbell," Cate explained.

"Any record of the girl existing?" Jack asked.

Cate shook her head and lifted her shoulders in a shrug. "None that I've found so far."

"So possibly just some tall tales from the village."

"It could be, but there's usually some truth in a rumor, some reason that started it."

“Most likely an old big-mouthed biddy like Mrs. Campbell,” Jack quipped.

Cate scowled at him. “She isn’t that bad!”

“If you say so. Okay, so who else are we trying to avoid?”

Cate shot him an unimpressed glance and groaned. “Funny. Also in the household was Victoria, Randolph’s wife.”

“Anything of note about Victoria?”

“Victoria MacKenzie, née Winston, was from a well-known and powerful English family. She was also a countess, so she made a lateral move marrying Randolph, although some would have said she stepped down because she moved out of English aristocracy settling for a Scottish lord rather than an English one.”

Jack stared straight ahead, then let his head drop to his chest, feigning snoring.

“Okay, okay, I get it, here’s the juicy bit,” Cate said, rolling her eyes. “Victoria had no shortage of suitors. Her family was not only wealthy and powerful, but she was renowned for her beauty throughout England.”

Mr. Reid flicked his gaze between the two of them, a twinkle in his eye. “Aye, she was a real beauty, that one!”

“So, what made the beautiful Victoria leave the English high society for Scotland?” Jack asked.

“She moved to Scotland and married Randolph because he spent countless months wooing her. He wrote her letters, poems, sonnets. He visited daily when he was within her vicinity. Even if she refused to see him, he’d leave her a love note and come right back the next day.”

“Looks like his persistence paid off.”

“It did,” Cate said with a nod, “she eventually succumbed to his considerable charm and married him. They had a son, Ethan, in the same year that the murder occurred. He was only nine months old.”

“So, when did he bring this supposed girl back?” Jack questioned.

“The rumor mill said he brought her back from his honeymoon,” Mr. Reid answered.

Jack threw his arms in the air. “What? Oh, come on, he was so in love with the beautiful Victoria that he brought back another woman from his honeymoon?”

“Yes, it seems rather quick that he tired of her when he was so persistent, right?” Cate said.

“Which makes me think that rumor is just that, a rumor.”

Cate raised her eyebrows, an innocent look on her features. “I guess we could find out tomorrow, take a swing by the old tower room and check.”

“Caaaaaaaate,” Jack admonished.

Cate held her hands up in defeat. “Okay, okay, we won’t go into the tower room tomorrow.”

Jack wrinkled his nose at her. “Anyone else?”

Cate tapped her family tree, indicating another name. “Yes, Randolph had a ne’er-do-well brother that hung around the house many times. His name was Lorne. He wasn’t a permanent resident at the castle. He would check in at times with a random woman.”

“Perhaps he brought the tower girl?”

“No, that rumor was definitely about Randolph. Lorne seemed like the type that wouldn’t bother hiding a girl in the tower room. He had numerous affairs none of which he kept secret. Other than those three, a random girl that Lorne brought home, and the staff, there shouldn’t have been anyone else at the castle in those days. Randolph and Lorne had a sister, but she died of influenza when she was only fifteen.”

“How did you find this information?”

“Various sources, some from the letters Victoria kept from Randolph, some from letters they wrote when he was in prison. Others from my book research, local legends, family histories, et cetera.”

“Good work, Cate. Now, I think we need a few ground rules and a backstory, in case we run into someone.”

Cate crinkled her nose. “Rules?”

“Yes, rules. Rule one: we’re only going to look around. YOUR words,” Jack said as Cate opened her mouth to protest. “IF, and this is an enormous IF, we discover anything amiss, we return. Upon our return, we will discuss how to proceed, if at all. Agreed?”

Cate heaved a sigh. “Okay, fine. I agreed to just get the lay of the land, so that’s what we’ll do tomorrow.”

“And if someone catches us, what’s the backstory?”

“Backstory?”

“Who are we? Why we’re there? You can’t very well say ‘Hello, I’m Cate Kensie, I’m a time-traveling history professor and this is my friend, Jack. Mind if we have a look-see?’”

Mr. Reid chuckled at the conversation.

Cate threw her hands in the air as she shrugged. “Wandered in by accident?”

Jack made a face. “I don’t think that will work.”

“We could say we’re some distant cousin. Families traveled all the time to stay with each other, often they arrived without notice because correspondence was delayed or lost.”

“Okay, so I’m some kind of distant cousin to the MacKenzies?” Jack asked.

“Well, both of us.”

“Both of us? That makes no sense.”

“Why not? We could be siblings.”

“Oh, right, that’ll work. Hello, I’m Jack MacKenzie,” Jack practiced, pretending to shake someone’s hand, “your distant Scottish cousin, and this is my American sister, Cate.”

“I could try a Scottish accent, mate,” Cate said in her best imitation of Jack’s accent.

Jack glanced at his grandfather before both burst with laughter. “Do you want to get us caught?”

Cate crinkled her forehead, a dejected expression on her lips. “I thought that was passable.”

Jack continued to chuckle, wiping the tears that had fallen from his eyes. “Lassie, you couldn’t pass for Scottish with that accent if you dressed head to toe in tartan, carried bagpipes and had your clan crest tattooed on your forehead.”

Still laughing, too, Jack’s grandfather agreed. “Aye, lassie, that’s terrible.”

Cate rolled her eyes. “Okay, smarty pants, how do we explain me then.”

“Ah, my wife?”

Cate frowned.

“Hey,” Jack said, sipping at his ale, “I saw that. I’m quite a catch, I’ll have you know. Besides, it would make sense why you’re American then and why we are together.”

“Yes,” Cate agreed. “It wouldn’t be very proper if I was running around the Scottish countryside with a man.”

Jack let out another loud laugh. “Nay, they’d think you’re one of Lorne’s girls.”

“Okay, so there we are. We are the MacKenzies, distant cousins to Randolph in for a visit. Didn’t you get our letter?” Cate feigned a shocked look.

“And the Emmy goes to... Well, I guess we have everything then. Looks like we’re ready to travel to 1856, or at least as ready as we’ll ever be.”

“I suppose I’ll need to dig up a fake wedding ring, but other than that we’re ready!” Cate said, raising her glass in a toast.

“Good luck to you two. Can I get a copy of this family tree? You’ve got it so neatly written,” Mr. Reid asked, admiring the lineage.

“Sure! I’ll make a copy for you now.”

“All right, I will see you tomorrow then, bright and early,” Jack said once she passed the warm paper off to his grandfather.

“Great! Okay, let’s say good night to Jack, Riley!” Cate said, turning to scoop up the little dog. “Riley?” she said, not finding him.

She turned, making a concerned face to Jack. “RILEY!” she called again, as she climbed to her feet and began looking around the room. Both the little dog and his bone were gone.

CHAPTER 4



Cate glanced around the room, her heart skipping a beat. Where had the little dog gone? He'd just been with them moments ago. They'd gotten carried away with their discussion about their trip to the past and he'd disappeared.

Jack pointed to the open doors leading into the hallway. "Perhaps he went to thank Mrs. Fraser."

Cate cocked her head and shrugged. "Well, one way to find out, we'll take our plates down and see if he's there or if we can find him anywhere along the way."

Stanley shoved his hands in his pockets and plopped into the chair. "I'll wait here," Mr. Reid joked. "You won't get me to walk the length of this castle!"

The pair gathered up their dishes and made their way to the kitchen. No traces of Riley existed along the way. Cate hurried into the kitchen, finding Mrs. Fraser washing a pot.

"Have you seen Riley?" she asked as she slid her tray onto the counter.

"Nay, I haven't seen the little pup," Mrs. Fraser said, wiping her hands on her apron as she spun to face them.

Cate bit her lower lip, her shoulders slumping. "It's odd for him not to come when he's called though."

Jack dumped his dishes into the sink and stacked the trays on the shelf above the counter. "We'll look around the house. He couldn't have gotten far, and we know he wasn't along the way here. I'll grab some flashlights."

Jack ducked into the pantry, grabbing two flashlights and flicking them on to check the light.

A whine echoed throughout the kitchen.

Cate leapt from her seat at the table. "Wait, listen! I hear him crying. It sounds like..."

"He's outside the door again," Mrs. Fraser chimed in, finishing her sentence.

She ran to the door and pushed it open. "Ah, here he is, Lady Cate. How did you get outside, you little bugger?"

The small dog scampered inside, his tongue lolling.

"RILEY!" Cate exclaimed. "Why do you keep running outside?"

"Perhaps he's burying his bone?" Mr. Fraser suggested.

Cate cocked her head as she studied his fur. "Maybe. He is a little dirty."

"Ah, that must be it, mystery solved!" Jack said as he returned the flashlights. "I'm glad he's back."

"As am I," Mrs. Fraser said. "You need to stop worrying your mum! Well, is there anything else you need, Lady Cate?"

"No, nothing, sorry for the commotion. See everyone Monday! Enjoy your day off."

They all said their good nights and went their separate ways. Cate climbed the two levels to her bedroom, preparing for a sleepless night. She was sure she wouldn't be able to get any rest with the upcoming trip tomorrow.

She rose before the sun, pacing her bedroom floor in nervous anticipation of her time travel trip. The sun rose over the moors, painting them in a colorful display, as she wandered the paths outside with Riley.

After a hastily eaten breakfast, she returned to her suite to work on styling her hair in an acceptable fashion for the 1850s. After working her long, brown strands into an updo, she stared at the dress she'd set out.

With a wrinkled nose, she began tugging it on, contorting her body to fasten it to the best of her ability. When she finished, she smoothed out the skirt as she stared in the mirror.

After a few finishing touches, she spun to face the small dog lounging in his bed.

"Well, Riley, what do you think? Would I pass for a nineteenth-century lady?"

Riley cocked his head at the question as though considering it.

Cate sucked in a breath, glancing at the timepiece hanging around her neck. Jack should be arriving any moment. She locked the door to her suite with Riley inside so he couldn't wander the castle while she was gone.

She hurried through the halls, carrying her skirts awkwardly and waddled down the stairs. She hoped they didn't run into anyone in the past. She'd never be able to run from them in this getup.

Jack pushed through the front door as her feet hit the marbled entryway floor. "Thought I'd let myself in the front door since I'm a MacKenzie now," he said, dressed in his nineteenth century garb.

"Funny. The clothes worked well," she said, eyeing him up and down.

Jack fiddled with his collar. "I'm not so sure about that, although, I think you look nice in your dress."

Cate curtsied dramatically, bursting into a chuckle. "Why thank you, kind sir!"

"Boy, are these uncomfortable," Jack said, pulling on his sleeves. "I'm glad I live in this century."

Cate smiled, holding in a laugh as she pressed a hand against her corset. "Mine aren't much better. Okay, ready to go?"

"No, but I don't think I've got a choice."

Cate started up the stairs, toddling slowly in her dress. "You haven't, come on!"

Jack caught up to her quickly, eyeing her sideways as they climbed. "Wow, so there *is* something that can slow down the great Catherine Kensie."

Cate sucked in a few deep breaths as she lugged the extra fabric up the massive staircase. "Yes, this dress is not comfortable, let me tell you. It weighs a ton! I'll have no trouble sleeping tonight after all the exercise from lugging this weight around."

They reached the bedroom containing the time rip leading to 1856 and slipped into the closet.

Cate held out the timepiece and eyed Jack before breathing in a deep breath. "Okay, let's do this!"

Jack placed his hand over hers and together they rubbed the watch. The second hand began its characteristic slowing down, ticking slower and slower until its movement became imperceptible.

As the watch ticked the present-day time away on its slowed cycle, they glanced around.

“Guess we made it,” Cate said.

Jack tugged at his collar again and swiped at a bead of sweat on his brow. “Guess so.”

Cate started for the closet door, closed in this time period. “Okay, well, let’s go explore.”

Jack grabbed her elbow and tugged her back a step. “Wait a minute, Cate.”

“What?” she said, holding her hands up and shrugging her shoulders.

He shoved her behind him and crept to the door. “At least let me check everything out before we plow out into the house.”

“My hope is everyone will be at Sunday services for the morning, including the servants. That should make it easy to sneak around the house,” Cate said.

He cracked the door open a slit and glanced into the outer room. Spotting nothing, he pulled the door open and stepped out, scanning the room again. Cate followed behind him.

They crept to the door leading to the hallway. Jack inched it open, peering through the crack into the hallway.

Cate placed a hand on his shoulder, lowering her voice to a whisper. “Well?”

“Coast’s clear for the moment,” he whispered.

Cate skirted past him and pushed through the door into the hallway. “Okay, let’s go!”

With a roll of his eyes, he followed her. “What are we looking around for, Cate?”

“Anything that gives us some information about Randolph and company, like journals or handwritten notes. Anything that can shed some information on the stories that surrounded Randolph and the castle in Randolph’s time.”

Jack hurried down the hall to keep up with Cate’s pace. “And where do you propose we search for this?”

With her skirts lifted, Cate bustled down the back stairs. “I thought we’d start in the office. All his correspondence is likely there. We can rifle through the desk.”

They wound through the halls to the office, pushing inside. Cate hurried to the paper-covered desk. She scanned the disorganized mess, discovering nothing of interest.

“Jack,” Cate whispered.

Jack twisted from his post at the door. “Yeah?”

She pointed toward a pile of files on top of an old-fashioned filing cabinet. “Check in those files over there for anything that might be of interest.”

Jack strode over to peruse the files as Cate dug through the desk drawers.

After searching each drawer, Cate joined Jack at the file cabinet. “Anything?”

“Only employment records and investments and so on, nothing that would shed any light on your mystery. How about you?”

Cate held out her empty hands. “Nothing.”

Jack nodded and grabbed her hand. “Okay, let’s head back.”

She tugged away from him. “Wait a minute. There are more places to check.”

Jack screwed up his face and shook his head. “Such as? I don’t like gallivanting around here.”

“We still should have time. They should still be at Sunday services. Let’s check Victoria’s bedroom.”

Jack grumbled as he followed Cate upstairs into a hall of bedrooms. After checking a few bedrooms, they identified the one Victoria inhabited. Cate scanned her desk and wardrobe, coming up with no clues.

She flipped through the journal in the top of the woman’s desk drawer, but, since the birth of her son, she had written little.

Jack twisted from his post at the door. “Okay, Cate, fun’s over, let’s go.”

Cate plodded back toward the 1850s bedroom. She paused at the entrance to the winding staircase to the tower.

“Cate, let’s go!” Jack hissed as she hesitated.

She didn’t respond, staring up the curving stairway that stretched between the stone walls. She closed her eyes for a moment and pictured the door at the top, knowing it waited around the bend.

“Cate, no. No way!”

Cate stared up the stone steps, her jaw set. “But this is why we came!”

Jack curled his fingers into fists, thrusting it in the air to emphasize his point. “No, Cate. It’s too dangerous.”

Cate twisted to face him, lifting her shoulders to her ears. “How is it dangerous?”

Jack waved a hand up the stairs. “What if someone is in there? What do you propose we do, Cate? Open the door and introduce ourselves?”

Cate shook her head. “No, of course not, but we could listen at the door and determine if it sounds like someone is in there. If there’re any signs it’s inhabited.”

Jack squeezed his eyes shut and scratched his forehead. “Let’s go home.”

Cate set one foot on the stairs leading up. “Oh, come on, one little listen and we can go, I promise.” She charged up the stairs without waiting for a response.

Jack hesitated at the foot of the staircase. “Cate? Wait! Damn it!” He charged up the stairs after her.

She reached the top of the stairs and let her skirt cascade to the floor as she pressed her ear against the door.

Jack met her there moments later, puffing with exertion after his run up the steps. “Well? Do you hear any signs of life?”

Cate’s brow furrowed and she pressed harder against the wood surface, straining to listen. After a moment, she squeezed her lips together and pulled away, staring at the door with a scowl. “No.”

Jack raised his eyebrows, snapping his fingers together in a faux display of disappointment. “Really? Aw shucks. Okay, let’s go.”

Cate pouted at him, her lower lip jutting out as she shot another glance at the door.

Jack cocked his head at her, a stern expression on his features. “Come on, you promised.”

She slumped her shoulders and sighed. “Okay.”

They spun and began their return journey down the stairs. After a few steps, Jack stopped dead. His arm jutted out, blocking Cate’s forward motion.

She squashed her eyebrows together, shooting him a questioning glance. “What is it?”

He pressed a finger to his lips before miming that he heard footsteps. Within seconds, Cate heard them, too. They clicked off the stone steps below them, closing in on their location.

Cate’s heart thudded against her ribs and heat washed over her. Her pulse quickened as she gnawed her lower lip to stop it from trembling. Her knees wobbled underneath her as the footsteps closed in on them.

They were trapped and soon to be discovered.

CHAPTER 5



Cate's knees wobbled underneath her as the footsteps pounded toward them. With a shaky hand, she clutched Jack's arm, offering him a wide-eyed and panicked stare.

Jack poked a finger toward a door a few steps away. Cate nodded, pulling a skeleton key from within her dress pocket.

He snatched it from her hand and raced down the few steps, sliding it into the lock and shoving the door open.

Cate hurried behind him, and Jack pushed her inside before slipping into the darkened, windowless space. He eased the door shut moments before the footsteps rounded the bend and approached their hiding spot.

They held their breath, pressed against the door as the footsteps passed them, continuing up toward the tower room.

Cate tapped Jack's arm and balanced on her tiptoes, whispering in his ear. "Open the door."

Jack whispered back a vehement, "No!"

Cate patted his arm again. "Open it!" she hissed.

With a huff, he twisted the knob and eased the door open a crack.

The pair stared out the small opening, training their view on the tower room door.

The figure of a man hovered a step below the wooden barrier, fiddling with a set of keys as he balanced a tray in his hand. Cate shifted her gaze, squinting at the contents of the tray. A plate and teacup sat on top.

After selecting a key from the ring, the man twisted to glance down the stairs.

They shrank back as he glanced over his shoulder. Cate gasped, clamping a hand over her mouth to quiet any noise.

“Who is that?” Jack whispered, studying the man’s features. Thick, dark, unruly hair topped an angular, chiseled face. Thick eyebrows shrouded his dark, deep-set eyes as they studied the stone stairs.

“That,” Cate whispered back, one eyebrow arched, “is Randolph MacKenzie.”

The man twisted the key in the lock and pushed into the tower room.

As the door at the top clicked closed, Jack risked opening their door further. “We better make a run for it.”

Cate whisked past him, dashing down the stairs as quickly as her dress would allow her.

Jack followed her and the two raced back to the bedroom.

With their hearts pounding and gasping for breath, they pushed the door closed behind them.

Jack grabbed Cate’s hand and pulled her toward the closet. “Let’s go home.”

Without a word, Cate produced the timepiece, and the two grabbed hold of it, rubbing it until it started its cycle of speeding up. Within moments, the timepiece was back to normal speed.

Jack let out a long breath. “Oh, thank God,” he said, running his hands through his hair then doubling over to rest them on his thighs.

Cate blew out a sigh of relief. “Close call.”

Jack flicked his gaze up at her. “Too close.”

She raised her eyebrows at him as she bit her lower lip. “But well worth it.”

Jack straightened, his brow furrowed. “How do you figure that?”

She cocked her head at him, her hands on her hips. “We have the answer to one of our questions.”

Jack screwed up his face.

“Randolph MacKenzie is most definitely keeping someone in the tower room.”

Jack groaned and ran his fingers through his hair. “A fine time for him to be visiting that person too, when he’s supposed to be at church service.”

“He must have stayed home to visit her. What better time to do so? The entire household, including his wife, is away.”

Jack loosened his collar, shooting a glance at Cate. “Well, are you satisfied?” Jack said, loosening his collar.

She offered him an incredulous stare and shook her head. “Not in the slightest, the mystery deepens! So, we’ve established he’s got someone in that tower. Why? And who?”

“Most likely a girl like the town gossips said.”

Cate paced a few steps away, her finger tapping her lips.

“Caaaaaaaate,” Jack chided.

“I need to do more research before...” Cate began.

“Before you give up?” Jack asked, hope filling his voice.

She waved a hand in the air to dismiss his notion. “No, before we go back.”

Jack’s shoulders slumped. “I was afraid you’d say that.”

“Look on the bright side, Jack.”

“What’s that?”

“You get to put off going back until I’m done researching all I can about this mysterious tower room tenant.”

Jack rolled his eyes for the umpteenth time, hands on his hips.

Cate flashed a smile at him. “Well, I am going to change, I’ve got my work cut out for me today!”

“I’d say good luck, but I’m almost hoping you find nothing.”

Cate pushed through the door of the closet, calling over her shoulder, “You should know me better than that, I’ll keep digging until I do.”

Jack shook his head, but smiled in spite of himself. “Yeah. Yeah, I know you will. So, I’ll have to hope that you have to dig forever so I can stay in my favorite time period: my own. I’ll see you tomorrow, Cate.”

“See you tomorrow, Jack. Enjoy the rest of your day off.”

Jack stared down the hall toward the main staircase.

Cate called after him, “Oh, and Jack?”

“Yeah?” he said, twisting to face her.

She offered him a genuine smile. “Thanks, I appreciate your help.”

“No problem, lassie, no problem.”

She returned to her room, finding an impatient Riley on the opposite side. “Hey buddy, why the long face? I wasn’t that long!”

Riley issued a small whine in response to her question. “Okay, okay, I get it. You didn’t have a proper walk today. I’ll tell you what, as soon as I get changed, I’ll take you for a walk.” Riley gave another whine then a yip.

She tugged at the laces on her dress. “I’m going as fast as I can. I’m *not* walking you in this!”

She changed as quickly as the clothes allowed her, setting the dress aside and scooping Riley into her arms. She wandered through the halls to the kitchen, slipping on her boots and headed into the cool autumn air.

“Where do you want to explore today, Riley?” she asked, as she set him down on the grass.

Riley raced away from her, darting around the side of the castle.

“Whoa, buddy! Wait up!” Cate called as she dashed to keep up with him.

As she rounded the corner, she spotted the little pup dash into a clump of hedges in the side garden, disappearing from sight.

She followed him into the garden, trying but failing to keep up. As she emerged from the garden, she scanned the rolling hills but saw no Riley. She called him several times, but the little dog did not come.

Cate frowned at the dog’s disappearance. He typically stayed close during their walks, enjoying a game of fetch with his favorite ball. Today, he’d not even demanded one toss before he’d run off. Had he caught the scent of a small animal and run off to chase it?

Cate shielded her eyes against the autumn sun. “Riley! Riley!”

She called a few more times before a small yip sounded to her right. She snapped her head in the direction of the sound, calling his name again. She took a few steps forward, cresting a hill.

The small dog milled around near a folly on the property. Cate’s shoulders slumped as she breathed out a sigh of relief and hurried down the hill toward it.

“And what is so interesting about this folly today, Riley, that you didn’t come when I called you?” she asked in a stern voice, her hands on her hips.

Riley glanced up at her, his dark almond eyes considering her question. Within a moment, he returned to milling around the outside, sniffing the ground. He stopped a few times and glanced toward the interior of the folly, his nose wiggling, but never ventured in.

She tugged the ball from her pocket and waved it in the air. “All right, Riley, let’s move on. How about we play some fetch?”

At the last word, Riley's ears perked, and he stared up at her, catching sight of the little ball she held in her hands.

She laughed, her eyebrows wiggling at him. "I figured that might get your attention."

She tossed the ball down the path. Riley chased after it, scooping it up into his mouth and waited for her to close the gap between them before dropping the ball at her feet for another round.

They continued their game until they reached the loch. Cate settled onto the bank as Riley curled next to her, resting his chin on her leg.

Cate lay back on her elbows. The trees danced in the autumn breeze and the wind rippled the pond. She caught sight of the tower's reflection in the choppy water. Her mind regressed to over a century earlier.

It appeared Randolph had someone in the tower room, but who and for what purpose? Were the stories about him true?

Cate pursed her lips, refusing to believe that was the case. Jack would argue Randolph was the cad everyone imagined him to be, but she couldn't shake the notion that there was more to this story than met the eye.

She would need to search for more information. The tower room topped her list. She'd been in the room once before when she'd sorted through her predecessor's personal items. A shiver ran through her as she recalled being locked inside for a few moments. In reality, she'd merely time-traveled to an era when the door had been locked.

Was the time rip in the tower the source of Randolph's preoccupation with the room? It was a possibility. If he knew of the time rip in that location, perhaps he used it to time travel while alone in the house.

But why the food, her mind questioned. A quick snack after he returned? Perhaps time travel left him famished. Cate chuckled at the latest supposition. As her theories bordered on ridiculous, she gathered the pup into her arms for the return trip to the castle.

"What do you say, Riley? Shall we head back for some lunch and investigating?"

Riley let his eyes slide closed with a big sigh as she cradled him.

"You're a lazy boy."

The comment elicited a wriggle from him, his eyes popping open and his nose sniffing the air. She set him down, allowing him to investigate their path back.

“That should tire you out for a while,” she said as they pushed into the kitchen.

She checked her timepiece after making and eating her lunch. She considered climbing the tower room at the later-than-expected afternoon hour.

She recalled her earlier experience in the room and the sudden appearance of Randolph MacKenzie. Alone in the castle, she preferred not to wander to the room for any exploration.

She’d put off any investigations until tomorrow, camping out on her chaise with a movie instead.

* * *

As the sun crested the moors outside her bedroom window, Cate yawned and stretched. The warm glow of the bright sun painted the morning sky brilliant shades of orange, yellow and red, casting the scenery below in a rosy light.

“Another beautiful morning, Riley,” Cate said to the pup as she tugged on her riding boots.

After a quick trip outside, she headed to the kitchen for her weekly breakfast with her staff. Gathering together on Monday mornings, they’d share conversation about their weekends and upcoming week.

Cate looked forward to the get-together, despite it having shocked Mrs. Fraser the first time she’d requested it. Now, though, even Emily Fraser enjoyed the shared mealtime.

“Good morning, Mrs. Fraser,” Cate said as she entered the kitchen with Riley trailing behind her.

“Well, good morning, Lady Cate. And good morning little Riley! I hope you got lots of rest this weekend!” Mrs. Fraser said, patting the little dog’s head.

“He sure did,” Cate answered for him. “Lots of playtime and lots of naptime. Where are our intrepid groundskeepers this morning?”

“Getting a few tools ready for the day while they wait on breakfast. Wanted to get an early start on their work. My Charlie is fussing to no end about having these old grounds just so for your big party.”

Cate shook some kibble into Riley's bowl before she set it down in front of the little dog. "Oh, I appreciate that, but the grounds are always above par in my estimation."

"Well, I appreciate hearing that, Lady Cate, and I know Charlie will too, but," she said, holding up her hands, "when he gets something in his mind there's no stopping him."

Cate chuckled as she returned the bag of food to the pantry, grabbing a few dried fruits from the shelves. "I know that feeling well."

"Darn right she does," Jack said, catching the tail end of the conversation as he pushed through the kitchen door with Charlie Fraser. "Good morning, Lady Cate. And where, oh where is my good friend, Sir Riley?"

Riley dashed to him, standing on his hind legs and waving his paw at Jack.

Jack picked up the small dog and tousled the fur on his head. "Oh, there he is, and how are you today, little laddie?" He leaned his head closer to the dog's mouth. "Oh, what's that? Hungry, did you say?"

"Good morning, Jack and Mr. Fraser. He can't be. He just scarfed down an entire bowl of food!"

She pulled a bowl down from the cupboard and shook some raisins into it before returning the bag to the pantry and grabbing a few treats for Riley.

After tossing the dog his tiny bones, they sat down at the table to eat.

"So, Mr. Fraser, I hear you have quite the vision for the castle's exterior for the party," Cate said with a wink.

Mr. Fraser nodded at her as he stirred brown sugar into his oatmeal. "Aye, I do, Lady Cate. It's been a long while since we've had proper guests on the estate. She's got to be in tip-top shape."

"Speaking of, that reminds me, Cate," Jack chimed in. "I'll have a few additional jobs for the lawn service the week of the party. I want the grounds to be perfect for the party."

Cate scooped up a spoonful of oatmeal. "Sounds good. Whatever you think we need."

"Lady Cate?" Mr. Fraser asked.

"Yes?"

"I had a... a..." He stammered. "A vision I guess you might call it for the outside, I was hoping to get your approval on it."

A smile brightened Cate's face. "I'm all ears."

He set his spoon in his half-empty bowl and leaned forward. “Well, if I’m not mistaken, there are some old family banners hidden away in the old servant’s quarters. The kind that used to hang on the castle to announce the clan for miles around. I thought it would be just wonderful to hang them again.”

Cate’s eyes lit up at the idea. “Oh, that sounds great. I bet that would look nice, especially given the party’s theme.”

“And,” he continued, sitting straighter in his chair, encouraged by Cate’s acceptance of his ideas, “the garden that’s accessible from the ballroom, wouldn’t it be lovely to have lights strung all the way around? We could open the doors to the garden if it’s a nice enough evening to allow the guests to wander back and forth between the inside and outside. Adding a few tables could incorporate the garden into the event. My cousin owns a rental business with just such lights so we’d have no problem getting what we need, assuming you like the idea, Lady Cate.”

Cate nodded as he spoke. “I think it sounds marvelous. Incorporating the lighted garden into the party is enchanting. It’ll seem magical.”

Mr. Fraser dropped his eyes to the table with a smile, proud of his accomplishment. “Why, thank you, Lady Cate.”

“I didn’t realize you were such a party-planning pro, Mr. Fraser. I should have been inviting you to my meetings with Mrs. Campbell,” Cate said.

The man’s eyes went wide and he shook his head. “If it’s all the same to you, Lady Cate, I’ll let you do the talking to her.”

Cate smirked at his immediate response. Neither of the Frasers cared for Isla Campbell. She couldn’t blame them. The woman was an insatiable gossip. And she would be one of the first sources on her list for researching her tower mystery. If anyone wanted to spill any rumors, no matter how unsubstantiated, about what went on in the tower room in the 1850s, it would be the town crier herself, Mrs. Campbell.

“I will relay your plans at our next meeting on Wednesday. I’m sure she’ll be thrilled to hear what you’re planning,” Cate said.

Mrs. Fraser gave a huff, insinuating nothing that simple could ever thrill that woman. Cate held in a giggle. They finished their meal making other light conversation about the party preparation. After breakfast, Cate stayed for a quick cup of tea, or cuppa, as they referred to it here, with Mrs. Fraser before taking Riley for his long walk around the grounds.

After lunch, Cate left a tuckered-out Riley napping in the library and climbed the many stairs to the tower.

Her heart thudded as she hovered outside the door, recalling their escapade in 1856. On this trip, she shouldn't run across anyone. But would she find any clues as to Randolph's interest in the room?

She slid her key into the lock and pushed open the door. She swallowed hard as she pondered what had happened in the room over one hundred years ago.

Had her ancestor bludgeoned a man to death and then threw him from the tower? And would she find any evidence of the crime?

Her stomach turned over and her nose wrinkled as she considered the tale of the woman locked here.

Now, the elevated space contained boxes of her predecessor's personal things. Reluctant to discard them, Cate left them littering the space to deal with later.

She sighed as she stared at the mess. At least she knew where she didn't need to check. She eyed the large wardrobe standing against the far wall. Maybe it held a clue to the murder or the woman. She'd have to fight her way to it, shifting boxes away from its front to reach it.

Before she did that, she'd examine the walls. Perhaps she'd find a clue there. She ran her fingers over the rough stone, scanning it. Scraps and dings existed in various areas but not significant indicating an altercation.

With a sigh, she eyed the boxes again. Beyond finding the words "HELP ME" carved into the stone like in a gothic novel, she didn't know what she'd expected to find in her examination of the walls.

She stared at the large furniture piece behind the cardboard mountain. She spun sideways, trying to shimmy between the boxes to reach the wardrobe. With a wince, she tried to shove her hip past the tight space, finding it impossible.

Her shoulders slumped as she realized she'd have to move the boxes away from the wardrobe in order to search it.

She considered enlisting Jack's help, but decided to dig in, realizing six months ago when she didn't have staff she'd have moved the stack of boxes on her own without hesitation.

After thirty minutes of hard work, Cate wiped the sweat from her brow and patted herself on the back for a job well done. She stared at the now accessible wardrobe with a smile.

The hinges creaked as she pulled open the heavy wooden doors. She peered inside, her smile fading as she found it empty. She toggled on her cell phone's flashlight and swung it around the corners. Nothing but cobwebs graced the inside. She swiped her finger along the bottom, swiping away the dust that covered the wooden shelf.

As she traced the message "dust me," her fingertip hit a groove in the wood. She flicked on the cell phone's flashlight and studied it, spotting a faint line.

With a large breath, she blew away the dust, her fingernail tracing the small crack. She followed the edge, finding that it formed a small rectangle.

Could it be a compartment?

She pressed her fingers against the box and tried to slide the wood forward, backward, or side-to-side. It wouldn't budge.

She tugged the drawer open underneath it, peering up at the box from the underside. She stuck her hand inside, blindly feeling around, but could not detect anything.

With a sigh, she shoved the drawer shut and returned to trying to pry the wood open with her fingernail. She sat back on her haunches, blowing a lock of hair from her face as she stared at the potential compartment.

Perhaps a mechanism somewhere on the wardrobe triggered the secret compartment. She pushed against the box, hoping it was spring-loaded. She felt around the area near the box, pressing around. Nothing. She tried pushing and pulling the decorative elements on the wardrobe. Nothing triggered the little box.

With her jaw set, she vowed to get it open by brute force if necessary. She picked herself up off the floor and hurried through the halls to the library.

Riley entertained himself chewing on a stuffed moose. She stroked the fur on his head and left him gnawing on the toy before retrieving a letter opener from the desk.

With the sharp object in hand, she climbed back to the tower and settled in front of the wardrobe. If she had to, she'd pry the box open.

She slid the thin metal into the slit and carefully pried. After some effort, the block of wood lifted.

She spent another forty-five minutes delicately prying, pulling, teasing and tugging the tight-fitting block free. With a satisfied grin, she extracted it, and set it aside, toggling on her flashlight to peer inside the hole.

She leaned forward, her heart skipping a beat as she stared at the contents.

CHAPTER 6



Cate's pulse quickened as she stared into the small compartment. She expected to find an empty hole or more dust, but instead spotted a few pieces of paper at the bottom.

A giddy grin crossed her face and she reached in, fishing them from the bottom.

The first paper was blank. On the second, was a charcoal drawing of a man's face by a talented artist. She recognized the likeness in the unsigned sketch.

A third piece of paper contained writing. She set the sketch aside, scanning the written words. Her eyes grew wide and her heart thudded in her chest.

R –

I am sorry, but I must go. Your family has already paid too heavy a cost. I will never forget what you have done.

– S

Cate drew in a sharp breath. Addressed to “R” and accompanied by the sketch of him, it must have been intended for Randolph.

Someone must have lived in this tower. Part of the rumor about Randolph must be true. Cate's brow scrunched as she re-read the words.

The person writing it didn't seem to be a captive. The note sounded apologetic, hinting that Randolph bore some burden on the writer's behalf.

With her mind brewing, she gathered the papers and letter opener and returned to the library. She laid the notes on the desk and checked her timepiece.

"How about a walk, Riley?"

The little dog discarded his toy, bounding toward Cate to accept her offer. They stepped into the bright fall sunshine and circled around the house into the gardens. Riley nosed his way along the shrubs until he caught a whiff of Jack, watering a few flowering plants.

"Well, hello there, little Riley!" Jack said, petting his head. "My, my, Lady Cate, this is a new look for you."

Cate's brow furrowed as she approached Jack. She looked down at her clothes, they seemed standard, her usual leggings with a tunic sweater and an added cardigan for extra warmth. She finished the look with a pair of black riding boots.

"Huh?" she said, confused.

Jack swept a few cobwebs from her hair. "Are you trying out your 'Ghosts of the Past' look?"

"Oh," Cate said, swatting at her hair and laughing, "I got a little dirty on my latest research mission."

"And where were we researching, Indiana Jones? The depths of a tomb?"

"No, the depths of the tower room."

Jack tilted his head, eyeing her. "Find anything interesting? Maybe a signed confession from Randolph?"

"I did! But it wasn't a signed confession."

"Oh, no, let me guess. It's something that deepens the mystery and means you are hellbent on time traveling to find out more."

"It's like you're psychic, Jack."

He sprayed another plant with a light mist. "I think my sixth sense is about as strong as your comedy routine."

She offered him an unimpressed stare. "Okay, all joking aside, I found a note hidden in a secret compartment in the wardrobe accompanied by a drawing. The sketch is of Randolph and the note is addressed to 'R'. The writer apologizes to 'R', saying the family had endured too high a cost already and would never forget what he had done."

Jack shut off the hose and shot her a glance. “Who signed it?”

Cate shoved her hands into her cardigan pocket and shrugged. “I’m not sure, it just says ‘S.’”

“S? Like the letter?”

“Yes, just the letter ‘S.’ I’ll show you the note and sketch tomorrow after lunch if you have a quick second. It’s quite something.”

Jack dragged the hose back toward the castle. “I’ll reserve my judgement for after I see it.”

“Fair enough! Well, I think this is a great find, I’m encouraged. I’ll let you get back to your watering though and we can discuss it more after you’ve scrutinized it.”

“Okay, Cate. But don’t get too optimistic, you know I’m a killjoy for time travel.”

Cate laughed as she began walking away, calling Riley to come with her. “Oh, yes, I know.”

Cate re-read the note several times over her evening, trying to glean any additional details she could from it. She wondered what Jack’s take would be on it. With any luck, he’d agree. And if her luck held out, she could wheedle some additional tidbits from Mrs. Campbell when they met next.

With a mid-week meeting looming over her, Cate spend the better part of her Tuesday organizing her information for the ball. After a pre-lunch walk with Riley, she returned to find an email waiting from Molly. The title alone made her laugh out loud as she clicked on the subject line that read “SO EXCITED!!!!!!!!!!!!!!”

Cate! We’re less than three weeks away from my trip to SCOTLAND! I still can’t believe I get to stay in a castle either. I can’t tell you how excited I am! Oh, I’m also excited to see you and that cute little doggie of yours, too! ;) I started packing! And I have already gotten overwhelmed, so I was hoping to get your help with it before I end up dragging three suitcases across the pond. Are jeans and sweaters appropriate? Is it cold there? Do we dress up every night for dinner like Downton Abbey? HELP! I’m not sure what to pack now that I’ll be staying with and dining with an honest-to-goodness Countess!

Also, thank you so much for renting a costume for me over there so I don't have to pack one. The way I am going, I won't have room for souvenirs on the way home!

Okay, I'll let you go before you disinvite me. Looking forward to hearing from you AND to my trip!!!

Molly

Cate chuckled again as she read over Molly's email. Same old Molly, she thought. She typed a quick reply as Mrs. Fraser dropped off her lunch tray.

Hi Molly – We are looking forward to seeing you, too! It will be nice to hear another American accent around the house. It's definitely cooler here than it is in Aberdeen! Sweaters and jeans would be perfect. Also, I'd suggest some comfortable shoes for walking and a light fall jacket or raincoat. Riley and I love to take long walks and we'd be happy to have you join us and see the entire estate. It's beautiful here.

As I mentioned before, I have two other guests coming later in the week. So, Wednesday, Thursday and Saturday, we'll have everyone for dinner and we wear smart casual for dinners. When we're here with just the girls, it will be casual dress. We might even dine in the library, no frills, if you'd like!

I'm just an email away if you have more questions!

Cate

Cate had just hit the send button when Jack appeared at the library door, knocking on it before entering. "M'lady," he said, bowing extravagantly.

Cate laughed, shaking her head. "Always so dramatic," she teased.

"Always," he said, grinning. "So where is this letter?"

Cate grabbed the papers from her folder, jumping up from her seat and thrusting the papers toward him. "It's more of a note than a letter."

He glanced first at the drawing, then read the note.

Cate waited with bated breath for his reaction. “Well?”

He shrugged as he shuffled through the papers again. “Well, nothing.”
“Nothing?”

He shrugged again. “Yeah, nothing. It looks like ‘S’ vanished and that was that. Seems like ‘R’ never found the note. He, assuming it’s a he, probably wondered what happened to her, assuming it’s a her.”

“Assuming? ‘R’ has got to be Randolph. ‘S’ drew his picture and put it with the note, so I think it’s a safe bet.”

“Okay, so ‘S’ left Randolph a note he never found.”

“And ‘S’ must have not been a prisoner, it looks like he or she left of their own free will after apologizing. So, the rumors about a person held captive in the tower room must be false.”

“I think you’re jumping to conclusions, Cate.”

Cate scowled at him. “If I am it’s not that far of a leap.”

“We aren’t sure ‘S’ isn’t a prisoner. Look here, I’ll never forget what you’ve done? That sounds ominous to me.” He pointed to a particular phrase in the note.

“No, it’s like ‘you’re so great, I’ll never forget what you did for me!’”
Cate argued

“Or, ‘wow, you’re a jerk, I’ll never forget what you did TO me,’” Jack countered.

Cate flailed her arms in the air. “What about the apology? And the stuff about the high cost for the family?”

“Perhaps ‘S’ means the high cost because he’s a jerk. I’m not sure, but I don’t assume it means that Randolph isn’t a murderer.”

“Okay, point taken, perhaps he is a murderer, but who is ‘S’? And what happened between them? And why did ‘S’ leave? There are so many questions.”

Jack shrugged again, handing the papers back to Cate. “And I don’t have any answers.”

“No, I don’t expect that you do but...” Cate said, a gleam in her eye as she glanced up at him.

Jack shook his head as though he didn’t want to hear what she said next.

“We could find out the answers,” she finished.

He sighed, his hands on his hips. “I’m not going to argue with you.”

“Because you want answers, too!” Cate exclaimed with a grin.

“No, because I’ll lose again. So, what is your plan?”

Cate tapped her chin, unprepared for the development. "I'm not sure. I have to consider it more. Give me a couple of days to come up with a plan for you to hate."

Jack poked a finger at her. "Deal. You come up with the plan, I'll hate it."

Cate bit her lower lip as a smile spread across her face and nodded.

"For now, I'll hate the idea that you're coming up with the plan at all while I go find these banners with Mr. Fraser."

"Okay! Oh, is there anything that I need to discuss with Mrs. Campbell tomorrow from your end?"

"No, nothing other than what I've mentioned already. If anything comes up, I'll let you know."

"Okay, sounds good! Thanks, Jack."

She returned to her desk and dropped the papers among the stack of party details. She groaned at the amount of work she still needed to get through before getting to her other mystery.

With a groan, she retrieved her lunch tray and sat down to finish the mundane tasks.

The party planning and another long walk with Riley ate up the rest of her day. As she laid in the bed the next morning, watching the rising sun, she considered the exhausting task ahead of her: her hours-long meeting with Isla Campbell. Perhaps the woman would provide her with some information, though.

She climbed from her warm nest and started her day with an early morning walk with Riley. Cold and damp weather settled around the castle. She wrapped her cardigan tightly around her as they strolled through the foggy morning.

She pushed through the kitchen door, into the castle, greeting Mrs. Fraser.

"Good morning, Mrs. Fraser, it's chilly out there today. Do you mind if I leave Riley here with you while I meet with Mrs. Campbell?"

Mrs. Fraser pulled a hot tray of cookies from the oven. "Not at all, Lady Cate."

"Thanks. I don't think Isla cares for animals."

"I dinnae think that woman cares for much outside of gossip," Mrs. Fraser answered. "The little pup will be just fine with me."

“Oh, Jack and Mr. Fraser are working right outside in the back garden, so he might try to sneak out on you again. I’m sure he’ll go straight to them, though, so no worries if he gets out of your sight!”

“Aye, he’s very fond of young Jack. I dare say, young Jack is just as fond of him!”

“They do have fun together. I’d better head up and get my notes together. If I know Mrs. Campbell, she’ll be here early.”

Mrs. Fraser smirked at her, jabbing a finger at Cate. “You know it, Lady Cate.”

As Cate wandered down the hall, she overheard Mrs. Fraser chattering away to Riley about a bone. She smiled to herself as she mounted the stairs and climbed to the floor above.

She greeted Mrs. Campbell just as the woman was about to ring the bell fifteen minutes early as always, and ushered the woman inside from the cool, damp weather.

“Mrs. Campbell, I had a feeling you might be early!”

Mrs. Campbell offered her a sly grin. “Oh, Lady Cate! I hope it’s not a problem?”

Cate motioned to the sitting room on her right. “Not at all, I’m ready for you if you’d like to step into the sitting room.”

The two spent two hours poring over the details, updating progress and discussing the rest of what needed completed. Mrs. Campbell suggested they meet four more times, two for planning and two for what she called “action items.” Cate agreed, noting them in her daybook.

“Well, if there’s nothing else, I suppose I should be on my way,” Mrs. Campbell said, her hands wrapped around her knees as though she had no intention of moving.

“Actually,” Cate said, “I was hoping you might have a few more minutes. I’d like to pick your brain about something I’ve come across in my research.”

Mrs. Campbell made a show of squinting at her watch. “Oh, well, I suppose I could stay for a few more minutes. How can I help?”

“When I first interviewed you, you mentioned a rumor about Randolph MacKenzie, he would have inherited the castle around the 1850s. Concerning a person in the tower room?” Cate prodded.

Mrs. Campbell’s features twisted into a smirk. “You mean a *woman* in the tower room.”

“Yes, I recall you said the rumor mill claimed it was a woman. Do you have any more information? Perhaps how the rumor started, or what prompted it?”

Mrs. Campbell looked up to the ceiling as if trying to remember. “For as long as I’ve known, that’s been the story. Randolph was a cad and kept a woman locked in the tower room. I’m not sure why or how that rumor began way back when, but my best guess would have been a servant with loose lips. Most of the village rumors had similar starts, someone at the pub with a bit too much to drink or some pillow talk.”

“I see, that sounds likely, yes,” Cate agreed.

“Oh, there are many other lascivious rumors that have torn through the town from this castle. You read Randolph ended up in prison for the murder of a servant. Perhaps the one with the loose lips, you never know!” Mrs. Campbell said, rambling on about the dirty secrets of Cate’s ancestors.

“Yes, I was just reading that in the materials you sent me from the historical society. Interesting story, isn’t it? What’s your take on it?” Cate nudged.

“My take? Oh, well, most likely that’s the servant that let slip Randolph’s secret and he killed him over it. He tried to cover it up, claiming he had an alibi but when a man has a secret like that hidden in the tower room, there’s no doubt he’d be willing to kill over it. I am surprised the guilt ended up getting to him enough to confess, though.”

She arched an eyebrow high and cocked her head. “My take is that your ancestor was a cold-blooded killer.”

CHAPTER 7



Cate raised her eyebrows at the statement. Mrs. Campbell had just accused her ancestor of murder. Not only was it insulting, but it dashed any hopes she had of finding an ally in her belief that Randolph was innocent.

She puckered her lips and pushed herself to stand. “Well, I suppose the past should be left in the past. Thank you so much for your time, Mrs. Campbell. I don’t want to keep you any longer. I’m sure you are very busy.”

Mrs. Campbell rose to her feet, tugging her tote onto her shoulder. “Oh, not at all, it’s no imposition. I’ll see you next Friday?”

Cate confirmed the appointment with a nod. “Yes, next Friday, same time as today.”

“Wonderful. Oh, I can hardly believe the party will be only two weeks away the next time we meet!” Mrs. Campbell said, as they walked to the door.

Cate pulled the front door open. “Yes, it’s almost upon us!”

“Well, enjoy the rest of your day, Lady Cate. We’ll be in touch!” Mrs. Campbell waved over her head as she headed for her car.

“Thank you!” Cate called, waving as she pulled down the driveway.

With a long sigh of relief, Cate threaded through the halls for her usual Wednesday afternoon staff lunch.

“Well, I’m glad that’s over with,” Cate announced as she collapsed into a kitchen chair.

Mrs. Fraser shot her a glance and shuddered. "As am I. I cannae say why, but I dinnae like when that woman is in this house."

Cate glanced around the space, finding Riley lounging near the door. "And how was Riley? Any trouble?"

"None at all, the little fellow ventured out to visit Jack, but he came back, didn't even need to call him."

Cate clapped her hands at the little pup. "Well, good job, Riley! I'd say that deserves a treat!"

At the mention of a treat, Riley leapt to his feet, dancing around with excitement.

Cate slipped into the pantry and retrieved a few tasty snacks. "I'll have to order more treats, it looks like. I could have sworn we had two bags, but I only found one."

"He's been begging too much, he'll eat you out of house and home this one!" Mrs. Fraser said with a chuckle, as Jack and Mr. Fraser came through the door for lunch.

"Hello, everyone, especially little Sir Riley!" Jack said. "What have we done to deserve the royal treatment today?"

"He ran off to find you and came back without having to be called!" Cate answered.

"Oh, is that what you told them? Sorry to say, he didn't come to find me."

Mrs. Fraser set a stray of sandwiches alongside a plate of cookies on the table. "What? I had the door propped open for air and I heard a rustling. Like a streak of lightening, he bolted outside, then returned. I assume he visited you and you sent him back."

"He didn't visit me! He must have found a new friend." Jack knelt down to scratch Riley's ears. "Have I been replaced, laddie?"

Cate's face twisted into a mask of confusion. "That's odd, I was sure he went to you and back. Maybe he just made a potty trip. Anyway, shall we have lunch?"

"Yes, we shall, m'lady, I'm starving! And, I've been smelling these biscuits all day," Jack said, swiping a cookie and biting into it.

Mrs. Fraser harrumphed and placed a sandwich on Jack's plate. "You'll spoil your appetite! Now see that you get a sandwich next, not another biscuit."

Conversation of the lunch centered around the new details from the quickly approaching party. Mrs. Fraser inquired after Molly's eating habits, pleased she would not be expected to serve hot dogs and hamburgers all week for the American.

Cate spent the rest of her day embroiled in castle research, finding it all-consuming. Only Riley's tiny paws planted on her leg roused her from her study for a walk before dinner.

Despite all the day's activities, Cate found herself unable to sleep that night. The note from "S" raced through her thoughts as she tossed and turned. Questions bombarded from all directions.

How could she discover their identity? Was "S" related to the murder? Did Randolph kill the servant because he had loose lips about "S?"

After a restless two hours, she rose from her bed and wandered through the moonlit halls of the castle. She meandered up and down the hall containing her bedroom, then expanded her pacing to include other upstairs areas.

She wandered to the portrait gallery for another gander at her ancestors. She found herself pausing in front of the portrait of Randolph MacKenzie, willing him to share his secrets. His blue eyes stared back, offering her no answers.

She wound down the backstairs, wandering past the closed off wing and heading toward the foyer past the library. Light streamed from under the library door.

Cate's heart skipped a beat. Was someone in the house or had she simply left the light on earlier?

She thought she had turned it off, maybe she hadn't. She crept to the door and pressed her ear against it. No sounds came from within.

She bit her lower lip and steeled her nerves, flinging the door open. She found the room empty and crossed to the opposite side, switching off the lamp.

As she left the library, she pulled the door closed behind her, satisfied that no light spilled from inside. Her eyebrows arched as an idea struck her.

They could travel back to 1856 at night and determine if the tower room was occupied by checking for light under the door.

A smile spread across her face as she considered the low-risk plan, assuming Jack may not object to it. It would be a small step, but perhaps they'd learn something from it.

With a plan in place, she wandered back to her bedroom, finally able to sleep.

As the sun peeked through the lace curtains of her bedroom the following morning, Cate fluttered her eyes open, still excited about her plan.

After breakfast, Cate and Riley stepped into the cool autumn air for a meeting in the garden with Mr. Fraser and Jack. The little dog bounded in front of her, a goofy grin on his face as he frolicked.

After sniffing a few bushes, Cate ushered him toward the back garden, looking forward to a party planning meeting that didn't cause her anxiety.

The little dog bounded toward the two man, springing onto his hind legs to greet Jack.

"Well, good morning, Sir Riley!" Jack exclaimed, ruffling the fur on his head.

Cate caught up with him a moment later, beaming at the scene in front of her.

"Good morning, Lady Cate. He really loves that lad, doesn't he?" Mr. Fraser called.

"Good morning! Did you mean Riley loves Jack or Jack loves Riley?" Cate questioned.

Mr. Fraser glanced at the two of them again. "Well, you could go either way with that, I'd say, Lady Cate."

"Good morning, Lady Cate!" Jack said after picking up Riley to continue rubbing his chin. Riley's tongue lolled from the side of his mouth in a wide grin.

"Good morning! I'm glad the two of you could join us!"

"I was just checking with him to make sure he had his costume set for the party. Eh, what's that laddie?" he asked, holding the dog closer to his ear. "Oh, it's a secret, is it? Well, I won't tell a soul!"

Cate chuckled as Jack set Riley on the ground. "Oh, his costume is in order, it'll look like his bed and blanket. This little guy will most likely sleep through the party."

"Aw, am I going to lose my buddy for the night?"

Riley looked up at him as though agreeing that he would never lose him as a friend.

"Well, unless we get some details nailed down, we won't have a party for Riley to sleep through!" Cate answered.

Mr. Fraser pulled a set of folder papers from his pocket and unfurled them. “Well, Lady Cate, running with your theme ‘Ghosts of the Past’ and the ideas we discussed over lunch, here is what I was thinking.”

Cate stared down at the sketches on the paper, detailing the man’s design. Sketches illustrated the castle from all angles, annotated with details about how to enhance the back gardens, in particular.

Cate glanced up at him with a wide grin. “Mr. Fraser! These are great!”

Banners waved at the castle’s entrance, marking the first thing visitors would see as they approached. Lights illuminated the castle from all angles. Cate pictured the castle lit up against the backdrop of a purple and red dusky sky.

In the back garden, lights were strung overhead, creating lit pathways through the various foliage for guests to traverse. A temporary water feature sat at the center. Gourds and pumpkins, some carved, some not, decorated the perimeter and the pathways. Tall corn stalks stood in various spots around the garden and framed the entrances to the ballroom. Hay bales, adorned with the fruits of autumn bordered each of the doors. Banners hung above the entryways, providing the finishing touch.

The design transformed the garden into a magical fall wonderland sure to please the guests.

Cate bit her lower lip, delighted with the idea, but concerned about the work it thrust upon her staff. “I love this design, but I want to be sure you two are not taking on too much! Will you need some additional help to achieve all this?”

Mr. Fraser clasped his hands behind his back and offered a timid smile. “Well, Lady Cate, I think we’ll be okay. The Bailey farm will supply most of what we’ll need and help us set it up.”

“That’s wonderful! I can help, too!”

“A real hands-on lady, aren’t you, Lady Cate,” Jack teased.

Cate offered a slight curtsy to punctuate her answer. “Yes, I am. And, I have an idea if you don’t mind?”

“I’m happy to hear it, Lady Cate,” Mr. Fraser answered.

“Well, I noted that your plans show some carved pumpkins. Perhaps we could all pitch in and carve them. We could put a small sign designating who carved each pumpkin to show the guests we’re real people! I bet Molly and Gayle would love to help, maybe even Mr. Smythe. And with you, Mrs. Fraser and Jack, that would be seven of them.”

Mr. Fraser's eyes lit at the concept. "I think that's a fun idea, Lady Cate. We could even make it a contest. Let people vote for the best. I had better tell Emily now, she'll want to spend at least a week planning her pumpkin!"

"That sounds great!" Cate answered.

They spent another forty-five minutes discussing various aspects of the design and logistics. Cate's excitement grew by the minute and she couldn't wait to see the plan materialize. After they had gone over all the details, Cate asked to make a copy of the plans to share with Mrs. Campbell at her next meeting.

"By all means, Lady Cate," Mr. Fraser said, passing the papers to her. "Although I dare say she'll have something she wants changed once she sees it!"

Cate tapped the paper and shook her head. "But I have the final decision! And I love every detail of this!"

"Want to leave Riley with us while you run in to make a copy?" Jack asked.

"Riley, do you want to stay with Jack for a minute?" Cate asked the dog.

His dark, almond-shaped eyes gleamed as he glanced at Jack, who brandished a stick, promising to play a game of tug of war with him. The dog's tail wagged furiously.

"I think that's a yes! Okay, I'll be right back."

Cate entered the castle and made two copies of the plans, one for herself and one for Mrs. Campbell. She smiled as she placed them in her planning folder, taking one final glance at them before returning to the back garden.

She handed the papers back to Mr. Fraser as she searched for Riley. "Here are your papers back, Mr. Fraser. Okay, Riley, time to finish that walk!"

The small dog was notably missing.

"Riley?" she questioned, glancing at Jack.

"Ah, the little laddie is right over..." He paused. "Well, that's odd. He was right here. He was right by this bush just a moment ago."

Cate scanned the garden. The little dog was nowhere to be found. Her heart skipped a beat as she realized he'd run off again.

CHAPTER 8



Cate scanned the garden, a sinking feeling in her stomach as she failed to find Riley.

Mr. Fraser's features scrunched with concern. "Disappeared, has he?" Mr. Fraser asked, concern crossing his face.

Cate shrugged, forcing a smile onto her face. "Maybe he started the rest of the walk without me. I'm sure he's fine, he rarely goes far."

"Well, I'll help you look for him," Jack offered.

"Thanks, Jack. I expect he's on the path to the loch, or over near that folly. I'm not sure why but he has a sudden interest in that spot."

"If you don't find him soon, let me know, I'm happy to help you hunt for him," Mr. Fraser said.

Cate nodded at him as she stepped away on the path toward the loch. "Thanks, I will let you know if we don't find him and sorry for stealing Jack for the moment!"

The man tipped his hat and nodded at her. "Not to worry, Lady Cate, we're just getting some measurements today to make the final calculations on how much of everything we'll need to make these gardens shine! Plenty of time to do that once we've located little Riley."

They started down the path, leaving Mr. Fraser behind as he spread his tape measure out along a row of bushes.

"So, you figure the little laddie is on the path?"

Cate called to him a few times. "Most likely, he rarely goes far, like I said."

They continued down the path for a few minutes before they spotted Riley bounding down a small hill.

Cate waved a finger at him. "There he is!"

"You were right, coming from the direction of that folly."

"I told you. I'm not sure what it is about that spot he loves, but there's something. One day I'll have to investigate it and find out what is so enticing to him."

Cate called to the small dog, and he bounded toward them. She scooped him up as he leapt onto his hind legs when he reached her. "What were you thinking running off? Silly boy, come here."

Cate cuddled him in her arms, giving his head a kiss and ruffling the fur on his back.

Jack smiled at the scene, his hands on his hips. "Well, looks like you're all set then! I'll get back to those measurements."

Cate flicked her gaze to him. "Oh, I was hoping to have a few more moments of your time to discuss something."

"Did you have a question about the party?"

Cate pursed her lips and shook her head. "No."

Jack studied the clouds above them, his finger tapping his chin in faux concentration. "Did you want me to grab your hundredth order of the fish and chips from the pub for you?"

Cate snickered at the joke. "No."

He snapped his fingers, pointing at her. "Oh, I've got it, you wanted to ask me what my costume was!"

"Well, it does involve a costume of sorts, so you're getting warmer."

"Are you having a private costume party that you'd like to discuss?"

Cate lifted a shoulder as she nodded. "That's one way of putting it, yes."

"And when is this party occurring?"

"In 1856?" Cate said, phrasing it as a question.

Jack scrunched up his face. "I was afraid that would be your answer."

"I have a low-risk plan to get us more information. Not tons of information, but some! Not even you can object to this one, Jack!"

His hands landed on his hips again. "Try me, lassie."

Cate rolled her eyes at him. "It's simple. We travel back when the family is having dinner. We make sure ALL of them are accounted for then we check the tower room."

“Oh, that’s it, huh? Just go back at night, mosey to the tower room and check if someone is in there, doing what, sleeping?”

“We can check for a light shining under the door!”

Jack rubbed his chin, pulling his lips to the side. “Hmm, we can avoid everyone. This might be one of your better terrible plans, Cate.”

“See! I told you! So, when should we go!”

He flicked his gaze to the blue sky again. “Hmm.” He paused. “Let’s see. How about...” he paused again, “the fifteenth of never? Does that work for you?”

Cate groaned. “Funny, Jack. Now, seriously, we should go this coming week, before we get busy with the party. How about this Sunday again?”

“Oh, Cate.” He sighed, shaking his head. “You are a handful.”

“Is that a yes?”

He offered her a slow nod. “It’s a reluctant yes.”

Cate grinned at him. “Okay, it’s a plan! And *now* you can collect those measurements.”

“Yes, measurements, a nice, safe idea that won’t ruin the course of history, my favorite! M’lady,” he said giving her a bow before he returned to the garden as she continued on her way toward the loch.

Cate laughed, then turned her attention to Riley, ruffling the fur on his head. “And where did you get yourself off to, Mr. Riley?”

Riley’s eyes gleamed at her but didn’t provide any information. “Not talking, huh? Well, then, I guess I’ll have to investigate what’s got you so interested in that folly.”

She set him down on the ground, watching him scramble down the path in front of her toward the loch.

As they reached it, Cate called to him. He stopped, spinning to glance at her, then came galloping back as he saw his blue ball in her hand. His eyes twinkled with anticipation as she tossed it. He sprang into a run, chasing it. He snatched it up, bouncing around in a circle, before returning it to her to throw again.

They made their way to the loch, with Riley enjoying playing fetch all the way. Cate settled on the bank, Riley curled next to her, spent from playing ball. With a sigh, she stroked his back as she gazed at the castle. Her attention focused on the tower.

If she was correct, their Sunday evening visit would confirm the presence of someone living in the tower room. Her low-key plan depended

on verifying the whereabouts of the rest of the family. That was a fact that she kept from Jack. She would never have convinced him if he knew they would be traipsing around the castle. She'd keep that one to herself for now.

She smiled down at Riley, who rolled onto his back to allow her to scratch his belly.

"Oh, Riley." She laughed, pulling him into her arms.

He snuggled into her, not appreciating the cooler weather.

She spent another half hour enjoying the loch and surrounding scenery before the cooler temperatures chased her in. A mountain of work awaited her between her research project and party planning. With no meeting about the party for another week, she shoved the materials aside after her lunch and opened her laptop to work on her book.

She stared at the blinking cursor for twenty minutes before she scowled at the laptop. She'd written a single word: the.

She sighed at lack of ability to focus and navigated to her email app instead, finding an email from Molly. Her subject line read TWO WEEKS!

Cate clicked open the email to read it.

Hi Cate! In TWO WEEKS, I will be on my way to SCOTLAND! Thank you so much for the packing tips! I think I have the packing under control now, although my shopping may not be. I'll confess, I felt I needed a few new sweaters for the trip. My Scotland sweaters should arrive any day now and I can't wait to put them in my suitcase! I'm giddy every time I cross a day off the calendar!

I keep reminding everyone in the department that I'll soon be seeing you and staying at your CASTLE. You know, in case they want to pass along their best wishes to you, but mostly because I'm just bragging that I'm staying at a castle.

I'm so excited, I can hardly sleep. Although, that might be because I've been watching a lot of haunted castle movies in anticipation of my trip. You promise that it's not haunted, right? Even if it is, I'm still coming!

Thank you so much again, Cate! I know I've said it 1000 times already, but I mean it. I really needed this. It's given me something to

look forward to, so THANK YOU!

Molly

P.S. They haven't filled your position yet. Guess they couldn't find anyone willing to do all that work for none of the reward!

The email brought a smile to her face. Molly's enthusiasm for the trip bounced off the screen. She couldn't wait to see her old friend and she hoped some rest and relaxation in the quiet town of Dunhaven would be just what the proverbial doctor ordered after Molly's tough divorce. She pressed the reply button and typed an email back.

Hi Molly! Riley and I are counting the days on this side of the pond too! We're excited to see you. I'm glad you have the packing under control, and I don't blame you for the shopping! You definitely need a few new "Scotland sweaters." You'll get plenty of use out of them here, we are cool and damp, sorry to say!

I PROMISE the castle is not haunted, you can put your mind at rest. Keep watching those spooky movies, that's the only Scottish ghosts you'll see!

I'm so glad that you're looking forward to the visit. Enjoy crossing those days off, it'll be here before you know!

See you soon,

Cate

She returned to her word document. All traces of the smile from Molly's email disappeared as she stared at the almost-blank page.

As her fingers hovered over the keyboard, she decided to head into town the next day for a shopping trip. She'd shop for a welcome gift to cheer Molly upon her arrival to Dunhaven Castle.

It would also occupy most of her time and divert her attention as she waited for their time travel trip.

With her plans set, she flicked her gaze back to her laptop. As she typed her first few strokes, Mrs. Fraser knocked and peeked into the library.

Cate's eyebrows shot up as she checked her timepiece. "Oh, Mrs. Fraser! Is there something you needed? It's not dinner time yet, is it?"

The woman clasped her hands in front of her, a tentative expression on her features. "Oh, no, Lady Cate, not yet! But I was hoping you had a moment?"

Cate waved her inside and motioned to the chairs by the fireplace, which boasted a roaring fire. "Oh, of course, Mrs. Fraser, please come in."

She pushed back from the desk chair and joined her, sinking into the supple leather of the armchair.

"Please, sit, Mrs. Fraser. Riley is really enjoying the fire. I'm thinking of curling up here with a good book, too. I'm not making much progress on my research."

Mrs. Fraser perched on the edge of the leather chair opposite Cate. "It is nice and cozy here. I'll tell Mr. Fraser the little pup is enjoying it. He'll be pleased."

"So, what did you want to discuss?"

Mrs. Fraser clasped her hands tightly again, tapping them against her knees. "Right, well, Lady Cate, I was hoping to ask a favor of you."

"Of course, anything, ask away."

Mrs. Fraser pounded her hands against her knees again. "I've been thinking, it may be easier for Mr. Fraser and myself to stay at the castle while your guests are with us. We will be available if any needs arise. Also, we will be on hand for the busy days prior to the party."

Cate grinned at her request, happy to have her stay, though requesting permission was unnecessary. "It's not necessary for you to ask or explain, Mrs. Fraser. You're welcome to stay here anytime."

Mrs. Fraser returned her smile, her chin raising and her hands unclasping. "Thank you, Lady Cate. Well, I prefer to ask just the same. Well, with that settled..."

Cate waved a finger in the air. "Oh, just a moment, Mrs. Fraser. I have one request."

Mrs. Fraser's brow furrowed in confusion. "Request?"

"Yes. I want to be sure this makes things easier for you and I do not want you working yourself to death trying to attend to all of us!"

Mrs. Fraser chuckled and waved the request away. "Oh, Lady Cate, it will make it easier on me and you'll not worry yourself about overworking me. I'll be fine!"

She stood from the chair and smoothed down her skirt. “Well, with that settled, I’ll leave you to your work, or your book!”

“Thanks!” Cate smiled at her as she departed from the room. She spent a few minutes curled by the warm fire. Her gaze shot across the room to her laptop, and she wrinkled her nose. With no desire to return to her work, she cuddled up under a blanket with a novel, attempting not to dwell on her upcoming trip to the past.

The next morning, Cate bounded out of bed, excited for her shopping trip. She headed into the small town early, before the stores opened, enjoying a morning walk around the town with Riley.

The sleepy town came to life as mid-morning approached and store after store opened its doors. She began her excursion by visiting one of her favorite shops, owned by Harry Abernathy.

“Ah, good morning, Lady Cate! And good morning to you, Riley!” Harry said, producing a treat for the little pup.

“Good morning, Harry! How have you been?”

“Cannae complain, Lady Cate! Are you enjoying the change in weather?”

“I can’t say I’m enjoying the cooler temperatures, but I have always been fond of fall!”

Harry’s wife, Helen, appeared from the back storeroom.

“Good morning, Helen,” Cate called.

“Good morning, Lady Cate. Doing some shopping today?”

Cate nodded as she scooped Riley into her arms. “Yes, I have a friend from across the pond coming in soon and I wanted to get her something to welcome her.”

“Ah, that’s very thoughtful of you,” Helen answered. “Is she coming in for the party?”

“Yes. She’s coming early to visit and staying for the party.”

“How are plans coming along for it?” Harry chimed in.

“Very well, thanks. Mrs. Campbell seems to be a professional at event planning, so I am following her skillful lead. She has a fantastic handle on all the details. You both are planning to attend, aren’t you?”

An excited grin filled Helen’s face and she clasped her hands together. “Oh, yes, we wouldn’t miss it! Isla is billing it as the event of the decade!”

Harry chimed in with a laugh, crossing his arms over his chest. “I’m surprised she hasn’t run you ragged yet, Lady Cate.”

“There are so many details, it is exhausting keeping track of them, but I think she’d be the one run ragged before me. She has thrown herself into this headfirst!”

“Aye, that’d be our Isla!” Harry agreed. “If we can help in any way, please ask!”

“Thank you both,” Cate answered. “Have you decided on costumes yet?”

“We have. But we’re keeping them a secret until the big day!” Helen pressed a finger to her lips.

“Fair enough! I look forward to seeing you both at the party.”

“Have fun with your shopping, Lady Cate,” Helen said. “I hope you find something your friend will enjoy.”

“Thank you!” Cate said as she stepped further into the store to browse.

Cate spent the entire morning browsing stores in search of something she thought Molly might enjoy. By 1 p.m. she hadn’t decided on anything. She took a break for lunch at the pub after settling Riley in the car for a nap.

She ordered fish and chips for the umpteenth time and used the time to mull over the gift options she’d narrowed down for Molly. After lunch she completed her purchases, choosing a tartan blanket that she paired with a copy of the book *The Mysteries of Scotland* which featured a blurb about Dunhaven Castle’s supposed haunting. She also picked out a photo album featuring a picture of Dunhaven Castle on the front for Molly to fill with her memories.

Pleased with her purchases, she carried her packages to the car and headed back to the castle for dinner, enjoying a Friday evening meal with her staff as usual.

Cate climbed into bed, pleased to be one day closer to her time travel trip. “One day down, one more to go!”

She spent the next forty-eight hours on pins and needles, awaiting the journey. She used the time to search employment records for a clue to the elusive “S,” but with only one initial, she found nothing definitive.

As she searched through employment records, her brow furrowed at the staff’s days off. She expected them to occur on Sundays, however the dates listed did not match up with the current year. A quick search for an 1856 calendar reminded her the dates in 1856 occurred on different days of the week than they did in her year.

With an eyeroll at her own stupidity, she realized their first trip to 1856 hadn't been on a Sunday as she'd assumed after all. She'd tell Jack about the discovery when they met in a few hours for their second trip back.

Cate spend the remaining time pacing the floors in nervous anticipation. She enjoyed a fall evening walk, bundled in a thick cardigan with Riley wrapped in his tartan sweater. After the sun began to descend in the sky in a brilliant blaze of deep red, they returned to the castle.

Jack's car eased to a stop as they approached the entrance. He popped from inside. "Hello, Sir Riley!"

Riley bounded toward him, and Jack caught him mid-leap, pulling him close to his chest as he rubbed his belly.

"Perfect timing!" Cate called as she continued up the path.

"I'm not sure anything about this is perfect," Jack answered as she closed the gap.

"Stop being a stick in the mud! This'll be a quick one, just your style. Oh, by the way, I figured out why we may have run into Randolph."

"Oh?" Jack inquired as he set Riley on the ground.

"Yes, we traveled back on a Sunday in our time, but in 1856 the twenty-ninth of September was a Monday," she explained.

"Ohhhh," Jack said, realization dawning on him, "the days of the week are different! Good catch, Lady Cate."

Cate beamed at him. "Thanks. Ready to go?"

Jack shivered "I'm with Gertrude on this one, I'm not a fan."

Cate rolled her eyes at him. "Well, let's head in and get ready, it'll be dark soon."

"Clothes in the bedroom I normally use as usual?" he asked.

"Yep! And I'll meet you in the 1856 bedroom after I've changed and settled Riley."

They pushed into the castle's expansive foyer and headed their separate ways to change into period-appropriate clothing. Cate swept her hair into an updo, donned her dress, and hung the skeleton key around her neck next to the timepiece.

After nestling Riley in a blanket on her chaise, she kissed the top of his head and slipped from the room, closing and locking the door behind her.

The trip to the other bedroom was not as effortless as when she wore her usual leggings or jeans paired with a tunic. The weight of the fabric made moving more difficult than she was used to.

She found Jack already waiting for her, fussing with his collar. "I wish we could travel to an era with more comfortable clothing."

Cate shot him a glance as she whisked her skirts inside the room. "I'm sure I can make that happen."

Jack rolled his eyes at her. "Very funny, Cate."

She shot him a devilish grin. "Ready?"

"As I'll ever be."

They entered the closet and placed their thumbs on the watch face, rubbing it. Within moments, the timepiece's ticking decreased. The second hand slowed to a crawl, indicating the slowed passage of time in their own century.

"Looks like we made it," Cate whispered. "Let's go!"

"Agreed, let's get this over with. Straight to the tower room and back, right?"

"More or less."

"Caaaaaaaate," Jack began.

Cate cut him off with a wave of her hand. "Come on!"

She bounded to the closet door, cracking it open an inch to peer out. "All clear!"

She tugged the door fully open and hurried across the bedroom to the main door.

"Wait up," Jack mumbled, racing after her.

She eased the door open enough to peer out. "Coast is clear, let's make a run for the stairway."

"Okay, on three," Jack said, counting to three before they made their dash down the hallway to the stairs.

Cate's run was less dash and more hobble in her domed skirt with all its flounces, but they made it unseen. They climbed the circular stairs approaching the tower room.

As they rounded the bend, bringing the tower room door into full sight they both spotted the glow emanating from beneath the closed door. "Look!" Cate breathed.

Jack nodded, grabbing her elbow. "I see it. Point proven. Now, let's go."

Cate tugged back against her. "Just a second. We can't tell what's happening in there."

"Nope, and unless you brought your x-ray vision googles, we will never know."

“I didn’t but...”

Jack tugged on her arm again. “Cate, let’s just go.”

“Just listen! This stairwell goes to the ground level. We could take a quick peek from outside. See if we spot anything.”

With a vehement shake of his head, Jack disagreed. “No, no, absolutely not!”

“Okay, you stay here, I’ll go.”

“Cate, I can’t do that!”

Cate raised her eyebrows and grinned. “Looks like you’re going with me then. The longer we spend arguing about it the longer we’re here.”

He rolled his eyes at her as they began their descent of the stairs. “Oh, Cate, I hope you don’t come across any more mysteries. Let’s go.”

They hurried down the circular stone stairs and pushed through the door into the cool autumn evening.

Cate scrambled across the lawn to reach the area where the tower was visible. Jack hurried behind her. She spun to view the tower windows. Black nothingness met her gaze.

She furrowed her brow, changing positions as she studied the various windows. Only blackness stared back.

She shot Jack a puzzled glance. “We just saw lights in there.”

“Maybe the person left. Perhaps there isn’t anyone living in the tower room.”

“What are the odds in the few minutes it took us to walk here that person left?” Jack opened his mouth to answer but Cate answered for him. “It’s low, I promise.”

Jack waved his hand at the obviously dark windows. “Well, it’s dark now, Cate.”

Cate stared at the windows for several more moments. “Or are the windows blacked out? So, no one could see light?”

“Oh, come on,” Jack began, “how...”

Cate interrupted him. “Jack, look!” she exclaimed, pointing to the window.

Jack’s gaze followed her finger. He saw a flash of light from the tower window. Warm, yellow light gleamed from within the tower. A woman’s silhouette appeared limned in the light as she gazed out into the moonless sky.

CHAPTER 9



Cate stared up at the dark form of the woman at the window. A moment later, the woman let the drape slip from her hand as she stepped back, plunging the windows into darkness again.

“I knew it!” Cate exclaimed, clasping her hands together in delight. “Blackout curtains to make it appear that no one is there!”

Jack swallowed hard, glancing around as he rubbed the back of his neck. “We should go.”

Cate read the urgency in his voice and agreed. They crept back inside and picked their way through the halls to the bedroom, careful to avoid others.

Jack breathed a sigh of relief as they entered the closet and returned to their own time.

Cate stalked across the room, her fingers pressed against her forehead. “So, there *is* someone in the tower room. A woman, not just someone, a woman. And they are trying to hide her presence. That has to mean something. But who is it? Why is she there? She must be the mysterious ‘S’ from the note. Randolph was hiding her in the tower. But why? If he was madly in love with Victoria why did he bring her?”

Jack balanced his hands on his thighs as he doubled over, still recovering from the trip. “Cate, slow down, my heart is still returning to normal speed. I can’t keep up with all your questions.”

Cate continued her pacing. “They are definitely hiding her. But for what reason?”

Jack straightened and shook his head.

Cate pondered it for another moment before spinning to face him. "Are you thinking what I'm thinking?"

He raised his eyebrows at her. "Somehow I doubt it."

"We need more information. We need to go back."

Jack hung his head in his hands. "Definitely not what I was thinking."

Cate's jaw fell open. "Really? How are you *not* thinking that?"

"Go back? Nope, definitely wasn't thinking that, Cate. I hate going at all, let alone going back to a time when a man is about to commit murder to continue to hide a secret woman in the tower room."

Cate jabbed a finger at him. "So, you do think there's more to the story, and it somehow involves the mysterious 'S!'"

Jack screwed up his face and sighed, his hands falling to his hips. "Oh, Cate, you always know just how to twist what I say to support you."

After a moment, he chuckled. "You're one amusing lassie, when you're not dragging me back to a time when I have to wear a ruffled collar and almost get killed."

Cate rolled her eyes at him. "You're so dramatic. We weren't almost killed."

"I *was* almost killed!" he countered. "By my heart, when it almost attacked me."

Cate rolled her eyes again but couldn't stifle a giggle. "Oh stop. Be serious, we need a plan." She turned pensive again. "Hmm, when can we go again? We need a plan that allows us to investigate and perhaps talk to a few people. I realize the party is coming up and you'll be busy getting things ready, but I'd like to eke some time out this week."

"Whoa, whoa, Cate. Slow down." Jack held up his hands in front of him to signal for her to stop.

Cate's shoulders slumped. "Oh, please don't tell me you're not willing to investigate this! We learned way more than we knew when we first started! And even then, you thought it was worth looking into! Now we confirmed the existence of a mystery woman, and we suspect there may be more to the murder than the story from the articles, we need to press on!"

Jack heaved a sigh. "Oh, Cate."

Cate bit her lower lip, a frown forming. "It's my family, it's important to me. I realize I didn't know them, but I have no other family. The ghosts of my past are all I have."

He flicked his gaze in the air before returning it to her. “You’re lucky I like you, Cate.”

Cate clasped her hands together under her chin, a smile spreading across her face. “So, you’ll go with me?”

“Yes, you’ll just go without me if I don’t, and I don’t want that. *But* we only go with a plan I like. And we won’t just talk to random people. And we’re definitely not going to tell Randolph anything we know. We’re going to leave the past as intact as we can.”

Cate bobbed her head up and down, unable to conceal the grin spreading across her lips. “Deal. How’s Wednesday?”

“As good as any day I guess.”

“That gives us time to formulate a plan and make at least two trips before...”

“AT LEAST TWO?” Jack shouted before wagging a finger at her. “Wait a minute—”

“Possibly two,” Cate interrupted him, “if we find out something that needs followed up on. With the party coming up we won’t be doing much then and we’re running out of time!”

“Time is the one thing we have plenty of,” Jack joked.

“We don’t! The murder occurs on Halloween! And we’ll lose a whole week for the party if not more.”

“I’m now very excited for the party!”

Cate batted at his arm. “All right, funny guy. Well, I guess I’ll let you off the hook for now. I’ll come up with a plan and we can re-convene tomorrow to discuss it.”

Jack wiped his brow. “Whew, sounds good to me. I’m going home to enjoy my modern life.”

After changing, they said their goodbyes and Cate headed to her sitting room. She was too wired to sleep and used the time to come up with a plan for her next visit. With a notebook and pen in hand, she jotted notes about the trip. They could use the cover of distant cousins with some business of Jack’s bringing them to the area. It would allow them instant access to the family, but also explain any disappearances from the castle.

She smiled down at her plan before she tucked her notebook away in the drawer of the chaise’s side table and settled for the night.

After bounding through her morning routine driven by nervous energy, she and Riley made their way outside for a morning walk. Riley burst into a

full run the moment his feet hit the gravel. Cate hurried behind him, sure he'd lead her straight to Jack.

The little dog did not disappoint, dodging around some hedges and straight to Jack. She found the two playing a game of tug-of-war as she caught up to him.

Jack waved and called a good morning as she approached.

"Good morning, Jack. Careful, he'll tear your arm off for that prize!" she said with a grin.

"Yes, I can see that. A mighty strong little rascal, this one!" Relinquishing the branch, Jack told the pup, "Okay, you win, big guy!" Riley, pleased with his new prize, carried the twig a safe distance from Jack and commenced gnawing on it.

Cate raised her eyebrows and offered Jack a tentative smile. "I have our plan all set!"

Jack groaned, letting his head fall between his shoulder blades. "I was hoping for twenty-four hours to recover, at least!"

"Time is of the essence! I spent last night planning, so we weren't delayed!"

"Okay, okay," Jack said, holding up his hands to admit defeat. "So, tell me this plan of yours."

"Well, I think you were right. We need to tell Randolph that we are distant cousins, part of the MacKenzie clan. That will give us access to the household and the family. We can use the ruse that we are in the area traveling while you are on business. That gives us an excuse to stay outside of the castle and come and go as we please. Our priority should be learning the lay of the land, having a brief discussion with Randolph and perhaps a few other household members. Just a casual conversation to see what he's like."

Jack stuck his hands on his hips. "I have so many objections."

"That's perfect," Cate interrupted. "I figured you could say that you are an attorney."

Jack let his eyes rise to the sky above. "Now I have even more."

Cate gave him an unimpressed stare. "I promise not to say anything to Randolph that would even give him a hint regarding what we're doing."

"Okay, okay. I must admit, it seems a reasonable plan and a good way to start pursuing this scheme."

Cate flashed a smile at him. "We should go back in the early afternoon, perhaps right after lunch. We don't want to interfere with a meal or preparation for a meal. Since we're seeing Randolph, it shouldn't be too much of an issue since he likely conducts business during this time."

"After lunch on Wednesday, I guess," Jack agreed. "If we must."

Cate cocked her head. "We must."

They chatted for a few more moments before Cate retrieved Riley and continued on their walk. All she needed to do was make it through Tuesday and they'd be off.

When the sun crested the moors on Wednesday morning, Cate sprang from her bed. Excited as a kid at Christmas, she went about her morning routine. She took Riley on a long walk so that he would be tired and ready for an afternoon nap. She busied herself with games of fetch and spent some time at the loch. Even with her full schedule, the morning dragged by.

After what seemed like an eternity, lunch arrived. Cate enjoyed spending the time in the castle's kitchen, having a lively discussion about pumpkin carving with the Frasers and Jack.

Afterward, Cate and Jack excused themselves, under the ruse of estate business. She settled Riley in her sitting room for a nap, then changed into her period clothing. When she was ready, she met Jack in the bedroom closet.

They both drew in a deep breath as they prepared to activate the timepiece and return to the 1850s. A nervous energy filled them both as they anticipated interacting with others in the time period for the first time.

Jack clasped his hand around Cate's and together they rubbed the timepiece until it began to slow.

Once the timepiece's second hand had slowed to a crawl, Jack whispered, "I forgot to ask, what's the plan for getting out of here to the front door?"

"Sneak down the back stairs?" Cate said with a shrug.

"As good a plan as any, I suppose," Jack agreed.

He cracked the closet door, peering into the bedroom. "It's clear, let's go."

Cate followed him for a repeat performance at the bedroom door. Finding the hallway clear, they made a dash down the hall and into the back stairway. They descended the steps, peering out of the door into the

gardens. With no one in sight, they crept out of the door and, trying to remain hidden from anyone's sight, made their way to the front door.

"You sure you want to do this?" Jack asked one final time before announcing their arrival with the lion's head door knocker.

Cate nodded, unsure but unwilling to admit it. Jack lifted the knocker and let it thud against the door. Together, they waited for someone to answer the door. Within a few moments, an older gentleman opened the door to them.

"Yes?" he inquired.

Cate nodded to Jack who responded, "Jack MacKenzie and wife here to see my cousin, Lord Randolph MacKenzie."

"If you would be so kind as to follow me, sir, I will show you to where you may wait for Lord MacKenzie." The pair followed the man, whom Cate assumed was the household's butler, to the sitting room off of the foyer. "I shall announce your arrival to Lord MacKenzie at once, sir." He left the room, leaving the doors ajar behind him.

"Good job!" Cate whispered after he departed.

"Yes, good job me. I got us into your own house!"

Cate made a face at him but offered no further commentary. The two sat on pins and needles waiting for Randolph to arrive. Within a few moments, two men appeared in the doorway. Cate recognized Randolph from his painting in the gallery. The butler preceded him, introducing him upon entering.

Her ancestor studied the pair of them, his eyes narrowing as he flicked his gaze between them. Cate's pulse quickened as she stared at him. Was she looking at a murderer?

CHAPTER 10



Cate's heart thudded in her chest as she stared at her ancestor. Randolph dismissed the butler and approached Jack.

Jack extended his hand for a handshake tentatively. "Lord MacKenzie, it's a pleasure to meet you, sir. I'm a distant cousin of yours, Jack MacKenzie."

Randolph grabbed his hand firmly and pumped it. "Jack MacKenzie, I can't say I've heard of you, laddie, but family is always welcome at Dunhaven Castle."

"Ah, this, sir, is my wife, Catherine. I sent word ahead through the post of our arrival. It appears you haven't received my letter."

Cate hid a smile at Jack's quick thinking. He knew enough to fib that they had sent a letter announcing their arrival. The mail in this era was far from dependable.

"I haven't. The only thing you can count on with the post is that you can't count on it!" Randolph let out a hearty laugh as he approached Cate.

As was customary, Cate remained seated, extending her hand, palm facing down for him to take. He brushed her hand with his fingers as he bowed to her. "Mrs. MacKenzie, a pleasure."

"Likewise, Lord MacKenzie," she answered.

He cocked his head and narrowed his eyes. "Do I detect an American accent, lassie?"

A smile spread across her face as she answered. "You do, Lord MacKenzie, I hail from the other side of the pond."

“I see. Welcome to Scotland, then! And please, call me Randolph. We’re all family here.” He turned to Jack and motioned toward the couch. “Please, sit down. Can I offer you a scotch?”

Jack licked his lips, shooting a questioning gaze at Cate. She gave a slight nod, signaling that he should accept the offer.

“How kind of you,” Jack accepted.

Randolph poured two glasses of scotch. “Anything for the lady?”

“No, thank you,” Cate declined.

“Don’t tell me you’re a teetotaler, Mrs. MacKenzie,” Randolph said, laughing as he handed a glass off to Jack.

Cate smiled at him as he sat across from them. “No, but I typically only enjoy those beverages at a much later hour.”

He smiled at her then turned toward Jack. “What brings you to my fair land, cousin Jack?”

“Well, as I explained in my letter, I am in the area on some business. I hoped that I could meet some family while here. I apologize again for arriving unannounced.”

Randolph waved his hand in the air as he settled back in his seat. “Bah, nothing to worry about, cousin! And what is your business?”

“I am an attorney, mainly land dealings and holdings,” Jack lied, before downing a large gulp of scotch.

“I see. Interesting. And you’ll be staying on with us at Dunhaven Castle?” Randolph inquired, his head nodding.

Jack glanced at Cate. “Eh, no, sir,” he stammered.

“We’ve taken a place of our own, on the outskirts of town,” Cate explained. “With Jack’s extended business here, we considered it best to set up our own household.”

“Nonsense! You’re family! Cancel your contract and stay here. You’re an attorney, I’m sure you can find your way out of it.”

Jack offered a nervous chuckle. “While that may be, I am also a man of my word. I’d not cancel a contract out of turn.”

“Man of your word, eh? Good man. Honest and independent, just like a Mackenzie.” Randolph nodded to him in approval, his eyebrows raised. “Well, surely you’ll dine with us often while you’re here, I hope?”

Jack began to answer when Cate interrupted him. “How gracious of you, we are delighted to accept your invitation at a time that suits you and your wife, Victoria.”

“Perhaps Monday? Victoria is throwing together a little soiree, nothing fancy, I’m certain she’d love to have you attend.”

“We are happy to accept,” Cate answered him.

“Wonderful! I understand the festivities begin at six o’clock. Oh, I’m sure Lady MacKenzie would love to have you for tea, Mrs. MacKenzie. It will be nice for her to have a female friend. I do feel rather sorry for her, moving here to the fringes of civilization.” He puckered his lips as he frowned at his scotch.

“We shall plan to arrive at six,” Cate responded. “It’s such a lovely castle, I’m sure she is contented with such a home despite its remote location.”

Randolph smiled at her over the rim of his glass. “Such a gracious wife you have, cousin. While it’s true Lady MacKenzie wants for nothing, her happiness is still vital to me, as I’m sure yours is to my dear cousin.”

Cate smiled at him to acknowledge his compliment.

Jack took the final sip of his beverage. “It certainly is! Well, we won’t take up any more of your time this afternoon. Thank you for meeting with us and I look forward to dining with you and Lady MacKenzie soon.”

“Of course,” Randolph said, standing as Jack stood.

Cate also rose to her feet.

Randolph pulled the timepiece from within his pocket, flipping it open to the check the time. Cate’s pulse quickened as she stared at her ancestor holding the same timepiece that now hung around her neck, hidden under her dress.

He flicked the gold cover closed. “Anything for family.”

The statement sent a chill up her spine as the impact of the moment was staggering.

He shoved the watch into his pocket and thrust out his hand to shake Jack’s, then nodded to Cate. “I shall look forward to seeing you both again soon.”

He wandered to the wall and pulled a cord hanging from the ceiling to summon the butler. Within moments, the butler strode through the door. “Ah, Thomson, Mr. and Mrs. MacKenzie were just leaving, if you could show them out. And please collect their address so that Lady MacKenzie can correspond with Mrs. MacKenzie about an invitation to tea.”

“Very good, m’lord,” he answered with a nod of his head.

Randolph stalked from the room as Thomson motioned for Cate to approach the desk in the room. She picked up the quill, feeling as though she were in the stone age as she scratched it across the thick paper.

She folded the paper and handed it off to the butler. "Thank you, Thomson. And we can see ourselves out so we do not need to trouble you."

"It's no trouble at all, Mrs. MacKenzie," he responded, leading them into the foyer.

Cate's heart sank as she realized they'd have to sneak back into the castle in order to return to their time. Could they enter and navigate to the bedroom unscathed again?

Cate licked her lips as her heart pounded. She needed a diversion, and she needed one quickly. She bit her lower lip hard as Thomson swung the front door open.

With a deep inhale, she threw her hand across her forehead, swooning into Jack's arms. She grasped his jacket as she fell. "Oh, I feel so faint!"

Jack's eyes went wide at the scene, and he caught her before she fell, panic lacing his voice. "Cate!"

Thomson pushed the door closed, his thick eyebrows squashed together as he studied Cate. "Oh, dear. Is the lady quite all right, sir?"

Jack swallowed hard, his face whiter than normal and shot a panicked glance at the butler. "I don't know, perhaps she should lie down?"

Cate moaned as she fluttered her eyelashes, her head wagging and back forth. "Oh, yes, yes, if I could only lie down."

"Of course, madam. Sir, if you could help her up the stairs, I will see to finding her a bedroom to rest in until she has recovered." The butler motioned toward the massive staircase leading up.

Jack fought to get his arms around the fabric of Cate's dress and lifted her into his arms. She flung her arms around his neck as he mounted the stairs. With the butler in front of them, she risked a glance at Jack, giving him a wink.

He screwed up his face as she returned to playing unsteady before realization dawned on him.

The butler led them down the upstairs hall, taking them to a bedroom in the same hall as the one they needed to reach.

He pushed open the door and stood aside as Jack carried Cate through, placing her on the bed. "Shall I call a doctor, sir?"

Jack perched on the edge of the bed, clasping Cate's hand in his. "No, it's likely the journey has been too much for her. I'm sure she only needs a moment to rest and recover, then we will be on our way. Please, don't let us keep you."

"Thank you, sir. I will check back with you in the event that you should need anything, or the lady's condition worsens."

Jack offered him a nod before returning his attention to Cate. "Thank you, Thomson."

With the dismissal, the butler exited the room, leaving the door ajar.

Moments after he exited, Cate ceased her sick act, popping her eyes wide and sitting up. "Wow, I can't believe that worked! Hurry! We'll make a run for the bedroom!"

"Best idea I've heard all day," Jack agreed as he pulled her off the bed.

The pair crept to the door, checking for anyone in the hall. Finding it empty, they made a dash across and down the hall, entering the bedroom and racing to the closet.

Cate removed the timepiece from the folds of her dress. Both of them clutched it, rubbing it in unison. The second hand speeded up, soon returning to keeping normal time.

Even Cate breathed a sigh of relief this time.

"Oh," Jack said, putting a hand over his heart, "I always feel so much better once we're home."

"What an incredible experience though! My ancestor, Randolph, right there in front of me! And did you see the watch? He held the same watch that I inherited. It really is mind-blowing." Cate bit her lower lip as the excitement bubbled to the surface.

"That's one way of describing it, I suppose. Clever stunt, I was becoming concerned about navigating back to this closet without being caught."

She grinned at him and curtsied. "Thank you!"

Jack rubbed the back of his neck, raising his eyebrows. "And, I must admit, that was quite an experience. Randolph seems to be quite an interesting character. I rather liked him!"

Cate smiled again and nodded. "I did, too! And now, do you still find it believable that he killed a man because he gave a questionable glance at his wife at the table?"

Jack shrugged, tugging at his collar. "I suppose it's plausible. He was very family-oriented."

Cate's shoulders slumped at the words. "Oh, come on, Victoria's happiness is vital to him, anything for family, honest and independent, that's what a MacKenzie is! Does he sound like a man who kills someone over a glance, then lies about it?"

"Perhaps he snapped? And maybe guilt got to him?"

"He didn't seem like a hothead," Cate said.

Jack puckered his lips and shook his head. "No, he didn't. He seemed like a right fellow. I felt bad lying to him."

Cate nodded, her lips forming a momentary frown. "A necessary drawback. But consider how much better it will be when we prove his innocence, and he can live a happy life with his wife and child!"

Jack jabbed a finger in the air. "*If* we prove his innocence. Now, I better get back to work. I'll leave you to come up with a strategy for Monday, well Sunday for us. I will be on pins and needles all week."

Cate beamed at having a trip to the past she wouldn't need to convince Jack to take. "Don't worry, I'll have a plan locked down in no time!"

With a wink, she spun on her heel to leave the closet.

"Oh, Cate," Jack said, stopping her.

She twisted to face him. "

Before you leave, what did you write on the paper for our address?"

"I didn't," Cate admitted with a shrug. "I wrote a note stating to leave any correspondence with the postmaster until we had set up our household. I hope that works."

"Ah, good thinking," Jack said.

Cate smiled as she nodded before returning to her bedroom suite. Between the encounter with her ancestor and the promise of another trip to the past, she could barely contain her excitement.

Details raced through her mind about the trip they'd just taken and the upcoming travel. In only four short days, she'd have to have everything ready. She wrinkled her nose. Four short days? Four days too many, by her count.

After changing her clothes, she considered a trip before their dinner Monday. With correspondence expected from Lady MacKenzie, they probably should take a trip back to collect their mail. She'd mention it to Jack when she saw him next.

She gathered Riley in her arms for a pre-dinner walk. As they strolled along the path, she gazed up at the castle with new eyes. She pictured Randolph raising his family here, or rather, missing that opportunity due to the circumstances thrust upon him. She marveled at the castle, at how much different it was yet how unchanged. The castle in Randolph's time had not yet included the additional wing. Cate stared at the wing, recalling how the castle had looked without it.

Her gaze shifted to the tower. Cate's mind returned to the mystery she was trying to solve. Who was this mysterious woman Randolph kept in the tower? And for what purpose? Randolph seemed personable, friendly and in love with his wife, not like the type of man who kept a woman imprisoned against her will. But was he hiding a huge secret behind his friendly smile?

CHAPTER 11



Cate pondered Randolph's motives as she stared up at the tower. Staring at the tower room in the present time offered her no answers, though. She'd be forced to wait until Sunday to seek any further information.

Even if she convinced Jack to travel back before then, they wouldn't visit the castle. One uninvited trip this week would be enough.

Cate spent the rest of her day and evening attempting to read while daydreaming about her adventure in the past.

She sprang from her bed the next morning, searching out Jack on her morning walk with Riley.

"Good morning, Lady Cate."

Cate closed her cardigan tighter around her. "Good morning. Have you fully recovered from the time travel trip?"

Jack shot his gaze up to her as he dug at the base of a bush. "In a word, no. And I am quite glad that we have days to prepare for another."

"Actually, I was hoping to make a trip before our dinner party."

Jack froze, his shovel half-full of dirt. He flicked his gaze up to her, his jaw hanging open.

Cate stuck her hands in her pockets and shrugged. "We should check our mail."

Jack pressed his lips together in a thin line. "We shouldn't take any chances. We could be caught."

“We’ll have to be careful. Think of it as practice for our future trips. We’re going to have to do this several more times.”

Jack stood the shovel up and propped his hands on it. “I shudder to think.” After a moment, he sighed and nodded. “Okay, we’ll go Friday morning early. Minimize the chances of being caught.”

Cate grinned at him, pleased with the plan as nervous anticipation already filled her. She barely slept that night, but bounded out of bed the following morning to ready herself for the trip. They’d leave around 6:30 a.m., travel to town on foot and inquire about any correspondence. With the slow movement of time in the present, they should be able to return before breakfast and never be missed.

Cate met an already prepared Jack in the bedroom closet right on the dot of six thirty.

He sighed as she held the watch out for him to grasp. “You’d think I’d be getting used to this by now but I’m still a bundle of nerves.”

Cate lifted her eyebrows as she flicked a gaze up to him. “Just wait until we have to dine with them. This is an easy trip!”

Jack shuddered all over. “Don’t remind me. Okay, let’s go check our mail.”

They grasped the watch together, rubbing it in unison. Within seconds, the second hand slowed, and they slipped back into the past. They crept out of the castle, meeting no one at this hour of the morning.

The sun crested the moors as they set off toward town on a path obscured from most of the castle’s view. The lugging of her awkward period clothing made the walk more taxing on Cate, both of them pronouncing their newfound appreciation for modern clothing more than once during their trip. After a small struggle, they made it to town, heading straight to the postmaster.

Their efforts were rewarded. The postmaster had one letter from Lady MacKenzie for Cate. They thanked him then hurried back to the castle. By now, the household would be stirring but with careful timing they made their way back to the bedroom closet undetected. They returned to their own time with no issues. Jack breathed his customary sigh of relief after they were back.

Like a giddy child, she waved the letter in the air in front of her with a grin. “I can’t wait to read it!”

“Well, I can wait to hear about it, I’m going to change before breakfast and head down there. I’m starving.”

“Me too,” Cate admitted. “Time travel makes me hungry.”

Jack chuckled at her terrible joke as they parted ways to change before breakfast. Cate placed the letter from Victoria on her side table in her sitting room, giving it a forlorn glance as she exited the room for breakfast.

She ate her breakfast in the library, checking her email and completing a few other tasks as she ate. Her mind continued to return to the correspondence waiting for her upstairs. Before she could read it, she promised Riley his morning walk. Despite her obvious interest in the letter, she still enjoyed watching Riley romp around the grounds.

After returning to the castle, she curled up on her chaise with the letter in hand. With careful precision, she unsealed the wax seal. She marveled at the weight of the paper and the script writing even before unfolding it, running her hand over the name written on the outside: *Mrs. Jack MacKenzie*. Cate held back an eye roll at the salutation with no mention of her own name at all.

She unfolded the letter, appreciating the elaborate penmanship before reading the brief correspondence.

Dearest Cousin Catherine -

I learned from my dear husband, Lord Randolph MacKenzie, of your recent arrival in our little hamlet. I am most eager to make your acquaintance. My husband has informed me he has already invited you to our small party on Monday, 13 October and I am delighted that you have already accepted. Please arrive at Dunhaven Castle at five thirty in the evening, a time prior to other guests.

I look so forward to meeting you in person. I am sure we will become fast friends. As I expect our meeting will be a success, I would also invite you to do me the honor of paying a call for afternoon tea on Wednesday, 15 October. You may express your acceptance in person when we meet. I expect you have much to do in

setting up your household and do not expect correspondence to be at the top of your list.

Yours in friendship,

Victoria

Excitement coursed through her as she read the letter. Dining with her ancestors was both thrilling and overwhelming. She glanced at the letter again, appreciating all the sentiment that a handwritten note from this era carried. It was a marked change from the correspondence of today, most often hastily typed and lacking any warm regard or personal sentiment.

A list of next steps filled Cate's mind. She would need to prepare Jack for the manners expected from a visiting couple for a dinner party, since they would not be seated near each other for dinner, as was the custom in 1856. Cate would also need to inform him they must travel back again on October fifteenth for Cate to attend tea with Victoria.

At least for that visit, Jack need only to find a spot to hide out and wait for Cate to finish her business. She imagined the news that they would be making two visits to the past in a matter of only a handful of days would go over like a lead balloon.

As she bit her lower lip as she pondered the best way to inform Jack of the latest developments, Mrs. Fraser knocked and entered with a tray of lunch.

"Didn't mean to be presumptuous, but I thought I'd bring your lunch early. Since you have a meeting with that woman this afternoon," she said, referring to Mrs. Campbell, "I figured you may want to eat early."

"Thank you, Mrs. Fraser, good idea!" Cate answered, folding the letter, and placing it on her side table.

The excitement of the correspondence from Victoria had almost made her forget about her meeting later. What a perfect way to spoil her fun, she mused. Either way, it was necessary. She would have to wait until tomorrow to discuss plans further with Jack.

After lunch, party planning details consumed Cate's afternoon. The meeting left her spent, but they accomplished a good deal. As she watched Mrs. Campbell's car pull away from the house, she found herself longing for her staff dinner. Despite the early hour, she made her way to the kitchen.

She had left Riley with Mrs. Fraser for the afternoon while she met with Mrs. Campbell.

Upon arriving at the kitchen, she found Mrs. Fraser wiping off a wet Riley. "What happened to you?"

"Went and got himself a mess again," Mrs. Fraser answered her. "I let him out earlier and the little monkey disappeared on me again and got caught in that rainstorm that passed through."

"Oh, Riley." Cate shook her head at him as Mrs. Fraser set him down on the floor. "What is with you and your disappearing acts anymore?"

The pup offered no answers beyond a mischievous gleam in his eye.

"And how did your meeting go today, Lady Cate?"

Cate sank into her chair and let her chin rest in her hands. "Very well, I believe. Although, I am exhausted. The details of this party seem endless!"

Mrs. Fraser shot her a coy grin as she removed cookies from a baking tray. "I would have thought the company was the most exhausting part of that meeting."

Cate returned her smile. "She does seem to make even the simplest task rather tedious, but she has a good handle on planning an event of this magnitude. For that, I am appreciative, I wouldn't know where to start."

Mrs. Fraser tossed the spatula into the soapy water in the sink. "Ah, I don't believe that, Lady Cate. As bright as you are, I expect you'd do just fine on your own!"

Cate pushed herself to stand, wandering to the sink to wash the dirty utensil. "Thank you for the vote of confidence, Mrs. Fraser! Speaking of planning, have you planned your pumpkin carving? We're only two weeks away from the party!"

Mrs. Fraser eyed her as she dried the spatula with a wrinkled nose, but allowed her to do a little work. "Oh, I have. I've got a special design in mind, but no one is getting any details before the contest!"

Cate laughed as she tossed the item back in the drawer. "Fair enough. I haven't even contemplated mine. I'm so pleased everyone liked the idea enough to chip in. Even Mr. Smythe and Gayle are excited to create their own pumpkin carving for the competition."

"I think it's a fun idea, Lady Cate. No doubt Isla didn't agree but I think it's splendid."

"Thank you. Yes, she was concerned about it not being what she called 'appropriate' but it's all in good fun."

Mrs. Fraser nodded in agreement. They chitchatted a few moments longer, with Cate pitching in here and there to help with dinner preparations as much as Mrs. Fraser would allow. They enjoyed a leisurely dinner filled with fun conversation about the upcoming event.

After dinner, Cate made a list of the fine points of dining in the 1800s she wanted to discuss with Jack before their dinner invitation. She reviewed it and, once she was satisfied, retired for the evening.

The following morning, Cate took a long walk with Riley before spending the rest of her day researching for her book. She tried to focus her energy even though she found herself distracted much of the time. The day dragged by with evening finally approaching. The sun hung low on the horizon as Jack met her in the library after dinner.

Cate pulled out her list to share with him. His eyes widened at the length of it, and he asked if she could provide a cheat sheet that he could hide in his hand. Cate laughed despite Jack's insistence that he wasn't joking. She assured him he would be fine. The quick thinking he'd displayed on their last visit made her confident he'd breeze through the dinner.

With the rules squared away, Cate let Jack head home for the evening. They planned on meeting tomorrow around four to dress. They would then travel back and leave enough time to sneak out of the castle and to the front door for their five thirty call. On his way out, Jack expressed his genuine hope that he would sleep tonight. Cate agreed, stating that she was far too excited to sleep. It wasn't excitement that threatened to keep Jack up, he confessed.

She spent most of her night tossing and turning with anxious anticipation. She frittered her morning away with various tasks, finding herself checking the timepiece frequently as she waited for the hours to tick away.

She met Jack at the front door at 4 p.m., ushering him inside to change. She nestled Riley into his bed near the fireplace in her sitting room before she began her transformation into Victorian lady.

With her hair pulled into a chignon and decorated with a ruby hair comb, she pulled on the ruby red gown, struggling to fasten it. When she'd finished, she smoothed the lace top before she fussed with the bustle and train in the back.

After finally completing her dressing, she made her way to the bedroom to meet Jack, who awaited her in his formal dinner wear.

“Wow, that’s quite a dress!” Jack said as she tried to make her way through the door in the hooped skirt.

“It is a bit unwieldy, I must admit,” Cate said, hoping she was able to sneak anywhere on the estate in this much fabric.

Jack eyed the massive skirt. “Please don’t fake faint again. I don’t think I could navigate holding you in that dress.”

“I’ll have to try another type of subterfuge,” Cate said, leading the way to the closet.

Jack followed her, taking a deep breath and wiping a bead of sweat from his brow. “I hope I don’t do anything wrong.”

“You’ll be fine, I’m sure! If you do anything that wrong, I’ll kick you under the table,” she said, grinning at him and holding the timepiece out.

They both grasped it and started the process to return to 1856. Within moments, they were standing in the bedroom closet in another century. If Cate’s calculations were correct, they should have a clear path for them as most servants would be preparing for dinner and the household occupants would be dressing.

They crept through the halls until they stepped into the cool October air, breathing a sigh of relief. With extra time before they needed to present themselves, they strolled to the loch. As the time approached five thirty, they made their way to the front entrance.

Jack used the door knocker, and Thomson greeted them. “Welcome back to Dunhaven Castle, Mr. and Mrs. MacKenzie. May I take your wrap, ma’am?”

Cate removed her capelet, handing it to Thomson.

“Lord and Lady MacKenzie are waiting in the east sitting room, if you’ll follow me.”

They followed the butler to the sitting room where he announced them as they entered.

“Ah, Cousin Jack,” Randolph said as they entered, “glad you could make it to our little party.”

He approached Cate, grasping her hand and bowing to her. “Mrs. MacKenzie, lovely to see you again.”

Cate acknowledged his greeting, peering over his shoulder to Victoria seated on the loveseat. With delicate features, beautiful dark, exotic eyes,

and an exquisitely shaped mouth, Cate could understand why her beauty was renowned. Her dark hair was swept up, framing a delicate neck around which hung a beautiful emerald necklace.

Cate and Jack approached her as Randolph introduced her. Her smile lit up her face.

Jack approached, delicately taking her hand, imitating Randolph and bowing to her. "Lady MacKenzie, a pleasure to make your acquaintance."

Cate gave a slight curtsy, conveying a similar sentiment.

Randolph made his way to the bar cart. "Drinks?"

"I'll have what you're having," Jack answered, sitting across from Victoria. Cate chose a seat next to her on the loveseat.

Cate eyed the sherry in Victoria's hand. "I'll have a small sherry."

"I hope you are feeling better, Mrs. MacKenzie," Victoria began.

"Yes, I am, thank you. And please thank Thomson for his hospitality when I took ill. After a few moments of rest, I felt strong enough to travel back home. We weren't able to locate him, so we took our leave causing no further disruptions."

Victoria sipped at the yellow liquid. "And I hope you didn't find it awkward to arrive earlier than our other guests, but I hoped to spend a small amount of time with family only."

Cate accepted the small glass handed to her by Randolph. "Not at all, and thank you so very much for extending the private invitation."

"Of course. I understand from my husband that you will not be staying with us. I hope the stories of our home haven't put you off."

Randolph huffed as he handed Jack a scotch. "Oh, Victoria, please, let's not start with that."

"The truth of the matter, Lady MacKenzie, is that we considered it best to establish our own household given that we were unsure how long we may be staying. We did not want to upset your household if our plans unexpectedly changed."

"It's no upset at all and I understand how important family is to my husband. But if you shan't be staying with us, I do hope you will accept my invitation for afternoon tea?"

Cate sipped at her sherry, a smile spreading across her face. "Of course, I accept your gracious invitation."

Victoria offered her a gracious grin. "Wonderful. I hope you will be a fixture on the property despite not taking up residence here."

“Yes, please consider our doors always open to you,” Randolph noted.

Cate glanced to him to nod, finding he held her gaze longer than she expected. Odd, Cate ruminated to herself, he seemed to be staring at her. She swallowed hard, her posture stiffening before she focused her attention on Victoria again.

The women made further conversation about how the move was going for the couple while Randolph and Jack discussed business and the prospect of an upcoming shooting party.

Soon after, other guests began arriving. Cate and Jack did their best to mingle amongst the others with Victoria and Randolph providing a good bit of the small amount of background information on their newly arrived family members.

At dinner, Cate and Jack found themselves seated across from each other as was the customary practice. Despite the trepidation they both experienced about trying to make conversation with people from centuries prior to theirs, they made it through dinner.

Cate watched each of the footmen present in the dining room. Which one, she wondered, was the servant who would be murdered? It was impossible to tell without knowing their names.

She scrutinized their movements as closely as possible, trying to glean any details she could about them. None of them seemed to pay particular attention to Victoria. She recalled the reported motive for the murder was too intimate a glance shared between Victoria and the victim.

No such glances occurred at this dinner party. She rejoined Jack at post-dinner drinks and they were briefly able to compare notes before beginning to socialize again.

With the plan to leave the party before the other guests so they could sneak to the bedroom while their hosts were engaged with the others, Cate gave Jack their pre-arranged signal.

He nodded at her and she excused herself to Victoria, stating they were leaving earlier as she remained tired from their journey north.

“Leaving?” Randolph asked, overhearing Cate’s conversation with Victoria.

“Yes, I’m afraid so,” Jack stepped in, “I’m afraid the journey has been taxing on Mrs. MacKenzie.”

“I understand,” Randolph said, “If it isn’t too much, I’d hoped to have a brief word with both of you before you left.”

Cate and Jack shared a glance. Cate gave him a slight nod, signaling he should accept the invitation. She wasn't sure they had much other choice.

"By all means," Jack said, nodding to Randolph.

"Wonderful, follow me, we can speak uninterrupted in my study. Victoria, please excuse me, I shan't be long."

The pair followed him from the room. Cate's heart raced as she trailed him down the hall to a set of double doors leading to an office. Randolph crossed to the bar cart, pouring himself a drink before he stood behind his desk.

Cate pressed her lips together as she stood in bewildered silence. Her pulse raced as she wondered what the purpose of the secret meeting may be.

Randolph sipped at his scotch and narrowed his eyes at them. "Well, now that we are alone, I was hoping you'd tell me who you really are."

CHAPTER 12



Cate's heart thudded against her ribs as Randolph stared at them, waiting for an answer. She bit her lower lip as it trembled, shooting a shocked glance at Jack.

Jack swallowed hard. "I'm sorry? I'm your cousin, Jack. We aren't closely related, I believe..."

Randolph waved his hand in the air, cutting off Jack's words. "Yes, yes, I know the cover story. Cousins, distant, a letter was sent but never arrived. You're staying on the outskirts of town, but I inquired after you and no one heard a thing. In a town this size, the arrival of a new MacKenzie would have been the talk of everyone, so I have my doubts that your story is true."

"Well, we..." Cate tried, also stammering. "We're not... we didn't..."

"Perhaps I'm asking the wrong question," Randolph interrupted her. "Rather than WHO are you, perhaps I should ask WHEN are you from?"

Cate froze, eyeing the timepiece sticking out of his pocket before glancing at Jack.

"I'll take that as an affirmation that my theory was correct," Randolph said. "You're time travelers. Future, I'd say, since neither of you are one of my parents or grandparents."

Cate swallowed hard and nodded. "Yes, you are correct."

He sipped at his drink, a slight smile on his lips. "I'd ask what you're doing here but I shouldn't know that. But now that I am aware of the circumstances surrounding your visits, that should make whatever you're here to do easier for you."

Jack winced and clasped his hands in front of him. "Sorry about lying to you, but you can imagine the position we're in, I'm sure."

"Absolutely," Randolph agreed.

"Thanks for your understanding. We'll take our leave now and return to our own time. Please enjoy the rest of your evening."

"Oh, before you leave, Catherine, you will still attend tea with my wife?"

Cate's forehead crinkled at the question and she nodded. "Yes."

"Oh good, I worry about her adjustment to country life. I'm certain it would make her happy."

Cate smiled at him again as she and Jack turned to leave.

"One more thing," Randolph said.

They turned back, and he eyed each of them, his eyes narrowed. "If you're time travelers, that means one of you is a MacKenzie and one of you is a Reid. I'm going to bet you're the MacKenzie." He pointed to Cate.

A grin swept over Cate's features. "I am, yes."

"Ah, I knew it, I knew it. She's got the MacKenzie spunk. But, by golly, you're a Yank!"

Jack tugged at his collar and grinned. "A little too much, in my opinion, sir."

"And you've all the practicality of a Reid," Randolph added.

Cate chuckled at the sentiment. "A little too much, in my opinion."

Randolph smiled at them. "Well, I won't hold you back any further, I'm sure you know the way to wherever will return you. I look forward to seeing you both again and good luck to you in whatever it is you're trying to do."

"Thank you," Cate said as they stepped from the room.

They hurried without a word to each other up the main staircase and to the bedroom closet. They returned to the present, where Jack breathed another sigh of relief.

"Wow," Cate said.

Jack tugged his collar open and wrinkled his forehead. "You aren't kidding! How did he figure it out? Are we the worst time travelers ever?"

Cate laughed as she tugged her train behind her, passing into the bedroom. "He strikes me as being intelligent. And we had some rather large gaps in our story in retrospect."

“Our second meeting only and he calls us right out. I didn’t think I was going to stay upright.”

“Silver lining, we don’t have to sneak around as much. Now he knows, I get the impression he also realizes we’re doing something back there and that if push came to shove, he’d cover for us.”

Jack put his hands on his hips. “Yeah, I’m not sure I want to push our luck on that.”

“Me either, I agree we should continue to be careful but at least some pressure is off.”

“I could use some of your optimism, Cate.”

“Or my spunk,” she said, pointing to him with a wink.

“You have that to spare, lassie. Oh, I can’t believe we have to do this again in two days.” Jack rubbed his forehead with his fingertips.

Cate sank onto the bed, the fabric of her dress falling to her ankles. “Hey, you’ve got it easy! You just have to stay hidden. I have all the hard work.”

“Speaking of hard work, did you notice anything out of the ordinary during the dinner?”

Cate shook her head and shrugged as she toyed with the lace on her sleeve. “I didn’t. If there is an affair, it’s well hidden. Although, I don’t believe that story. I’m not sure which servant it was from the men that were serving tonight, but I didn’t see anything suspicious.”

“Neither did I. It would be helpful if we could identify the servant.”

“I agree. It doesn’t help that there will be no pictures of him. We only have his name. Our best bet is to continue to travel back and spend time in the household and hope to identify him by his name.”

Jack scowled at the statement. “Not what I wanted to hear. But I agree.”

“We’re almost halfway through the month, leaving us only two-and-a-half weeks to get more information. It doesn’t help that in less than a week we’ll be tethered to our time for a week.” Cate flung her arms in the air.

“I can’t say that I’m upset being tethered here as you put it. But we’ll do what we can before your guests arrive and after.”

Cate rose to her feet, steadying herself as the dress shifted. “Thanks, Jack. I think it’s time we get out of these clothes.”

“I agree. And you’re welcome. I’m actually starting to find this interesting. Randolph seems like a good man. I hope we can help him. I hope you’re right about his innocence.”

Cate smiled at him and nodded as she tugged her train up. "I'm glad! Now, let's change out of these clothes."

Jack loosened his collar further with a grin. "I'll second that."

"Me too. I agree with you on the clothing perspective!"

He pressed his hand to his heart. "Oh, wow! You mean you agree with me on something? I'm flattered!"

She rolled her eyes at him, laughing as she stepped into the hall. "See you tomorrow, Jack."

"See you tomorrow, Cate. I'll let myself out when I've changed into normal clothes."

Cate toddled back to her room, gaining a new admiration for the women of this century. Wearing these dresses was not an easy feat. Neither was undressing alone, but she managed, feeling as though she was wearing nothing but air in her normal clothes compared to the weight of the evening dress.

She was exhausted after the evening, not only from traipsing about in the dress but also from the demanding social engagement. The tension she experienced most of the night hit her like a palette of bricks. After changing, she took Riley out for a short walk then cuddled under a blanket on her chaise with Riley curled on her lap. It didn't take long before she was nodding off. With that, she turned in early, sleeping well despite the day's excitement.

She awoke the next morning still riding the high of her Victorian-era dinner. Her trip the following day pushed to the forefront of her mind. She spent over an hour selecting the dress she wanted to wear for her tea with Victoria. After a long deliberation, she selected a pink and white striped gown.

After lunch, Cate spent the time doing some research. While on a break, she found an email waiting from Molly.

Cate! We're less than a week away! I'm so excited! I can't believe in four days I'll be on a plane to England and in five I'll be in Scotland staying at a castle with a Countess! I have been talking nonstop to anyone who will listen about my upcoming trip! I think Jeff is getting annoyed with me. Well, I can't tell if he's more annoyed that I keep reminding him about your turn of good luck or if he's annoyed by my

lack of focus on the job. Either way, in four days, I won't have to think about him or work or Aberdeen for ten whole days! I am counting the days down!

FOUR TO GO!

Molly

Cate smiled at her computer screen. Molly's enthusiasm for her upcoming trip thrilled her. Putting her time traveling on hold would be a disappointment, but Molly's presence should more than make up for it.

Before Molly's arrival, though, she had a few trips to the past to make. They brought a smile to her face as she typed a reply to Molly, stating how eager she was for her arrival and that she, too, was counting down the days. After finishing her email, she went back to her work, concluding just before dinner.

After dinner, she discussed a plan with Jack for their trip the following day. He detailed an entire plan of traveling to town and putting in a few appearances to cover their tracks while Cate enjoyed tea with Lady MacKenzie. He hoped the plan would make up for the lack of scuttlebutt in the town over their arrival.

With a solid plan in place, Cate slipped between the sheets to count down the hours. She tossed and turned most of the night as excitement coursed through her. Regardless of her lack of sleep, she sprang from her bed the next morning.

As she lounged on the banks of the loch with Riley, she gazed at the reflection of the castle, imagining the tea set Victoria may use, the tea sandwiches, scones, and cookies. Would Victoria wear a blue dress? Or perhaps a rose one?

She smiled at the vision of the tea she'd concocted in her head. Soon enough she would find out firsthand what the tea set looked like and what fashions Victoria would wear.

She returned to the castle and, after her lunch, she began her preparations for the trip. She fussed with her hair, trying several styles before settling on one and starting the process of dressing.

She worked through the complicated fastening, biting her lower lip as she stretched her arms behind her. After completing her efforts, she tottered down the hall, meeting Jack in the 1850s bedroom.

The two entered the closet and used the timepiece to travel back to 1856. They slipped through the halls unnoticed, circling around the castle and parting ways in the gravel driveway. With a wave to Cate, Jack made his way toward town as she turned back toward the castle.

As she approached the castle's main entrance, she smoothed her skirts and fussed with a lock of hair. Thomson answered the door seconds after she knocked.

"Please come in, Mrs. MacKenzie. Lady MacKenzie is awaiting you." Thomson motioned for her to follow him, leading him down the hall toward the tearoom.

Victoria sat at the table in the middle of the large white marble floor with a baby balanced on her lap. She glanced up with a gracious grin. "Mrs. MacKenzie, welcome. I am so grateful that you could join me for tea."

As Cate entered the room, Victoria nodded to the woman standing nearby. The woman rushed to relieve Victoria of the child, exiting the room in an instant.

"Please sit down, Mrs. MacKenzie."

Cate approached the table, taking a seat next to Victoria, and removing her gloves. Victoria poured tea into two porcelain cups with red roses.

"Thank you for the invitation, Lady MacKenzie. I appreciate how welcoming you have been in my first few days in Dunhaven."

Victoria smiled at her, offering her a tea sandwich. "Please, call me Victoria, we're family. And how have you been finding our little hamlet?"

Cate selected one and nibbled on it before sipping her tea. "Quite charming, Victoria."

"I detect an American accent. Where in America are you from?" Victoria inquired.

"The midwestern United States. You may know of Chicago? It is the closest large city to where I was raised."

Victoria nodded her head. "And how did you meet my dear husband's cousin, Jack?"

Cate stuck to the backstory that she and Jack had prepared. "I was visiting my aunt in New York. Jack was traveling on business. We were seated next to each other at a dinner party hosted by one of my aunt's close friends."

"How charming," Victoria said before sipping at her tea.

"And how did you meet Lord MacKenzie?" Cate asked.

“Randolph was in London, as was I, staying with relatives. We attended a ball together. After the ball, he sent me a sonnet and asked to court me. I declined but his enthusiasm proved too much for me. He sent notes and flowers almost daily until I agreed to be courted.”

“How romantic,” Cate answered as she recalled the sonnets she’d found while exploring the castle. Randolph had been quite the paramour, expressing his heartfelt emotion many times to woo the beautiful Victoria into a courtship and marriage.

“Yes,” Victoria reflected with a smile. “How are you settling into your new home? I am disappointed you are not staying with us. It would have been lovely to have family stay in the castle.”

Cate sidestepped the question, sipping her tea before answering. “We are settling in nicely, thank you for asking. Are you and Randolph the only family in the castle?”

“Primarily. Randolph’s younger brother, Lorne, stays with us now and then. He offers little companionship to either of us. Other than our staff and Ethan, our infant son, we are alone.”

Cate narrowed her eyes as she noted Victoria did not mention the occupant in the tower. So, the secret was either kept by her or she didn’t know. “It must be quite a change from your London life.”

“Yes,” Victoria said with a wistful gaze out the window. “Quite a change for me.”

“How do you find Scottish country life?”

“Peaceful,” Victoria answered tactfully. “How long do you and Mr. MacKenzie plan to stay in our little hamlet?”

Cate nibbled at her sandwich again. “We are uncertain, but at least through the end of the month. Perhaps through part of November.”

“Oh!” Victoria exclaimed, her eyes lighting up and a grin spreading over her features. “Then you’ll attend our Halloween Ball on All Hallows’ Eve! Please say you will!”

Cate froze at the request, staring into the woman’s dark eyes. Should she accept the invitation to attend the ball where a murder would occur?

CHAPTER 13



Cate swallowed hard as she considered the invitation. At that ball, a murder would occur. Would she find her ancestor the guilty party or could they piece together the crime and spare his life?

She forced a grin on her face. "It sounds delightful, thank you for the invitation."

Victoria clapped her hands. "What a fortunate turn of events. I am so pleased to have family attending. You should dine with us again before the party."

"We would love to dine with you again."

Victoria clasped her hand and squeezed. "Oh, you shall do so more than once, I hope."

"Thank you for your gracious hospitality."

"Will you be able to join us for a private dinner party two days hence?" Victoria asked before sipping her tea.

Cate contemplated a moment as the invitations continued to roll. "I must check with Mr. MacKenzie, but I believe our schedule would accommodate it, yes."

"Wonderful. I am so pleased."

"Well, have you ladies solved all the world's problems?" Randolph asked, entering the tearoom. Jack trailed behind him.

Victoria chuckled and grinned at him. "Oh, Randolph! We have not but we have decided that Mr. and Mrs. MacKenzie shall dine with us two days hence and that they shall attend our ball on All Hallows' Eve!"

Randolph eased into a chair at the table. "Divine! I am so pleased. I do hope you'll join us often for dinner at the castle. It's splendid having family nearby."

"As much as our schedule permits and without us wearing out our welcome!" Jack answered as he joined them.

"Magnificent!" Randolph answered as he rapped his knuckles on the table.

Jack shot the man a sideways glance. "I had one request, if it's not too much to ask."

"Ask away, cousin!" Randolph said.

"I hope you don't view this as ill-mannered, but would it be possible to tour the castle? I would like to see it all."

"Well, certainly, old chap. Shall we do it at the upcoming dinner party?" Randolph clapped him on the back.

"That sounds perfect, yes," Jack answered with a nod.

"Then we shall see you in two days forth and shall give you the grand tour of our family's home!"

"Well," Jack began, rising to stand, "I suppose Catherine and I should be on our way."

Cate stood and thanked Victoria for her hospitality.

Randolph rose with them. "I'll walk you out."

He led them to the main stairs. "I shall leave you here, dear friends. I know not the reason you are here but if I may say, I hope it keeps you returning to us. I haven't seen such a pleasant and cheerful look on my wife's face in months."

Cate smiled at him. "We plan on it. We'll see you in two days!"

"I bid you both a fond farewell until then," Randolph said before he turned and strode down the hall, not glancing back.

Cate and Jack made their way to the bedroom, returning to their own time. Jack breathed his usual sigh of relief.

Cate patted him on the arm. "Good going getting us the tour of the castle!"

Jack grinned and wiggled his eyebrows at her. "Thanks. I thought you would appreciate that."

"Let's see how he handles the tower when we tour the castle."

"I'm interested in that, too. He seems like a nice chap. I hope we don't find anything untoward."

Cate snickered, covering her amused expression with a hand. “Did you just say chap?”

He loosened his collar. “Sorry. I guess the past is rubbing off on me.”

“Anyway, I can’t imagine anything untoward. He seems enamored and very much devoted to his wife. He dotes on her. After talking with him I’d be shocked if he was the rogue everyone made him out to be.”

“Perhaps he’s a fantastic actor.”

“Perhaps. But he seems so genuine.”

“I guess we shall see,” Jack responded.

Cate nodded in agreement. “Well, I’m going to change and get ready for dinner.”

“Great plan. We need to devise a strategy for the upcoming dinner with Randolph and Victoria, too. Although, this should be an easy one. We’re off the hook with Randolph, no other guests to worry about, and I’m starting to get used to the 1800s!”

Cate cocked her head, her eyebrows raised. “Wow! Are you beginning to enjoy this?”

Jack laughed and shook his head. “I wouldn’t go that far, Cate.”

Cate made her way back to her bedroom suite to undress, happy to change back into modern clothes. She took Riley for a quick walk before dinner then spent the rest of the evening lounging on her chaise.

The following day Cate spent relaxing. Although she enjoyed her trips and savored every moment of her excursions to the past, time difference was proving more difficult than she was prepared for. Akin to jet lag, Cate found herself fatigued from living her double life. She spent hours in the past. Upon coming home, however, only a short period of time had passed. The result meant her days were longer than twenty-four hours.

She spent her relaxing day researching castle history for her new book, though she couldn’t deny the best research was likely spending her time immersed in the past. After her weekly lunch with her staff, she and Jack outlined a plan for the upcoming dinner party in 1856.

With a plan in place, Cate wandered back to the kitchen to collect Riley who had been contentedly chewing a bone there.

As she approached the space, Mrs. Fraser’s voice carried down the hall. “Now where could that have gone? Have you seen it, little Riley?”

Cate wandered into the space, her brow furrowed. “What’s going on?”

Mrs. Fraser waved her hands in the air in frustration. “Oh, well, I’m afraid my old age is catching up to me.”

“What?”

“I could have sworn I set out two pieces of meat for tonight’s dinner. But I cannae find the smaller one of them. I must not have put it out. Well, looks like I’ll have to make do with what I have. It’ll be enough, but I won’t be able to put any away for sandwiches over the weekend, in case your guest wanted a quick snack.”

Cate waved away her concern. “Aww, well don’t give it a second thought, I’m sure we’ll be just fine without it, Mrs. Fraser. Nothing to worry about.”

“Aye, you’re right, Lady Cate.”

Cate gathered Riley and his bone. She intended to spend some time selecting her next dress before settling in her sitting room for a lazy afternoon. After another debate over two dresses, she selected a demure dark blue gown, much less grandiose than her previous dinner gown since they would only dine with family.

She spent the rest of her day researching before turning in early, the extra hours catching up to her.

Following her early night, Cate awoke refreshed. She would spend another day on pins and needles in giddy anticipation of her upcoming dinner party. It had been years since Cate had any family. When her parents died, she assumed she was alone, with no family to speak of. Although Randolph and Victoria’s familial connection spanned generations, time travel had made them seem like immediate family.

Cate had already excused both herself and Jack from dinner, using the explanation that they had a few errands for the estate to take care of in town. With that news, Mr. and Mrs. Fraser had left the castle early, heading home for a quiet dinner. That left Jack and Cate alone to dress and travel back for their dinner party.

The familiar excitement crept into her body as she watched the second hand of the timepiece slow to a crawl. Within an instant, they were whisked back to 1856. Sneaking from the castle, they made their way to the front door where Thomson greeted them. They reentered the castle, this time as guests. Thomson showed them into the sitting room where Randolph and Victoria awaited them.

“Ah, Jack, Catherine, lovely to see you again,” Randolph said, preparing a cocktail for them both.

“Yes, thank you for joining us for the evening,” Victoria greeted them.

“The pleasure is all ours,” Jack answered as he eased onto the couch. “And I must confess, we are looking forward to the tour.”

“Yes,” Cate added, “I am fascinated by your home. There is nothing comparable in my country.”

Victoria cocked her head and furrowed her brow. “Are there no grand homes in America?”

“Grand homes, yes. Castles, no,” Cate answered.

“My wife is quite taken with your home,” Jack added.

“Well, then we should start the tour!” Randolph suggested, raising his glass to them.

“At your convenience, sir,” Jack said.

Randolph showed them out of the sitting room. They spent over an hour touring the house. Randolph pointed out several unique features. Cate found it fascinating to see the castle a mere sixty-four years after it was built.

They concluded their circuit, ending back in the sitting room to enjoy a cocktail before dinner. Conspicuously missing from the tour was that particular tower room.

Cate took a chance mentioning it during their pre-dinner conversation. “I noticed a turret while Jack and I walked the grounds. Forgive me,” Cate said, pressing a hand to her forehead and offering a demure smile, “what room was it on our tour?”

“Ah, we didn’t visit it on the tour, dear Catherine,” Randolph answered.

“Oh, what a pity. I hoped to see it.”

There was a pause in conversation.

Jack flicked his gaze to Randolph as he tapped the side of his glass. “I’m afraid my wife has romantic notions about that tower. White knights rescuing princesses and so on.”

Randolph roared with laughter. “I’m sorry, Cousin Catherine. There are no white knights or princesses. I’m afraid the only thing you’ll find in our tower room are chests full of old articles from past generations. I doubt one could even set foot in the room.”

Cate cast a fleeting glance toward Jack before offering a smile to Randolph. “Well, there is my romantic bubble burst.”

“I’m so very sorry to have crushed your quixotic concept of our home. I can only hope to make it up to you with our dinner.”

Thomson appeared as if on cue. “Dinner, sir,” he announced.

“What perfect timing,” Randolph said as they stood to enter the dining room.

As they sat for dinner, Cate feigned forgetfulness. “Oh, how silly of me, I seem to have left my bag in the sitting room.”

“Oh, you mustn’t worry, nothing will happen to it,” Victoria reassured her. “We will all remember to retrieve it before you depart.”

“Oh, thank you. I should like to keep it with me. If it isn’t too much trouble, perhaps one of your footmen could retrieve it?” Cate waved a finger in the air at one of the men with a hopeful expression.

“Of course,” Randolph said. Turning to the nearest footman, he said, “Andrew, retrieve Mrs. MacKenzie’s bag, wouldn’t you?”

Cate offered a smile to the short, dark-haired, dark-eyed man, though his mouth seemed to be set in a perpetual scowl. He left the room without a word, returning a moment later with Cate’s bag.

She smiled at him again as he handed it to her before shooting a glance at Jack. Jack arched an eyebrow, giving her a knowing glance and a slight bob of his head to acknowledge that they’d just identified the victim.

Dinner conversation turned to the upcoming Halloween ball that Lord and Lady MacKenzie were hosting. Cate showered Victoria with her praise for the idea.

“I hope it is a success and we can make it an annual event! It promises to be so much fun,” Victoria responded.

“We are looking forward to it,” Cate assured her.

“I am thrilled you are attending. It has made my planning more enjoyable knowing we can share it with family. And on this subject,” Victoria continued, “my dressmaker is coming Saturday mid-morning. We will finalize options for my ball gown. I was hoping you’d not have plans, Catherine, and could call at that time. Perhaps she can design something for you as well? Unless you have a gown already or prefer your own dressmaker?”

“Oh,” Cate began, glancing at Jack then her dinner plate, unsure of what to say.

“I expect you can fit it into your schedule, can’t you, dear?” Jack encouraged, nodding at her. “You’ve not found a dressmaker you’re fond

of.”

Cate smiled at him before flicking her gaze to Victoria. “Thank you for the invitation, Victoria. I have given no consideration to my gown. This is very helpful.”

“Splendid!” Randolph said, “it appears you ladies have everything under control.”

“Oh, but there are so many details to attend to,” Victoria corrected.

Randolph offered his wife a grin and a wink. “Well, all the important details, anyway.”

The dinner continued with pleasant conversation about the upcoming ball and other frivolities. They finished their night with a nightcap before Cate and Jack, escorted by Randolph, slipped upstairs to return to their own time.

“Well, that was an interesting evening,” Cate said as she slipped into the library’s armchair after changing to modern clothes.

“Rather enjoyable,” Jack admitted, slouching into the supple leather.

“And very informative!”

Jack dipped his chin at her and pointed a finger in her direction. “Yes, a clever ruse on your part to elicit the name of the servant.”

“Lucky, too,” Cate said, “Randolph chose Andrew. And he omitted the tower room from the grand tour! We know it’s not full of boxes, we’ve seen a woman there.”

“Yes, I found it interesting how Randolph side-stepped that when you asked about it.”

Cate tapped her chin. “I wonder why.”

“I don’t know. But if he is lying about it, I can’t imagine it’s for any good reasons.”

“I’m afraid I can’t argue with you,” Cate admitted.

A sinking feeling filled her. Perhaps Jack had been right. Maybe Randolph was a madman, clever at hiding his murderous tendencies. He’d already lied to them once. Would he do it again?

CHAPTER 14



Cate pondered the information they'd received earlier. Or specifically, the lack of information. Why had Randolph lied to them about the tower room? What was he hiding? And would he kill to keep it hidden?

"Maybe I'll learn something at my fashion show with Victoria on Saturday. Thank you for the encouragement to accept her."

"Well, you need a dress, I'm sure. Although, I'm not pleased you'll be going on your own."

"I'm rather sorry about it too," Cate acknowledged. "I was hoping you could have taken a peek around the place while I enjoyed my fashion show."

"Gee, and here I thought you cared, Cate."

Cate grinned at him. "I'll also admit I will miss you. The only times I've traveled alone were by accident! And they were scary!"

"That's because you assumed you were seeing ghosts!"

Cate chuckled at her early experiences with time travel, recalling the nonsensical information she had been faced with and how she had concluded the castle was haunted.

"Well, it's a lot more fun this way. But I'm sure I can handle a small shopping trip while you pick up Molly from the train station. Thank you again for offering to get Molly. I didn't want her driving for hours by herself in a foreign country."

“My pleasure, Cate. Just don’t be late from your little shopping excursion! I don’t want to explain where you are to anyone!”

She winked at him as she waved the timepiece in the air. “I’ll make sure to keep an eye on my time! Now, I suppose I should let you go home. We both need rest before the meeting with Mrs. Campbell tomorrow.”

“Yes, these extra hours in my day are really becoming exhausting. So is Isla Campbell. So, I will bid you adieu, m’lady!” Jack stood and bowed extravagantly.

Cate yawned as she climbed into bed after seeing Jack off. The extra time to her day exhausted her and so did the prospect of an Isla Campbell meeting. She needed all the rest she could get for the three-hour meeting.

Cate dragged herself from bed the following morning. While she had slept well despite her evening’s excitement, she dreaded the planning meeting. Today promised to be a humdinger. With one week to go before the party, Mrs. Campbell wanted to discuss every detail. She had insisted Jack and Mr. Fraser be present to account for the exterior decorating plan.

Cate shortened her walk with Riley to accommodate the meeting, scheduled for 9 a.m. Mrs. Campbell arrived fifteen minutes before her scheduled time. This time, Cate was prepared for her early arrival. She met her at the front door, showing her into the library to begin their discussion.

“I can hardly believe we are less than a week away!” Mrs. Campbell exclaimed as she entered the library with Cate.

Cate led her to the set of armchairs, sinking onto one. “It has snuck up on us, hasn’t it!”

“Oh, and I am so glad you both could join us, Jack and Charlie,” she said, greeting the two men. “Forgive me for taking up your day, but I am finicky about every detail. We must strive for perfection with this ball.”

“A noble goal,” Jack answered.

“I agree,” Cate added. “Where shall we begin?”

Mrs. Campbell perched on the armchair next to Cate. “Well, I believe we should begin with the external decorating scheme.”

Mr. Fraser opened his folder. He spread his design, notes, and orders across the low table centered between them. “I have made...” he began.

“Yes, Lady Cate showed me your design. I found it...” She paused. “Quaint. I had a few ideas to spruce it up. Give it a more sleek, modern design.”

Mr. Fraser sat straighter in his chair, a frown on his face.

Mrs. Campbell began to remove notes from her own folder.

“Oh, that won’t be necessary,” Cate interjected with a wave of her hand.

Bewilderment crossed Mrs. Campbell’s face as she arched an eyebrow at Cate. “Oh, while I realize Charlie has presumably made the required arrangements. I deemed that...”

“He has not only taken care of all the required arrangements, but I considered the design perfect.” Cate lifted her chin with a smile.

“I appreciate your candor, Lady Cate. Although, my concern stems from the clash it may provide to the interior design that we have planned.”

Cate shook her head. “Mr. Fraser’s exterior design will not be changed. I don’t consider the designs clashing, but that they provide a complimentary contrast.” She punctuated her statement with a curt nod.

“Surely there’s some room for...” Mrs. Campbell tried again.

“The design will remain unchanged. That is final. Now, let’s proceed. Mr. Fraser, you were saying?” Cate focused her attention on the older man.

Mr. Fraser nodded, offering an appreciative smile to Cate. “Aye, as I was saying, there are several elements involved in my design. Banners are ready and we will hang them on Monday. Trimming is complete, we will make final adjustments on Monday to the gardens. I arranged everything needed for the lighting. Lighting will arrive on Tuesday. Bailey’s farm is bringing the pumpkins and cornstalks for us on Wednesday. We are, from our end, ready to go, Lady Cate!”

“Wonderful,” Cate answered. “Mrs. Campbell, how are we with your arrangements?”

Mrs. Campbell, a frown still on her face, began, “Would it be possible to do a walkthrough to envision the exterior proposal?”

“Yes, we will complete a walkthrough of both the interior and exterior.”

Mrs. Campbell gave the briefest of smiles. “Wonderful,” she said in a monotone voice. “Well, on my end, all arrangements are taken care of, also. Linens have been ordered and will be delivered to the town library on Monday. Tables and chairs will arrive on Wednesday. Lighting and other decorations are also coming Wednesday. The musicians have been confirmed. I approved all final menu choices with the caterer yesterday along with our final numbers. Which, if I may add, are fantastic. This event sold out weeks ago. It is the event of the season!”

Cate smiled at her. “I’m glad this has been a success so far. With all your planning and attention to detail, it will be a very grand event.”

“Oh, I do hope so!” Mrs. Campbell exclaimed. “Well, shall we begin the walkthrough? I’m eager to see the gardens and get a clearer picture of the vision. And we need to discuss the final interior design and placement.”

Cate stood and clasped her hands in front of her. “Sure! Let’s move to the ballroom.”

The group wound through the halls into the ballroom, exiting through the massive double doors leading outside. They began with the gardens. Mr. Fraser and Jack had them in exquisite shape already. They looked enchanting and would, without question, add to the ambiance of the party.

Mrs. Campbell was less enthused about the design but admitted that the gardens were well-kempt. And, while the design was still more quaint than she imagined, she was satisfied with the end result. Cate held back rolling her eyes at the remark. Satisfied was a far cry from the word Cate would have used to describe the design.

At Mrs. Campbell’s insistence, the men stayed on through the interior walkthrough and design discussion. If they needed to assist with decorating, Mrs. Campbell wanted to be sure they had a firm handle on her vision.

When they had fleshed out every minute detail down to the number of prongs on the appetizer forks, Cate ushered them to the kitchen for lunch to conclude the meeting.

Mrs. Campbell feigned confusion about being steered downstairs, surprised that Cate ate with the staff. She had assumed, as she stated as they descended the steps, that she would enjoy a private luncheon with the Countess.

When lunch ended, Cate almost skipped to the front door to see Mrs. Campbell out. She sunk into one of the large leather armchairs in the library after watching Mrs. Campbell’s car disappear down the drive. It was an exhausting morning. Still, they had accomplished everything they needed to. Cate was pleased with the progress and looking forward to the party.

She smiled to herself. Prior to the party, though, she had plans to look forward to. She picked Riley up to take him for a long afternoon walk. As they walked, she contemplated her full day tomorrow. She’d start with her dress fitting with Victoria for the upcoming Halloween ball in 1856. Upon returning from that, she was enthusiastically anticipating Molly’s arrival. In just over twenty-four hours, her friend would join her at the castle. She couldn’t deny the excitement building inside her.

She enjoyed a leisurely evening, her last night alone in the castle before guests arrived. It would be nice to have life in the castle, although she had gotten used to being alone here. She no longer checked dark corners for ghosts or found the moonlit rooms unnerving. Instead, Cate laid in bed admiring the shadows created by the moonlight in her room. She dozed off, dreaming of ball gowns.

The following morning, Jack left the estate early, making the long drive to Edinburgh to retrieve Molly from the train station. Cate readied herself for her trip to the past. Mrs. Fraser was busy with preparations for the soon-arriving guest, making it easy for Cate to slip to the past unseen.

Cate snuck down the backstairs, made her way to the front door and knocked to gain entrance. Thompson showed her to Victoria's private sitting room.

"Oh, Catherine!" Victoria rushed to her, giving her a warm embrace and a kiss on her cheek. "Please come in, sit down. May I offer you tea?"

Cate sank into one of the chairs at the table. "Thank you, tea would be delightful."

Victoria poured them each a cup of tea. "My dressmaker should arrive any moment. Have you thought about design, color, fabric?"

Cate smiled at her enthusiasm. "I hadn't. I hoped to see what you selected so I may complement it."

Victoria beamed as they discussed fashion. "I'm so eager to show you my selection. I've chosen a burgundy ensemble with a drop waist. I plan to try the new bodice style, with the front closure. The button detail it adds to the bodice is quite alluring."

Cate stirred her tea before setting her spoon on the saucer. "It sounds lovely."

"I was thinking, Catherine, with your fair skin and light eyes, perhaps something in sapphire. I believe it would be very becoming on you and a nice contrast to my dress. Oh, I don't mean to be overbearing though if you prefer another color."

Cate sipped at her tea as she considered the suggestion, agreeing it would work well on her. "No, I think that may be the perfect selection."

Victoria squeezed Cate's hands. "Oh, how fortunate I am that you have traveled to us, Catherine!"

Cate took another sip of her tea before she set the cup in the saucer. "I agree! Victoria, I don't mean to be improper, but I hoped I could ask a

candid question?”

Victoria cocked her head, but gave a slight nod to encourage Cate to continue.

“Your footman, the one who retrieved my purse, Alexander, was it? Has he been with you long? I feel as though I’ve seen him before. He seems so familiar to me.”

“Oh, you mean Andrew? He is new to the household. We had a...” Victoria stumbled. “An incident. It left us rather short-handed. Andrew was not highly recommended but, well, given the circumstances, we accepted him.”

“Incident?” Cate questioned, then added, “oh, I hope I’m not prying.”

Victoria offered a tight-lipped smile, “Of course not, you’re family. Several months ago one of our footman left, in the middle of the night, in fact. He claimed to have seen strange people wandering the estate. The final straw was when he was roused from his bed by what he called a screaming banshee.”

Cate straightened in her seat as she listened to the tale, intrigued to know more about the circumstances that had brought the soon-to-be victim to the estate.

CHAPTER 15



Cate raised her eyebrows at the tale of ghosts and mayhem.

Victoria continued, “Oh, how this must sound. I assure you, there is nothing wrong with our home!”

“I don’t doubt that, Victoria,” Cate assured her. “I’m rather surprised to hear that a grown man gave in to such nonsense.”

Victoria raised her cup to her lips. “I quite agree, Catherine. However, it seems these tales abound at every turn. The village is filled with them.”

Cate offered her a shrug as she nibbled at the corner of a biscuit. “People love gossip.”

“Quite. Especially when the rumors are stoked by our servants.”

“Your runaway footman?”

“And others. Just a few months ago, Lorna, one of our housemaids, ran screaming through the house to our housekeeper carrying on about having seen a woman at the top of the stairway.”

Cate raised her eyebrows as she glanced at Victoria over the rim of her teacup. “Indeed! She must have been imagining things.”

Victoria shrugged and waved her hands in the air. “She claimed the woman was shouting at her, babbling incomprehensible nonsense, frantic about something.” She shook her head, dismissing it. “I don’t know. I believe the girl to be unstable, perhaps.”

Cate’s mind returned to when she had moved in a few months before. Prior to her discovery about her true inheritance, she had inadvertently time traveled to this exact time. The maid had not been crazy, she had seen Cate

herself standing at the top of the main staircase. She had shouted to her to help find a missing Riley. She remembered the poor maid fleeing from the room at the sight of her.

Cate set her teacup in its saucer and offered a consoling smile, hoping the maid would not recognize her if they came face to face again. "The mind can play many tricks, particularly in a house this large."

Victoria offered her a broad grin. "How judicious you are, cousin Catherine."

A light knock sounded on the door before it popped open. Two women stepped into the room. "Madame Bisset, m'lady," the maid announced.

Victoria rose and waved the woman to the table. "Please come in Madame Bisset. It is my pleasure to introduce my cousin, Catherine MacKenzie. Mrs. MacKenzie will also attend our ball. We would like to discuss her dress with you."

"A pleasure to meet you, Madame MacKenzie," the woman answered in a thick French accent. "Countess Victoria," she said, kissing Victoria on each cheek, "I have some lovely new designs for you to consider."

"We are excited to see them. Please, sit. Shall I pour you tea?"

"Thank you, Countess." Madame Bisset sat between the two women at the round table. She placed a portfolio in front of her, opening it.

"Oh, please show Mrs. MacKenzie the design for my gown first. Then we'll consider Catherine's dress."

Madame Bisset pulled one design from the pile, showing a large, hooped skirt, a bejeweled bodice with button detail down the center.

"How charming," Cate exclaimed as she studied the design.

Victoria beamed, raising her chin with pride in her selection. "And now, Cousin Catherine, we'll find you something equally charming. Oh, Madame Bisset, we deemed a sapphire blue may be an attractive color for Mrs. MacKenzie. Do you agree?"

Madame Bisset considered it, eyeing Cate up and down. "Yes," she said, after a moment, "quite fitting, Countess."

The ladies spent another hour going over designs, discussing options and adjustments. Cate settled on a hooped skirt with a ruffled bottom and black lace details. The bodice included a ruffled top. Victoria pronounced that she had the perfect sapphire necklace to fit the neckline and insisted that Cate borrow it for the evening.

Madame Bisset gathered Cate's measurements, and they concluded their tea. Cate remained for a few moments after Madame Bisset departed. The two women chatted about what a lovely morning they enjoyed before saying their goodbyes.

Cate asked Victoria if she could stop by the library to borrow a book, stating that she and Jack planned to be traveling for several days. She could not visit with Victoria until October twenty-eighth. After Victoria showed her to the library, she assured Victoria she could see herself out after she made her selection.

Left alone, Cate grabbed a book and snuck back to the bedroom closet to return to her own time. She changed clothes and hurried down to the bottom level of the castle to assist Mrs. Fraser with any last-minute preparations before Molly's late afternoon arrival.

With everything prepared, she waited with Riley as the car drove down the gravel drive toward the castle. Molly's hand waved from inside the window as the car eased to a stop.

She flung her door open and leapt from the car with an excited squeal. "CATE! Oh, my! It's so great to see you!"

She wrapped Cate in a giant hug before holding her arms out to take Riley. "And hello, Riley! Oh, come here you sweet little boy! Oh, you both look so great!"

"It's good to see you, too, Molly. How was your trip?"

Molly's eyes rose up to the castle, darting all over the structure. "Oh, my gosh! Look at this place! Huh? Oh, the trip? It was fine, great. Oh, sorry, I'm just overwhelmed by this whole thing. I mean, I can't believe this is your home!"

"It is incredible!" Cate answered. "Would you like to see the inside?"

"YES! I'm dying to explore every part!"

Jack chimed in before they could enter the castle. "I'm taking the luggage to the Rose Room, right?"

"Yes, that's right, thanks, Jack!" Cate answered.

"Oh, oh my gosh, my luggage, here, I can get it." Molly scrambled to grab her suitcase.

"Nay, I wouldn't have it, lassie. I'll carry your luggage up," Jack admonished with a grin. "You'll get the royal treatment here!"

"Aww, thanks," Molly said.

Cate slipped her arm around Molly's waist and pulled her toward the house.

"I already feel like I'm getting the royal treatment with the chauffeured ride from the train station and now luggage service to the, what was it? The Rose Room, did you say? I could get used to this!"

They made their way through the double doors into the foyer.

Molly's eyes went wide and she pressed her hand over her open mouth. "CATE! This is unbelievable! I can't believe you live here! I am so jealous!"

Cate smiled, remembering her own reaction to seeing the castle's entryway months ago. Mrs. Fraser approached them from across the foyer.

Cate waved her over. "Oh, Mrs. Fraser, what great timing. Please come meet my friend, Molly."

Mrs. Fraser stuck her hand out with a smile. "It's a pleasure to meet any friend of Lady Cate's."

"Molly, this is my friend and housekeeper, Mrs. Emily Fraser."

A giggle bubbled up from Molly. "Lady Cate! Oh, how far you've come, honey! It is a pleasure to meet you, Mrs. Fraser."

"I just came up to determine if there was anything Ms. Williams needed after her trip," Mrs. Fraser said to Cate.

Cate glanced at Molly who was already shaking her head. "Oh, no. No, I'm all good! Thanks, though. And please call me Molly!"

Mrs. Fraser smiled and nodded at her. "A pleasure to meet you, Molly. Well, I'll begin dinner preparations then." She turned on a heel to return to the kitchen.

Cate raised an eyebrow at her last comment. It appeared she wouldn't stand on ceremony with Molly, obliging her by using her first name.

Cate motioned for them to proceed up the massive staircase. "Well, I'll show you to your room. Jack should have your luggage up there soon. You can freshen up before dinner. If you need anything, I'll show you where to find me."

"Thanks, Cate! Oh, I'm so excited to check out my room. Even if it's in the dungeon, it'll be better than my current place."

"I haven't found a dungeon yet. Not enjoying the new apartment?" Cate asked as they ascended the stairs.

Molly groaned and rolled her eyes. "Ugh, no. It's cramped and crappy. Just horrible. I swear I spotted a cockroach or a mouse or something gross

behind the fridge, too.”

Cate grimaced, her delicate nose wrinkling. Her heart sank as she led Molly down one of the wide halls. Unable to continue payments on her house, Molly had no choice but to sell and move into a small apartment. Guilt coursed through Cate over her recent stroke of good luck.

They wove through the halls to the wing containing Cate’s bedroom. A few doors down from the double doors that lead to her suite, Cate said, “Here we are. I’m right down the hall through those double doors if you need me.”

Cate pushed the door open and signaled for Molly to enter first.

Molly’s jaw dropped and her eyes went wide. “Cate, it’s beautiful!”

Molly stepped inside, gawking at the bedroom suite, decorated in a mauve-rose color and appointed with dainty, feminine details. It boasted a large fireplace with a loveseat and a comfortable armchair and ottoman, grouped around the fireplace making a cozy setting. Across the room, a four-poster bed stood against the wall. It also contained an en-suite bathroom for Molly’s convenience.

Cate lifted her shoulders as she smiled. “I imagined you might like it, it’s one of my favorite rooms!”

Jack arrived with the luggage. “Where would the lady like her suitcases?”

Molly fluttered her hand in the air. “Oh, gosh, just anywhere is fine!”

“Maybe by the wardrobe, Jack?” Cate suggested.

Jack wheeled the luggage over to the wardrobe. “All right, easy enough. Anything else you might need?”

“No, I don’t think so, thanks!” Cate answered.

“M’lady!” Jack said, giving his usual bow before leaving the room.

Molly giggled at his extravagant departure. “He’s too much.”

Cate laughed as she lifted Riley from Molly’s arms. “Yes, he’s quite the comedian. Well, I’ll let you get settled. See you for dinner around five thirty. I’ll pick you up right here!”

“Good thing,” Molly said, “I’ll get lost!”

“It can be overwhelming! It overwhelmed me, too, when I arrived. But you’ll learn it!”

Molly’s smile turned upside-down. “Too bad by the time I do, I’ll be ready to leave.”

Cate smiled at her, giving her arm a squeeze. “See you soon, Molly!”

She returned to her bedroom with Riley in tow to relax before dinner. After a quick jaunt with Riley, she made her way to Molly's door, giving it a light knock. Within seconds, Molly whipped open the door.

She had changed her outfit from jeans and a sweatshirt to a pair of black leggings and a burgundy tunic for dinner. "Oh, Cate! You said casual was okay, right? Is this okay?"

Cate smiled and nodded at her. "It's perfect. Is this a new 'Scotland sweater?'"

"It is, yes, do you like it?"

"I do! It's a gorgeous color, it looks great on you!" Cate said.

"Aw, thanks, honey."

"Ready for dinner?"

Molly stepped into the hall and swung her door shut behind her. "Am I ever! I'm starving! Traveling really makes you hungry. Lead the way, Cate!"

Cate and Riley led her to the dining room. Mrs. Fraser set out the last dish on the sideboard. "Lady Cate and Molly, I hope you enjoy your meal! I have a special dessert prepared for you both afterwards. I'll serve that in the library whenever you are ready."

"Thank you, Mrs. Fraser! Please enjoy your dinner," Cate said as she lifted her plate from the sideboard.

"Cate, have I told you how jealous I am of your life?" Molly said, as Mrs. Fraser left the room. "This dining room is beautiful. Well, the whole house is! Castle I should say!"

They made light conversation during their meal about Molly's trip, the latest goings on in Aberdeen and at Aberdeen College. Jeff, Cate's old boss, struggled to fill the needs of the department. After Cate's departure, he'd been forced to cover most extracurricular events himself, unable to convince anyone else to put in the extra time.

"Serves him right, if you ask me. After what he did to you with that tenure-tracked bid, he should get stuck!" Molly said as she cut her roast beef.

When they finished their dinner, Cate led her guest to the library. She'd set Molly's gift out earlier by the fireplace. A roaring fire burned inside, the glow bouncing off the gift bag.

"Oh, wow, Cate! I continue to be awed by your home! Oh, this fire looks so cozy!"

They settled into the armchairs near the fireplace. Riley opted for his usual spot on the rug, cuddled close to the warmth of the fire.

Mrs. Fraser arrived with a tray of her homemade cookies and two steaming mugs of hot chocolate. "This will keep you warm on this chilly October night!"

"Thank you so much, Mrs. Fraser," Cate said as the woman slid the tray onto the coffee table.

"If you need anything else, let me know, Lady Cate!"

"We'll be fine, Mrs. Fraser, and we'll clean up after ourselves. You are free to retire for the evening."

"I'll see you in the morning, then, Lady Cate. I hope you sleep well, Molly." Mrs. Fraser left the room, pulling the doors closed behind her.

Molly wrapped her hands around her mug, sniffing the aromatic beverage before taking a sip. "Mmm, this is the best hot chocolate I have ever had."

"She is a fantastic cook! You'll like these cookies even better!" Cate waved the plate in front of Molly.

Molly took one from the tray, nodding her head to confirm that Cate was correct in her assessment.

"I have another surprise I hope you'll like, too," Cate said as she set the plate on the tray. She rose from her seat and retrieved the gift bag, handing it to Molly.

"More surprises?" Molly mumbled, mouth full of cookie. "Wow!"

"A welcome gift, of sorts. I hope you like it!"

"Aww, oh, honey, you didn't have to do this! But I'm so glad you did!" Molly grinned, pulling the tissue paper out.

She grabbed the blanket out of the bag first. "Oh, this is beautiful! It's so soft and cuddly! I love it!" She reached back in, pulling out the book and photo album next.

Cate settled back into her chair, grabbing her mug. "The book discusses the haunted castles of Scotland. It not only mentions Dunhaven Castle, but that it's considered to be haunted. I thought of you as soon as I spotted this since you were so concerned it was haunted."

Molly giggled and shot a glance to Cate. "I did tease you about that, but see, someone else concluded it was haunted, too!"

"The one with the picture of the castle is a photo album. You can keep all your memories of Scotland in there."

“Aw, Cate,” Molly said, clutching it to her chest, “I love them, all of them! You didn’t need to buy me anything though! The invitation to stay was enough!”

“I enjoyed the shopping and I’m so glad you like everything.”

Molly clung to the items. “I do, I really do.” She closed her eyes, taking a deep breath. “I needed this, Cate. I’m so sorry, I’m sorry.” Her voice broke and a tear rolled down her cheek. She sniffled and sank her head into her hands.

Cate reached over and rubbed her arm in a silent display of support, waiting for her friend to recover enough to talk about what upset her.

CHAPTER 16



Cate's heart broke for her friend as she waited for her to regain her composure.

Molly sighed, wiping her tears away with a hand and sniffing. "I'm okay, I'm sorry. I didn't want to ruin our first night."

"You're not ruining anything, Molly," Cate answered. "There's no need for an apology."

Molly nodded as she continued to wipe at her cheeks. "It's just that I feel..." She paused and blew out a long breath. "So stupid. Just so incredibly stupid. It's so embarrassing."

Cate responded with an apologetic smile.

Molly grasped her hand, giving it a squeeze. "I just can't believe it still sometimes. I can't believe Tom cheated on me, with my own student assistant. What's worse, I introduced them. I took her out to lunch with Tom and myself to thank her for being a great assistant."

Cate listened without responding, allowing Molly to get it out.

Molly waved a hand in the air as she shook her head. "Great assistant, huh? And he just continues on with his life while mine is blown apart. We had to sell the house. I had to move into some crappy little apartment because I can't afford anything else, meanwhile, she moved in with him! They're playing house together somewhere. It makes me sick."

Molly sank her forehead into her palm.

"It's not your fault, Molly. This is all on Tom and your assistant."

“Yeah, yeah, that’s what everyone tells me. Accompanied by that sad, pitying look in their eyes. I hate even walking around town. I feel like the laughingstock. I wish I didn’t have to go back.”

Cate’s shoulders slumped at her friend’s words. “I’m so sorry, Molly.”

Molly continued, “I mean, my sister said I could stay with her for a bit, IN HER BASEMENT.”

Cate wrinkled her nose, her lips forming a grimace.

Molly waved at her expression and nodded. “Yeah, exactly! Like that’s inviting! She couldn’t even offer me a spot in her kids’ playroom, which is essentially her fifth bedroom! Says she’s ‘full up’ now that she’s taking care of Ted’s mom.”

Molly rolled her eyes. She sniffled again, taking a deep breath, and shook her head. “But that’s enough of my misery. I will not let Tom and Aimee ruin the trip I have looked so forward to! At this moment, my life is perfect! I am in Scotland, with one of my very best friends, in her *castle*. I will not spend my time moping! Now, give me another one of those cookies, because I am also *not* counting calories on this trip!”

Cate smiled at her and squeezed her hand. She picked up the tray, offering a cookie to Molly. They spent the rest of the evening talking about Cate’s transition to Scottish life. Molly insisted that Cate give her the grand tour of the castle and grounds the following day

Given the plan for Molly’s first full day in Scotland, they turned in early, after finishing their hot chocolate and cookies and cleaning up their mugs. Cate wished Molly a restful first night in the castle as they parted ways for the night.

Cate bundled tighter in her cardigan as she walked with Riley the next morning, watching the sun cross the horizon and paint the moors with bright oranges, reds, and yellows.

She glanced at the stones of the castle, also colored from the morning sun, wondering how Molly had slept. She hadn’t disturbed her on her way out with Riley, in case she was sleeping in after her long day of travel.

After Riley had his fill of frolicking in the yard, Cate gathered him into her arms and returned to the castle. She pushed in through the front door and hurried up the stairs to Molly’s room.

She waited a few moments after knocking, but received no response. She tried again, pounding louder on the door. She sucked in a long breath as she waited for an answer, again receiving nothing.

She called Molly's name through the door, straining to listen for any noise but none sounded.

Molly must be a sound sleeper, she figured, as she wound through the halls and down to the dining room, planning to check on Molly later.

She pushed through the door in the dining room leading to the kitchen below. Voices and laughter floated up the stairs as she descended.

Cate furrowed her brow as she realized she overheard two women's voices. She recognized Mrs. Fraser's voice and, after a moment, identified the other as Molly's.

She reached the kitchen doorway, peering in at the scene. Molly stirred the oatmeal as she listed easy ways to keep the oatmeal from sticking or becoming lumpy to Mrs. Fraser.

Mrs. Fraser shook raisins into a bowl, a towel slung over her shoulder. "Now, I knew most of those tips, Molly, but that last one I cannae say I've heard before. I will have to try that."

"It works like a charm, I promise!" Molly answered with a grin.

Mrs. Fraser twisted and spotted Cate in the doorway. "Oh, good morning, Lady Cate. You're sneaking up on me again."

Cate wandered further into the kitchen with a laugh. "Sorry. I just got here, I didn't want to interrupt!"

Mrs. Fraser waved a hand in the air. "You'd never be interrupting, Lady Cate."

Molly greeted her with a broad grin. "Good morning!"

"Good morning, Molly. How did you sleep?"

"Great! Best night's sleep I've had in a while. That bed is fabulous! I was up early, so I figured I'd pop down and see if I could lend a hand with anything." Molly nodded to the pot she was stirring. "Make myself useful."

Cate smiled at her as Mrs. Fraser answered, "And what a hand she is! She knows her way around a kitchen, this one! Well, that should be about it. If you ladies would like to head up to the dining room, I'll bring everything up."

"Oh, I assume the oatmeal goes in this server here?" Molly asked, already starting to pour it in. "I'll carry this up if you want to bring the toppings."

"I can help," Cate offered.

Mrs. Fraser shooed her from the kitchen. "Nay, Lady Cate. Besides you haven't got a free hand." She nodded to Riley in Cate's arms.

“Oh, he’s capable of walking.”

“We have a handle on it, Lady Cate,” Mrs. Fraser assured her. “Don’t we, Molly?”

Molly nodded as she continued to empty the pot into the server. “We sure do!”

Cate bit her lower lip as the scene unfolded in front of her. Mrs. Fraser checked the oatmeal as Molly poured it, marveling that there was not one lump and the bottom of the pot was clean.

An idea formed in Cate’s mind. She pressed her lips together, determined to follow up with Mrs. Fraser later.

She led the way upstairs with Molly and Mrs. Fraser trailing behind her. She and Molly prepared their oatmeal as Mrs. Fraser filled their water glasses before returning downstairs.

As they settled at the table, Cate tossed Riley a dog biscuit from the stash Mrs. Fraser set out for him every morning.

She lifted her spoon filled with oatmeal and blew on it. “I’m so glad that you slept well.”

“Oh, I did. Best night’s sleep I’ve had in *months*. I was asleep before my head hit the pillow. I don’t think I even moved.”

Cate sprinkled a few more raisins into her oatmeal and stirred them in. “That’s great, Molly. I was concerned that you had a bad night. When I knocked this morning and didn’t get a response, I worried our ghosts may have gotten you!”

Molly slid the spoon from her mouth as she shook her head. “Nope, great night! That’s why I got up early. I felt so good I thought I’d see if I could lend a hand to your housekeeper. She seems so nice. Hey! I thought you said there were no ghosts!”

“We have no ghosts, I promise. I’m only teasing. But sometimes it can be tricky relaxing in a different bed.”

Molly waved her hand around to encompass the room. “Oh, I’ll have no trouble relaxing in this place. Like I said, I love this place! It’s such a nice change from the peeling paint and dirty wallpaper in my new apartment.”

Molly rolled her eyes. “I can’t wait to see the whole castle. Say, how d’you sleep? I hope you have enough energy to show me *everything* and I mean everything!”

“Plenty of energy here!” Cate assured her. “And I’m sure Riley will love to show you his loch.”

“I can’t wait to see it, Riley!” Molly said to the little dog.

They finished their breakfast, discussing more of Cate’s new life. Molly, true to her word, did not want to discuss any more of her situation. She found her new life “depressing” and didn’t want to be reminded of it as she was living her “dream vacation,” according to her.

Cate obliged her, trying to keep the conversation light. Although, she still experienced a sense of guilt discussing her recent good fortune when Molly’s luck seemed to be on the downturn.

They began their tour after breakfast outside. Molly met Cate in the foyer after running back to her room to grab another one of her special sweaters she’d purchased for the trip.

They stepped into the cool, crisp air, squinting against the brilliant sunshine. Riley bounded in front of the two women as they walked down the path that led to the back gardens.

Molly marveled at the landscaping and the gardens. Light fog still clung to the tops of the moors that surrounded them. They continued to the loch with Molly playing fetch with Riley.

Molly remarked again about the breathtaking scenery as they settled on the banks. They spent another half hour chitchatting about the area and the grounds of Dunhaven Castle before returning for lunch.

Molly leapt from her seat as they finished eating, insisting on the grand tour of the castle’s interior. They spent the rest of their day scouring every detail of the castle, ending back in the library and curling up in the armchairs to enjoy a cozy dinner fireside.

Exhausted after their excursions, they retired early, planning a trip to town the following morning. The two women spent the morning shopping and retrieving Molly’s costume for the ball.

“I hope you have enough room to pack all those souvenirs,” Cate said as she helped Molly haul her loot up to her room.

Molly winced as she stared down at the multiple bags clutched in each of their hands. “Oh, gosh, I may have over shopped. Oh well!”

They dumped the bags in Molly’s room before heading downstairs to greet Gayle. Her car barreled up the drive just as they stepped out the door onto the gravel drive.

Gayle eased her car to a stop near the door. Jack pulled her door open for her, offering his hand to assist her out before he removed the luggage from the boot.

“Hello, Gayle!” Cate called, “how was your drive in?”

“Hello, Lady Cate,” Gayle said, smoothing her sweater over her slacks and reaching out to embrace Cate. “It’s so lovely to see you again, dear. The drive was not too bad, but I will admit, I am stiff! And hello to you sweet Riley!” Gayle gave him a pet under the chin, getting down on his level to greet him.

“Aww, well, I hope a night in one of our beds will ease that!” Cate answered as she motioned to Molly. “I’d like you to meet my friend, Molly Williams.”

“Hello, Molly,” Gayle said, extending her hand, “it’s a pleasure to meet you. Lady Cate has told me nothing but wonderful things about you!”

“Cate always was a fantastic liar!” Molly said with a laugh, shaking Gayle’s hand. “A pleasure to meet you, too, Gayle.”

“Shall we head inside?” Cate suggested. “Mrs. Fraser should have dinner ready in about an hour. I put you in the room you stayed in on your last visit. You can unwind and freshen up after your long drive.”

“That would be lovely,” Gayle responded. “And thank you, Jack, for retrieving that luggage.”

“My pleasure, ma’am!” Jack responded, carrying the luggage in behind them.

“Molly, I’ll be right down after showing Gayle to her room. Would you mind taking Riley into the sitting room for me?”

“Sure!” Molly responded, happy to relieve Cate of the cute pup.

Cate made her way up the stairs with Gayle. The two chitchatted about the upcoming party and Gayle’s costume. She left her in her bedroom to relax and change prior to dinner then made her way back to the sitting room to spend the hour before dinner with Molly.

Cate found her sitting on the floor near the fireplace with Riley, stroking the dog’s fur. “Oh, he’s loving that,” Cate said as she pushed through the double doors.

Molly shot her a glance and chuckled. “Me, too! It’s cozy here by the fire. Oh, I just love it here. And I love everyone’s accents, they all sound so posh!”

Cate eased into an armchair with a laugh. “It sounds normal to me now, but it was so strange to me when I first came.”

“So, Gayle is the secretary for your attorney, right? The guy who sprung the big news on you?”

“Yes, Gayle is his assistant. She helped me move into the castle. She’s so friendly and kind-hearted, she made my transition so much easier. I was delighted when she said she could attend the party.”

The women chatted a few more minutes before heading to dinner. Between Gayle’s and Molly’s outgoing natures, conversation flowed easily during the meal. They planned another trip into town the following day.

As they settled into the sitting room after the meal, Cate’s phone rang. She checked the display, finding Mrs. Campbell’s number on the screen. She swiped to accept the call.

“Hello, Mrs. Campbell.”

“Lady Cate!” the woman’s harried voice sounded on the other end. “Thank *goodness* you answered.”

Cate licked her lips, trying to prepare a response to the woman’s panicked voice when she plowed forward without waiting for a response.

“I know we have a meeting scheduled on Wednesday, but we *must* meet tomorrow.”

“Oh, is everything okay?”

“No,” Mrs. Campbell said flatly. “Everything is most certainly *not* okay. Oh, I cannot believe this. And I apologize for the added stress to your schedule, but, well, quite frankly, Lady Cate, *this* is an emergency!”

CHAPTER 17



“Emergency?” Cate questioned, her heart dropping at the word.

“Yes,” Mrs. Campbell gasped out on the other end of the line.

“Simply disastrous. Oh, I don’t know what we’ll do, but we *must* meet tomorrow to discuss it.”

“All right, Mrs. Campbell, we can meet tomorrow morning. Don’t worry, I’m sure we’ll figure it out.”

“Oh, to have your enthusiasm. See you tomorrow.” The line clicked as the perturbed woman hung up.

Cate arched an eyebrow as she glanced at the phone she’d just pulled away from her ear.

“Everything all right, Lady Cate?” Gayle questioned.

Cate raised her eyebrows as she slid her phone onto the side table. “There is some sort of emergency with the party. Mrs. Campbell requested a meeting. Sorry, ladies, looks like I won’t make our trip into town tomorrow.”

“Oh, poor Cate,” Gayle said with a frown. “No fun for you.”

“That’s okay. I can have fun in Dunhaven whenever I want.”

“Good point, Cate,” Molly chimed in, before twisting to face Gayle. “She lives here so she shouldn’t get to have as much fun as us. We’re on vacation!”

“Well, I’m certain you’ll have a lovely time in town,” Cate answered. “Don’t feel bad for me. I’m certain Mrs. Campbell will keep me busy.”

“Deal,” Molly said, “looks like we’re free to shop ‘til we drop, Gayle!”

“Yes, it does!” Gayle agreed. “Well, shall we head to bed to get a nice rest before our shopping spree?”

“Great idea!” Molly said, thumping her hands against the chair arms as she stood.

They headed to bed, all of them arising early for a quick breakfast before they parted ways. Cate waved them off as she strolled away from the castle with Riley, meeting Mrs. Campbell in the library upon her return.

Mrs. Fraser had already shown the librarian into the sitting room, grumbling to Cate that the woman had arrived well before her appointment and had the audacity to seek Mrs. Fraser out in the kitchen to ask where she should wait. Cate went to the sitting room, Riley in tow, for her meeting.

“Mrs. Campbell, lovely to see you again, although I’m sorry it’s because of an emergency!” Cate said, walking through the door, Riley in her arms.

“Oh!” Mrs. Campbell exclaimed as she saw Cate enter, “you’ve brought the dog.” She eyed him like a bug. “Hello, there.”

“Yes,” Cate said, setting him next to her on the loveseat as she sat down and motioned for Mrs. Campbell to do the same. “Oh, you aren’t allergic, are you?”

“Oh, no, nothing like that. I just thought he might be a distraction, well, I hope not,” she said, waving her hand in the air as if to dismiss her comment.

“He shouldn’t be, he’s well-behaved. I hope we can resolve whatever issue there is quickly, to set both our minds at ease.”

“Yes, so do I!” Mrs. Campbell said.

“So, what is the issue?” Cate prompted.

“Oh, yes, yes, I’m sorry, I’m just not thinking today, ever since I got the call yesterday. Here is the long and short of it, I ordered burgundy tablecloths for all the tables we’ll be setting up in the ballroom and various areas. The tablecloths they sent are red.” Mrs. Campbell paused, closing her eyes as if unable to deal with the horror of the situation. “Of course, I called at once to complain. However, according to them, there isn’t much that can be done. The tablecloth company can’t locate enough burgundy on such short notice. We’d either have to drive to Edinburgh to pick up half of them or use the red.”

Cate sat stunned, never having dreamt that the color of tablecloths for a party would constitute an emergency.

“I know, I know,” Mrs. Campbell continued when Cate failed to answer, “it’s a travesty. Everything we’ve done is planned around the burgundy, napkins, decorations. Since it’s so impactful, I wanted to leave the final decision to you, Lady Cate. I was so flabbergasted. I didn’t know what to do.”

After a moment, Cate collected herself and answered, “Well, given the circumstances, I say we just go with the red. It will be very dramatic!”

Mrs. Campbell’s eyes widened and a shocked expression covered her face. “Really?” Cate’s choice seemed to flabbergast her as much as the so-called emergency.

“Yes. As you stated, there’s little we can do now. None of us can spare the time to drive to Edinburgh to pick up more tablecloths. We’ll have to make the best of it.”

Mrs. Campbell bit her lower lip. “Oh, yes, I suppose so. Well, I hope they don’t clash with the draperies in that room.”

“I’m sure it will be fine. We can describe the color as ‘blood red’. Very Halloween-oriented!”

Mrs. Campbell gave her a tight-lipped smile. “How enterprising of you, Lady Cate. Yes, we shall make the best of a bad situation. And we shall ask for a discount! I will see to that myself!”

Cate stood to end the conversation. “A very good idea, Mrs. Campbell. I know you’ll negotiate a good discount. And crisis averted!”

With some reluctance, Mrs. Campbell also stood. “I suppose so. Well, if you’re positive you’re satisfied with the solution, then I guess I can be on my way.”

“I am certain we can make the red work! It will provide a lovely contrast to the other décor. If things are too match-y, it may seem drab.”

Mrs. Campbell gave her a wide-eyed smile, still horrified by the situation. “Ah,” she began, not sure how to answer.

“If anyone can pull off this look, Mrs. Campbell, I’m sure it’s you and Dunhaven!”

Bolstered by Cate’s confidence in her, Mrs. Campbell raised her chin and broadened her smile. “I’m up to the task, Lady Cate! You can count on me!”

“That’s the spirit!” Cate said as they walked to the door.

“Well, I shall see you tomorrow then for the initial setup. I pray there will be no other crises waiting ‘round the corner to spring on us!”

Cate flashed her crossed fingers at Mrs. Campbell. "Fingers crossed! See you tomorrow, bright and early!"

Cate closed the door after Mrs. Campbell's car pulled down the driveway, sighing and rolling her eyes. She checked the timepiece that hung around her neck. About an hour before lunch remained. It would provide the perfect time to have the discussion she had been planning with Mrs. Fraser.

Cate wound her way down to the kitchen, knocking on the door jamb on her way in to announce her arrival.

Mrs. Fraser glanced up from her work. "Ah, Lady Cate, is the pest gone?"

Cate laughed at her description as she settled at the kitchen table. "Yes, Mrs. Campbell has left."

"And what, pray tell, was the emergency?"

"The linen company sent red tablecloths instead of burgundy."

Mrs. Fraser slung her dish towel over her shoulder after wiping her hands. "Oh, heavens! Well, that certainly was an excellent reason to interrupt your day! That woman is a ninny. I'm sorry, Lady Cate, I should be more charitable, but I just cannae tolerate that woman."

"It's okay, Mrs. Fraser. I marveled at the alarm it caused her, too. There wasn't much anyone could do. The company cannot send the correct color because they don't have enough stock. We'd have to drive to Edinburgh to collect the correct ones, which no one has time to do. Long story short, I told her we'd stick with the red and make do, despite her apprehension that it will clash with anything and everything else that we'd planned."

Mrs. Fraser glanced up from the cookies she arranged, her eyes wide. "Was she expecting you to send someone to Edinburgh, or worse, go yourself?"

"I had the distinct impression that's what she was hoping for. Since that is not an option, red it is!"

"A wise choice, Lady Cate. The red will be fine." Mrs. Fraser gave her a nod of her head before waving a bone in her hand for Riley.

Riley's dark, almond-shaped eyes gleamed with excitement as he danced on his hind legs. "Here you are, little Riley, a nice juicy bone for a special little boy! I'll have your lunch ready soon, Lady Cate. I'll bring it up to the library."

“If you have a moment before lunch, I’d like to speak with you about something, Mrs. Fraser.”

Mrs. Fraser wiped her hands on her apron. “I always have a minute for you, Lady Cate. Do you mind if I continue to prepare lunch while we talk?”

“Not at all. I can help a little, too!”

“Now don’t trouble yourself at all, Lady Cate, I can do it,” Mrs. Fraser said, shooing her away to a seat at the table.

Cate yielded to her demands, taking a seat at the table before launching into her request. “Now, what did you want to discuss, Lady Cate?” Mrs. Fraser asked as she bustled around the kitchen.

Cate bit her lower lip before launching into her request. “Well, I know that you’ve been considering retirement after finding a suitable replacement to train. As much as I’ll regret the day you leave, I realize that it is something we need to plan for, even though I hope it’s still several years off.”

Mrs. Fraser nodded as she set serving utensils out on a tray. “Aye, and I have mixed feelings about it, too, Lady Cate. But don’t you fret, I’ll still be around on the estate, and I hope you’ll let me visit from time to time!”

“Mrs. Fraser, you are welcome to visit or stay anytime you’d like!”

“Thank you, Lady Cate. Though there’s nothing to fuss over yet. I haven’t had any luck finding a suitable replacement to train yet!” She shook her head in disbelief. “Seems no one wants to go into service these days!”

Cate sucked in a deep breath. “About that, I had an idea that I wanted to run past you. Now, I’d only consider it if you are one hundred percent on board with it. If you have even the slightest reservation, I won’t ever mention it again. And please don’t feel obliged to say yes for my sake, only if you’re comfortable and agree.”

“My goodness, Lady Cate,” Mrs. Fraser said, coming to a dead stop, “well, I’m all ears but I’m a little nervous given that disclaimer!”

Cate offered a nervous smile, feeling much the same way. “I had an idea for a replacement for you and someone who can relieve you of some heavier chores until you retire. My friend, Molly.”

“Ms. Williams?”

“Yes. I should tell you I haven’t mentioned it to her at all, so she may not even be interested. I will only mention it to her if you approve of the idea. She hasn’t been having an easy time of things lately. She’s struggling to make ends meet and to get back on her feet after the rug was swept out

from under her. A change of scenery might be just what the doctor ordered!”

“Or just what her ladyship ordered.” Mrs. Fraser nodded her head. “And very kind of you to think of helping her.”

Cate tapped her fingers against the table. “Again, I don’t know if she’d accept. I haven’t mentioned the idea to her. I wouldn’t do that until you’ve had time to consider it and let me know your thoughts. Take a night or two to sleep on it before you give me your answer.”

“I don’t need to sleep on it, Lady Cate. I would be happy to take Molly on to train, if she wants the job.”

Cate straightened in her seat, a grin forming on her lips. “Are you sure?”

“Aye. Molly’s been a good friend to you and she’s a good lassie. Besides, in the end, the choice is not mine but yours.”

Cate shook her head. “No. The choice is half yours, Mrs. Fraser. These are your last few years here. I want you to be happy. You will work closely together in training her. It’s important to me you are comfortable with the choice. So, are you sure? Please take all the time you need to consider it.”

Mrs. Fraser shook her head as she continued with her work. “I needn’t any more time to consider it. I like Molly. She’s a whiz around the kitchen. I’d feel more than comfortable leaving Dunhaven and you in her care once I’m fully retired, which won’t be for several years if I have any say in it.” Mrs. Fraser wagged a finger in the air.

The smile broadened on Cate’s features and her mind leapt ahead to how she’d ask Molly. Though, it also raced ahead to the day she’d have to say goodbye to Mrs. Fraser.

“Well, there it is, you have my blessing. Extend the offer to Molly!” Mrs. Fraser added.

Cate nodded at her. “Okay, I’ll speak with her about it before she leaves. Thank you, Mrs. Fraser.”

“I hope she accepts, Lady Cate. I think she’d be a wonderful addition to the castle! You know, it’s a shame what that man, if you can call him that, did to her. But his loss will be Dunhaven’s gain if she accepts!”

“I hope she accepts too, Mrs. Fraser. I’ll let you know as soon as I have her answer.” Cate beamed at her.

As the conversation came to a close, Jack and Mr. Fraser came through the door.

“Ah,” Jack said, “Lady Cate! Joining us for lunch today?”

“Well, it isn’t my normal lunch day, but since I’ll miss it tomorrow, I’d like to stay today if you’ll have me.”

With no objections, Cate spent her lunch with her staff, discussing the final details to accommodate Mr. Smythe’s arrival.

As Cate settled on the banks of the loch after her meal, she reflected on the conversation she’d had with Mrs. Fraser. Excited to ask Molly to join her staff, she prepared the way she’d make the offer.

After a time, her mind turned to the past. She and Jack had not visited in nearly a week, and she was itching to return to the investigation. They had identified the servant who would become the victim. Could they elicit any other information before the murder?

The busy schedule over the next few days meant they could not risk a trip back even if time almost stood still. With a sigh, Cate collected Riley and returned to the castle, forcing herself to focus on the present.

Tomorrow would kick-start full swing of party preparations. She would need all the stamina she could muster, leaving no energy to live a double-life.

She enjoyed the last few moments of quiet solitude before returning to the castle to prepare for dinner. As she approached, a car wound down the driveway, returning from Dunhaven.

Cate greeted an excited Molly and Gayle as they spilled out of the car with dozens of packages.

“Oh, Cate!” Molly exclaimed, “I think I may need extra luggage and an extra seat on the plane to take all this back.”

Cate eyed the piles of packages in the boot. “I hope they can get the plane off the ground with all of that!”

“She might have to make two trips,” Gayle quipped.

“Only if I can stay another week here between them,” Molly added.

Cate relieved them of a few packages and ushered Riley into the castle ahead of everyone. They climbed the stairs, laden with the purchases and went their separate ways to freshen up for dinner.

Excitement built as the party approached and they spent most of the meal discussing the work ahead of them, opting for an early evening to prepare for the decorating.

After breakfast the next morning, everyone met in the ballroom. Riley opted to spend the day in the kitchen with a new bone from Mrs. Fraser.

Mrs. Campbell arrived early, surveying the crew of Mr. Fraser, Jack, Molly and Gayle. "I see reinforcements have arrived."

"Yes, and ready to work!" Gayle answered with a grin as she smoothed her untucked blouse over her jeans.

"I've gone over the basic plan with them. Today is the delivery and setup of tables, chairs, and so on inside and most of the exterior decorations. Tomorrow, we work on the decorations inside," Cate said.

"And pumpkin carving!" Molly exclaimed with a fist pump.

"Yes, pumpkin carving," Cate agreed.

Mrs. Campbell shook her head and arched an eyebrow. "You Americans and your pumpkin carving."

"I think it's fun, too!" Gayle added. "Are you sure you won't join in the competition, Mrs. Campbell?"

Mrs. Campbell issued a polite but disingenuous smile. "Positive. Well, the truck with the tables and chairs should arrive any minute."

They stood in awkward silence for the few moments it took for the delivery truck to arrive and back to the gardens.

Mrs. Campbell remained in the ballroom, overseeing all items coming in. The others followed Cate to the truck to coordinate and assist with unloading.

With everyone's help, they unloaded the truck in just under two hours. The repositioning and setting up of all items took far longer. They completed the basic set up of the furniture after a working lunch.

They had just finished the meal when the trucks carrying the decorations for outside arrived. The cornstalks and pumpkins seemed endless. It took the better part of the afternoon to unload the materials from the trucks.

Everyone worked until late afternoon, finishing about half of the setup. They planned to finish the rest first thing the next morning. They broke from their work, allowing everyone to freshen up before Mr. Smythe's arrival.

Cate, Gayle and Molly reconvened at the castle's driveway as Mr. Smythe's car pulled down the drive. Jack arrived just as his car slowed to a stop, ready to assist with the luggage.

"Hello, Mr. Smythe," Cate said as he stepped from the car, "it's so nice to see you again. How was your trip in?"

“Lady Cate, hello. The trip was pleasant. I completed a good amount of paperwork on the train.” Cate smiled to herself; the man’s work ethic was limitless. Gayle followed Cate in greeting him.

“I’d like you to meet my friend from the States, Molly Williams,” Cate said, motioning to Molly.

“Hello!” Molly said, thrusting her hand forward. “It’s nice to meet you.”

Mr. Smythe accepted it, pumping it up and down. “The pleasure is all mine.”

“Mr. Smythe, I’ve put you in the Blue Room, as usual,” Cate informed him.

Jack emptied the luggage from the boot. “I’ll take the luggage up straight away.”

“Thank you, Mr. Reid,” Mr. Smythe answered.

Cate motioned toward the doors. “Shall we?”

The group made their way inside.

“I trust you didn’t put your pumpkin carving design in your luggage, Mr. Smythe,” Gayle teased. “Jack might try to peek at it.”

He patted his breast pocket, raising his chin. “I’ve got it here in my pocket. I take no chances.”

Cate chuckled at the truth in his statement.

Mr. Smythe set a foot on the stairs, excusing himself. “If you ladies don’t mind, I’ll take my leave to freshen up before dinner.”

“Okay. We’ll see you at dinner,” Cate answered with a wave.

Gayle and Molly entered the sitting room while Cate excused herself to retrieve Riley before dinner. She meandered to the kitchen.

Mrs. Fraser appeared to be in a frenzy as she entered.

“Mrs. Fraser!” Cate exclaimed. “Is everything all right?”

The woman offered Cate a worried glance. “I’m afraid we have another emergency.”

CHAPTER 18



Cate drew her chin back to her chest at the pronouncement of an emergency. Her stomach turned over and her heart skipped a beat as she wondered if something happened to Riley.

Mrs. Fraser fluttered her hands in the air. “Don’t mind, Lady Cate, it’s not *that* bad. And I’m getting it fixed.”

“What happened? What’s wrong?” Cate asked.

“I had to make a quick change for our dinner this evening. I was short one piece of meat.”

Cate furrowed her brow, not understanding.

“Your little monkey stole one right off the table and disappeared with it this afternoon.”

“RILEY!” Cate exclaimed, eyeing the little pup who laid near the stove as though nothing had happened. “Shame on you!”

Mrs. Fraser shook her head at Cate as she continued with meal preparations. “Oh, don’t blame the poor pup. I practically left it right under his nose. All he had to do was jump on the chair and grab it. It’s only natural that he’d take it.”

Cate collected the dog from the floor, frowning at him. “It’s so unlike him. He’s typically well-behaved. I am so sorry. I should have checked in with you earlier to ask if you needed help. I wasn’t thinking! I shouldn’t have left him with you, you have so much extra work. But, as I said, he’s not usually like this!”

“Oh, it’s nothing to worry about, Lady Cate. I was able to adjust the recipe. Besides, with the stories you’ve told me about your cooking, I’m not sure you could have helped. Oh, I’m only joking, Lady Cate.” Mrs. Fraser winked at her.

Cate chuckled at the assessment. “You are correct, though. Can I do anything to help?”

“Under any other circumstances, I would decline, but since I am behind, would you fill the water and wine glasses upstairs?”

“Yes, I can manage that task!” Cate declared, retrieving the water pitcher from the refrigerator and the opened wine bottle from the counter.

When Cate returned after completing her task, she found Mrs. Fraser’s kitchen back in its usual order. “See, Lady Cate, I told you I had it under control.”

“I never doubted it, Mrs. Fraser.”

“Now, out with you, back to your guests!” Mrs. Fraser pronounced, waving Cate out of the kitchen after she returned the water jug to the refrigerator.

Cate climbed the stairs to the dining room, finding Molly and Gayle already there.

“Ah, there you are, Cate!” Gayle said.

“Sorry,” Cate apologized, “a minor kitchen disaster courtesy of Riley.”

Gayle offered Riley a scratch under the chin. “Uh-oh. What have you done little fellow?”

“The little thief tried to abscond with our dinner!”

“Oh, no! Riley! I hope you weren’t successful! I’m starved!” Molly said.

“Don’t worry, Mrs. Fraser has it under control.” Cate answered.

“I’d expect nothing less!” Gayle said, as Mr. Smythe entered the dining room.

They were seated for dinner just as Mrs. Fraser entered with the meal. The group enjoyed their dinner, making light conversation as they ate. The delicious meal certainly did not hint at any mishaps. After a brief nightcap, everyone retired for the evening, exhausted from their long day.

The group met the next morning for another long day of decorating. Even Mr. Smythe, dressed in a casual ensemble, pitched in to help.

They spent their morning setting up hay bales, cornstalks and pumpkins, adjusting lights and arranging other decorations. Cate worked with Molly

on the displays closest to the ballroom doors.

They positioned a few pumpkins on top of a hay bale, calling to Molly to ask how they looked from the door. She received no response.

“Molly?” Cate called, twisting to face her.

Molly stared up at the castle, biting her lower lip. “What? Oh! Sorry! A little to the left, honey.”

Cate rose to her feet, dusting off her hands. “Everything okay?”

“Oh, yeah, yeah.” Molly waved her hand in the air. “Just me being a downer.”

“What’s wrong? Allergic to hay bales?”

“No. Just realizing the party is tomorrow. I’m still looking forward to it, but... well, it also means my trip is almost over. I’ll be so sad to leave.”

Cate cocked her head, using the moment to broach her idea. “Molly, what if you didn’t have to leave?”

Molly roared with laughter. “If I didn’t have to leave, I’d consider my life perfect.”

A grin crept over Cate’s face and Molly offered her a confused stare. “Do you know something I don’t? Did Mr. Smythe tell you I have a long-lost relative with a castle to give me?”

“No. But... I had an idea.”

“An idea?” Molly raised her eyebrows.

“Yes. Mrs. Fraser, my housekeeper, is planning to retire in the next few years. She was hoping to find a replacement to train, but so far, she hasn’t had any luck. I remember how much you love to cook and bake. And after I saw you two in the kitchen together the last few days, I spoke with her and asked if she thought you might be a fitting replacement. She agreed that you’d be a wonderful selection. So, I’d like to offer you the job.”

Cate bit her lower lip, her eyebrows jiggling. “I realize it may be a surprise and that you may not have an answer, and that’s fine. Please take all the time you need to consider it. Oh, and I realize, also, that this may not even be something you’d consider. That’s okay, too, you’re under no obligation here, Molly.”

“You can... what?” she stopped short as she noticed Molly grinning at her.

Tears welled in Molly’s eyes and she pressed her lips together, shaking her head at Cate. “Oh, Cate. Stop your babbling and give me a hug.”

She drew Cate into a tight embrace. “Thank you for the offer. Your kindness makes me feel all warm and fuzzy.”

Cate squeezed her, patting her shoulder. “I just want to help. You seemed so unhappy when you came. But, please, you’re not obligated to...”

Molly pulled back, interrupting her. “Cate, I would *love* to work for you.”

Cate’s eyebrows raised and a slight grin crossed her open lips. “You would?”

“Yes! Oh, this wasn’t one of those things where I was supposed to decline politely was it?”

“No! I’m thrilled! I just assumed you might need some time to consider it! It’s a big move!”

Molly’s lips puckered into a frown, and she shook her head. “Nope, there’s nothing for me in Aberdeen. You’re right, my life was miserable before I came. I hate living in that town now. I need a fresh start, and nothing’s fresher than a new country! I have been so happy since I’ve been here, it’s the happiest I’ve been in months. I don’t want to leave, but it will be easier knowing I’m coming back... for good!”

Cate pulled Molly into another huge. “I’m so glad you accepted, Molly. There are a million arrangements to make. We have a lot to discuss, salary, start dates, living arrangements and all of that. Oh, I want you to live at the castle, if that’s okay! There are so many details, but it’ll be so fun discussing them!”

“If that’s okay? I couldn’t imagine a better place to live! Oh, Cate! I’m so excited! I believed the best day of my life was the day I arrived here. But I was wrong. Today is the best day!”

Cate grinned at her before she turned back to the hay bales. “We better get this display finished before we get in trouble for slacking!”

“Yes, I don’t want to be fired before I even start.”

With their renewed enthusiasm, they made quick work of the displays.

The garden decorations took the better part of the morning. After the group ate lunch, they gathered in the ballroom to put the final touches on the décor there. By mid-afternoon, everything was in order. After one final walkthrough, Mrs. Campbell was satisfied. The group disbanded to freshen up before dinner.

Cate strolled through the ballroom and gardens one final time before heading up to her room. Festive Halloween décor adorned the ballroom.

Blood red linens covered the tables placed around the room. Seats were placed along the outskirts of the room, adorned with burgundy chair skirts.

Pushing out through the massive doors, Cate entered the garden outside. Transformed into a magical fall wonderland, hay bales, pumpkins and cornstalks greeted her at every turn. Lights swung overhead to allow the guests to enjoy the space well after the sun set. Cate made her way to the far end of the garden, peering back at the castle. Banners swung lazily in the breeze, lending a regal air to the castle.

Only a few final touches remained, the largest of which was the addition of the carved pumpkins. They'd meet in the kitchen this evening and carve them over a dinner of light sandwiches.

Cate strolled back into the house and to her sitting room. She expected Riley to greet her, however, she found the room empty. A wave of panic swept over Cate until she spotted the note on her side table. Mrs. Fraser, despite the fiasco yesterday, thought the pup would be too cooped up for the day. She had "rescued" him from the room, taking him to the kitchen with her for the day.

Cate changed and fixed her makeup and hair then went straight to the kitchen.

She found Riley watching Mrs. Fraser set out the sandwiches. Pumpkin carving stations filled each place setting at the table.

"Good afternoon, Mrs. Fraser," Cate said. "No incidents today, I trust, Riley?"

Mrs. Fraser set the plate of sandwiches on the table. "No incidents, Lady Cate. He's been the picture of perfect behavior."

Cate sank into a seat and scooped the dog into her arms. "I'm glad to hear that. Riley, did you thank Mrs. Fraser for rescuing you?"

"It was my pleasure. I hated to see him alone all day."

Cate eyed the setup for each person complete with a bowl for scrapings and seeds and a set of carving knives. "Well, thank you for taking care of him, Mrs. Fraser. And these sandwiches look great! You have been busy!"

"Aye, Lady Cate. I couldn't help much with the decorating, so this is my contribution."

Cate smiled at her. "You more than contributed by providing us all with lunch! It's going to be a fun evening!"

Mrs. Fraser laid out a variety of baked good on another plate. "I quite agree. I cannae wait to carve my winning pumpkin!"

“Your winning pumpkin, is it? Pretty confident, Mrs. Fraser.”

“That I am, Lady Cate!”

Cate chuckled at the statement as she snapped the lid on the tin of cookies. “Oh, I have some great news, Mrs. Fraser.”

“Oh?”

“I spoke with Molly earlier this morning and she has accepted the position to follow in your footsteps as the housekeeper! There are lots of details that still need to be discussed, but it looks like we’ve got your replacement settled.”

Mrs. Fraser wiped her hands on her apron and beamed at Cate. “That’s wonderful news, Lady Cate! Although, I won’t be leaving until I am satisfied with her work.”

“I’d expect nothing less, Mrs. Fraser.”

Molly joined them next. “Hi girls! I figured I’d pop down and see if I could help with anything.”

“Hi, Molly! I just told Mrs. Fraser the good news! That you’ll be returning to us to learn her position and take over once she retires.”

Molly squealed, waving balled fists in the air. “I’m so excited, I can barely contain myself. It took all in me not to send Jeff my letter of resignation the moment I went to my room. I was too lazy to type it all on my phone, though! But I will send it the moment I get back!”

Mrs. Fraser said, “Molly, I’m so pleased that you’ll be joining us. Lady Cate made an excellent suggestion to bring you on.”

“I’m excited to start! I wish I didn’t have to go home!”

“Well, Miss Molly, you can start right now by setting out a second plate of biscuits from that tin in front of you.” Mrs. Fraser nodded to the tin on the preparation table.

“Sure thing!” Molly responded as she tugged the lid off.

Cate sank into her chair at the table. “Don’t worry, you’ll be back before you know it, Molly. We’ll figure out the details this weekend before you leave, then you’ll have something to look forward to!”

The ladies discussed a few more minor details about Molly’s new position before Mr. Fraser and Jack joined them, followed within minutes by Gayle. Mr. Smythe arrived last, explaining he’d spent a few extra minutes making adjustments to his award-winning design.

Over the next three hours, the group enjoyed their work, conversation, and roasted pumpkin seeds before carrying their creations to the gardens

outside.

After finishing the carving, they enjoyed hot chocolate and cookies before retiring for the evening. Cate tossed and turned, finding it difficult to sleep. Her attention turned from her upcoming party to the one being hosted by Randolph and Victoria. A murder would occur, and she'd met the victim. Yet, they were no closer to discovering why he was murdered or by whom. More questions remained than answers.

Cate threw back the covers and slipped into her slippers. She roamed the halls until she found herself in the tower room.

She squinted as she flicked on the light and stared at the box.

"What happened here in 1856?" she murmured.

She closed her eyes, trying to imagine a scene where an enraged Randolph bashed in his footman's head then tossed his body from the window. She wrinkled her nose. Something didn't fit.

Perhaps the murderer was the mysterious "S." Had she gone mad from being locked into the tower room and murdered a man? But why would Randolph confess?

Cate scanned the room again. The murder weapon was never mentioned in any of the news articles. Had it never been found? Could it still be in the castle?

Cate eyed the wardrobe across the room. It stood six inches from the floor on raised legs. She'd discovered a secret compartment in the furniture piece, but she hadn't looked under it. Could it be hiding a centuries-old murder weapon?

She skirted the boxes and knelt on the floor in front of the wardrobe. She peered underneath. The room's light was not bright enough to pierce the darkness under the wardrobe. She cursed herself for not bringing her cell phone. She considered retrieving it, then decided she would make do without it. Steeling her nerves, she closed her eyes and reached a hand underneath, blindly feeling around.

She yanked her hand back after a moment, her nose wrinkling as she worried about what she might touch. She bit her lower lip and thrust her hand under the wardrobe again.

Her hand struck something. Instinctively, she pulled it back before pressing herself against the floor and squinting into the shadows.

She stretched her arm under again, feeling for the object. Her fingertips found it. Cold metal touched her skin. She grasped it and tugged. The object

swiveled, wedged under the heavy wardrobe.

She squeezed her lips together, yanking at it until she freed it and pulled it from under the wardrobe.

She stared down at the find. A thick layer of dust obscured every surface of the object. She blew on it, sending a cloud of dust billowing into the surrounding air. After a few sneezes, she wiped more dust away and studied the object.

A brass globe sat atop a rectangular stand on the heavy object. She turned the object over in her hands as she studied it.

It nearly slipped from her hands as she glanced at the bottom. A thick smear of rust-colored material covered the bottom. Cate's heart skipped a beat. Was she holding the murder weapon from a centuries old murder in her hands?

CHAPTER 19



Cate climbed to her feet, still clutching the brass globe. She stared at the large brownish red smudge on the bottom, wondering if it was blood.

With her heart still pounding, she threaded through the halls to the kitchen, placing the item in a plastic bag before washing her hands.

She returned to her sitting room and collapsed onto the chaise, staring at the item in her lap.

Could this object be the murder weapon? Why didn't the authorities find the object?

Cate set the paperweight on her side table and checked the timepiece. Already after midnight, she trudged into her bedroom to go to sleep, leaving her mysterious find behind.

The rising sun pierced through her windows a few hours later, awakening her from a dead sleep. She stretched and rose, kicking herself for roaming around the castle for half the night.

After breakfast, activity buzzed in the castle. Final touches were added to the décor in the ballroom and gardens by Historical Society volunteers. The caterers descended on Mrs. Fraser's kitchen to begin party preparations, chasing the woman from her usual haven. She snatched a tin of shortbreads before being ushered out.

Cate sank into an armchair next to her in the library as the woman nibbled on a cookie and read a novel, her feet propped on an ottoman.

"It's nice to see you with your feet up, Mrs. Fraser."

Mrs. Fraser shook her head. "Chased from my own kitchen, I was."

"Good thing, it's your day off!"

"Aye, you mentioned that, but I still don't understand what we will eat for lunch."

Cate grinned at her, arching an eyebrow. "Don't worry, Mrs. Fraser, I have it covered!"

Jack pushed through the doors to the library. "I hope it's not cereal!"

Cate glanced over her shoulder at him. "And what's wrong with that? I'd even spring for the kind with marshmallows."

"You hear that, Mrs. Fraser? And you worried about our lunch."

Cate rose from her seat, smoothing her leggings. "Jack, I had a question for you if you have a minute."

"Sure, what did you need?"

"Come with me, I'd like you to take a peek at something."

Riley leapt onto Mrs. Fraser's footstool, curling in the blanket draped over her legs.

"Well, it looks like you've made yourself quite comfortable, Riley."

Mrs. Fraser shooed her away. "Leave him, Lady Cate. He's nice and cozy. Not to mention, he's keeping my feet warm!"

"Thanks, Mrs. Fraser," Cate said. "We won't be long."

"Take your time, Lady Cate! Both of us are cozy here!"

Cate led Jack from the library toward the back stairs.

"Everything okay with the party preparations?"

"Yes," Cate said as they mounted the stairs. "It has nothing to do with that. I found something I'd like you to take a glance at."

"Care to give any more explanation?"

Cate held a finger in the air, her eyebrow arching. "Yes, but not just yet. I want you to look at it first and give me your impression."

She led him to her sitting room, crossing to the chaise and grabbing the bagged object from the side table.

He accepted it as she passed it off to him, bobbling the heavy object. "Wow, it's heavy."

He glanced at it, turning the bag and its contents around in his hands.

"Something I'm supposed to notice?"

"Turn it over," Cate answered.

Jack's eyebrow arched and he shot a glance at Cat. "Is that blood?"

"I'm not sure, but that's what I thought."

Jack scrunched his eyebrows, staring at Cate. “Where did you find this? And why do you think it’s blood? I mean it looks like blood but why would there be blood on this paperweight?”

“I found it in the tower room, wedged under the wardrobe. The same one where I found the mysterious note from ‘S.’”

Jack screwed up his face before realization dawned on him. “You think this relates to the murder?”

Cate gave him a knowing nod. “Yes. Well, that’s the most obvious idea in my mind.”

“Surely the police would have found this when the murder occurred. What are the chances the murder weapon lay hidden in the tower room for over a century?”

“I wondered about that, too. But I re-read the articles about the murder again. When the body was first found, they assumed he had died from the fall. They wouldn’t have looked for a murder weapon. They would have presumed the fall killed him, whether or not it was an accident. It was only after the autopsy that they realized he was dead before he fell. By the time they searched for the murder weapon a week had already gone by. They could have easily missed it!”

Jack pondered the information, nodding his head. “It’s a long shot, but you could be correct. They found that he was killed by blunt force trauma to the head, right?”

“Right. This is the sort of object that may have struck the fatal blow.”

“Or it could be rust and discoloration from being stuck under the wardrobe for years.”

Cate cocked her head. “I have a method to tell if it’s blood.”

“I’m all ears.”

“We can put a few drops of peroxide on it. If it’s blood, it will bubble. If not, it won’t.”

“Worth a try, I guess. Do you have some?”

“Yes, let me grab it.” Cate disappeared from the room, retrieving a bottle of hydrogen peroxide from her bathroom and an eye dropper. “Okay, open that bag and let’s try this.”

Jack tugged the bag open and removed the paperweight.

Cate filled the eyedropper with peroxide then dribbled a few drops onto the stained surface. Within seconds, the surface bubbled and fizzed.

They shared a glance.

“So, it is blood,” Cate said as she eyed the fizzing liquid.

“Looks that way. You may be right, Cate. We may have a murder weapon in our hands.”

“I’m not sure if that makes me feel better or worse,” she answered as she stared down at the brass object.

“Well, it tells us where the murder occurred, most likely.”

“Yes, I’d say it’s likely the murder occurred in the tower room. I doubt someone bludgeoned Andrew to death somewhere else then went to the tower room to hide this object after throwing his body from the window there.”

Jack nodded in agreement.

“Well,” Cate said, relieving Jack of the object and nesting it back inside the plastic bag, “I expect we’ve learned all we can for the moment from this. We should go grab Riley and head to lunch!”

“Ah, yes, your infamous and mysterious lunch. We wouldn’t want the cereal to get soggy.”

Cate made a face at him, rolling her eyes and shaking her head. “Come on.”

They returned to the library and Cate retrieved the little pup, asking everyone to meet her in the dining room for her mystery lunch.

She waited at the front door for the delivery and carried it to the dining room with Riley trailing behind her.

“Lunch is served, American style!” she exclaimed as she popped through the doors with her bounty

Molly clapped her hands. “Yay! Pizza! Oh, I hope there is pepperoni.”

“There is pepperoni, cheese, mushroom and green pepper!” Cate announced as she plopped the boxes down next to the paper plates and plastic cups she’d set out.

Mrs. Fraser opened one box, the aroma of greasy pizza filling the air. “Why, Lady Cate, I expect I might enjoy this lunch!”

“Mmm,” Jack said, already diving into his mushroom slice, “this might be your best cooking ever, Cate.”

“And you assumed it would be cereal!” Cate retorted, a hand on her hip as her guests filled their plates.

After lunch, Cate and Molly cleared the plates and cups, taking everything to the kitchen for disposal. Riley trailed behind them. Abuzz with activity, caterers bustled around preparing dishes, serving trays and

unpacking food. The exterior door swung open and closed in an endless cycle as people traveled in and out.

They tied up the trash bags and set them near the door when Riley bolted through the open space as a caterer stepped inside.

“Riley!” Cate shouted after him.

She raced to the door as the pup bounded across the yard and disappeared from her sight.

Cate ran a few steps into the grass. “RILEY! RILEY! COME BACK HERE!”

She shouted for several more minutes to no avail. The little pup did not return.

She marched further into the yard, shouting at the top of her lungs.

Molly followed after her. “Maybe we should enlist help. We still have some time before we need to get ready.”

Cate nodded, her face creased with worry over Riley’s off behavior. “Yes, perhaps we should. I’m concerned he ran off because of all the excitement in the house. It may have frightened him. I don’t want him to get too far from the house and become lost.”

Molly patted her shoulder. “Sure. Don’t worry, we’ll find him! He couldn’t have gotten far.”

Cate nodded to her, glancing back over the rolling hills.

Molly thumbed back toward the castle. “Tell you what, you stay out here, keep calling him. I’ll go get the others.”

“Thanks, Molly.” Cate crossed her arms and bit her lower lip as she continued to scan the property.

Within minutes, Molly had the search party organized.

“Thank you all for helping. He went over the ridge over there,” Cate said, pointing in the direction she’d last seen Riley, “I’ve never seen him run so fast. I’m sorry for the trouble, I just don’t want him to become lost if he is frightened.”

“Of course, Lady Cate, we’re happy to help you look,” Mr. Fraser reassured her. “Mrs. Fraser and I will head to the loch, the laddie enjoys it there.”

“Molly, Gayle and I will go to the back garden and see if the chap has gotten himself into the decorations there,” Mr. Smythe offered.

Cate nodded as she tugged her sweater tighter around her. “Thanks.”

“That leaves us,” Jack said, “we’ll follow where he ran over the ridge. Meet back here in twenty minutes whether or not you find him so we can figure out our next course of action.”

They agreed to the plan then split up to search for the small dog. Cate gnawed her lower lip as they trudged across the property. She couldn’t face the party if Riley was lost.

Cate hurried across the yard, her eyes searching every corner of the landscape in the hopes of spotting a glimpse of the tiny dog.

As they crested the hill, they searched the horizon. There were no signs of Riley. Cate called to him several times, but spotted no sign of him.

“Should we continue further?” Cate asked.

Jack shielded his eyes, scanning the horizon. “Yes, but which way?”

“Oh, I don’t know,” Cate said, her voice wavering.

Jack waved a finger in the air. “Hey, isn’t the folly along that path there? You’ve found him there a few times before, haven’t you?”

Cate’s eyes widened and she grasped his forearm. “Yes! Oh, maybe he ran there! At least I hope so, anyway. Come on, let’s hurry.”

Cate hastened to the path with Jack dashing behind her. The folly came into sight a short distance away. They jogged toward it, calling Riley’s name.

They reached the folly with no sign of Riley. Jack thumbed on his flashlight before entering.

Despite the bright sunshine, the interior remained darkened.

“Riley!” Cate called, her voice echoing off the stone as she stepped inside.

Jack swept the flashlight around the walls.

“Riley!” Cate called again.

A whimper emanated from across the room.

Cate raced toward it. “Over here, shine the light over here.”

A stone bench ran the length of the back wall. Cobwebs and leaves adorned it, making it difficult to see underneath. As Jack trained the light under it, something dashed out, cracking into Cate’s leg and causing her to stumble back a step.

“RILEY!” she exclaimed as the little pup leapt up toward her. “Oh, Riley! Why did you run off? Thank goodness we found you!”

Cate scooped him into her arms, hugging him close. She kissed the top of his black head as she squeezed him again. He offered an appreciative lap

on the cheek.

With his flashlight still trained on the stone bench, Jack cocked his head, his brow wrinkling. “That’s interesting.”

“What is?”

Jack bent to one knee, grabbing a red object from amidst the decaying pile of leaves. “There’s some garbage here, it looks like.”

He stared at the chewed-up bag. “Yum-yum Bones. Isn’t this one of Riley’s treat bags?”

Cate stepped closer, eyeing the bag. “Yes, it is.”

Riley wriggled in her arms, leaping to the stone floor below and darting under the bench. “Riley!” Cate exclaimed. “What is so interesting under that bench?”

“Perhaps he left a treat from his treat bag,” Jack said as she shined his light under the bench. “Or not.”

Cate knelt on the floor next to Jack, peering under the bench. “What is it?”

She blinked a few times to adjust to the light before her eyes went wide. She straightened and gawked at Jack. “Is that...”

CHAPTER 20



Cate glanced under the bench again, detecting not one pair of eyes gleaming against the flashlight's beam, but two.

"Another dog, it looks like," Jack answered her unfinished question.

"Riley, come out here. Come on." Cate settled onto her haunches, patting her thighs. Riley trotted out from under the bench, glancing at Cate then the other pup. "I think he's trying to tell us something."

"Yes, I think so. And by the looks of it, he's been trying for the last month. I see what's left of Mrs. Fraser's steak here, a torn open bag of treats and some other food scraps." Jack reached under the bench, coaxing the other dog out. "Come on little fella, come on. We won't hurt you."

With Jack's urging, the other dog crept out from under the bench.

Riley whimpered, wagging his tail at Cate. The dog stood just taller than Riley but was about his size. He appeared to be gray and white, however, mud smudged large portions of his fur. His fluffy tail curled in a tight pigtail over his back.

Cate extended her hand to the dog. "Oh, hello, little guy. Are you a guy?"

The dog stretched his neck, sniffing Cate's hand before attempting to retreat under the bench.

"Oh, no you don't," Jack said, snatching him before he could hide again. "Looks like Riley has found a friend, Lady Cate."

“Looks like it. Well, I suppose we better take them both back to the house. We can inquire about lost dogs in town later. For now, we should get him cleaned up and fed. Poor thing, it seems he’s been hiding here for quite a while.”

“Yes, it does. But it looks like Riley has kept him well fed.”

Cate scooped Riley into her arms, kissing him on the head. “Indeed, he has. And it also explains all of his naughty behavior of late. Oh, Riley, what have I told you about bringing home strays?”

They hiked the path back to the house, arriving last.

“We found him!” Cate shouted from a distance, lifting Riley in her arms.

Molly applauded the announcement.

“And then some!” Jack added.

“Is that...” Gayle began, her finger pointing to the dog in Jack’s arms.

“Another dog?” Molly finished for her.

“Yes,” Cate said, as they closed the distance between them. “We also found the remnants of your stolen steak, Mrs. Fraser. And a bone from the other piece of meat you thought you had forgotten in the freezer.”

“So, I haven’t gone senile! The little bugger stole it, did he?”

“He did,” Cate admitted. “I’m sorry!”

“No apology needed, Lady Cate. It looks like he did it for the right reasons. Hello, little pup.” Mrs. Fraser ruffled the other dog’s fur.

Cate heaved a sigh of relief. “Well, with the emergency over, everyone can return to their party preparations! I will give this little one a bath and something to eat.”

After everyone welcomed Riley and his new friend, they dispersed. Cate offered both dogs a bowl of food. The new pup downed his in seconds. The poor animal still seemed to be hungry despite the amount of food Riley had been providing him.

After they ate, Cate used the washbasin in the laundry to give the second dog a quick bath. She wrapped him in a towel and carried him to her bedroom, Riley trailing behind.

After toweling him off, she set him on the floor. Riley carried a ball to him, setting it down in front of him. He then retrieved a bone, dropping that in front of the other dog, too. He nudged it toward him, encouraging his canine friend to chew it. The little gray and white pup snatched the bone,

carrying it a few feet away and settling in to chew it. Satisfied, Riley curled in his bed, his eyes becoming heavy.

Riley's concern for the other dog warmed her heart. She found herself hoping no one owned him. Riley could use a friend.

She'd have to settle that matter later. Now, she needed to ready herself for the party.

She left the two dogs behind in her bedroom while her makeup, opting for a dramatic look to match her blood red ball gown, and swept her hair into an up-do. Her travels to the past had provided her with plenty of practice.

Before slipping into her costume, she checked on the dogs, finding them nestled together in Riley's bed. Riley's chin rested on the other pup's back as though protecting him.

She smiled at the scene before rousting the two from their slumber for a quick walk, then settled them back in their shared bed before donning her costume.

With her selection from the same era they time traveled to, Cate found the costume almost normal. She checked the gold timepiece hanging from her neck. With a few minutes before she needed to be downstairs, she spent the time giving Riley and his friend a little TLC.

A knock sounded at her door.

"Yes?" she called.

"Just me," Jack's voice answered, "can I come in?"

"Yes, you can! Everything okay?"

"Yes," Jack announced as he entered in his costume. "I just wanted to see how Riley's little buddy is doing."

Cate rose from her seat on the chaise and motioned to the two dogs curled in the bed. "He seems fine. Riley has been sharing his bed with him. He's still shy with me, but he seems to have a friend in Riley."

Jack stooped down to pet the two dogs. Riley climbed from his bed to give Jack an appreciative lap to his face. "You're still my best buddy, Riley. And kudos to you for taking care of your little friend."

Cate smiled at them again. "I wonder if he belongs to someone."

"We can ask around at the party tonight," Jack suggested as he stood.

Cate sucked in a breath as she eyed Riley curling next to the other dog again. "I'm almost hoping he doesn't. It would be nice for Riley to have a pal."

“I suppose we’ll find out soon enough! May I escort you down, Lady Cate?” Jack asked, giving an extravagant bow.

“Thank you,” she said, adding a curtsy.

Jack offered his arm and together they made their way down to the ballroom. The room hummed with activity as the caterers began their preparations for food service. Drinks were being set out, warming candles lit and appetizers placed on trays. The band tested their instruments.

Molly joined them next, her costume a take on Marie Antoinette. She beamed with excitement, a broad grin on her face.

“This place looks great!” Molly said.

Gayle and Mr. Smythe arrived next, each of them dressed in clothing from the seventeenth century. Mr. Smythe looked at home in the formal clothing.

Mr. and Mrs. Fraser were right behind them. Cate awaited their arrival, dying to see Mrs. Fraser’s top-secret costume. Mr. Fraser had selected an old-fashioned Scottish outfit, complete with a kilt. Mrs. Fraser wore an eighteenth-century hooped skirt in a blue tartan fabric. She looked regal and Scottish to the core.

Cate loved the outfit, telling Mrs. Fraser how fitting she found her costume. If there were to be a costume competition, everyone agreed Mrs. Fraser stood a great chance of winning.

Chimes rang throughout the house.

“That would be Mrs. Campbell, I’d bet,” Cate said. “I’ll go meet her and then I had better get ready to greet guests!”

She made her way to the front door, opening it to Mrs. Campbell, dressed in a regal ball gown.

“Good evening, Mrs. Campbell! Please come in!” Cate ushered her through the door and to the ballroom.

The woman followed Cate to the ballroom, eyeing the setup again and issuing orders moments later to ensure the party came off without a snafu.

Cate left the ballroom with the very capable Mrs. Campbell in charge. While Mrs. Campbell had volunteers to welcome the guests and escort them to the ballroom, she wanted to be there to greet all the guests when they arrived.

She didn’t have long to wait before her first guests arrived. The guests, many townsfolk from Dunhaven, were excited to see the castle. Most had never seen the interior of the castle, despite it dominating the landscape of

the town for their lifetimes. Cate found herself excited to greet them and meet those she hadn't met yet.

When the bulk of the guest list had arrived, Cate left the greeters at the door for the remaining stragglers and joined everyone else in the ballroom where the party was in full swing. Music filled the air along with talking and laughing. The caterers mingled with champagne and hors d'oeuvres.

Cate made her rounds, speaking with each guest again. She made sure to direct them to the pumpkin contest and encouraged them to vote. After she was sure she had spoken to everyone and any new arrivals, she found Molly and Mrs. Fraser hovering near one of the food stations.

She joined them, finding them critiquing the assortment and presentation. "Can't you take one night off?"

"I find it enjoyable to critique cooking that isn't mine," Mrs. Fraser retorted. "Besides, Molly and I are comparing notes as a beginning step to her training."

"I don't mind," Molly chimed in. "I'm so excited to start, I don't even want to go home!"

"Look at it this way," Cate said, "it's just a small detour to collect all your belongings!"

"A tiny one if I have any say in it," Molly said.

"I'll be speaking to Mr. Smythe about the paperwork before he leaves. I hate to make him work on his vacation. But I don't think he ever takes a vacation."

Cate left the two women to continue their critique of the catering. She caught Mrs. Campbell as she was taking a break from circulating amongst the guests to micro-manage some of the caterers. She asked the woman to oversee the pumpkin carving competition vote so that the results were above reproach.

After squaring that away, Jack approached. "If you have a minute, Lady Cate, I think I may have found the owner of the extra dog."

Cate's heart sank. She had hoped to keep the dog and the appearance of the owner disappointed her. Yet, she understood, knowing how she would feel if she lost Riley and someone else found him and wanted to keep him.

Jack led her to a couple outside admiring the pumpkin carving. "Lady Cate, this is Mr. and Mrs. Frank and Cara Bailey, owners of Bailey's farm."

"Oh, yes, we met earlier. You provided all the pumpkins, cornstalks and hay bales. Thank you!"

“I think they also may have provided the new addition upstairs,” Jack added.

“Aye,” Frank said with a nod. “I think you may have ended up with one freeloader from the Bailey farm, Lady Cate.”

Cate forced a smile onto her face. “He’s just upstairs if you’d like to take a peek.”

“I don’t want to interrupt your party, Lady Cate,” Frank said.

“I think I can slip away for a few moments, follow me.” Cate signaled for the couple to follow her from the ballroom, leading them to her upstairs suite.

Riley and friend were curled in his bed. The two lifted their heads to peer at the newcomers as they entered, too lazy to get up.

Frank glanced at Cara, nodding his head. “Aye, that’s him. He looks right at home here!”

Cate smiled, despite a pang of sadness. “I’ll bet he misses his real home.”

“He never really had a ‘real’ home, Lady Cate,” Cara said. “Our dog had puppies a little over a year ago. We found homes for all of them except this one. He’s very reserved and never stood out to anyone considering adopting one of our pups. About a month ago, he disappeared. We searched and searched for him but never found him. I suppose he was hiding out here on your estate.”

Cate squatted down to pat his head. “Aww, what a shame. He’s very cute! Poor baby, getting lost!”

“It appears your dog has taken quite a liking to him!” Frank said.

“Yes. Riley has been sneaking off to see him for the entire month, I believe. He’s been supplying him with as much food as he could steal, too,” Cate answered with a laugh.

“What a fine friend!” Cara said. She glanced at Frank who nodded again. “Lady Cate, I don’t suppose you’d be interested in providing a home for him? It looks like Riley likes his new friend.”

“Oh!” Cate exclaimed, straightened. “I... Well... I’d love to! I mean, only if you’re sure. After a year, you must be attached to him. I don’t want to take him away from you.”

Cara wrapped her arm around Frank’s and shook her head. “Nay, Lady Cate, we always hoped he’d find a good home. It seems he’s found a fine one here. Living on a farm, we have so many animals. This poor pup seems

to need more attention than we can give him. But I'm sure he'd receive nothing but the best care here!"

Cate grinned at her. "Then I wholeheartedly accept. I think Riley will be thrilled he's staying."

Cate rubbed the new dog under the chin. "Did you hear that? You've got a new home! And don't worry, I'll get you your own bed, too."

"He'll have the royal treatment now!" Jack said. "What will you name him, Lady Cate?"

Cate glanced up at the couple standing next to her. "I think I'll name him Bailey!"

Satisfied with the results, everyone returned to the party downstairs. Cate was thrilled to keep Bailey and she bet Riley would be, too.

When they returned to the ballroom, the party was still going strong with music, dancing and revelry. Mrs. Fraser milled around the room, introducing everyone to Molly, her successor and protégé. Although quick to dispel rumors she'd soon be retiring, she seemed to be enjoying her moment as the proud peacock with her new peachick.

People flitted from inside the warm ballroom into the cool, crisp autumn air and the escape of Mr. Fraser's gardens.

No matter what activity they were participating in, it seemed everyone was enjoying the party.

Mr. Smythe had already commented to Cate that he considered the party to be a success. Gayle hadn't left the dance floor since the music began. Molly's unwavering grin made it apparent that she was enjoying herself. Jack's loud laugh with friends confirmed his enjoyment.

As Cate entered the ballroom, Mrs. Campbell sought her out. They had the results from the pumpkin carving contest and were ready to announce the winner. She suggested it may be an appropriate time for Cate to make a small speech to the group.

Cate wrinkled her nose at the prospect. Despite having been a college professor, speeches were not Cate's forte. She made a brief statement, thanking everyone for attending, and stating that it was a pleasure to meet each and every one of them.

She gave all credit for the party's success to Mrs. Campbell. Her concluding remarks hinted at another party and the hope to make the Halloween party an annual event.

When finished, Cate handed the microphone back to Mrs. Campbell, who had a few announcements of her own to make. Following her remarks, she waved a notecard in the air.

“We have the winner of the pumpkin carving contest!”

A round of applause went up through the crowd. Mrs. Campbell’s volunteers carried the carving in, setting them on the stage next to her.

“Before I announce the winner, I’d like to reveal the carver of each pumpkin.” She slid on a pair of reading glasses and glanced down at her card.

“The dog by shrub pumpkin was carved by Mr. Jack Reid.”

Another burst of applause sounded and Jack nodded and waved a hand.

“Lady Justice by Mr. William Smythe.” She paused for the applause. “The cornucopia by Emily Fraser. The image of Dunhaven Castle by Charlie Fraser. Spooky jack-o-lantern by Lady Cate. Smiling pumpkin by Molly Williams. Surprised pumpkin by Gayle Pearson.”

After the applause died down, Mrs. Campbell asked the band for a drum roll.

She cleared her throat and arched an eyebrow, glancing down at the card before removing her glasses. “The winner of the first annual Dunhaven Castle Halloween Ball Pumpkin Carving Contest is...”

CHAPTER 21



Mrs. Campbell scanned the crowd as she let silence hang in the air. Everyone waited with bated breath for the winner's name. She arched an eyebrow. "CHARLIE FRASER!"

Applause broke out throughout the room along with cheers from Cate, Mrs. Fraser and Jack. His meticulous design had gained him the glory his quiet nature often failed to capture.

Cate returned to Mrs. Campbell's side on the stage, retrieving a trophy hidden away behind a table skirt. A secret to everyone but Cate and Mrs. Campbell, they'd ordered a trophy for the winner. Their name would be engraved along with the year of their win. She was overjoyed to hand it over to Mr. Fraser after a few pictures were snapped of Lady Catherine with the winner.

Following the award ceremony, Mrs. Campbell concluded by inviting everyone to enjoy the rest of the party. Music commenced again and chatter filled the room.

Cate poured herself a glass of punch and made her way to the edge of the room, overlooking both the ballroom and the gardens. She watched life pass her by, as the cool autumn air caressed her skin, comforting her off after her moment in the spotlight.

She reflected on her time in the castle. From the moment she'd stepped foot onto the property, she had felt an incredible sense of ease. She had never experienced such a homey feeling as she had here. She sensed that Molly had the same sentiment about Dunhaven.

The party wound down within a few hours. Cate said her goodbyes to most guests before returning to an almost empty ballroom. Her own guests, staff and Mrs. Campbell remained. After a few moments of conversation with Mrs. Campbell, the woman also said her goodbyes. Cate saw her off.

Despite being exhausted after a fabulous night, they decided to meet for a nightcap after changing. Left over energy from the party kept them up for another hour, discussing everything from Cate's new dog to Mr. Fraser's win. Finally worn-out and sleepy, the group parted ways for a much-needed rendezvous with their beds.

Cate spent an extra hour in bed the next morning, enjoying the sunrise as it painted a cloudless sky with vivid purples and pinks.

The ball had been a rousing success. Mrs. Campbell already babbled ideas about the next event as she left the castle, dubbing it "Christmas with Lady Cate," and intent on hosting a winter celebration to showcase the castle bedecked in holiday splendor.

The idea of planning another party exhausted her, but she couldn't deny it was an excellent idea. At least Mrs. Campbell seemed content to allow Cate the weekend to recover, suggesting that they meet on Wednesday to discuss the next event.

Cate pushed the next party from her mind, determined to focus on a lazy weekend with her friends. They had no plans which, in Cate's mind, were the best plans. She couldn't wait to discuss Molly's return.

As she ushered the dogs outside for a morning jaunt, she found Molly wrapped in one of her "Scotland sweaters" enjoying the view.

"You will need a lot more sweaters," Cate called.

"I KNOW!" Molly bellowed. "Cate, I am so excited!"

"So am I!" Cate exclaimed as she closed the gap between them.

Molly took one of the leashes from Cate. "I'm telling Jeff as soon as I get home, I'm giving him my two weeks the day I am back!"

"We need to discuss so much. When do you plan to move?"

"Tomorrow? Do I even need to go back?" Molly asked as the gravel crunched under her feet.

She gazed at the scenery surrounding them, understanding the impulse to want to stay. Although she was likely biased, she found it one of the most beautiful spots on earth. The rolling hills, the way the mist clung to the moors, the sky painted like a picture, the way the colors reflected onto the

castle's stone giving it a magical glow; all of it created a setting that couldn't be more perfect.

"You don't *have* to go back," she answered, "but you may want a few items from home."

"Sadly, you're right. I do need more than a week's worth of clothes and a travel toothbrush. Although, I won't need much else, will I? Not that I have much, a handful of cheap pieces of furniture in my awful apartment. But I still need to deal with it. What did you do with your stuff?"

"Donated most of it. I took my clothes and a few personal keepsakes. But furniture, kitchenware, my car, all of that went to charity."

"I think I will do the same. You have no idea how happy it makes me to say that. Wow!"

Cate grinned at her as they wandered through the side garden. "It makes me happy, too. I'll be counting the days until you are back and in your Rose Room! Let's continue this discussion over breakfast. We can discuss timelines with Mr. Smythe. He took care of all my paperwork for my move."

"I can't wait. Will I become a Scottish citizen?"

"I think so!" Cate wrapped Molly in a hug, excited to see her friend so energized. It was a contrast to Molly's arrival. The difference one week later was astounding. No longer dwelling on the past, Molly focused on her bright future.

The women wandered back to the castle. As they entered the dining room, they found Mrs. Fraser fussing over some food on the sideboard. Cate scolded her for bothering on her day off, insisting that Mrs. Fraser sit at once and let Cate make a plate for her. The rest of the group soon joined them. Everyone helped themselves to the à la carte cold breakfast.

During breakfast, the conversation turned toward Molly's upcoming move. With Mr. Smythe's advice they nailed down a rough date for her return. Much to Molly's delight, with Mr. Smythe's recommendation and Molly's own estimates for tying up loose ends, she would be back to Dunhaven by mid-December.

"Christmas in a castle," Molly said, pressing her hand to her chest. "I can't believe it."

"Are you sure you don't want to postpone until after the new year? Spend Christmas with your family and friends?" Cate asked as she stabbed a blueberry with the tine of her fork.

“Nope,” Molly said with a wave of her hand. “I’d rather spend Christmas with my new family in the Rose Room than sleep on a foldout couch in my sister’s basement.”

“I shall plan to have all the paperwork completed as your Christmas present,” Mr. Smythe said with a wink as Mrs. Fraser wrapped her arm around Molly’s shoulders.

“We’ll be happy to have you, Miss Molly.”

The group enjoyed a quiet weekend on the estate. Cate enjoyed having the company, though she missed her family in the past. She longed to visit them, excitement building for her dress fitting appointment on Monday. It helped ease the disappointment she would feel when all her guests left.

On Sunday, the group took one final trip to Dunhaven together before everyone departed Monday. Mr. Smythe drove back alone while Gayle and Molly drove together to the train station. Both women were glad to have the company for the long drive and train ride. Molly had a late flight back to the States. She didn’t return to work until Thursday, when she planned to hand in her resignation and begin preparing to move to her new home.

Cate watched the cars disappear down the drive. Mr. and Mrs. Fraser and Jack joined her, waving as everyone departed. Everyone returned to their respective duties. A sad quietness descended on the castle.

Riley and his new friend, Bailey, provided a wonderful distraction to combat the silence. The two pups enjoyed wrestling, playing with a ball, tugging on toys together. Riley seemed to enjoy his new companion, rolling around the floor like a puppy again.

She sat with her chin propped in her palm as the dogs frolicked, daydreaming about trying on her ballgown today. The fated ball grew closer and closer and their window for seeking information dwindled.

She pushed her frustrations with their investigation aside and prepared for her trip back.

When she was ready, hair swept up, and hooped skirt on, she made her way to meet Jack. Slowing the watch, they traveled back to 1856. They traversed the usual circuit down the back stairs and around to the front of the castle. Thomson greeted them, leaving Jack to find his way to Randolph’s study while he showed Cate to Victoria’s sitting room.

Victoria rose and greeted Cate with an embrace.

“Cousin Catherine,” Victoria said, kissing her cheek, “it’s lovely to see you again. And how were your travels? I hope your journey did not tire you

too much.”

Cate followed her to the table she had arranged for tea. “Excellent. I have this for you. I hope you are keen on it.” Cate removed a silk fan. Before visiting, she had searched high and low for something to return with for Victoria. She was careful to select something fitting for the time period.

“Oh!” Victoria said, clapping her hands together before taking the fan from Cate. “It’s lovely, Catherine! How grateful I am that you thought of me while on your tour.”

“How has your dress come along?” Cate asked as Victoria set the fan aside.

“I’m very pleased with it. I had a fitting last week. The color is striking, I shall be a standout! As will you in the sapphire gown! Are you eager to see it?”

Cate’s smile radiated as she nodded her head. “I am! I must confess patience is not a virtue I possess. I was most eager for our trip to end!”

“If I may also confess, it is not my virtue either. I was impatient for your return! I have missed you!”

Before Cate answered, Thompson opened the door, announcing Madame Bisset had arrived. The woman glided into the room followed by two servants carrying garments. They placed the garments on a nearby chair, following Thompson out of the room after delivering their packages.

“Countess and Mrs. MacKenzie,” she said, throwing her arms around both women as they approached her. “I trust you both are well?”

“We are,” Victoria answered. “Please, sit down. Let us have some tea.”

“Lovely,” Madame Bisset said, sitting at the table. “Oh, Mrs. MacKenzie, I am so pleased with your gown! I hunted for the perfect fabric. I had it re-dyed to be the exact color we discussed. Oh, it is truly lovely, simply marvelous. When paired with Countess MacKenzie’s gown, you two will be dazzling.”

“I am so eager to see it!” Cate said as she stirred her tea.

“As am I,” Victoria agreed. “We have been discussing it all morning. Oh please, may we see it now? Catherine, you wouldn’t mind postponing your tea for a moment to model for us?”

“I thought you’d never ask!” Cate exclaimed, leaping from her seat.

“Just a moment, I’ll ring for my ladies’ maid, she can assist you, Catherine.”

Within moments, Bryson, Victoria’s ladies’ maid, arrived.

Victoria waved her in. "Oh, Bryson. Please assist Mrs. MacKenzie in trying Madame Bisset's creation! We are impatient to see it!"

Bryson motioned for Cate to follow her to the dressing room, carrying the gown with her. Bryson's proficiency in working with various garments outdid Cate's on her best day. She had Cate ready in record time.

"How's it coming, Catherine?" Victoria called in.

Cate appeared in the doorway.

Victoria clapped her hands together. "OH! Madame Bisset, you have outdone yourself again. Oh, Catherine! It's incredible! We shall be the belles of this ball. Are you pleased with it?"

With a grin, Cate glanced down at the details of the sapphire gown. "Very! It is extraordinary!"

The frills, trimmed in black lace over the deep sapphire color, fell delicately to the floor. When Cate moved, the fabric sashayed and flowed around her like water gently floating along in a stream. Madame Bisset had added beading details on the off-the-shoulder sleeves.

Victoria rushed to a jewelry armoire nearby, removing a necklace. "Come, Catherine, envision the entire ensemble."

She led Cate to a mirror, placing the necklace around her neck. The sapphire necklace sparkled around Cate's neck, matching the neckline well. "It's perfect! Oh, please say you will borrow it!"

"I couldn't decline, Victoria," Cate said, "it is too perfect!"

"Splendid! I am so pleased!"

Madame Bisset fussed over the dress, pinching it here and bunching it there. She commented that it fit very well, just a few minor adjustments would bring it to perfection. Cate returned to the dressing room to change out of the evening gown, hating to take off the beautiful gown.

After changing, she returned to the tea table, finishing her tea and light snacks with Victoria and Madame Bisset. They talked fashion and the upcoming ball. Cate felt like a schoolgirl, giggling over lace details and accessories.

They saw Madame Bisset off, spent a few more moments chattering about the upcoming party, then Victoria walked Cate to Randolph's study to meet Jack. A man unknown to Cate exited the room as the ladies entered. The foursome spent a few moments chatting, however, Randolph seemed distracted, checking the gold timepiece several times.

Jack suggested they be on their way, perceiving Randolph's anxiety. Randolph agreed, excusing himself from seeing them out, stating they were family and could do so on their own. Victoria said her goodbyes, leaving Jack and Cate in the hallway to find their way to the front door.

"That was something. Tell you when we get back." Jack started toward the main staircase when Cate tugged him back. "What?"

"I think we should follow Randolph," she whispered.

He lowered his voice, his brow furrowing. "Follow Randolph? Why?"

"Didn't you notice how troubled he seemed? He kept checking his watch. We should follow up on that."

"Perhaps he had something important to do," Jack countered.

"Or perhaps this ties into the murder. We're days away, and Randolph is uneasy and agitated. I think we should at least check it out."

"Okay, okay. But we cannot, under any circumstance, prevent this murder from happening. I'm not even sure we should help Randolph stay out of jail, but I understand your impulse to protect your family."

They hurried down the hall in the direction Randolph had gone earlier. Cate spotted him walking down the path leading to the loch. They dashed out of the castle, making their way to the path, careful not to get too close.

As they approached the loch, Cate and Jack ducked behind a large tree, concealing them but allowing them a full view of the loch.

Randolph continued toward the water. When he reached the bank, another person emerged, approaching Randolph. Cate recognized Andrew, the footman who was soon to be murdered.

She smacked Jack in the chest.

He rolled his eyes at her, loathe to admit she was right.

They watched as the two men conversed. Their gestures and postures suggested they were arguing. After a few moments, the conversation turned more heated.

Randolph grasped the footman by his collar, shaking him before lobbing the man backwards.

Moments later, Randolph stormed toward the castle past Jack and Cate's hiding spot. They shrunk back into the shadows of the large tree.

"Now what?" Jack whispered.

"Let's follow him," Cate said, pointing to Andrew, who was still smoothing his ruffled clothing.

"I was afraid you would say that."

Within a few moments, Andrew made his way down the path. They waited until they could follow him without being spotted.

When they entered the castle, Andrew was nowhere in sight.

“Let’s split up,” Cate suggested, mounting the stairs.

“That’s a terrible idea, Cate,” Jack began.

“We don’t have a choice, I’m not taking no for an answer,” Cate said. She spun and sprinted up the stairs two at a time.

Jack groaned behind her.

She continued despite his grunting, with a specific destination in mind.

Breathless, she scurried down the second floor hall toward the turret stairs. She peered up the curving stairway, craning her neck as if it would help her see through the stone walls. Gathering her skirts, she started up the steps.

As she climbed, she glimpsed the door at the top. It stood open. She sped up, fashing toward it. When she was within a few steps of it, Andrew appeared at the top.

He spotted her and slammed the door shut behind him, locking it. His lips settled into a sneer. “Something I can help you with, Mrs. MacKenzie?”

Cate’s eyes widened as her heart pounded in her chest. She swallowed hard, forcing herself to think logically. “Oh, yes. I seem to have lost track of my husband. Have you seen him?”

Andrew lifted his chin, stiffening his posture. “I have not seen him, madam.”

Cate swallowed hard, continuing, “Are you sure? I could have sworn I saw him ascending these very stairs!” She took another few steps up.

He stepped down toward her from the landing. “You are mistaken, Mrs. MacKenzie. If you’ll excuse me, I must return to my duties.”

Cate held her hands out to stop him. “Oh, but...”

Annoyance shone plainly on his face. “Yes, Mrs. MacKenzie?”

“I wondered... might I have a quick look around the tower room? I’d love to see the views.”

“No, you may not, Mrs. MacKenzie. Now, if you’ll please excuse me.” He pushed her down another step.

“Really?” Cate continued. “I’ll be quick!”

Andrew turned to face her again, climbing the stairs to her level. “Perhaps you should concentrate on locating your husband.”

“What would the harm be?”

“You should learn to mind your own business, Mrs. MacKenzie,” he said, bringing his face close to hers. His lips formed a sneer and his features conveyed the disdain he felt for her in one evil look.

Cate swallowed hard as Andrew’s demeanor changed from annoyed to threatening. She glanced down the stone steps, wondering if she would survive a fall should he push her before she flicked her gaze back to him.

CHAPTER 22



Andrew narrowed his beady eyes at Cate, his nose wrinkling at her. “Shall I ask Thomson to assist you in finding your absent husband?”

She forced a weak smile. “No, thank you. I’m sure I’ll find him,” she whispered.

He nodded to her, staring at her as she descended the stairs. She glanced back once. Andrew loomed above her. She quickened her steps, rushing to the bottom of the tower stairs and almost toppling into Jack as she rounded the bend.

He caught her as she spilled into the hallway. “How did I know I’d find you here.”

“Ah, Mrs. MacKenzie,” Andrew said, rounding the stairway behind her, “I see you located Mr. MacKenzie. I shall call off the dogs.”

Jack gave Cate a puzzled look.

Cate shot Jack a glance, grasping his hand and squeezing it. “Yes, I ran into Andrew while looking for you. I’m sorry I lost track of you somewhere.”

Jack nodded and smiled down at Cate. “Well, you found me!”

“How fortuitous. Mrs. MacKenzie seems to have an innate ability to lose precious things then wander about searching for them in places she shouldn’t.”

Jack’s smile faded and he squashed his eyebrows together, cocking his head. “Excuse me?”

Andrew clasped his hands behind him, lifting his chin. "Mrs. MacKenzie shouldn't be wandering the halls of the castle, sir."

Jack wagged a finger at the man. "Mrs. MacKenzie and I are family, sir. Lord and Lady MacKenzie have graciously opened their home to us. I don't believe either of them intended it to have the restrictions you are implying."

Andrew crinkled his nose, smirking. "You misunderstood me, Mr. MacKenzie. I am only concerned about the lady's well-being. The castle has many dangerous places, including the tower room which is filled with many trunks. She may be hurt should one of them fall on her."

Jack firmed his jaw. "How kind of you to exhibit such concern for my wife. I will be sure she is cautious in future visits."

Andrew forced a smile and nodded to him as he pushed past them down the stairs.

"I think we should head back," Cate suggested once he was out of earshot.

"Great idea," Jack agreed.

They wound through the halls to the bedroom. Slipping inside, they set the watch back to normal time, returning to their time.

Jack breathed a larger than normal sigh of relief. "Don't do that again."

"Do what?" Cate asked.

"No splitting up. I don't even want to travel back, yet I know you'll never agree!"

Cate's shoulders slumped. "We must go back. Victoria will be crushed if we don't attend the party."

Jack rolled his eyes as he stalked away from her. "Yes, yes, I realize that. Randolph made it clear how much Victoria was enjoying your time together. But I think we need to have a serious conversation about dropping this murder investigation, Cate."

"Why?"

He shot her a wide-eyed glance. "Cate! Did Andrew not give you the same vibe he gave me? He was threatening us, in particular, you."

"I don't..." Cate began.

"No, no, no, no, no," Jack said, waving his arms in the air, motioning her to stop her answer. "I don't want to hear you defend him. It was obvious. He was threatening you."

"Which only makes me more curious!"

"Bah!" Jack exclaimed, waving his arms in the air again.

“Think about it! I caught him leaving the tower room. He was attending to whoever is hidden in there. Who is it? Why are they hiding her? Why is he privy to the secret? Why was he arguing with Randolph?”

“I don’t know the answer to any of those, but given what we saw today, it is possible that Randolph killed him. You saw the hostility between them firsthand.”

Cate contemplated for a moment before responding. “I still disagree. Randolph would not have put his family in harm’s way by doing that, even if he is prone to losing his temper.”

Jack shook his head again. “I don’t want you alone with that man again.”

Cate didn’t answer, flicking her gaze to the hardwood floor below her feet “We should attempt to gather more information in the remaining days we have. Do you have time for a quick trip tomorrow and maybe Wednesday? I’ll come up with some excuse to visit.”

Jack shook his head, his hands falling to his hips. “Oh, Lady Cate, I will never win. Okay, okay, whatever you say, boss. I’m beginning to look forward to this guy being gone.”

“He will be soon enough. That’s why we need to gather as much information as we can before he makes his exit.”

“Okay, but *only* because we are already committed to this investigation. And no splitting up!”

Cate agreed with a nod. “Same time, same place tomorrow!”

“Guess so,” Jack acquiesced.

“Oh, hey, what did you want to tell me when we got home?” Cate inquired.

A smile spread across Jack’s features. “Oh, I had almost forgotten in the excitement. I met my great-great-great-grandfather.”

Cate’s eyes lit up and a grin crossed her lips. “Malcom Reid? Was he the man we passed on our way into Randolph’s office?”

“None other. That was... strange. I can see the appeal though. You must feel the same with Randolph and Victoria.”

Cate’s smile broadened. “It is, they are my family. I feel a connection to them, no matter how odd that may sound.”

“I understand. Meeting Malcom was... staggering, mind-blowing. I now understand your enthusiasm for time travel.”

“I’m glad you met him. I’ll bet you’ll be seeing more of him.”

Jack wrinkled his nose. "Okay, okay, I guess that's a good thing."

They parted to change clothes and return to their normal day. Cate spent a large part of the day enjoying the grounds with Riley and their newest friend, Bailey.

While Cate walked with her pups, her mind mulled over the growing mystery in 1856. Things seemed to be reaching their breaking point, hurling toward a precipice with her powerless to stop it. It was amazing, even knowing that tragedy was about to strike, she still seemed incapable of altering the situation. Perhaps despite any interventions, some events were destined to happen.

Cate second-guessed herself, questioning if she had been more aggressive in her early investigation if they would have had a better chance of preventing the upcoming tragedy. She shook her head. Not only could they not interfere to prevent the man's death, but if they had been any more aggressive in their investigation, it may have tipped their hand. Although, they had done a poor job of covering their tracks, Randolph had seen right through their weak facade.

She sighed, settling on the banks of the loch with Riley and Bailey at her side. Her pondering turned to the conversation she had witnessed on these same banks only hours ago.

Unable to hear the heated words exchanged, she couldn't tell what they argued about, but it was clear they were arguing. Randolph was annoyed, perhaps even angry. What if her entire theory was wrong? Perhaps an innocent man was not punished. Perhaps Randolph was guilty.

"I confess," she said to the two dogs, "I have no clue what I'm doing. Now, don't tell Jack. But I'm worried. What do you think, Riley? Should I press on?" The little dog didn't answer. "How about you, Bailey?" He, too, was mum on the subject.

Cate surmised the only way to find answers was to continue their investigation. Resolute in her plan, Cate focused her energy on enjoying the rest of her day.

Before dinner, Cate received an email from Gayle thanking her for the stay and informing her she and Mr. Smythe were back in London. She had seen Molly to the airport for her late-night flight. Gayle looked forward to seeing Molly again in a few short weeks when Molly arrived in Scotland permanently.

The email eased Cate's nerves, it was nice to know two of her three guests were settled. She now awaited an email from Molly, stating she was home safe and sound. She'd have a good while to wait, not expecting to receive the all clear from Molly until Tuesday afternoon.

She opted to eat dinner with her staff, finding the castle too quiet after the departure of her guests. They enjoyed another delicious meal courtesy of Mrs. Fraser, discussing the events of the week, Molly's new position, Cate's new addition and Mr. Fraser's pumpkin carving win.

Jack asked if a "Christmas with Lady Cate" competition was in the cards. Mr. Fraser joked that he'd likely win, so perhaps they should consider having his name engraved on the trophy before it was sent. They shared a hearty laugh. Cate helped clean up following dinner, as much as Mrs. Fraser permitted her. She gathered both dogs, retiring to her sitting room to enjoy a movie before turning in for the night.

She rose before the sun the next morning, pacing the floor of her sitting room, leaving Riley and Bailey sleeping in the bedroom. Her mind raced with plans for their trip today.

Jack hadn't mentioned glimpsing the globe they presumed was the murder weapon yesterday. Perhaps in the excitement of the encounter with Andrew he had forgotten. Or perhaps he hadn't found it anywhere in the castle. If the latter was true, they needed to explore further today.

She settled onto her chaise as the sun peeked over the horizon. Clouds dotted the sky, diffusing and reflecting the sun's rays. When the fiery ball made its debut, Cate rose, dressing for the day and shuttling the pups outside before breakfast.

Jack met her in the library following breakfast.

"Ready?" Cate asked as she leapt from the desk's chair.

"Nope. But I doubt that matters."

Cate crinkled her nose at him. "Oh, before we go, did you spot that paperweight anywhere yesterday?"

Jack put his hands on his hips and shook his head. "I did not, though I could have missed it."

"That should be our first priority today. If we find it, we may be able to identify the scene of the murder."

"Right," Jack said with a nod. "We keep to the shadows and search for any clues we can find."

"It'll be faster if we split up and do a quick scan of—"

“No,” Jack interrupted.

“But—”

“I said no, lassie. Remember, you’re not supposed to be traipsing about the castle alone after the incident with Andrew.”

Cate chewed the inside of her cheek as she silently disagreed.

“Just think about it. There’s less chance of getting caught the less time we spend there.”

Jack shot her an unimpressed glance. “I’ll consider it.”

Cate offered a tight-lipped smile. “Great. Meet in a few hours in the usual spot?”

“Okay,” Jack answered with a nod before they parted ways.

Cate took a morning walk with the two pups before settling them into her sitting room and readying for their trip.

She met Jack in the bedroom closet afterwards and they slowed the watch, slipping backward to a bygone time.

After a few minutes of spirited, whispered arguments, Jack ceded that they would split up to investigate with Cate scouring the upstairs and checking the main level. They would meet back in the closet in thirty minutes.

Sneaking into the hallway, they parted ways. Cate poked around a few upstairs rooms where she was almost certain not to find anyone. She found nothing of interest and spotted no sign of the murder weapon.

She meandered through the halls, wandering to the turret. She stood at the bottom, hands on her hips as she stared up the winding stairs.

With a quickened pulse, she tugged the skeleton key from around her neck, flicking her gaze back up the steps.

What did she expect to find? What would she do if she found someone inside? How would she explain? She would answer those questions when and if the situation faced her.

One by one, Cate climbed the stone stairs to the turret. Each step she took solidified her resolve. She must open the tower door and determine what or who waited inside. She also needed to determine if the murder weapon was in that room. As she rounded the bend, the tower door loomed ahead of her.

She paused for a moment, hesitating as she second guessed her plan. She shook her head, shaking away any doubt. Setting her jaw, she plodded up the remaining stairs. She tried the doorknob, finding it locked.

With a shaky hand, she grasped the key swinging around her neck and pulled it over her head. She inserted it into the lock.

As she turned the key, a voice boomed behind her. “Oi! What do you think you’re doing there?”

CHAPTER 23



Cate stiffened, her heart skipping a beat at the sound of the man's voice. She ripped the key from the lock, tucking it into the pocket of her dress before she spun to face the voice's owner.

An indignant Andrew stormed up the steps toward her.

"I... I..." Cate stammered.

"You what, Mrs. MacKenzie?" he demanded, meeting her on the landing.

Cate swallowed hard. "I thought I heard a noise, someone crying."

He narrowed his eyes. "And you took it upon yourself to investigate it, roaming through someone else's home uninvited?"

Cate raised her chin. "Not someone's. My family's."

Andrew poked a finger toward her. "Your husband's family, Mrs. MacKenzie. You are not a member of this household regardless of your husband's relationship to Lord MacKenzie. You should not be poking your nose where it is not welcome."

He grabbed Cate's arm roughly, dragging her down the stairs. "Now..." he began when they reached the bottom.

"Excuse me," a new voice shouted, "unhand my wife, sir!"

Cate twisted to find Jack marching toward them.

"Your wife, sir," he said, emphasizing the last word and dropping Cate's arm, "has been skulking around the castle. Again. I caught her at the tower door."

Jack closed the gap between them, his hands on his hips. "I would hardly call it skulking. My cousin, Lord MacKenzie, has given us free access to the property, including the castle. You have no business telling either of us where we are or are not permitted."

"Yes," Cate added, "what are you hiding up there?"

Andrew gave them an annoyed stare accompanied by a smirk. "I'm merely stating that you, madam, should take care when roaming the estate. You may find yourself in harm's way."

"I don't appreciate the veiled threat," Jack retorted.

Andrew cocked his head, his nose wrinkled in annoyance. "No threat at all, sir, just friendly advice. Now if you will excuse me, I have several duties to attend to."

Andrew turned on a heel, climbing the steps to the tower.

Cate flicked her gaze up to Jack. "Thanks."

"Let's go," Jack said, motioning for her to precede him down the hall.

Cate acquiesced without a word, plodding down the hall and back to the closet. Together, they reset the watch to normal speed, returning to their own time.

Once back, Jack could no longer contain his frustration. "Are you mad?" he shouted.

Cate sighed, lowering her chin to her chest. "I'm sorry. I found nothing in the bedrooms. We need more information, information that's only in the tower room. They're hiding something there, something very important."

Jack flailed his arms wildly. "Are you kidding me, Cate? Do you hear yourself? That man has threatened you, twice now! He caught you somewhere you shouldn't have been, manhandled you down the steps and who knows what he would have done next if I hadn't shown up. And all you can think about is what he's hiding?"

Cate spun to face him as she paced the floor. "Yes, all those things you mentioned means it must be something big! Besides, what were you doing there? You must have had the same idea I did."

"I doubt that. I finished downstairs and didn't see you anywhere upstairs. I suspected where you were. I hoped I was wrong, but I wasn't." Jack loosened his collar with a sigh.

"We need to go back tomorrow. Try to find something, anything out. We're two days away from the murder."

Jack breathed another sigh, shaking his head. "Cate, I really think we need to rethink this."

"We can't. We need to follow through. No tower runs this time, I promise. Let's go back and observe. We're so close to the murder, there's got to be some telltale signs. We have to use everything we know to get information."

Jack considered it. "Okay. But no more stunts. I'm serious, Cate."

Cate held her hands up in surrender. "I have that meeting with Mrs. Campbell tomorrow about the next party. We can go after lunch, mid-afternoon?"

"It's a plan."

They parted ways, Cate heading back to her suite to change and spend some time with Riley and Bailey. Despite the wonderful distractions the pups provided, Cate found herself unable to concentrate on anything but the impending murder. Tomorrow marked one day prior to the murder's occurrence. They were no closer to the solution. The only thing Cate had accomplished was making an enemy.

She put it out of her mind. There was nothing she could do tonight. She settled for the evening with a book and her two best friends.

A thick fog covered the area and dark clouds threatened rainy weather when Cate awoke the following morning. The gloomy weather matched her mood. Frustrated by her lack of progress, she hoped to make more headway today.

Before she could, though, she had a party planning meeting with Mrs. Campbell. The librarian and historical society president hoped to capitalize on the rousing success of the Halloween ball. With the momentum of the previous party still rolling, Mrs. Campbell wanted to nail down a few details and get an announcement released pronto.

She met Mrs. Campbell at the front door, prepared for her fifteen-minute-early arrival.

Mrs. Campbell bustled into the house, carrying an armful of materials. "Lady Cate! You were so right to postpone this meeting until mid-week! It gave me a plethora of time to research and plan. My mind is just overflowing with ideas. Not only for 'Christmas with Lady Cate,' What about 'New Year with our Newest MacKenzie,' or 'Cupid and Lady Cate,' the first day of spring celebration, Burns' day. There is no end to my list."

Cate's eyes widened at the last statement, but the woman's enthusiasm proved contagious. "Well, it sounds like we have quite a bit to talk about then!"

Mrs. Campbell spread her materials across the coffee table as they settled into the armchairs in the library.

Mrs. Campbell sat back with a grin on her face, waving her hands in the air. "Let's start with the Christmas party. I'm thinking plaid!"

They spent the next two hours discussing dates, details, décor, and announcements for the Christmas event. They wrapped up discussing the potential for a few other events, to which Cate agreed.

Despite her earlier trepidation, Cate found herself eager to host the holiday party and share the stunning castle with others.

Mrs. Campbell took her leave just before lunch with a long to-do list. An equally long list existed on Cate's end. Cate glanced at it, chuckling as she considered that Jack would likely find the work on the list preferable to their next task.

She folded the paper and shoved it in her pocket, planning the best way to broach the topic during lunchtime conversation. Mrs. Fraser made it easy, asking specifically about the meeting as they sat down for their meal.

Cate pulled the list from her pocket and slid it toward the men across from her.

"It sounds lovely to me, Lady Cate! And Molly will be here for the party, she'll be so pleased!" Mrs. Fraser exclaimed.

Cate eyed the two men who exchanged glances, their eyebrows raised. "Yes! She will be thrilled!"

Jack leaned forward in his chair, waving a finger at a particular item. "Is she serious about number four?"

"I told her we'd need to consider whether that was a practical option."

Jack read it from the list, his nose wrinkled. "Snow machine in the event it doesn't snow?!?"

Cate shrugged. "She wants all the magic and majesty of a Bing Crosby White Christmas."

"I'll hope for snow," Jack answered as he tossed the list on the table.

"Me, too," Cate admitted.

"It doesn't matter to me if there's snow or not. Not eating my own cooking is magic enough for me!" Mrs. Fraser said with a laugh.

“Speaking of, I thought perhaps we should consider a catered meal on Christmas Day, too! I’d like everyone to have the holiday off.”

“That sounds lovely, Lady Cate. Leave it to me,” Mrs. Fraser said, “I know where we can get a good Christmas meal.”

“Okay,” Cate agreed. “I’ll cross that off my list. Sorry to add to yours!”

“’Tis nothing, Lady Cate,” Mrs. Fraser assured her. “Do you think we’ll be having guests in the castle again?”

“I’m not sure. I plan to invite Mr. Smythe and Gayle, but given that it’s Christmas, they may prefer to spend it at home.”

“Well, you just let me know and I’ll plan accordingly,” Mrs. Fraser said, patting her hand.

They finished their lunch, speaking further about a few other details that would need taken care of before the party. With the event only two months off, they would need to sort out details on their end soon. They planned to meet on Thursday afternoon to go over design ideas and sort out decorations already at the castle.

After lunch, Cate took the dogs for a short walk before returning to her bedroom to dress for her trip to 1856. She had no plan, unusual for her, but planning hadn’t helped her in the past. She hoped to find something before the party tomorrow night and subsequent murder.

She hated feeling this helpless, but she was determined to press on. After dressing, she met Jack in the closet. They slowed the watch, returning to 1856. Sneaking down a set of backstairs, they exited the castle and made their way to the front.

“It makes me nervous that we don’t have a plan,” Jack said, knocking on the door.

“I know what you mean, but I’m not sure what we can do except observe and gather more information,” Cate said with a shrug. “We’re so close to the murder, something, anything may be a clue or tip us off. We just need to keep our eyes and ears open.”

“I like that. Observe only, good idea,” Jack said as the door opened.

“Ah, Mr. and Mrs. MacKenzie,” Thomson said, motioning to the foyer. “Please come in. I shall announce your arrival.”

“We’re not expected, I hope it’s not an inconvenience,” Jack said as they entered.

“I am certain it won’t be. You’re family, sir. You can wait in the sitting room.”

Cate and Jack shuffled to the sitting room to wait as Thomson announced their arrival. Randolph joined them soon after.

“Jack, Catherine, lovely to see you,” Randolph said, striding toward them to shake Jack’s hand and kiss Cate’s.

“My apologies, we come unannounced. My wife has borrowed one of your books and wanted to return it as soon as she had finished.”

Randolph waved his hand at them. “Think nothing of it, you’re family, family is always welcome.” Randolph poured drinks for the men as Victoria entered the room, hurrying to Cate to give her a hug and kiss. “You have missed little, my dear, just our cousins apologizing for disturbing our peace.”

“You are never disturbing us,” Victoria assured them.

“We apologize for coming unannounced. But I have finished with the book I borrowed and wanted to return it.”

“You needn’t make a special trip, but I will not object as I do love to see you,” Victoria said, ringing the bell on the wall to alert the servants of a request.

“Truth be told,” Cate said, “I hoped to return this and select another.”

“By all means! I must make time to read, as you do, Catherine,” Victoria said, as Thomson entered the room. “Thomson, please bring some tea for me and Mrs. MacKenzie.”

“Right away, Lady MacKenzie,” Thomson said with a head bow before leaving the room.

The foursome made polite conversation, discussing the upcoming ball. Excitement built for the festivities. They made plans for Cate and Jack to arrive early so Cate could dress at the castle. Victoria insisted this was most convenient for Cate.

Tea arrived, delivered by Andrew, who seemed surprised to see Cate and Jack. He offered a fleeting smile that resembled more of a smirk as he set the tray down near Victoria.

When they finished tea, Victoria ushered Cate upstairs to show her the necklace she planned to wear, a new gift from Randolph for the occasion. Jack seized the opportunity to excuse Randolph from playing host. “Well, I shan’t keep you any longer, cousin. I’m capable to wait for my wife’s return on my own. I’m sure you have business to attend to.”

Randolph checked his watch. “Yes, if you don’t mind waiting alone, I do have something pressing that requires my attention.”

“Not at all, cousin.”

“I dare say though, you may be in for a long wait. I fear ladies discussing clothing and jewelry may take longer than discussions in the House of Lords!” Randolph roared with laughter at his own joke before disappearing through the door.

Jack smiled as he left. Randolph may be correct. Either way, it gave him a chance to take one last peek around. He had detected nothing that hinted at the upcoming tragedy.

Cate and Victoria scurried down the hall in a cloud of giggles as the men exchanged a few final comments.

Victoria steered her to her suite. She crossed to the large jewelry case across the room. “Wait until you see it, Cousin Catherine. It is simply marvelous!”

She opened the case. The necklace gleamed and sparkled. A large ruby hung in the center, surrounded by smaller rubies on either side.

“Oh! Victoria, it’s beautiful!”

Victoria giggled with delight. “Isn’t it? And it is a perfect match for the red dress I planned for the ball. It seems Randolph pays attention when I speak! He has matched the stone perfectly!”

“It will look exquisite with your dress!”

A knock sounded at the door.

“Come in!” Victoria called.

Andrew poked his head into the room. “Andrew? What did you need?”

“I apologize for the interruption. Mrs. MacKenzie, I believe you may have dropped this.” He handed her a small slip of paper.

“Oh, how kind. Thank you, Andrew,” Cate said, accepting the paper. “I am so clumsy!”

“Thank you, Andrew,” Victoria said, dismissing him. He exited the room with a curt smile.

Cate shoved the note into her purse, feigning admiration for the necklace a few more moments. After a polite amount of time, she excused herself, expressing her excitement for the upcoming ball and telling Victoria that she would show herself to the library to select another book.

Cate embraced Victoria then left the room. She traveled downstairs to the library, hastily returning the book before digging the paper out of her purse. She read the note.

Catherine— I must see you, it's urgent. Meet me at the loch at 3:30.

-Randolph

Cate glanced at the clock on the mantle. It was almost 3:30 p.m. already. She huffed, gathering up her skirts and fleeing from the library to the nearest exit door. The note slipped from her hands, fluttering to the floor as she raced from the room to meet Randolph.

Once outside, she ran down the path toward the loch. As she approached, she spotted no one. She hurried toward the loch, hoping she hadn't missed him. Perhaps this was the break she had been waiting for. She couldn't lose this opportunity.

She approached the edge of the loch, out of breath. She panted, scanning the area for Randolph. As she turned, a figure raced toward her side.

Before she could react, Andrew grabbed her by the arms. "You really don't know when to stop, do you, Mrs. MacKenzie?"

Cate struggled against him, gritting her teeth. "Let go of me."

He fought her, squeezing her as he forced her backward. "I've got a good thing going here. I will not allow you to ruin it for me!"

"What thing is that?" Cate demanded.

"I told you to mind your own business. You couldn't do that, could you?" he roared at her, pushing her another step back.

Cate struggled to maintain her footing, but proved no match for him. "Let go!"

Step by step, he shoved her back toward the loch. Her feet splashed into the icy water. The bottom of her dress soaked through as it swirled over the water's edge. She struggled to push back onto the bank, but she was engaged in a losing battle. The water crept further up her legs as the bank descended.

"You are a problem, Mrs. MacKenzie. Now, you won't be," he growled.

He gave her one massive shove, toppling her backward into the loch. Cate expected the bottom to be nearer than it was. There was a steep drop-off in the loch's bed behind where she had been standing. She lost her footing as she toppled backward, icy cold water surrounding her.

Clawing at the water, she struggled to stay afloat. She kicked her legs, but they became entangled in the fabric of her slips and skirts. The dress weighed heavier and heavier on her as the water penetrated the fabric. She

thrashed wildly for a moment before she slipped below the surface. She reached toward the light as she sank further.

CHAPTER 24



Cate struggled as she sank further into the icy waters of the loch. The distance between her and the surface continued to grow, and the light at the top began to close.

Suddenly, she surged upward. Hands grabbed her, and she rushed upward. She broke through the surface, gasping for air as someone dragged her ashore. She collapsed on the bank, choking and coughing.

Jack loomed over her as she laid on the ground. "Cate! Cate! Are you alright?"

She gulped a few more breaths of air before nodding her head. "Yes," she choked. "I'm okay."

Soaked through, Jack fell backward onto the bank with a deep sigh.

After a moment, she sat upright. "Thank you." She took another moment to catch her breath before adding, "Lucky you found me when you did."

Jack scrubbed his face with his hands. "Aye, damn lucky. If I wasn't so relieved you're alive, I would let you have it for sneaking off like that. No splitting up, remember?"

"Yes, I remember. But I got a note from Randolph. Well, that's what it said, anyway. It told me to meet him at the loch and I had no time to find you."

Jack pushed up to his elbows. "I know. I found the note on the library floor when I was poking around. I came as quickly as I could. Not fast

enough to stop that bastard from tossing you into the loch, but at least fast enough to stop him from killing you. Cate, you've got to be more careful!"

Cate wrung the fabric of her dress as best as she could. "I know, I know. I'm sorry. I wasn't thinking. I suppose we should get back. I'd like to get home and change into something warm and dry."

"Me, too. Assuming we still can, that is."

"Why wouldn't..." Cate began before the realization struck her. "THE WATCH!"

"Aye, the watch," Jack answered.

She pawed it from the folds of her dress, clicking open the cover. The second hand ticked ever-so-slowly, but it still ticked. "It's still working, hopefully it's not damaged."

"Let's not wait to find out. Let's go," Jack said, standing and offering her a hand to right herself. "Before it breaks."

She allowed him to tug her up. "Okay."

They hastened to the castle, through a back entrance, up to the closet and prayed as they rubbed the timepiece.

Cate breathed a sigh of relief as it sped up. "Oh, I hope that worked and we're home," she said as the timepiece ticked normally.

"Only one way to find out," Jack said.

They left the closet. Cate ran down the hall to her bedroom suite. If they were home, she should find two small dogs waiting for her there. She burst through the double doors. Two tiny pups lifted their heads, eyeing her.

Cate beamed at them. "Riley! Bailey!"

Both dogs ran to her. She knelt on the floor, gathering them into her arms. "We're back!"

"Thank heavens," Jack said behind her.

"At least we haven't broken the watch."

"It may be better if we had."

Cate stood, stamping a foot on the floor. "No. We still have the murder to solve and Randolph's reputation to save!"

"Yes, I realize that. But I'm less happy about it now than I was before. This is getting dangerous, and we've taken a reckless chance that may have stranded us in the 1800s!"

"It's more dangerous because we're on to something!" Cate said. "What is in that tower room that has Andrew so apprehensive that he's willing to kill for it?"

“I can’t believe you’re still so interested even after what happened,” Jack said, shaking his head. “Oh, Lady Cate, I’ll never figure you out.”

Cate turned serious. “To be honest, I am still shaken by it. I guess it’s how I deal with anything unpleasant, throw myself into the ‘research’ I’m working on.”

Jack grinned at her. “That, my dear Lady Cate, is called avoidance. I’m going to get out of these wet clothes. You should do the same.”

He meandered to the door in his still-wet clothing, turning back to give her a grand bow before he departed. “M’lady.”

Cate shook her head at him. “Jack,” she said before he left.

“Yeah?”

“Thanks again. You’re a lifesaver.”

Jack’s shoulders slumped and he shook his head. “Oh, that’s a terrible joke, Lady Cate, just terrible.”

She grinned, sticking her tongue out at him as he left.

Cate peeled off the wet clothing, laying the garments out to dry before re-dressing in a warm sweater and pair of leggings. She cuddled under a thick blanket, unable to focus on anything but the impending murder. And the unfortunate incident that almost killed her before she was even born and stranded Jack in 1856.

She worried they wouldn’t solve the mystery or salvage Randolph’s reputation. Tears brimmed in her eyes as she considered this may all be for naught. Tomorrow night, a man would lose his life. Would they be able to save her ancestor?

She spent a restless night and morning pacing the floor of her suite as she worried over the upcoming ball.

After what seemed an eternity, the moment for Cate to ready herself arrived. She eyed her previous dress as she slid on her underskirts. It still lay spread across the bathroom floor, still damp from her unexpected dip in the loch.

Cate’s stomach turned at the sight which reminded her of how dangerous the situation remained.

She chased the doubt from her mind as she slid her dress on and fastened it. She put the final touches on her hair and clothes before giving her two pups a hug and kiss and leaving them in her bedroom. She met Jack, who carried his formal clothes slung over his shoulder in a garment bag, in their usual spot.

“Ready?” she asked.

“As I’ll ever be. You?”

She heaved a sigh. “I think so. I’m nervous, I’ll admit, but I am ready.”

“Then away we go!!” Jack said, placing his hand over hers to slow the watch.

Within ten minutes they had arrived in 1856, snuck out of the castle and were ushered back inside. Thomson showed Cate to Victoria’s suite before offering Jack a separate bedroom in which to change. Abuzz with activity, the castle reminded Cate of the hours before her own party. Servants bustled here and there, preparing for the onslaught of guests to arrive.

“Ah, Cousin Catherine!” Victoria exclaimed as she leapt from her seat. “I thought you’d never arrive! I must confess, I’ve been a ball of nerves all day. I’m like this before all my parties. Oh, I do hope tonight’s a success.”

Victoria’s excitement made Cate’s heart ache. She knew the tragic end that awaited them along with the family’s fates.

Cate’s lips faltered before she pasted a smile on and tried to match Victoria’s enthusiasm. “I have been excited all day!”

Victoria hugged her again, squealing with excitement. “Let’s have some champagne!”

The woman poured two flutes from a bottle chilling nearby, handing one to Cate and taking a sip from her own.

Cate sipped at the bubbly liquid as Victoria guided her to the dressing table. “Come, let’s get you ready! Bryson!” she called, “Bryson!”

She pushed Cate into the seat and fussed with her hair. “What are you thinking about your hair? I’m thinking let a few locks flow down like this. What do you think?”

“Pretty! I’ve never worn it like that!”

Victoria winked at her. “Jack will be surprised! He’ll love it! He won’t be able to take his eyes off you!”

Cate smiled back, hoping the sadness she felt didn’t creep into her expression.

Victoria waved her ladies’ maid over and showed her the style. “Bryson, here’s what we’re thinking. You can do that, can’t you?”

“Oh, I can try,” Cate offered.

Victoria waved her hands away. “Nonsense! Bryson is a fabulous hair stylist. Relax and let her work her magic!”

Victoria sank into an armchair across the room, sipping champagne, as Bryson began to whip Cate's hair into a style. Her deft ability swept Cate's hair into the updo Victoria suggested much faster than Cate could have.

"How is that, m'lady?" Bryson asked Victoria.

"Excellent! Yes!" Victoria approached Cate. She fussed a bit with the style then agreed it was what she had envisioned. "Now, time for the dresses! Oh, yours first, yours first!"

Cate bit her lower lip, offering a genuine smile. Sincere excitement filled her as Bryson brought the dress over. She sipped more champagne to ease her nerves, unaccustomed to being dressed, or rather undressed, by a ladies' maid.

Victoria pressed her fingers to her forehead and winced. "Oh, we should have planned for you to stay the night. I hate to think of you having to collect your belongings and carry them home."

"We'll be fine," Cate said. "Don't give it another thought."

"At least let us send you in a carriage."

"Nonsense," Cate argued. "We'll be fine. I am an American, after all. We excel at this!"

"Let's postpone this discussion until after the party," Victoria said, not willing to give in just yet. "Oh, that color looks just lovely on you!"

Cate glanced in the mirror. The dress, still unfastened, hung around her frame. Her creamy skin stood out against the sapphire color. Victoria's selection was spot on.

Bryson finished fastening the dress and Cate gave a twirl. "What do you think?"

"It's perfection! Now, the necklace!" Victoria fetched it from a nearby jewelry box and placed it around Cate's neck. "The final touch! Stunning!"

Cate smiled as she ran her fingers over the large gemstones. "Your turn!"

She switched places with Victoria, taking a seat in the armchair and sipping the rest of her champagne.

"That color is beautiful!" Cate said as Victoria slipped into the red dress. "It complements your skin so well!"

"Isn't it? Yes, it is a good shade for my coloring. I was not blessed with the creamy complexion you have, Catherine."

Cate stifled a laugh, never thrilled with her pale skin.

As Bryson finished fastening Victoria's dress, Cate spied the necklace box on the dressing table. She set down her champagne flute and retrieved it from the box.

"Now, your finishing touch!" she exclaimed, placing the necklace around Victoria's neck.

"Thank you! Come, look in the mirror," Victoria said, pulling her next to her so they were both in front of the mirror.

"Beautiful ladies!" Bryson chimed in from behind them.

"Thank you!" they answered in unison.

"Oh, Catherine, I'm so excited!" Victoria squealed, squeezing Cate's hands. A knock on the door interrupted them from further conversation. "Yes?" Victoria called.

"May we enter?" Randolph answered.

"Oh, just a moment!" Victoria called back. She reached to her dressing table, snatching a bottle of perfume. "Here," she said, spraying some on Cate and then herself. "Now we are ready!" she called.

The door swung open, and Jack and Randolph strode into the room.

"Well, if these aren't two angels descended straight from heaven in front of us, cousin." He took Victoria by the hands, admiring her, then kissing her cheek. "You look lovely, my dear. Simply lovely."

"Thank you, husband. How kind. And how handsome you are!" Victoria answered.

Jack raised his eyebrows at the romantic gesture before making his best attempt to follow Randolph's tough act. "So, this is the infamous dress. It has lived up to its potential. You look beautiful, Catherine." He kissed her cheek.

Cate held in a giggle at his act. "Thank you. I must thank Victoria for the necklace, it's a perfect match!"

"Oh, it pales when compared to your beauty, cousin Catherine!" Randolph said. "Well..." he checked his watch, "we should proceed downstairs. Guests will arrive soon! Shall we?"

He offered Victoria his arm. She accepted. Jack followed suit and Cate threaded her arm through his. They followed Victoria and Randolph to the ballroom.

"The ballroom looks lovely, Victoria," Cate said as they entered.

Decorated in black lace with red accents, the ballroom gave off a seasonal vibe. An orchestra set up, testing their instruments. Cate eyed the

band, realizing neither she nor Jack had any dancing skills appropriate for the era. Her passing knowledge of a waltz would be no match for the attendees. She hoped to keep off the dance floor as much as possible.

Victoria checked with the staff, fussed over the décor, and then returned. "I suppose it's passable," she said in answer to Cate.

"Nervous, darling?" Randolph asked her.

"As always, yes," she admitted. "I want to make tonight a success."

"I'm sure it will be, my dear. Now, we should ready ourselves to receive guests. They should arrive any moment now."

Cate removed herself from blocking the entry way, dragging Jack behind Victoria and Randolph so they could greet their guests first. She spotted Andrew across the room, delivering a few items from the kitchen. He did a double take when he spotted her before turning on a heel to leave. Nervous butterflies rattled in Cate's stomach at the sight of him. On one hand, the prospect of facing the man who almost drowned her overwhelmed her. On the other hand, she felt pity for him, knowing his fate.

"Your friend looks happy to see you," Jack whispered.

"Yes, he seems downright tickled," Cate breathed.

"Don't go sneaking off anywhere out of my sight."

"Don't worry, I won't," Cate agreed.

"Good, it'd be a terrible shame to ruin that dress."

Cate gave him a light smack with the back of her hand then changed the subject as the first few guests arrived. "It's interesting, though, to see the similarities and differences between our Halloween ball and theirs."

"Lucky for us, the biggest difference was no one was killed at ours."

Cate nodded in agreement but said no more as Randolph and Victoria called them over to introduce them to their first batch of arrivals. As more guests poured in, Cate and Jack stayed close to their hosts to be introduced to other guests.

Once most introductions were complete and the influx of guests died down, the foursome separated, moving around the room to mingle. Victoria wanted Cate to chat further with old friends from London. She ushered Cate around the room skillfully, entering and exiting conversations like a professional. After a few hours at her own party, she had been exhausted from playing social butterfly. Victoria seemed to thrive on it.

Cate attempted to keep an eye out for any strange occurrences despite the dizzying array of conversations she enjoyed. In particular, she paid

careful attention to Randolph's whereabouts. Knowledge of his whereabouts were crucial for her to determine if he was innocent.

She spotted him moving through the guests across the room, Jack in tow. He must be introducing Jack to guests as Victoria was with Cate. With any luck Jack would be able to account for Randolph's location for a large portion of the party.

While Cate and Victoria conversed with a duchess, the name and lineage of which Cate had already forgotten, Randolph and Jack approached, providing refreshments for both ladies.

Cate checked the time. Only an hour and a half remained before the body would be discovered.

She eyed Jack's half-full glass. Subtly, she tried to signal him to drink it so they could escape for a private conversation. After a few attempts, he understood, downed his drink and announced that he needed to retrieve another. He offered to return with refreshments for anyone else, but no one took him up on the offer. Cate excused herself with him.

"I didn't think you would ever pick up on that," she said as they walked away.

"Your skills at charades are weak, Lady Cate."

They retrieved a new drink for Jack and retreated to a corner to talk.

"Well?" Cate said, monitoring the party. "Anything interesting on your end?"

"Nothing of note. I've heard enough about land deals, the House of Lords, and almost everyone asked me if my wife knew anything about the impending conflict in the States. But no hints at why someone will soon be murdered."

"Randolph was never away from you, right?"

"Never. What about on your end?"

"I heard less than you! All my talk was about marriages, births, parties, and clothing. Oh and one rather heated discussion about the best painter for a handsome portrait."

"Do you think Victoria may have killed him? And Randolph covered for her?" Jack asked. "He seems protective of her."

"But why?" Cate questioned, as they watched Randolph and Victoria laughing with a group of friends. "It doesn't fit her personality at all, and she doesn't seem to have much to hide. In fact, she seems an open book in the discussions I've had with her."

“I just can’t figure out who else he’d be covering for if he didn’t do it.”

“I don’t know. It must have to do with that mysterious woman in the tower. Now would be a perfect time to meet her but we can’t leave the party.”

“And we will *not* split up,” Jack insisted.

“No, you’re right. I don’t want to end up thrown down the tower stairs by Andrew. I’d end up dead before I was born!” Cate sipped at her champagne.

Further conversation was stunted when Randolph tapped his glass, signaling everyone to silence. A hush fell over the room.

Randolph shouted from the center of the room, “Welcome everyone to our first Halloween Ball!”

The crowd responded with applause.

Randolph waited for them to die down before continuing. “My wife, the beautiful Victoria, and I are so glad you could join us! I would like to take a moment to thank each of you for joining us on this chilly October evening. From those of you who traveled from afar to those of you who live in our own town, we are so pleased to have you at Dunhaven Castle! Now, I won’t drone on and on, but I want to take one more moment to recognize the efforts of my exquisite and magnificently talented wife, Victoria, who put all this together. Victoria, my dear, you have outdone yourself. This ball will be remembered for years.”

The last statement plunged a knife into Cate’s heart. Haunting words spoken only one hour before a murder.

“Please, everyone, let’s raise a glass to my beloved Victoria,” Randolph continued. Everyone raised their glass. “And now, without further ado, let’s dance!”

The room burst into applause. Animated conversation reignited, and the orchestra readied to play their first waltz. Randolph led Victoria to the middle of the floor to begin the dancing. Cate and Jack inched toward the wall, hoping to avoid the dance floor.

Cate glanced at Jack, her lips pressed together in a thin line. “I’m hoping to avoid any dancing. I imagine it would be a dead giveaway that we’re not from this century.”

Jack adjusted his collar. “No kidding. I’ve got no idea what they’re doing.”

“At least we can easily account for Randolph’s whereabouts!”

Cate and Jack kept to the outskirts of the room for several dances. After a few rounds, Randolph and Victoria, who had switched partners several times, approached.

Randolph sipped at his drink. "Wallflowers, are we?"

"I'm sorry to say we are," Jack admitted.

"Oh, surely, cousin Jack, you'll dance with your lovely wife!" Victoria said.

"I think she'd prefer I didn't. I've two left feet, and her toes would never survive it!"

Cate nodded in agreement. "I'm happy to watch the fun."

"Nonsense, Cousin Catherine!" Randolph exclaimed. "I shall have the next dance and I shall not step on your toes!"

"Oh, really, that's not..." Cate began with a shake of her head.

"Now, I won't take no for an answer," Randolph insisted, taking Cate's hand, and tugging her to the dance floor.

Victoria chuckled and waved her on, patting Jack's arm with her other hand. "Don't worry, Cousin Catherine, I'll keep Jack company while I rest for the next round!"

A wide-eyed Cate issued a panicked glance toward Jack as Randolph swept her away.

Randolph led her to the center of the floor.

"I'm not much of a dancer..." she began.

"Poppycock! Follow my lead, you'll be fine. This one is easy, I shall show you. If you don't catch on, we shall simply tell everyone dancing in America is altogether different! Place your hand just so. Excellent! And off we go. Just like this. One, two, three, one, two, three, one, two, three and turn, one, two, three, one, two, three, that's the way."

Randolph whisked her around the floor, making it easy despite Cate's less than perfect performance. A grin spread across her face as she spun around the floor. By the end of the dance, she found it as enjoyable as promised. As the music came to an end, she applauded, curtsying to her partner while still breathless from the experience.

Randolph began to speak to Cate but was interrupted. Andrew approached, whispering in Randolph's ear before disappearing.

Randolph pressed his lips together in a thin line, his jaw flexing. "Please excuse me, cousin Catherine, there is something urgent I must attend to."

"By all means," Cate managed as Randolph spun to leave.

Peering around, she spotted Jack in their favorite corner. Victoria was being led to the dance floor by a new dance partner. Cate widened her eyes, tilting her head toward Randolph in a signal for him to follow her.

“What’s up?” he asked, joining her as she scurried to keep up with Randolph.

“Andrew just said something to Randolph. He seemed agitated and excused himself to attend to ‘urgent business.’ Something’s up, we need to follow him.”

“Did you see where he went?”

“Yes, down this hall. There!” Cate pointed to a light streaming from an open door.

They crept forward toward the lit room. Cate’s heart pounded against her ribs as she wondered if they were about to witness a murder.

CHAPTER 25



Cate swallowed hard, shooting a glance at Jack with anguish etched into her features. Loud voices floated into the hall as they approached the open door.

“... will NOT continue to be threatened in my own home!” Randolph shouted.

“Don’t look like you’ve got much choice the way I see it,” Andrew answered.

“Do not presume to tell me what I have and haven’t,” Randolph blasted back.

“What you have is a secret whore,” Andrew snarled.

“How dare you, sir!” Randolph retorted.

“How dare I? How dare I? How dare *you*! Asking me to wait on your whore, fetching her this and that, all the while asking me to keep quiet about it. And nothing in it for me.”

A scuffle sounded. Cate shifted to peer through the crack in the door. Randolph had Andrew by the collar.

“Now you listen to me you sorry excuse for a human, this ends tonight! I shall pay you what you ask, and you shall vacate this property and never return.”

Andrew squirmed from his grasp. “You’d turn me out on the street given the information I have on you? That wouldn’t be wise.”

Randolph smirked. “Any tale you tell now will be the sour grapes of a released staff member. No one will believe you. Now collect your things

and go *after* you've attended to Sonia."

"You're making a huge mistake, friend. You've no idea the lengths I'll go to to protect what's mine. Just ask Catherine MacKenzie."

With that he spun and exited the room. Cate pushed Jack backward, flattening him against the wall. In his rage, Andrew stormed past them, never noticing them hidden in the shadows.

Cate stared after him. "Do we follow him or stay with Randolph?"

"He looks like he's going to the kitchen, we can't very well go there..." Jack began when a figure loomed at the door.

Randolph stood in the doorway, spotting them in the shadows. "Catherine... Jack..." he stumbled, trying to compose himself, "I must apologize for my prolonged absence. I hope I haven't been missed."

"Randolph..." Jack began.

Cate pushed Randolph back inside the room. "Randolph, we must speak with you. We overheard your conversation with Andrew. He must leave the house now!"

"Catherine," Randolph questioned, "what is the meaning of this?"

Cate jabbed a finger at him. "Perhaps you should be the one explaining that. What is the problem with Andrew? We saw you the other day at the loch and overheard you tonight. What is he threatening you with? Who is Sonia?"

Randolph's posture stiffened and he flexed his jaw. "I can't answer those questions, Catherine, I'm sorry."

"Damn it, Randolph, now isn't the time to be tight-lipped!" Cate exclaimed.

Randolph eyes widened at her statement.

"She's only trying to help, Randolph," Jack chimed in. "We need the answers to those questions."

"Why? What do you know?"

Cate glanced at Jack, rubbing her forehead in frustration.

"Nothing we can share," Jack responded.

"I'm afraid I'm the same with nothing to share. But perhaps you can answer this. Why did my footman suggest I ask you about the lengths he's willing to go to in order to protect what's his?"

Cate sighed as Jack began, "We can't..."

"He pushed me into the loch yesterday after catching me wandering in the castle a few times. I almost drowned. I was lucky, Jack pulled me out

before anything happened to me.”

Randolph’s eyes went wide and he skirted the desk. “My God, Catherine! Are you alright? You should have informed me at once!”

“It’s difficult to explain. I don’t... this time traveling is so difficult to navigate. You must accept there are things we can’t share with you.”

Randolph considered her statement for a moment. “I understand. But I ask you to offer me the same consideration.”

They were at a stalemate, neither side willing to reveal additional information.

“I’ve relieved him of his position. He’ll soon be gone from this house, so he shan’t be bothering you again.”

Cate’s heart sank. She prayed that whatever she and Jack had done in the past had changed events enough that Randolph was correct.

Randolph checked his pocket watch. “Now, we should return to the party before we are missed.”

Cate nodded in reluctant agreement. A check of the nearby clock showed it was almost the time that the body would be discovered. Perhaps, in the end, they had avoided the horrible mess.

“You go ahead without me, I need a moment. I’ll be right behind you,” Randolph said. Cate glanced at Jack again. “Now, go! I’ll be fine!”

Cate and Jack acquiesced, exiting the room, and heading toward the ballroom.

“Do you suppose we should have left him?” Jack asked.

“I’m not sure we had a choice,” Cate admitted. “It’s almost time for the murder anyway, maybe we somehow avoided it.” She shrugged, defeated for the moment.

They entered the ballroom where the party continued in full swing. Music filled the air accompanied by laughing and enthusiastic conversation from the revelers.

Victoria approached them, grinning. “There you are! Have you seen Randolph? He seems to have disappeared.”

She scanned the crowd for him.

Cate plastered a smile on. “Oh, he was right behind us. We were discussing a painting and stepped out to view it. I’m afraid it was our fault! He should be here any moment.”

“A painting?” Victoria questioned. “He left my ball for a painting?”

“Yes, a family portrait,” Jack added. “My sincere apologies, Victoria. I’m afraid I was somewhat overzealous in asking about an ancestor. Randolph is a gracious host.”

“Yes,” Cate agreed. “Again, we’re so very sorry for stealing him away!”

Victoria waved it away. “No apology needed, dear cousins. I was hoping to have another dance with him though.”

“I’m sure he’ll be here any moment,” Cate assured her.

They waited together a few more moments before Victoria spotted him.

“Ah! There he is!” Victoria exclaimed.

Randolph approached them, smiling, seeming unruffled. He kissed Victoria on the cheek.

“Viewing a painting while we have a ball occurring? Honestly, Randolph! You are such a terrible host!” Victoria teased.

“Well...” Randolph began, when he was interrupted. A blood-curdling scream ripped through the air. The noise startled the guests, most of them grinding to a halt mid-dance. The band one-by-one stopped playing as another scream and more shouts came from outside the ballroom.

One of the servants, who had run toward the scream, raced back inside toward Randolph. “M’lord, you had better come quick.”

“What is it?” Victoria asked, concern crossing her face.

Cate and Jack shared a glance, knowing what awaited Randolph.

“Stay with Victoria,” Jack said, following Randolph and the servant outside.

Cate stood with Victoria, a frown on her face at being left behind. Within seconds, two men carried a limp form through the door and propped her in a chair. The woman, the source of the initial scream, had fainted dead away after realizing what her gaze had fallen upon while walking the gardens.

Victoria, Cate in tow, rushed to her side. “What’s happened? Is she all right?”

“Merely fainted, Lady MacKenzie,” her companion replied.

“Bring smelling salts and some brandy,” Victoria ordered a staff member.

“Excuse me,” Cate said, leaving her to attend to the unconscious guest.

She made her way to the gardens, following the path toward a small group of men that included Randolph and Jack. As she approached, she saw the limp form of Andrew sprawled in an unnatural pose. Blood pooled

under him, his eyes stared straight ahead. Cate's stomach turned at the sight. She squeezed her eyes shut, blocking out the image.

"My God, Catherine!" Randolph shouted. "You shouldn't be here."

Jack turned and caught sight of her. "Cate! Catherine," he corrected, approaching her, "you don't want to see this, go inside."

Cate nodded to him, her eyes still wide and staring at the body.

"We'll talk later," he said, turning her away from the scene.

Cate returned to the ballroom where Victoria continued to hover over the ill woman. As she startled back to consciousness, Victoria handed her a brandy to sip.

The sobbing woman sipped the drink with a shaky hand.

"What is it? What caused you to take such a turn?" Victoria asked, smoothing the woman's hair.

"Oh, it was simply awful! Too awful to speak about," she sobbed.

Victoria looked to her companion for an answer.

Before he could provide it, Cate stepped between them. "Victoria, perhaps we should give her some room and discuss this in private."

"Discuss what? What has frightened poor Louise so? Why won't anyone tell me?"

Cate tried her best to usher Victoria away from the growing scene, but she failed. Whispers turned to gasps, gasps to louder expressions of shock and horror.

Cate pitied Victoria as Louise's companion informed her of the cause. "Why, m'lady, she saw a body. Someone has died this Hallow's Eve, fallen from the turret it looks like. It appeared to be one of your footmen."

"What?" Victoria gasped.

"Not died, murdered!" another guest chimed in.

Victoria swooned. Cate, along with a nearby gentleman steadied her. Randolph, Jack, and several others rejoined the group.

Victoria searched his face for answers. "Randolph?" she breathed, shaking her head in disbelief.

Randolph put his arms around her. "I'm sorry, my darling," he said, then raised his voice, "and I'm sorry to all our guests. There has been a tragedy tonight. I fear that young Andrew, one of our footmen, has met with an accident that cost him his life."

Gasps rung throughout the room as Randolph confirmed the rumor. "The police have been sent for. I ask that all of you please remain calm and

within the ballroom until they have arrived. Thank you for your patience and please, despite the dreadful news, continue to enjoy the refreshments while you wait.” He nodded to the staff to continue serving beverages to the rattled guests.

Victoria wrung her hands as she stared at the floor. “How could this happen?”

Randolph guided her to a nearby chair. “Come, darling, please sit down.”

She eased onto the chair before springing back up. “Oh, I should...” her voice trailed off, unable to suggest something suitable to do.

“Just rest, darling.” Randolph soothed her. “The police will be here any moment.”

“Are you alright?” Jack asked Cate.

Cate bobbed her head up and down. “Yes, thank you. I’m fine. I wish I hadn’t seen the body, but yes.”

Cate guided Jack a short distance from the reeling Victoria, so she did not overhear their conversation. “Did you spot anything of interest?”

“Nothing more than we already know,” Jack answered. “The fall didn’t kill him, as we read.”

“It’s that obvious?”

“Yes,” Jack said. “It was obvious.”

“It couldn’t...” Cate began when Randolph interrupted her.

“Catherine,” he called, waving her over.

Cate hastened to him with Jack following behind.

“Could you please stay with Victoria? She’s taking it rather poorly, I’m concerned. There are many things I should attend to, but I am reluctant to leave her.”

“Certainly,” Cate assured him. “Jack can help with anything you need.”

“Thank you, both. Jack, please follow me.”

Cate stepped toward Victoria, placing her arm around the woman’s shoulder. She offered her a consoling smile, not able to offer much else in the way of comfort.

“How could this happen?” Victoria asked, concerned.

Cate could offer no answers. Within a few more minutes, the first round of police arrived. They swept past the ballroom to the crime scene. Randolph and Jack, met them outside with a few other men. They conversed for several moments before two officers entered the ballroom.

“Good evening, everyone,” one shouted to the crowd. “As you well know, a member of the MacKenzie staff has died this evening. We do not know the circumstances surrounding this death, it appears it may be accidental. Still, we should like to speak with each of you before you leave tonight. If you would please form two lines at the door, you will need to speak with one of us before leaving. Please form two lines, thank you! Please move in an orderly fashion, thank you!”

The officer continued to instruct the partygoers until everyone had formed two lines and they commenced questioning the guests.

Victoria glanced up at the lines of her guests. The band had begun to gather their instruments and join the line.

“Oh,” Victoria moaned, her voice faltering, “oh, what a mess.” Tears formed in her eyes.

“Victoria, perhaps we should remove ourselves from the commotion and retire to your suite. I’ll inform the police of our location, you can rest,” Cate suggested.

“Perhaps you are right, I feel lightheaded.”

“Come, let’s get you settled.” Cate helped her from the chair. Along the way, she found Bryson, suggesting that the woman accompany them to help settle her mistress. Once in the privacy of Victoria’s suite, Cate left her in Bryson’s capable hands while she returned to the ballroom to help see guests off.

When the last guests departed, the police asked to speak with the staff then the family members. Randolph organized the staff to be questioned, offering them the night off from their clean-up if they did not feel up to the task given the circumstances.

Jack rejoined Cate for a moment. “We better get our stories straight. We only have a few moments.”

“I plan to stick to the truth as much as I can,” Cate answered. “We were with Randolph discussing a painting then returned to the party. A few minutes passed before we heard the scream.”

“What about Andrew?”

“Nothing. I don’t plan on mentioning our run-ins with him. We’d have little reason to have had many conversations with him. It shouldn’t be a stretch.”

“I agree. We say as little as possible.”

Cate nodded as an officer approached them.

“Mr. and Mrs. MacKenzie, we’d like to speak with each of you. Perhaps Mrs. MacKenzie first so she may return to Lady MacKenzie and rest.”

Cate found the statement amusing despite the circumstances, but she nodded her agreement.

“If you’ll follow me, Mrs. MacKenzie, you can have a seat right here.”

Cate recounted her version of events to the officer. She left out any hint of conflict between Randolph and Andrew or herself and Andrew.

“I’m so sorry to put you through this trouble, Mrs. MacKenzie,” the officer whispered with a consoling glance. “I don’t have any further questions for you. But if it wouldn’t be too much trouble, could you show me to Lady MacKenzie’s room so I may gather a statement from her?”

“Yes, I would be happy to,” Cate agreed.

Cate led the officer to Victoria’s room. She knocked at the door and entered first, explaining to Bryson that the officer wanted to speak with Victoria. Bryson conceded she wasn’t sure Victoria could offer any answers, but they were welcome to try. She would situate Lady MacKenzie in her armchair, and Cate could show the officer in. Cate retrieved the officer from the hall, showing him into the bedroom.

“Hello, Lady MacKenzie,” the officer began. “I’m terribly sorry about this imposition, but I won’t be more than a moment.” He asked her to recount where she was when the body was discovered.

Victoria struggled to respond, her answers confused and nonsensical.

“She was in the ballroom the entire time,” Cate offered.

“Yet, you were not, Mrs. MacKenzie, so you cannot attest to that, is that correct?”

“Correct, although we were not gone for long. She was there when we left and when we returned. I believe she was enjoying a dance with a gentleman whose name I don’t recall. She was with us when the body was discovered.”

“I see. Well, I shan’t trouble you ladies any further. Good evening, Mrs. MacKenzie, Lady MacKenzie. I can show myself out and back to the ballroom.” He exited the room.

“OH!” Victoria exclaimed bursting into tears, covering her face with her hands.

Cate rushed to her side. “Perhaps you should lie down, Victoria.”

She pulled her hands away from her face. Tears streamed down her cheeks. “I desired a party everyone would remember. I suppose I achieved

that.”

“Oh, Victoria, I’m so sorry your party was ruined.”

“How shallow I must sound,” Victoria groaned, wiping tears from her face. “A man is dead. A man who was in my employ, in my household for months and my first concern is my party.”

“You don’t sound shallow, Victoria. This evening was important to you. There is nothing wrong with being upset.”

“We shall once again be the talk of the town.” She exhaled a ragged breath.

Cate understood her trepidation. According to what she read, things would only get worse. Even without the chain of events about to unfold, a murder on the estate would provide the town with juicy gossip for months.

“Yet this, too, shall pass, Victoria. Soon, they will move on to discuss the next sensational story.”

Victoria burst into tears again. She clutched at Cate’s hands. “What a disaster. Oh, I couldn’t bear this without you here, Cousin Catherine. Thank you.”

Cate offered her a consoling smile. “Come now. You should rest, Victoria.”

Victoria nodded, allowing Cate to help her to her bed.

Cate covered her, then sat on the edge of the bed, holding her hand. “Try to sleep.”

Victoria nodded to her as Cate stroked her hair. She let her eyes slide closed. Exhausted from the excitement of the party and the tension that followed, Victoria drifted off in seconds.

A quiet knock sounded on the bedroom door. Bryson poked her head in.

Cate held a finger to her lips, signaling her to stay silent as she eased to stand and crept to the door.

Randolph and Jack waited in the sitting room.

Cate pulled the door closed behind her, signaling to them to keep quiet. “Victoria is asleep.”

“How is she?” Randolph asked.

“Upset. Perhaps the sleep will do her good,” Cate answered.

“You are calming for her, Catherine. Thank you.” He squeezed her hands.

“Randolph, we need to speak to you,” Cate said.

A knock sounded at the door. "Sir," a footman said, peering in. "You're needed downstairs."

Randolph nodded at him. "You two will return tomorrow, please?"

Cate and Jack nodded after sharing a glance.

"Good. Speak with you then. Excuse me."

Randolph followed the footman. "

Well, I guess that's our cue," Jack said.

"Yes, seems so. Just let me check on Victoria one more time." Cate crept to the bedroom, inched the door open and peered in. She eased it shut and tiptoed back to Jack. "She's asleep."

"Good. Okay, let's go."

Cate unclasped her necklace and left it in its box before she accepted Jack's arm. They made their way to the bedroom closet, setting the watch back to their time.

Despite spending over eight hours in the past, only half an hour had passed in the present time.

Cate yawned as they slogged out of the closet. "I am exhausted, but I'll never be able to settle."

"Same here," Jack admitted.

"We have a little time before dinner. Want to compare notes?"

Jack tugged at his collar. "Can I change first? I've been in this monkey suit all night, it's stiff as a board."

"Me too – this dress is beautiful, but wow is it heavy! Meet you in the library?"

"Perfect," Jack said with a nod.

Cate dragged herself to the bedroom to change clothes.

"What a night!" she exclaimed to Riley and Bailey.

They cocked their heads, listening to her babble.

"I suppose the two of you don't understand, it's still afternoon for you! Oh Riley, Bailey, what a mess. I hope we can help poor Randolph. Come on, let's meet Jack in the library and see what we can learn!"

At the mention of Jack's name, Riley leapt to his feet, his tail wagging. Bailey studied him, giving a slight wag to his tail.

Riley danced as Cate gathered a notebook and pen along with the newspaper clippings about the murder. He nudged at Bailey, exhibiting his excitement and encouraging Bailey to join in.

"Okay, little buddies! Let's go!"

After Cate opened the door, Riley dashed down the hall. Bailey raced to keep up with him. The black and white dog barreled down the stairs and sprinted to the library. Bailey hurried behind him. The two dogs burst through the open doors, Riley galloping straight to Jack.

“Well, hello, little fella!” Jack said, lifting him into his arms. Bailey approached Jack, eyeing the scene cautiously. “And hello to you, too, other little fella!”

Jack tousled Riley’s fur, and Riley gave him an appreciative lick on the face. When Cate caught up, she found Jack kneeling down, still holding Riley, giving a tentative Bailey a quick head rub.

Jack climbed to his feet as Cate wandered to the armchair. “The new addition isn’t as keen on me as Riley.”

“I’m sure you’ll win him over. Riley took an immediate shine to you, which is unusual for him. Bailey is more bashful than Riley. I’m sure he’ll come around soon, though! He’s had a tough start!”

“Aye, but he’s living the life of... well, Riley now.” Jack gave a hearty laugh as Riley cocked his head quizzically at the mention of his name.

Cate groaned at the joke. “You should take your act on the road.”

“I’ll keep my day job, thanks,” Jack declined. “Or my night job, or whatever I’ve got here. I feel like I’ve lived through two days already and it’s not even suppertime yet.”

Cate winced as she sank into the armchair near the fireplace. “Yes. The only thing keeping me awake is fretting over Randolph and Victoria. I feel terrible for them both.”

“Aye, so do I. I expected it and it still was a shock. I can imagine they are both reeling. Well, unless Randolph expected it, too.”

Cate considered the statement. They witnessed a heated argument between Randolph and Andrew not long before the man ended up dead. Had her ancestor snapped and killed the man?

CHAPTER 26



“*H*e couldn’t have done it though, right?”

Jack rubbed his chin as he considered the question. “I don’t know. Perhaps he could have. We weren’t with him the entire time. There was a gap between when we returned to the party and when he returned.”

Cate chewed her lower lip as she performed a quick calculation in her head. “Yes, but was it a large enough gap for him to have committed a murder? I don’t imagine so.”

“It would have been a tight window but may be possible.”

“Really tight,” she answered after a few moments of recollection. “It’s safe to assume the body was thrown from the tower window based on where it landed, would you agree?”

Jack bobbed his head up and down. “Yes, I’d consider that a reasonable assumption.”

“Okay, so that means Randolph had to leave his office, locate Andrew, kill him with the globe paperweight by striking him with multiple blows, toss his body from the tower, discard the murder weapon in the tower room and return to the ballroom all within that small time frame. It doesn’t seem possible.” Cate ticked the points off on her fingers as she spoke.

“Well, assume Andrew was in the tower and Randolph knew it.”

Cate curled her legs under her as her mind continued to whirl. “Okay, that’s a safe bet. And it would shave some time off, but still, that’s a tall order to go to the tower, murder someone, throw his body out the window

and make it back to the party within... what would you estimate it at? Perhaps five to seven minutes?"

"No longer than that, yes. And yes, that is a tall order."

"We could try it out and time it," Cate suggested.

Jack slouched in his seat. "It's not a bad idea, although I was rather comfy here."

Cate rolled her eyes at him.

"Okay, okay, Lady Cate, we'll try it."

They left the dogs playing with a ball in the library and navigated the halls to the room that served as Randolph's office.

"Okay, now, as soon as I leave, you go to the tower room, unlock it, pretend to bash someone multiple times with a paperweight, heave their body out the window then meet me in the ballroom," Cate said.

"I never realized how teacher-like you really are, Lady Cate. Okay, got the time ready on your phone?"

"Yes. Oh, give me a few moments head start. We didn't see or hear Randolph leave his office when we were walking down the hall."

Jack nodded at her, taking his position behind the desk. "Got it."

"Okay, here we go!" Cate said, starting the timer and striding from the room.

She walked to the ballroom on the same route they used at the party, stepping into the now empty, cavernous space. She watched the seconds tick by on her app as she waited for Jack. Time ticked by slowly. She chewed her lower lip as she began to doubt she'd been correct in her assumption. Perhaps Randolph did have the time to commit the murder.

She paced the floor as the time reached the five-minute mark. No sign of Jack, but she couldn't breathe a sigh of relief yet. With a deep sigh, she increased her speed, pacing double-time in an ever-widening circle.

As Cate rounded the corner in the far end of the room, Jack appeared in the doorway, gasping for breath with beads of perspiration on his forehead.

"Time?" he gasped.

Cate checked the timer. "Seven minutes, forty-eight seconds."

He doubled over, letting his hands rest on his knees as he continued to suck in breaths. "I had a few thoughts along the way."

Cate eyed him with an arched eyebrow. "Let's go back to the library. Looks like you need a rest!"

"Great idea, Lady Cate!"

They meandered back to the library. Jack sank into the armchair, scrubbing his face.

Cate curled her legs under her as she frowned. "So, that window is really tight. You were forty-eight seconds over the time frame we came up with. So, I'm not sure it helps."

Jack poked a finger at her. "But as I spent a few moments thrashing my arms around pretending to murder someone with a brass paperweight something occurred to me. This is a close contact crime. Is it likely that he'd end up with no blood on him?"

Cate raised her eyebrows. "Oh, great point and I didn't see any."

"Neither did I. And I doubt he had time to clean it off. I ran so we could determine the shortest amount of time Randolph would have had to commit the murder."

"By the sound and sight of you, it was much faster than Randolph would have. He wasn't out of breath and wasn't perspiring when he rejoined us."

"Maybe he's in better shape than me," Jack suggested.

Cate shot him a look.

Jack wiggled his eyebrows at her. "Thanks for the vote of confidence."

"Okay, we've ruled out Randolph as a suspect."

"I agree. The possibility is remote."

Cate breathed out a sigh of relief. "One thing settled: Randolph is not the murderer. Two questions remain. Who is the real killer and why does Randolph cover for them?"

Jack flung his hands in the air, slapping them against the supple leather. "Between the guests and the staff, there were over one hundred people. There's no way we could keep track of where everyone was, this is impossible, Cate."

"It's not. Would Randolph confess to a crime he didn't commit for the vast majority of the people there?"

Jack cocked his head. "Good point."

"That narrows the list. There are only two people I imagine he would protect."

Jack mulled it over. "Victoria. She's the only one I can come up with."

"Victoria, yes. He'd do anything for her. But she's not the murderer. I doubt she left the party for even a second. It's not her he's covering for."

There is someone else, though. And I'd put money on the fact that she is the murderer."

Jack scrunched his features in thought. "Who?"

"Sonia."

"Sonia?"

Cate nodded. "Yes, the woman he told Andrew to attend to before he vacated the castle. Sonia."

"We don't even know who Sonia is or what she means to him."

Cate let her legs fall to the floor as she leaned forward. "She's the woman from the tower. It fits! The body falls from the tower. Randolph sent Andrew to the tower. The woman there murders him. When the investigation draws too much attention, Randolph confesses to divert the attention away from Sonia."

"That's a great theory, Cate, but it reminds me of a certain cheese."

"Huh?" Cate said, wrinkling her brow in confusion.

"Your theory is like Swiss cheese, it's full of holes."

Cate frowned at him. "It's a darn good theory if you ask me. And I love Swiss cheese."

Jack leaned forward as he made his case. "Come on, Cate. Think about it, really consider what you're suggesting. To start, what is the motive? Why would Sonia, who we don't know is even the tower lady, kill Andrew? Could Sonia possess the strength it takes to inflict the injuries Andrew sustained? Even if she did, does she have the strength to toss his dead body out of a window? From what we saw of her, which was only a glimpse, I understand, she appeared to be a smaller woman. No larger than you. Do you think you could have beaten Andrew and tossed him from a window?"

Cate blew out a long breath. They sat in silence for a few moments, each ruminating over the discussion. Jack had many good points. However, not many other theories made sense. But the notion left several dangling threads such as motive and opportunity. She could answer none of Jack's questions.

She squashed her lips together. "There's something else. When I had my unfortunate incident with Andrew..."

Jack gave her a wide-eyed stare. "Unfortunate incident? Is that what you're calling it now?"

Cate bit her lower lip and shrugged. "Sounded better than saying when Andrew almost drown me. Anyway, when the 'thing' happened, Andrew

mentioned something about having a good thing going that he wouldn't let me ruin. Could that play into it?"

"A good thing going?" he asked. "As in his position at the castle, perhaps?"

"But how would I ruin that?"

"By telling Randolph that he was rude and manhandled you."

"He'd kill me over that?"

Jack rubbed at his eyes. "Who knows."

Cate stretched and yawned. "I'm tired, too. We're spinning our wheels. We need dinner and a long nap!"

As if on cue, Mrs. Fraser arrived with Cate's dinner tray. "All finished with your estate business and ready for dinner, I hope!"

Jack pushed himself up to stand. "Ah, estate business is never finished."

"That's the truth! But time for a break! Now, come on, you," she ordered, pushing Jack toward the door, "let's leave Lady Cate to a quiet meal. She looks as though you've tired her out with all your estate business."

Cate spent her meal mulling over their discussion but coming to no new conclusions. Her overtired mind failed to process anything new. She spent the evening dwelling on her worry for Randolph and Victoria. Anxiety coursed through her, particularly since she couldn't solve anything tonight.

Sheer exhaustion drove her to bed. She fell asleep, awakening in the same position she'd fallen asleep in. Still drained, she dragged herself from her bed. She walked through the misty landscape to the loch, shivering as she recalled her last visit here had almost been fatal.

She returned to the castle, nervous anticipation making concentrating on anything before their late morning trip to 1856 impossible.

An email from Molly was the only thing that could capture her attention. Despite her worry, she found herself smiling at the subject line: I DID IT!

Hi Cate! Well, I did it! I quit! Told Jeff yesterday and gave my two-week notice! He wasn't happy, asked me to stay until the end of the academic year but I've got better things to do!

Speaking of, WOW, how did you do this when you moved? I am so excited but I looked around my cramped little apartment and

wondered how I still have so much stuff?!?! I already stopped to get boxes, I will start packing this weekend. Where should I send everything?

I haven't broken the news to my sister yet, I'm waiting so I can savor the moment. I'm just waiting to hear from my ex, too. Won't take long for word to filter to him through the grapevine in this town!

I hope everything is going well for you there. I can't wait to be back "home" (and I really can't wait to call Scotland home!). Miss you, Riley and Bailey!

Love you guys!

Molly

The grin on her face broadened as she read Molly's enthusiastic email. She flicked her gaze in the air as she tried to imagine the look on Jeff's face when Molly resigned. She almost felt sorry for him. Almost.

She clicked the reply button and sent Molly the information she'd requested and some encouragement for the packing that lay ahead of her. She informed her the Rose Room awaited her and told her about the newly planned Christmas event at the castle.

With the email on its way, Cate closed the laptop and headed upstairs to dress for her trip to the past, beating Jack to the closet. She arrived fifteen minutes early, pacing the floor of the bedroom as impatience coursed through her.

Jack stepped into the bedroom as she spun on her heel to stalk in the opposite direction. "You're early!"

"Ready?" Cate asked.

Jack offered her an amused smirk. "Anxious?"

Cate wrung her hands. "Yes. I won't deny it. I'm nervous. I feel sorry for Randolph and Victoria. Even if we learn nothing, we can at least support them."

Jack clapped her on the shoulder. "I understand. I feel the same way. Randolph didn't commit this crime. It is a shame his family is destroyed by this. I still can't figure out why he does it."

“Let’s hope to get some answers today. Let’s not push too much, though. I realize we only have a limited amount of time, but I think we should proceed with caution.”

Jack stopped dead on their walk to the closet. “Ohhh, what is this I’m hearing? Lady Cate wants to proceed with *caution*? I can’t believe my ears!”

“Oh, stop,” Cate said with a chuckle. “I’m being serious!”

“I’ll believe it when I see it, Cate. Now, come on.”

They stepped into the closet and activated the timepiece, sending them back to 1856. After their usual circuit out and around to the front door, Thomson met them, ushering them into the house. He showed them to Randolph’s office. Two police officers exited the office as they entered.

Randolph shoved the timepiece into his pocket. “Jack, Catherine. Thank you for coming. Catherine, Victoria is in her room. She has not emerged from her room. But I’m sure she would see you.”

“I will visit her in a moment. Are there any developments regarding the investigation?”

“The officers told me they expect the autopsy to occur early next week. They’re bringing in a coroner from Edinburgh. I don’t understand what they expect to find. The man fell from a third-story window. It seems rather obvious.”

Cate wrinkled her brow, knowing what they would find. It appeared Randolph did not, still believing Andrew died from the fall.

“Randolph, what did you discuss with the police yesterday?” Cate inquired.

“The standard questions, same as they asked everyone, I assume. My whereabouts, information about Andrew, any issues I’ve noticed as his employer.”

“What did you tell them?” she pressed.

Randolph scrunched his features. “The truth. I told them I last saw him alive when I fired him. I imagine you overheard that. We then spoke for a few minutes before returning to the party.”

“We weren’t with you returning to the ballroom,” Jack said. “Did you tell them that? We did, I hope it hasn’t caused any trouble.”

Randolph waved his hand in the air, dismissing it. “No trouble at all. I arrived in the ballroom only a few moments after you. I spoke with a few servants then returned to the ball. They can confirm my story.”

Cate and Jack shared a glance. So, this was the alibi disclosed in the early news articles before Randolph confessed.

Cate considered pushing further and inquiring about Sonia, but deciding not to push any further at the moment, sure Randolph would refuse to discuss it. "I'm glad. I have been worried all night. If you'll excuse me, I'll go to Victoria now."

She snaked through the castle's halls to Victoria's suite. With a quiet knock, she called to Victoria.

Within a moment, Victoria pulled the door open. Appearing beleaguered, she glanced up at Cate before her eyes fell to the floor below.

"Oh, Catherine," she muttered, "please come in. I shall ring for tea."

Cate sank into a chair next to her, patting her hand. "How are you, Victoria?" Cate asked, taking her hand as she sat down.

"I suppose I'm carrying on. Thank you for helping last night. Randolph told me you saw the guests off. Thank you. I wasn't up to it. I shall be known as a terrible hostess, I suppose."

"Everyone will understand," Cate assured her.

Bryson arrived with a tea tray, leaving it with Victoria after checking if anything else was needed.

Victoria poured tea for Cate and herself. "I can't thank you enough, Catherine, for your help not only with the guests but also for what you did for me last night. Oh, I was so distraught. Thank you for comforting me when I needed it."

"I didn't do much. Did you get any sleep?"

"Yes, yes, I did. Although I remain exhausted. I cannot wait for this mess to end. I haven't been able to face anyone yet. How did you sleep? Oh, you had to travel home after that, I feel awful. You should have stayed with us."

"Don't trouble yourself over it, Victoria. Randolph offered," Cate fibbed, "but we did not want to disturb the household at such a time. I slept little. I experienced a restless night. I worried about you."

"Oh," Victoria said, grabbing Cate's hand, "you are such a dear, Catherine."

Cate sipped her tea. "Randolph said the coroner should arrive early in the week to complete his investigation."

Victoria brooded in her chair, staring at the fire dancing in the fireplace. "What a nasty business. I cannot wait for it to end."

“I understand. Hopefully soon.”

Cate changed the subject, asking how Victoria would celebrate the upcoming Christmas holiday. The two women chatted about the holiday, Victoria’s son Ethan, winters in Dunhaven and more before Cate suggested she should find Jack and depart.

“Thank you, Cousin Catherine, for providing a distraction for me today. I do appreciate your stopping by.”

“You’re welcome, Victoria. Jack has some business this weekend, but I will check in again on Monday with you if that’s suitable.”

“Most suitable. In fact, please join us for dinner on Monday if you can.”

“I shall share the invitation with Jack, but I believe we are free.”

“Wonderful. I shall see you then.” Victoria embraced her, kissing her on the cheek.

Cate navigated to Randolph’s office, finding Jack with Randolph and Malcolm, discussing a few estate items.

She knocked on the jamb. “Sorry to interrupt. I’m here to collect Jack.”

Jack stood, saying his goodbyes to Malcolm and Randolph.

Randolph rose from his seat. “When can we expect you again? I hope soon.”

“Monday,” Cate answered, “for dinner.”

“I shall look forward to it,” Randolph answered.

The men exchanged handshakes and Jack and Cate departed, making their way to the closet and returning home.

“Change and meet to discuss before lunch?” Cate suggested.

“Sure, meet you in the library,” Jack answered.

With both now in regular clothing, they slouched into the leather chairs near the fireplace.

Cate drummed her fingers on the arm. “We can confirm that Randolph had a solid alibi, now. If servants saw him after we did, there’s no way he had the time to kill someone and return to the ballroom.”

“Right, so we have that confirmed.”

“Nothing of note on my end from Victoria. She’s holding up okay. It’s taken a toll, but she’s doing fine. I imagine the real issue will come when Randolph confesses. Perhaps we can avoid that.”

Jack flung his hand in the air. “I don’t see how. I’ve got nothing on my end. Randolph acts like nothing happened. He won’t even discuss it. We

spent most of the time going over estate business. He asked about the circumstances of your mishap with Andrew.”

“What did you tell him?”

“I danced around an explanation, saying Andrew caught us on the way back to the time travel location and wasn’t happy about it.”

“Did he buy that story?”

Jack nodded as he slouched further in the chair. “I think so, yes.”

“Anything else?”

Jack shook his head. “No, nothing of note. Although, can I just say how weird it is to discuss estate affairs with my great-great-great-grandfather?”

Cate laughed at the odd statement. “No stranger than it is to discuss fashion with my great-great-great-grandmother.”

Jack held up his hands in defeat. “You win, estate business has changed less than fashion.”

“Well, anyway, we’re on hold until Monday. I told Victoria we’d visit then, and she invited us to dinner. I’m hoping the autopsy results are in. That’s when the real action begins. Until then, Randolph will tell us nothing.”

“I agree. He’s tight-lipped, and he will remain so until something precipitates a major change.”

“Right, like him confessing to a murder he didn’t commit to protect Sonia. I hope we can prevent that but I’m not sure.” Cate bit her lower lip as she drummed her fingers again.

“We may have to let it play out. We’re not supposed to be changing things, remember?”

Cate scrunched up her face. “Yes, I know. But I intend to prevent Randolph from going to jail and ruining his and Victoria’s futures. I’m just warning you.”

Jack held up his hands again as she poked a finger in his direction. “I realize that. I won’t try to stop you. You’re protecting your family. I’d do the same if it was Malcolm accused. Rules be damned.”

Cate offered him a tight-lipped smile and a nod as she stood. “Well, it looks like you’re off the hook for the weekend.”

He rose to his feet with her. “Oh boy, you mean I only need to go through forty-eight hours in the next forty-eight hours?”

Cate chuckled. “Yes, two whole days of only twenty-four hours each.”

“What will you do with your normal twenty-four hour days?” Jack asked with a wink.

Cate threw her arms out to the side with a sigh. “Fret, most likely. I’ll try to keep my mind off things by working on my book and maybe getting a few things ready for Molly’s arrival.”

They spent a few more moments discussing Molly’s impending move before disbanding for lunch.

Her weekly dinner with her staff aided in relieving her mind of some of the stress she felt waiting for time to pass. The rest of the weekend dragged.

When Monday finally arrived, nervous anticipation kept her agitated from sunrise. The autopsy results would be revealed today. The situation would spiral from here.

The cause of death would be revealed. Randolph would confess to a crime he didn’t commit and devastate his and Victoria’s lives.

Cate spent the day reviewing the case again, unable to push it from her mind. In mid-afternoon, she readied for the trip. As she and Jack set the watch back to 1856, her hands trembled.

After slipping from the castle, Jack knocked at the front door. Cate wiped sweaty palms on her dress. Thomson answered, ushering them inside. Victoria swept into the room, her face a mask of worry.

“Thank God you’re both here, cousins. Please, come quickly.”

Cate’s forehead pinched. “What’s happened?” Cate asked breathlessly.

A pained expression crossed Victoria’s beautiful features. “Oh, it’s just terrible.”

CHAPTER 27



Cate's stomach somersaulted at the woman's words.

Victoria chewed her lower lip, wringing her hands. Worry creased her forehead. "The police are here speaking with Randolph. Andrew did not die in the fall. He was hit on the head, that's what caused his death. A blow to the head. Well, blows, there were multiple. This has now changed the entire investigation. It's now considered murder. They are questioning Randolph further and want to search the castle. What a disruption. Oh, I am so sorry, we may be late for dinner."

Cate guided the woman to the loveseat. "Don't worry about dinner, Victoria. I'm glad we are here to wait with you. Let's sit down."

"Oh, yes, let's sit down. Oh, Jack, you're an attorney, aren't you? Perhaps you could join Randolph in speaking with the police. I'd feel so much more at ease knowing you were there, that he had legal advice from someone we can trust, from family."

"Ah..." Jack hesitated.

"He would be more than happy to," Cate answered for him. She gave an encouraging nudge to Jack.

"Oh, thank you," Victoria said, leaping from her chair to embrace Jack.

Jack offered a nervous chuckle. "That's what family is for. Catherine, a word before I join Randolph?"

Cate squeezed Victoria's hand before leaving the room with Jack.

"Cate, are you crazy?" Jack whispered when they were alone in the hall. "I'm not an attorney."

“No, but you’re aware of the specifics of the case. You know where this is heading. The ‘legal advice’ is the easy part, tell him to remain silent! Just make sure he doesn’t confess to a murder he didn’t commit. And don’t let them search the house without a warrant. You can stall them until we can brainstorm, just tell the police they aren’t allowed to do what they want to do without a judge signing off.”

Jack ran a shaky hand through his hair. “You watch too much *Law and Order*, Cate.”

“Good thing I did!”

“Maybe you should be the lawyer,” Jack answered, adjusting his collar.

“I can’t, there aren’t women lawyers yet, remember? Come on, you can do it! I have faith in you.”

Jack nodded, his cheeks puffing as he blew out a long breath. “Okay, here goes nothing.”

He headed down the hall to Randolph’s office, giving Cate one final glance and a salute before disappearing.

Cate offered an encouraging smile before returning to Victoria. The two women sat together in nervous anticipation, making limited and distracted conversation.

After half an hour, Randolph and Jack joined them.

Victoria sprang from her seat, rushing to them. “What happened?”

“They’re gone for now,” Randolph told her.

Cate studied Jack’s face, searching for more answers.

“They cannot search the castle until they have a warrant to do so. I expect them to return, but we will be prepared when they do. This will not be chaos. They will respect your rights and your home.”

A smile spread across Cate’s face, and she winked at Jack. His new role suited him.

“Thank heavens and thank you, Cousin Jack,” Victoria said, fanning herself as she collapsed into a chair. “What a mess.”

“Indeed,” Randolph agreed. “With any luck it will be cleared up soon and we can return to our lives.”

“Do the police have any suspects?” Cate asked.

“They haven’t said,” Randolph answered. “Andrew had several questionable associates, though. It doesn’t surprise me this was his fate.”

“Just terrible,” Victoria said, shaking her head.

“Enough of this talk tonight,” Randolph said, pouring a drink and handing it to Jack.

Victoria agreed, climbing to her feet. “We should go in for dinner, I imagine Cook is beside herself with the delay.”

“Yes, I expect you are correct, my dear. Shall we?”

The foursome wandered to the dining room. Cook sent her apologies along with the first course of soup. With the unexpected delay, the meal no longer remained piping hot. As the main course was served, and the quartet engaged in light conversation, attempting to avoid discussing the ongoing murder investigation. Halfway through their dinner Thomson interrupted them, approaching Randolph to whisper in his ear.

The expression on Randolph’s face transformed in an instant. He whispered a response to Thomson who nodded and left the room. Within minutes the butler returned, whispering again to Randolph.

Randolph flung his napkin onto the table in disgust. “How dare they intrude on our dinner!”

“What is it?” Victoria asked, setting her fork down.

Randolph leapt from his seat. “The damned police. They have sought Judge Darrow over his supper to obtain a warrant.”

Jack stood, setting his napkin on his chair as he prepared to follow Randolph. Before they could step out, the doors burst open. Several police officers stormed into the room.

“What is the meaning of this? How dare you interrupt my meal!” Randolph shouted as they entered the room.

Jack placed himself between Randolph and the officers. “Allow me to handle it, Randolph. May I see the warrant, please?”

One officer handed him the paperwork, adding, “You’ll find everything in order. We shall begin our search posthaste.”

“Just a moment.” Jack held up his hand.

“Mr. MacKenzie, please stand aside and allow us to conduct our business. The warrant is in order.”

“I...” Jack began, searching for an argument but finding none. Victoria joined Randolph, putting her arm on his shoulder. Cate glanced over Jack’s at the paperwork. “It appears everything is in order.”

“Right, boys, let’s begin!” the officer ordered.

“Just a moment!” Randolph shouted. “No one will lay one finger on anything in this house!”

“Lord MacKenzie, you may not interfere with this investigation, please stand aside.”

“There isn’t a need for a search,” Randolph insisted.

“Do you have information that would suggest a search is not warranted?” the officer asked.

“Yes...” Randolph began.

Jack held up his hand. “Wait, Randolph, do not say another word.” He turned to the officer in charge. “I’d like a private moment with my client.”

“If your client has information about the murder, I’d like to hear it.”

“And you shall,” Randolph insisted.

Jack squeezed his eyes shut, spinning back toward Randolph. “Randolph, please, I must insist as your legal counsel that you remain silent.”

The officer shook his head, a scowl on his lips. “Enough of this charade, boys, search the house.”

Randolph flung his hand in the air. “There’s no need, I tell you! The murderer is right here. It was me. I am the guilty party. I killed Andrew Forsythe.”

Victoria gasped, covering her full lips with a trembling hand. Jack’s head sunk to his chest, and Cate’s stomach turned over.

The officer’s face twisted into a mask of confusion. “You?”

“Yes. I did it. I created a false alibi, but I can no longer live with the guilt.”

“Randolph, please,” Jack said through clenched teeth.

Randolph waved him off.

The police officer, eyes wide, shook his head, saying, “Randolph MacKenzie, I place you under arrest for the murder of Andrew Forsythe.”

“Oh my God,” Victoria exclaimed, swooning. Cate raced to her side, easing her in a chair. One of the other officers handcuffed Randolph.

“I suppose you can lead us to the murder weapon,” the lead officer asked. “Otherwise, we still must conduct the search.”

“I can tell you where it is, but I doubt you’ll find it. I threw it in the loch the day after the murder.”

“We’ll try dragging the loch tomorrow morning. It’s too dark now,” the officer said. “Come along, Lord MacKenzie, we need to take a formal statement from you at the station.”

Cate leapt to her feet, rushing to Jack's side and lowering her voice. "Jack, you must go with him."

"What for?" Jack whispered, his voice thick with sarcasm. "He is a murderer, he's murdered any attempt I have at a defense!"

"Still! Go with him, try to minimize the damage. And try to find out why he's doing this!"

Jack sighed and nodded. "Okay, okay. I'll see what I can do."

Cate squeezed his arm in a silent display of support. "Good luck."

"I shall go with my client. He is not to be questioned unless I am present," Jack said, returning to his normal voice.

"Very well. You both can follow me," the officer said.

"Oh no! Randolph!" Victoria sprang from her chair throwing her arms around him. "Please," she begged the officer, "please do not take him."

"Lady MacKenzie, please stand aside."

"No!" she wailed.

The officer nodded to another who pulled her away.

"Don't touch me!" she shouted.

"Get your hands off of my wife!" Randolph bellowed, approaching the officer.

Chaos ensued as the police restrained both Victoria and Randolph.

"Victoria, please," Cate said, grabbing her by the shoulders, "this will not help. Please, let Jack straighten it out."

Tears fell from Victoria's eyes. "Yes," she gasped out. "Please, Cousin Jack, help him." She flung herself into Jack's arms, sobbing.

Jack patted her shoulder, promising to do his best.

Cate pulled her away, sitting her in a chair while the men cleared the room. She requested Thomson to fetch Bryson, directing that Victoria should be taken to her room to rest.

Thomson disappeared to fetch the ladies' maid below stairs. With Bryson's help, Cate took Victoria to her bedroom suite. Bryson dressed her in her nightclothes and situated her in bed. Cate delivered her a brandy to settle her nerves.

"Why is this happening?" Victoria croaked before downing the glass.

"Try not to worry, cousin. Jack will do whatever he can to settle this."

"Yes." Victoria nodded. "Yes, Jack must help him. Or..." her voice trailed off.

“Do not even think it, Victoria. Please close your eyes and try to sleep. You have had a severe shock.”

“How can I sleep with Randolph...” Her voice trailed off again, unable to verbalize the situation.

Cate adjusted her covers, taking her hand. “Please try to rest. Perhaps when you awaken, he will be returned. You’ll want to have all your strength then.”

Victoria nodded, squeezing Cate’s hand. “Please stay, Catherine. Ask Bryson to make up a room. You mustn’t return home alone, anyway.”

Cate nodded at her with a weak smile. “I shall wait here for Jack to return.”

Victoria gave another nod, satisfied, and closed her eyes. The shock and anxiety of the events took a hard toll. The tea Bryson prepared with the addition of the sleeping draught also aided and she drifted off to a fitful sleep.

Cate removed herself to the sitting room, asking Bryson to fetch her when Jack returned.

She collapsed into the armchair near the fireplace. She found herself tired yet unable to rest. The fire danced in front of her as she stared into it, her mind incapable of settling. She spent an hour fidgeting in the chair, jumping at every noise, hoping it was Jack returning.

After an hour, Cate rose from the chair to pace the room. She peeked in at Victoria who was still asleep, moaning as though suffering from a bad dream.

Cate entered the room, taking her hand and stroking her forehead until she was quiet. She returned to pacing the sitting room floor until weary. She sank into the armchair again, letting her head rest against the wing. Her eyes were heavy, she closed them for a moment and drifted off to sleep.

Cate’s body shook all over. Startled, she bolted up, her eyes snapping open.

“Cate,” Jack whispered, giving her a light shake while kneeling beside her.

“What? What time is it?” she asked, her voice groggy with sleep. Confusion flashed across her face before the realization of her whereabouts set in.

“Almost 2 a.m. You fell asleep. Come on,” Jack said, standing and offering his hand for her to join him.

Cate rubbed her eyes before grasping it. "Where are we going?"

"Home, silly."

"Home? What happened with Randolph? Wait, I should check on Victoria."

Jack stopped her. "Bryson is with her. We can talk about what happened when we get home and out of these clothes."

Cate nodded, sleep still in her eyes. She glanced back toward Victoria's room. Worry clouded her mind, but she hoped Victoria slept through the night. She followed Jack to the closet and returned to their own time.

"Whew, what a night," Jack said when they were home.

"Yeah. I bet you are tired."

Jack scrubbed his face with his hands. "You aren't kidding."

"Do you want to discuss everything tomorrow after you've had some sleep?"

"No. I'd rather do it while it's fresh in my mind. Besides, I'll not be responsible for you laying awake all night wondering what's happened."

Cate gave him a small smile. "I appreciate that. I would like to know."

"Let's change. We have about thirty minutes before dinner."

Cate nodded as they exited the closet. "I'll ask Mrs. Fraser to send a tray up for you with mine, in the name of estate business. We can talk over dinner then you can go home straight after."

"Perfect. I'll meet you in the usual spot?"

"See you in the library as soon as I'm changed and have taken the dogs for a quick jaunt outside."

Cate returned to her bedroom suite, greeted the dogs then changed. Exhaustion coursed through her despite her nap. She couldn't imagine how tired Jack must be. "Okay, boys," she said to Riley and Bailey, "let's go for a quick walk before dinner."

On her way out, she asked Mrs. Fraser to send both her dinner and Jack's to the library, offering to carry one tray up on her own. After a short walk with the dogs, Cate returned to the kitchen to collect her tray and accompany Mrs. Fraser to the library.

Jack lounged in his usual armchair, his chin dipping toward his chest as he nodded off.

"Here we are, lazy bones," Mrs. Fraser said as she slid the tray in front of him.

Jack's eyes snapped open, and he yawned. "Thanks."

Mrs. Fraser wagged a finger at him. “Now dinnae you go getting used to this treatment. I’m only doing it this once.”

“I wouldn’t dare, Emily, I wouldn’t dare.”

“I’m glad I did. I dare say you look like you’re coming down with something!”

“Ah, I just didn’t sleep well enough last night,” Jack said.

“We’ll see,” Mrs. Fraser said, “best you eat all your dinner and try to stave off whatever bug you caught. You sure you want to hang around this one, Lady Cate? I hope he doesn’t breathe his germs onto you. Can’t your business wait until you’re well?”

“Afraid not. I won’t breathe in her direction.”

“Well, I suppose I’ll go eat my own dinner far, far away from the germs.” Mrs. Fraser laughed, shaking her head as she departed.

Cate sank into the chair next to Jack, setting her tray on the table in front of her.

Jack stabbed a few pieces of the meal with his fork, already digging in.

“Hey,” Cate chided, “stop breathing in my direction.”

“Very funny, Lady Cate. You know very well I’m not sick.”

Cate giggled before diving into her own meal. “Okay, so what happened? What took until two in the morning? And did Randolph come back with you? What did he tell the police? Is he sticking with his story?”

CHAPTER 28



Cate perched on the edge of her seat, awaiting answers from Jack about Randolph's situation.

"Whoa, whoa, slow down, Cate. One thing at a time. I'll go over everything I remember then you can ask questions."

Cate bit her lower lip. "Okay."

He took a few more bites of food before beginning. "Okay, so I tried my best, but Randolph is sticking to his story so far. I spent hours trying to talk him out of it and trying to find out why he confessed. I even told him we knew he couldn't have done it. He refused to change his mind. He refused to tell me who he was trying to protect. Kept saying he realized what he was doing, and he was guilty."

Jack ate a few more bites of food and washed it down with some water. "I gave him my 'professional opinion' about what he was doing. He didn't care. The police questioned him. I did my best to minimize the number of questions and, after a while, they gave up. Told me they'd finish questioning him tomorrow. Speaking of, we need to be back tomorrow morning at nine for Randolph's questioning."

Cate nodded at the statement before her shoulders slumped. "I don't get it. Why is he doing this? It has to be Sonia."

Jack sank his head into his hands. "He wouldn't say. What a mess. I fully expect to lose my first and hopefully only legal case."

"Well, your client isn't doing you any favors."

"No, he is not."

Cate wrinkled her nose, offering Jack a consoling glance. “How bad did the questioning go? What did he admit to?”

“Not much, thanks to my superb legal maneuvering. And what he explained fell short of making much sense. That’s why the police want to question him again. And why I was able to postpone it until tomorrow.”

Cate furrowed her brow. “What do you mean?”

“The explanations he provided did not add up upon close inspection. He’s lying, and it’s obvious at times.”

Cate raced across the room, fetching a pen and paper. “Any specific discrepancies you remember?”

“He couldn’t identify the murder weapon. Said he didn’t remember what he grabbed to hit him with. When they questioned him on how he knew what item to throw into the loch, he flip-flopped, said he remembered what he hit him with at the time and directly afterwards but can’t remember now.”

Cate raised her eyebrows as she jotted it all down. “That sounds made up. I remember the news story mentioned the police being skeptical. I’ll bet this is why.”

“There was another time they asked about his supposed alibi. He said he had time to commit the crime and talk with the staff. Later he said the staff lied on his behalf at his request.”

“Is he still at the police station or did you get him out of custody?”

Jack shot her an incredulous glance. “I’m not *that* good of a fake lawyer, Cate. No, he’s still in custody. Spent his night in a cell.”

Cate shook her head at the situation as she tapped her pen on the notepad. “Perhaps you’ll have better luck tomorrow. I could speak with him, maybe that will help.”

Jack flung his hands in the air. “It can’t hurt. Although, we can’t give him any information. You can’t tell him what will happen to him or even hint at it.”

“You’re right. But I can try to convince him, anyway.”

Jack nodded to her. “How is Victoria taking it?”

“Not great. I got her to sleep. Once she wakes up and realizes Randolph is still in custody, I can imagine it will send her into a tailspin.”

“I would expect so, yes.”

“I’m hoping my talk with Randolph kills two birds with one stone. Convince him to stop this charade and make sure he’s okay so I can report

back to Victoria and set her mind at ease.”

Jack raised his eyebrows at the statement as he set his fork down on his plate. “You’re optimistic.”

“I’m sure I’ll fail at this, but I have to try to change this.”

“Are you going to be okay if it turns out we can’t?”

Cate froze as she considered it. “I’m not sure if okay is how I’d describe it but...” She paused, still pondering it. “At least we tried. That’s all we can do.”

Jack pressed his lips together and nodded. “I just don’t want you upset over something that we very well may not have the power to change.”

“I’m sure I’ll be upset, but we have to try. If we can’t change it, I’ll accept that.”

Jack stared at her a moment before he gathered his tray. “Well, that about does it for me. If you don’t mind, I will head home.”

Cate waved for him to set the tray down. “I don’t mind. Just leave that tray, I’ll take it down with mine.”

“And have Mrs. Fraser scold me tomorrow for making Lady Cate carry both trays? No way, lassie. I’ll take them *both* down myself. She’s already mad at me for breathing my bogus germs on you.”

Cate laughed as she handed her tray off. “Okay, you take them.”

Jack stacked the two trays and strode to the door, spinning to offer an extravagant bow. “Good evening, m’lady.”

Cate rolled her eyes as she held in a laugh. “Good night, Jack.”

* * *

She arose the next morning as anxious as she was the night before. She practiced her speech for Randolph over and over in her head, revising and adjusting it, attempting to create a speech that wouldn’t fail. After an hour, Riley and Bailey seemed more than convinced. She hoped her speech had the same effect on Randolph.

She tried it once more in the mirror as she dressed to meet Jack. They traveled back and made the walk into town, arriving at the police station with fifteen minutes to spare.

Cate suggested she visit with Randolph before their questioning began. At first, the police refused, but with a little convincing on Jack and Cate’s

parts, they agreed to allow Cate five minutes to visit with Randolph. Jack wished her good luck with her venture, sending her into the interrogation room.

Cate sat in the small, sparsely decorated room on an uncomfortable chair. She fidgeted, trying to ease the cramp developing in her back.

An officer led Randolph through the door, his wrists in thick handcuffs. She smiled at him as he sat across from her.

"Five minutes," the officer reminded her, then stood at the door.

"May we have privacy, please?" Cate asked.

"I'm not to leave you alone with the prisoner," he answered.

"Please?" Cate asked again, "if you could step just outside the door."

With a nod of his head, the officer stepped into the hall, hovering at the entrance.

Cate turned toward Randolph, reaching for his hands. "How are you?"

He withdrew them from the table. "Catherine, you shouldn't be here."

"I had to come. I must speak with you."

Randolph shook his head at her. "Please, Catherine, go to the castle, take care of Victoria. She is, in all likelihood, beside herself with worry and distress."

Cate tapped her finger against the wooden table between them. "She is, and for no reason, Randolph."

"There is a very good reason, Catherine. Her husband has just confessed to murder. She is confused, anxious, distraught. She needs you. Go to her."

"I'd like to share good news with her once I see her."

Randolph lifted his chin, a stoic expression on his features. "I'm afraid there may be none to give."

"Why, Randolph? You are innocent. You must end this madness!"

Randolph remained silent.

Cate splayed her hands out to the sides. "Why have you done this? Who are you protecting?"

"Officer!" Randolph shouted.

"Randolph, please!" Cate pleaded. "You must listen."

The officer entered the room. "We're done here," Randolph said.

Cate shook her head, shooting him a pleading glance. "No. Randolph, don't do this."

"Mrs. MacKenzie, if you please." The officer motioned toward the door.

"I'm not finished!" Cate exclaimed.

“Go to Victoria, Catherine. We’re finished,” Randolph said.

Cate sighed as the officer approached her, making it clear the visit was over.

“Please think about it, Randolph,” Cate added before leaving the room.

She stalked to the entryway where Jack waited for her.

“Any luck?” he asked.

Cate shook her head as she cast her eyes downward. “Afraid not. He wouldn’t listen to anything I said.”

Jack sighed as he squeezed his eyes closed. “Great! Well, looks like I’m in for a fun morning.”

Given the conversation she’d just had with Randolph, she did not envy his morning. “Do what you can. I’ll see you back at the castle.”

“Be careful, Cate. Wish me luck.”

“Good luck! You’ll need it,” Cate said, giving his arm a squeeze.

She hurried down the hall, twisting to give him a wink and a wave before she pushed through the doors into the street.

She plodded out of town, her heart heavy at her failure. What would she tell Victoria? How could she rationalize Randolph’s choices? How could she assure Victoria the situation would work out? She had no answers to these questions. Her uncertainty slowed her pace to a crawl.

The castle loomed in front of her. Tears formed in her eyes, threatening to roll down her cheeks. She pursed her lips, blinking them away and taking several deep, steady breaths.

After a few moments, she had composed herself and continued toward the castle, assuring herself that she possessed the strength to survive this ordeal.

When she arrived, Thomson greeted her at the door. “Thank goodness you are here, Mrs. MacKenzie,” he said, taking her coat. “Lady MacKenzie has taken a terrible turn upon finding out Lord MacKenzie did not return last evening.”

“Oh, no. I had hoped she wouldn’t become too upset over it before I could be here.”

“Please go to her room. Perhaps your visit will cheer her.”

“I will and I hope so. Thank you, Thomson.”

Cate wound through the halls to Victoria’s suite. She knocked at the door and Bryson ushered her into the room.

“Thank goodness you’ve come, Mrs. MacKenzie. She’s been like this all morning,” Bryson said, wringing her hands.

Victoria sat propped in her armchair, her complexion pale and her lips white. She stared straight ahead with glazed eyes.

Cate winced before she plastered on a weak smile and glanced at the ladies’ maid. “Thank you, Bryson. You may go.”

Bryson nodded to her, glancing toward Victoria before exiting.

Cate approached Victoria, kneeling beside the chair, taking her hand, and gently rubbing it. “Victoria. Victoria? It’s Catherine.”

After a gentle shake, Victoria blinked a few times, focusing on Cate. “Catherine! Is Randolph with you?”

“No,” Cate said. “He is with Jack. They are at the police station.”

Victoria’s eyes filled with tears. “Oh,” she cried.

She patted the woman’s hand. “Do not worry, Victoria. Jack is with him. He’ll take care of Randolph.”

Victoria buried her face in her hands. “He spent his entire night in jail.”

Cate eased into the chair next to Victoria’s. “Yes, he did. Jack did all he could, but he could not convince them to release Randolph last night. I’m sorry, Victoria.”

Victoria wiped at the tears on her cheeks. “Please don’t apologize, Catherine. I know Jack is doing all he can, and I thank him for it. However, I cannot dismiss my anguish over Randolph.”

“I understand. I can imagine how worried you must be. But, Victoria, you must remain strong for Randolph’s sake.”

Victoria dried her tears with her handkerchief as she sniffled.

Cate offered a fleeting smile. “I saw Randolph this morning. He looked well, tired but all right. He was, however, concerned about you.”

Victoria’s sobbing intensified. “Just like Randolph,” she croaked. “Always worried for someone else. Oh, Catherine, I cannot believe he is a murderer. Am I being foolish?”

Cate reached out, rubbing Victoria’s arm. “No, Victoria, you are not. I do not believe it either and neither does Jack. I do not understand why he confessed, but I am certain Randolph is no murderer.”

Victoria clasped Cate’s hand in hers, forcing a smile onto her tear-stained face. “Thank you, Catherine.”

“I’d like to be able to tell Randolph that you are doing all right under the circumstances and allow him to focus on himself.”

“Yes,” Victoria said, sniffing then breaking down in sobs again.

Cate perched on the arm of Victoria’s chair, wrapping her in an embrace.

After a moment, Victoria patted Cate’s arm. “Thank you, dear Catherine.” She dried her eyes again, sniffing. “Thank you. You are right, I must be strong. I can be with your support.”

She returned the hug. “Oh, I must look a fright.”

Cate smoothed Victoria’s hair, wiping away a few tear stains. “Why don’t you splash some cool water on your face? You’ll feel better.”

Victoria nodded, rising from the chair and wandering into the bedroom. She poured water from her pitcher into the basin and cleaned her face.

Cate smiled at her as she patted her face dry. “Shall we get you dressed?”

“Yes, perhaps then my mood will improve.”

“I understand how upsetting this is, but you must remain strong for Randolph and your son, Ethan.”

“He is too young to understand.”

“But he can sense your upset, the upset of the household. He’ll need your strength now more than ever.”

“How do you do it, Catherine? How do you remain so positive and focused? My head feels as though my brains have been scrambled.”

Cate pondered her question a moment. “When I was younger, my parents passed away in an unexpected accident. The shock left me the same feelings you are experiencing, but I realized I had no choice but to continue moving on with my life.”

Cate approached Victoria, grabbing her hands. “I do, however, understand what you mean. But give yourself time, Victoria, the shock will pass.”

“Oh, Catherine, I’m so sorry, I did not know. You’ve never mentioned about your parents.”

Cate shook her head, dismissing it. “No need for an apology. Now, let’s pick a dress that will brighten your day.”

“Perhaps something in blue, not too ostentatious given the circumstances but not depressing.”

“We’ll get through this, Victoria.”

“Thank you, Catherine.”

Victoria called for Bryson. Cate helped Victoria dress and when Bryson arrived, she tamed Victoria's hair into a low bun. Victoria asked her to have tea sent to the solarium and to have Ethan brought there. Victoria, at Cate's encouragement, wanted to keep her son close.

The two spent an hour fussing over Ethan and sipping tea. Victoria smiled once or twice during the visit. The time spent with her infant seemed to improve her mood.

As the noon hour approached, Thomson entered. He informed Victoria that Cook wanted to speak with her regarding the menu for the week. Victoria excused herself, leaving Ethan on Cate's lap.

As she departed, Thomson turned to Cate. "Mrs. MacKenzie," he whispered, "I wanted Lady Mackenzie distracted. Mr. MacKenzie has returned. He has asked to see you. I'm afraid the news may not be good. I did not want to upset Lady MacKenzie."

"Thank you, Thomson," Cate said. "I will take Ethan and meet him in the library."

"He is waiting in the foyer."

Cate gathered the child into her arms and made her way to the foyer to collect Jack.

"Oh, Cate, I hope Thomson was discreet," Jack said as she approached.

"He was. Victoria is distracted, let's talk in the library."

They hurried down the hall, shutting themselves inside to speak.

"What's happened?" Cate asked once in private.

"It's not good, Cate. I mean, it's not terrible, but it's not good." Cate waited for him to continue. He shook his head. "The questioning did not go well. He's giving conflicting information."

"That's not good."

Jack sighed and shook his head. "Unfortunately, that's the good news. His conflicting information has the police unsure. They haven't charged him yet, but I'm not sure how much longer we can avoid it. I'd guess a formal charge is coming this afternoon, tomorrow morning at the latest."

Cate sighed, her shoulders sagging. "We need a plan."

"You aren't kidding, one that is Randolph-proof."

Cate furrowed her brow as she patted the child's back. "What do you mean?"

"He's impossible. I suggested he consult with a more experienced attorney in these types of cases before plowing ahead with his admission of

guilt.”

“And?”

“And he flat-out said no. Then threatened to fire me if I didn’t do what he wanted.” Jack rolled his eyes as he ran his fingers through his hair.

“I cannot believe he is being so stubborn! How frustrating,” Cate said with a shake of her head. “How are you holding up?”

“I don’t know. It’s incredibly aggravating, but then again, I’m making this up as I go. I feel like I live on a bad episode of a legal drama.”

Cate sighed, squeezing his arm in a show of support. “What now?”

“Unless he’s charged, there’s not much.”

“Do you need to return to the police station?”

“There’s no need for me to return today, but I’m not sure I want to face Victoria. Thomson seemed to think the mere sight of me may cause a fit.”

“She is doing better than when I arrived this morning, but yes, Thomson may be right. I’m afraid the slightest thing will send her reeling.”

“Ah, what a mess. Can’t he see what this is doing to his wife?” Jack asked, throwing his arms in the air.

Cate brooded over the situation. “Why is he protecting this other woman at Victoria’s expense?”

After a moment, Cate’s gloomy expression changed, her eyes becoming bright, her lips parting in excitement. “Jack! Do you suppose you could go to the station and make sure they don’t charge Randolph until tomorrow morning at the earliest?”

Jack’s brow furrowed. “I’m not sure I can pull that off, but I can try. Why?”

“I have an idea. It would require us to return this evening, but I have an idea.”

CHAPTER 29



Cate grinned up at Jack as her mind raced ahead with her plan.

Jack opened his mouth to follow up with a question when Thomson knocked then entered the room.

“Pardon the interruption, but Lady MacKenzie is finishing up with Cook. Perhaps you should return to the solarium, Mrs. MacKenzie.”

Cate nodded at him. “Thank you, Thomson.”

Thomson nodded then exited, closing the doors behind him.

“I’d better go.”

Jack heaved a sigh. “I’ll do what I can at the police station then come back for you. Cate, I’m not going to like this idea you have, am I?”

“Not one bit.”

Jack puckered his lips and shook his head. “I was afraid of that. Can’t wait to hear it so I can really detest it. Wish me luck!” He gave her a salute as he left the room.

“Good luck!” she called after him.

Cate returned to the solarium, prior to Victoria and settling herself with the baby before her hostess returned.

Victoria suggested they move to the dining room for lunch. The ladies lunched, trying to keep conversation light.

As they finished their meal, Thomson arrived again. “Pardon me, Lady MacKenzie, Mrs. MacKenzie, Mr. MacKenzie has returned.”

Victoria’s eyes grew wide. “Send him in at once.”

“Yes, Lady MacKenzie.” Thompson nodded, leaving the room to fetch Jack.

Within moments, Thomson appeared with Jack in tow. Cate stared at him for some sign about what happened at the station. Jack gave her a slight nod. Cate breathed a silent sigh of relief. He pulled it off, she didn’t know how, but he must have.

Victoria perched on the edge of her chair. “What news of my husband?”

“The police have questioned him extensively. There will be no formal charge made for at least the next twenty-four hours.”

“Will he be returning home?”

“Not yet. But I hope soon,” Jack answered her.

“This is good news, Victoria,” Cate said, placing her hand on Victoria’s arm.

Victoria didn’t look convinced but nodded her head at Cate, placing her hand over Cate’s.

After a moment, she turned to Jack. “Have you eaten anything?”

Jack took a seat across from Victoria. “No, ma’am.”

“Oh, let me have something sent up. You must be famished!”

Cate shared a smile with Jack as Victoria rang for service. With encouraging news, she seemed to be returning to her old self.

Cate hoped her plan worked, so the trend continued. She hated to see vivacious Victoria reduced to a lonely hermit.

Victoria had sandwiches sent up for Jack which he ate with vigor, starved from the morning’s events.

As he finished, wiping the corners of his mouth, he thanked Victoria for the lunch. “And I’m sorry to seem ungracious but I have a few things I must attend to. Catherine, we should go and allow Victoria a chance to rest.”

Victoria’s forehead crinkled. “Oh, must you?”

“I’m afraid we must,” Jack answered for the both of them as he placed his hand over Victoria’s. “We’ll be back bright and early tomorrow morning, I promise. There is nothing to worry about, Victoria. Please try to rest, this will all be over soon.”

Victoria clasped his hand in hers, also reaching for Cate’s. “Thank you, both of you.”

Cate squeezed the woman’s hand. “Jack’s right, Victoria, you should rest. This is taking a tremendous toll on you. Please promise you’ll rest.”

“I shall try. Although, I worry about Randolph. I do wish he was home.”

“I tried my best...” Jack began.

Victoria waved her hand in the air, stopping him. “I understand and appreciate all that you’ve done. I’m not suggesting there is a deficiency with your work, Jack. But I would be more settled with Randolph at home. Still, I promise to rest.”

“Good. As Jack said, we’ll be here tomorrow morning.”

“Let me ring for Nanny to take Ethan.”

Cate rose and balanced the baby on her hip. “Oh, let me take him to the nursery. We’ll show ourselves out afterward.”

“Are you certain?” Victoria asked.

Cate answered her with a nod.

“Thank you, Catherine. I shall see you tomorrow.” Victoria embraced Jack then Cate, giving Cate a kiss on the cheek.

Cate and Jack took Ethan to the nursery then used a discreet path to get to the closet and return home. Jack breathed his customary sigh of relief after they were back.

“I’m dying to know how you pulled off your legal coup,” Cate exclaimed as they returned.

“And I’m dying to know your plan to save a man who doesn’t want to be saved,” Jack answered.

“Meet in the library?” they chimed in unison.

Cate laughed. “Yes, after we change, of course.”

“Of course,” Jack said with a chuckle.

After greeting Riley and Bailey, Cate undressed, stripping off her dress and undergarments in favor of modern clothes. Once changed, she and the pups made their way to the library to meet Jack.

“Hey, buddy!” Jack exclaimed as Riley bounded over to him. “I missed you! Did you miss me?”

“I expect he did, despite us only being gone for...” Cate checked her timepiece. “Twenty-four minutes.”

“This time differential is killing me. I’ve eaten lunch already, and it’s only 9 a.m.”

Cate sank into her usual armchair. “I know the feeling. Okay, I can’t take any more suspense. How did you pull off the delay in the formal charges being filed?”

Jack collapsed into the armchair next to her. “I threw everything I could at them. Told them he was under duress, tired and not thinking straight. I

reminded them that his story did not add up and they needed to consider other suspects because of that. Then I threatened them about a few procedural things, and they agreed to hold off.”

“Wow, you must have been doing your homework. Been watching *Law & Order*, huh?”

Jack chuckled as he kicked his feet up on the coffee table. “Yep. Okay, your turn. I’m dying to learn how you plan to fix this.”

“Randolph will not cooperate, we know that. So, it’s on us to take matters into our own hands.”

Jack’s eyes narrowed and he searched the ceiling for a higher power to assist him. “I’m alarmed already.”

“We need to learn more about Sonia, about what motive she may have had and why Randolph would go to such lengths to protect her. Randolph isn’t going to offer us any information.”

“So, what do you propose we do? Give him truth serum?”

“No,” Cate said, shaking her head. “I propose we ask Sonia.”

Jack’s feet returned to the floor as he leapt forward in the chair. “Ask Sonia?!”

“Yes. Assuming she hasn’t run away yet, she should still be in the tower room. We must ask her who she is and what happened that night. She must have killed Andrew. He fell from the tower, or so it appeared. He must have been with her, and she must have killed him. We have a key. We’ll take it back this evening, speak with Sonia, learn what we can and come up with a plan to proceed.”

Jack balanced his elbows on his knees as he vetted the plan. “What makes you assume she’ll talk to you?”

“We must convince her. I think she will.”

“Why would she? How are you so sure?”

“Well,” Cate conjectured, pondering a moment, “she only has contact with the servant or servants who care for her. Randolph is gone. It was clear she was fond of him. She’s got to be reeling, just like Victoria. Only she has no support system like Victoria has. The servants cannot provide her with any help, they have no means to. She may be more accommodating than we expect.”

Jack sucked in a deep breath as he considered it. “It’s a gamble.”

“There isn’t much choice.”

“You’re right. You want to do this tonight?”

“I think it may be best. Perhaps we can sneak back when most of the household is quiet. Then we’ll have some time before we return tomorrow to sort through whatever information we receive and devise a plan.”

Jack pursed his lips, contemplating for a moment before he nodded. “Okay, agreed.”

“Wow, that was easy!”

“You make a good point. And my legal skills leave a lot to be desired. With Randolph’s reckless behavior, he will go to jail. I can’t stop it unless we gather more information. I don’t want to be responsible for ruining Randolph’s life.”

Cate leaned forward, grabbing Jack’s hand. “You wouldn’t be responsible, even if we can’t stop this. Randolph is calling the shots. There’s not much you can do.”

“Thanks, Cate. But I still can’t help but feel somewhat responsible, considering I am the man’s legal counsel.”

Cate’s shoulders slumped and her face fell. “I’m sorry about that. I feel terrible having put you in that position.”

“Don’t. I could have refused, but I wouldn’t have.”

“We didn’t have to use the cover story we did. That’s what thrust you into this position.”

“I’d still be in this position. He refuses to have any legal counsel. He’s only accepting my help because it would seem awkward to Victoria if he didn’t accept ‘Cousin Jack’s’ help.”

Cate smiled at Jack. “Thanks for being a good sport about it.”

Jack rose to his feet and stretched. “No problem, Lady Cate. Now, I suppose some work awaits me.”

“Maybe you should rest first? Catch a nap?”

“I’ll be all right. I’ll take a quick nap after dinner before we travel back tonight.”

“Sounds good. See you later... around eight?”

“Perfect. See you then, Cate.”

Jack left Cate in the library. She slouched into the chair, putting her feet up on the table in front of her, trying to plan how to spend her hours before their second time-travel trip. She’d need a distraction.

She climbed to her feet and collected the dogs, heading outside to the loch for the morning.

Following her lunch, Cate scoured the castle for clues about Sonia. She searched the tower room again. She re-read the note to Randolph, stared at the sketch she had drawn of him. She searched through any documents she could find from the era for even the hint of a reference to the mysterious Sonia. She hoped to find something she could use to further the conversation she planned for this evening. She came up empty.

Cate cursed the lack of information. It did little to help her form a course of action for appealing to Sonia. They would walk into the situation blind. And nothing could be done about it. It could not be avoided. Information or not, they must confront Sonia and convince her to supply any information she could to aid in resolving the crisis with Randolph.

Cate took the dogs for another walk before dinner, hoping the crisp air would clear her head. She settled on a strategy of appealing to Sonia's esteem for Randolph. She hoped it worked. They were quickly running out of options.

As she waited for evening to approach, she browsed around on her laptop, finding an email from Molly.

Cate! I shipped the first set of boxes over to you yesterday! They should arrive within the next ten days. Would you let me know when you get them?

I heard from Gayle, too. She has the ball rolling on the paperwork for me to move. This is starting to feel so real now. I'm counting the days down.

And I told my sister! She called me over the weekend to ask me if I was coming for Thanksgiving (after she told me she didn't know where she'd put everybody!). I told her I was too busy to come and would have a quiet Thanksgiving alone. When she asked what I was too busy with, I told her I was packing to move... TO SCOTLAND. I also told her I won't be there for Christmas since I will be at my new home in a SCOTTISH CASTLE!!! I don't think I've ever heard that woman speechless, but I did on Sunday!

Well, I should get back to work. I'm counting the days down until I blow this joint, too! Jeff has me doing a complete overhaul of the

office 'to prepare it for the new person', painful 'til the bitter end.

Rolling my eyes

Talk to you soon, Molly

The slight distraction brought a smile to Cate's face. With each passing day, she grew more excited for Molly's arrival. She typed a reply, answering all Molly's questions and reminded her not to forget to shop for a Christmas party dress while she was looking for more Scotland sweaters.

The email left Cate with a renewed sense of purpose and drive. She closed her laptop and climbed off the bed to dress for the trip. Tired from their big day, Riley and Bailey never moved from their slumber, curled together in Riley's bed.

Cate slipped her crinoline underskirts on then her hooped skirt dress. She fixed her hair and put the finishing touches on her outfit. She gave both pups a kiss on the forehead, earning a large sigh from Riley as he stretched and settled back in.

"I won't be too long, I hope," she promised him.

She retrieved the tower room key before joining Jack in the closet to return to 1856. They snuck out of the bedroom and down the hall, creeping toward the tower stairs. They made it unscathed and began the climb to the tower.

As they approached the top, Jack asked, "Are you sure about this?"

"We don't have a choice. There are things we must learn, and confronting Sonia is the only way we will learn them."

Jack shook his head, raising his eyebrows. "You're one brave but stubborn lassie, Cate."

"I will take that as a compliment. Let's go, before I lose my nerve."

They climbed the last few steps to the tower door. Cate drew in a deep breath, inserted the key and turned it. Her heart pounded in her chest as she twisted the knob. She took one last deep breath before opening the door.

CHAPTER 30



Cate peered inside as the door swung open. In this century, the room was unrecognizable. Instead of piled boxes and bare floors, the tower housed a bed, dresser, writing desk, an easel, and a large area rug. Candles burned inside, lighting the room. Black fabric covered the windows, shutting out any light from the outside. The only similarity was the large wardrobe, placed in the same spot as it was in Cate's time.

A woman crouched at the wardrobe. She swung around to face them, peering at them with piercing blue eyes. Black hair framed a young, teenaged face. She stood and her green cape, tattered and frayed, swirled around her ankles.

"Who are you?" she demanded.

Cate stepped into the room, pulling Jack in with her and shutting the door behind them. "We're friends of Randolph's. I'm Cate and this is Jack. Jack is representing Randolph in the case the police are building against him for the murder of Andrew Forsythe. Sonia, is it?"

The mention of the murder investigation perturbed the woman. "Will he be cleared of the charges?"

"That is our goal, but we need your help," Cate said.

"My help?"

Cate nodded at her. "Yes. You must tell us what really happened that night."

The woman turned her back to them, wringing her hands. "I do not know what you mean."

Cate shook her head as she approached the girl. "Sonia, we don't have time for evasive answers. If we don't have the facts, we cannot help Randolph. Sonia, he'll go to jail! You don't want that, I know it."

Sonia collapsed onto the bed, tears falling from her eyes.

Cate hurried to her and eased onto the mattress. "Sonia, please help us!"

Sonia wiped the tears from her cheeks. "How do I know I can trust you?"

"We're here to help, both you and Randolph. We realize Randolph has been protecting you, both by keeping you in the tower room and by confessing to a crime he didn't commit. What we don't understand is why. We need to understand that to help him."

Sonia remained silent, licking her lips as she wrung her hands again.

"Sonia, please. Right now, we are your only friends. We only want to help. By the looks of it, you need it. Were you running away? Randolph will be devastated to find out you're missing."

Sonia nodded her head, tears threatening again. "I must go. I've cost this family too much now."

Cate grasped her hands and squeezed. "Randolph will be devastated if you leave. We can help, but we must have all the facts. Please, help us help you and Randolph."

Sonia shook her head, tears welling. "Please, you mustn't tell anyone about me. Only Uncle Randolph and a handful of people know I'm here. Not even his wife Victoria is aware."

Cate glanced at Jack. "Uncle Randolph?"

Sonia wiped away the tears that had fallen to her cheeks. "Yes, Randolph is my uncle."

Cate crinkled her brow. "Are you Lorne's daughter?"

Sonia shook her head. "No, Emilia was my mother."

"Emilia? Randolph's younger sister? But she died from influenza at age fifteen. I wasn't aware she was married nor had any children."

Sonia cast her eyes downward to her lap. "I'm afraid that's the story created to hide me, the ugly blemish on the family name."

"You mean..." Cate began.

"Yes, my mother died at age fifteen but not from influenza, she died in childbirth. I was a bastard. She was unmarried. My grandparents preferred that I be an orphan. Although that's a fair bit better than my paternal grandparents wanted for me. Uncle Randolph wouldn't allow it. He insisted

I stay here, argued with his parents. They couldn't explain the new baby without questions being asked. My father's family wanted no part of me, nor any potential for scandal on the family name. Uncle Randolph kept me a secret. Oh, please don't judge him for putting me in this room. I've been more than comfortable."

Cate stroked the girl's hair. "I understand, and we will say nothing, but you must promise not to leave. We can make sure you remain safe. Now, can you tell me what happened the night Andrew died?"

Sonia's face pinched as more tears fell from her eyes.

"Shh, shh." Cate soothed her. "I realize how hard this must be, but we need to understand the facts so we can help you both."

Sonia nodded again, breathing deeply, and composing herself. "Andrew used to bring me some of my meals. He was a vile man. Accused me of being many vulgar things. He blackmailed Uncle Randolph. At first, he paid, but Andrew demanded more and more. I felt so terrible. I almost left then. I wish I had."

"I'm sure Randolph is pleased you didn't leave."

"I do not agree," Sonia sobbed.

"It's all right, Sonia," Cate said, rubbing her arm, "please, continue."

"That night, that horrible night," Sonia lamented. "Andrew came here. He seemed different. Worse than ever, angry and bitter. He... He..."

Sonia stumbled, unable to find the words. "He attacked me," she managed, a few more tears rolling down her cheeks. "He ripped my dress. Said that he'd have his way with me, too, like Randolph. Uncle Randolph never hurt me. Not like that."

Sonia choked out her words amidst tears, struggling to tell the story. "He..."

Cate pressed her lips together in a thin line, understand the meaning of her words. She patted the girl's arm. "We understand, Sonia. You then defended yourself?"

Relieved of any sharing any of the lurid details, Sonia sucked in a deep breath. "Yes. I grabbed the first thing my hand reached and hit him."

Her shoulders sagged, and she sobbed as she continued. "I hit him. I hit him over and over until he didn't move."

Cate wrapped her arms around the girl and held her. "It's all right, Sonia. It's over now. You did nothing wrong."

She glanced at Jack who shook his head in disgust over Andrew's behavior.

After a moment, Cate prodded her to continue. "How did Andrew end up falling from the window?"

"Anna, one of the maids who has always been a loyal friend to me, helped me throw his body over. I didn't know what to do. I did not want Uncle Randolph to see what I had done. Perhaps he would have regretted his choice to help me. We struggled but succeeded in pushing him out the window nearest to this bed. I hoped it would appear as an accident. As though he had jumped. Then Anna assisted me in cleaning up the... mess. When Uncle Randolph told me the police were involved, I prayed they would find it to be an accident. But now..." her voice trailed off again.

Cate patted her shoulder. "I don't want you to worry, Sonia. We're here to help."

Sonia dried her tears. "I don't see how."

"Leave that to us. Can we trust you not to leave?"

"I imagine it would be easier if I did," Sonia argued.

"It wouldn't. Randolph will never forgive himself. Please promise us you'll stay, at least until you speak with us again."

Sonia nodded as she sniffled. "I promise. I will stay... for now."

Cate offered her a smile at the decision. "Sonia, before we go, is there anything else you can tell us about Andrew that might help us?"

Sonia reflected for a moment. "Andrew was not a nice man. He was involved in many nefarious things. I often spied him meeting with a man, exchanging things in the middle of the night. I am not aware of what the exact nature of their business was, but I cannot imagine it was anything respectable being conducted in the wee hours of the morning."

"Thank you, Sonia. That is helpful. I apologize for making you relive that night, but I assure you things will improve."

"Thank you for trying to help. And for not judging my past."

Cate stroked her hair. Hidden away for her entire life and made to believe she was a blight on her family, Cate pitied her. They needed a plan to help her.

"Try to rest, Sonia. We'll visit again when we have a solution."

"Please let it be soon," Sonia said, squeezing Cate's hand.

Cate helped the girl remove her tattered cape and settled her in bed. She blew out the candles that lit the room before she and Jack snuck from the

room. She shut and locked the door behind her before they returned to the closet and their own time.

“That poor girl,” Cate declared upon their return.

Jack shook his head. “And that bastard Andrew.”

“Yes. We must come up with a solution. We have to help them!”

“I’d love to, I don’t know how we can, though. I’m at a loss. Unless we turn her in for it and hope we can prove self-defense, I don’t see a way out of this.”

Cate sank onto the edge of the bed outside the time rip location. “There must be a way. I need time to deliberate. Perhaps we should discuss this after breakfast and see if we have any ideas.”

Jack yawned. “Good idea. Despite all the excitement, I’m exhausted. I don’t think I can put an idea together. It’s cutting it close though, we’ve got to be back tomorrow afternoon. They will charge Randolph, there’s no avoiding it.”

“Okay.” Cate squeezed his arm. “Don’t worry, we’ll find a way. Try to get some rest. Are you okay to drive home?”

“Yeah, yeah, I can make it,” Jack answered. “Hey, you try to get some rest, too. Don’t be up all night scheming.”

“Who, me? Never! See you tomorrow.”

“Yes, you, Lady Cate. See you tomorrow.”

They parted ways, with Cate returning to her room. Riley and Bailey leapt up to greet her as she entered. Despite her weariness from the long day, worry clouded her mind. They had no plan to fix the situation and they were running out of time.

Cate shook her head as tears threatened to spill onto her cheeks. She remained on her chaise for another forty-five minutes after she changed before surrendering to her growing sleepiness. She climbed into bed, drained and no closer to a solution. Despite her upset, she fell asleep within minutes.

Cate bolted upright in bed, gasping for breath. Confused, she sat dumbfounded for a few moments. As her breathing calmed and her mind settled, she realized the source of her distress.

A strange dream had disturbed her otherwise restful slumber. She and Jack had been at the castle in 1856. Sonia was there, visiting. Randolph entertained them with stories of his exotic travel. Victoria discussed an

upcoming party. Andrew arrived, threatening to ruin all plans, but in the end, he dissolved away to nothing, blowing away like smoke in the wind.

Cate clutched at the covers as the silly dream left her unsettled. She slid from under the sheets and out of bed. Her bare feet touched the cold floor, jarring her awake further.

Moonlight drenched the room. She took a few moments to stare out over the glowing landscape. Something about the dream bothered her, she found herself unable to shake it from her mind. She paced the floor for a few moments.

As she settled onto her chaise, a notion struck her. She leapt up, her breath quickening. After a few moments of pondering, a smile crept across Cate's face.

It was an unusual idea, but it just might work. She couldn't wait to tell Jack. She hoped he agreed. At the very least, they had a direction to move in and a plan they could try.

Excited but still tired, Cate crawled back into bed. Satisfied with her strategy, she fell back asleep and slept until her alarm.

The morning sun brightened the sky, painting it a rainbow of reds, oranges, and yellows. The vivid display matched Cate's sunny mood. She sprang from her bed, rushing to dress for the day. After a brief trip outside with Riley and Bailey, she made her way to the kitchen. She greeted Mrs. Fraser with a happy grin, picking up her breakfast for the morning to take upstairs. She hoped she could finish it without bursting from excitement.

After breakfast, she returned her dishes despite Mrs. Fraser's protests and gathered Jack in the name of estate business. He followed her upstairs where they settled in the library. Taking a deep breath, Cate said, grinning, "I have a plan!"

"Great! I came up with nothing, so I'm all ears. I can't believe it, but I'm all ears for a Cate Kensie plan."

"Keep an open mind. I don't have all the quirks sorted out, but I think it might work."

Cate spent the next hour detailing her plan to Jack. They discussed it at length, debating various aspects, revising minor details, adjusting pieces, gauging reactions from other parties and settling final elements. When they were satisfied, they glanced at each other.

"Well, Lady Cate, it's crazy but it just might work."

CHAPTER 31



Cate and Jack sat in the armchairs as each of them considered the plan Cate had outlined.

“Gosh, I hope this works,” Cate said. “We have to act fast, though, we don’t have much time.”

“You’re right. We need to get things in place before I’m due at the police station. They will file charges against Randolph this afternoon unless we can convince them not to. The only way we can do that is to convince Randolph to recant his story. And the only way he’ll do that is if he knows Sonia is safe.”

“Will retracting his confession be enough for the police to dismiss him as a suspect?”

Jack shrugged his shoulders as he drummed his fingers against the chair’s leather. “Perhaps not outright, but it should shed enough confusion that they will consider other suspects. At least I hope so.”

“Well, it’s our only option, so let’s change and do this.”

“Okay. And if you’ve got any good luck charms, now’s the time to carry them, Lady Cate. Meet you in the usual spot!”

“See you in a few!”

They separated, each going to don their era-appropriate apparel. Cate changed in record time, selecting the least fussy dress that she had to make their tasks easier. When she was ready, she met Jack in the bedroom closet. He paced the floor, anxiously awaiting her.

“Second thoughts?”

“Nope, not one. Just anxious to get moving.”

“Me, too,” Cate agreed. “Let’s go.”

Together, they rubbed the watch, sliding back over one hundred and fifty years. When they arrived, they hurried straight to the tower room.

Cate unlocked it and they hastened inside, closing the door behind them. The first step of their plan required them to convince Sonia to trust them and follow their direction.

“Cate!” Sonia exclaimed. “I spent much of my night wondering if I had dreamt you and wondering if you would return.”

“We are real,” Cate assured her, “and we have a plan.”

Sonia listened intently as Cate outlined their plan, summarizing the highlights and positive outcomes. “Do you think this will work?” she asked.

“Yes, it will work,” Cate pledged, “it has to.”

“I trust her,” Jack chimed in. “We’ll make it work.”

Sonia nodded. “All right, then let us proceed.”

“Good. Come along.” Cate stood, pulling Sonia to her feet. “We must gather your things and move you.”

Between the three of them, they assembled Sonia’s limited possessions, placing them in a suitcase.

“Follow me,” Cate said to Sonia, lugging the suitcase with her.

“Be safe,” Jack said as they stepped onto the stone stairs.

Cate nodded at him. “I’ll be back as soon as I can to help.”

“Okay. I’ll do what I can before you’re back.”

* * *

Cate led Sonia through the halls, avoiding any contact with other occupants of the castle. They arrived at their destination, a bedroom closet in an unused bedroom.

She situated Sonia in the closet, making her as comfortable as possible. “Stay here until either Jack or I come for you. Try to stay quiet. No one should be in here but just in case.”

“I have been hidden for years. I know how to remain unseen.”

Cate fussed with a pillow as she shot her a glance. “You’re right, sorry. Well, with any luck, we’ll be back soon.”

Sonia squeezed her hand and offered her an encouraging nod. “Go, Cate. And thank you.”

Cate smiled at her before she darted from the room, racing to the tower to finish helping Jack. By the time Cate returned, he had already stripped the bed, pushed the desk and dresser near the door and rolled up the area rug. He had also removed the blackout curtains from the window.

Cate’s eyes widened as she marveled at his progress. “Wow, great job so far!”

“Are you sure you’re able to do this in that outfit?”

“I’ll try. I picked a less cumbersome dress just for the occasion. Come on, we’ll move the desk first.”

“Right,” Jack said, positioning himself behind the desk, allowing Cate to take the front and walk facing forward. “Ready?”

“Ready. Straight to the unused bedroom.”

“And hope no one is there. Okay, on three.” Jack counted to three, and they lifted the desk. They managed to wrangle it down the stairs without too much effort, tucking it away in an unused bedroom near the tower stairs.

They climbed the steps again, repeating the process with the dresser. This heavier item they stowed in the storage room a few steps down from the tower room.

They dismantled the bed, shoving the mattress in the same storage room as the dresser and stacking the frame in the corner of the room. Next, they shifted several boxes from the storage area into the tower, shoving them in various locations to make it appear to be used for storage.

Cate huffed as she sank onto the top of a trunk they had dragged into the area. She wiped a few beads of sweat from her brow as she caught her breath. “Okay, part one of the plan finished. Sonia is moved, and the tower room is dismantled. No one would suspect someone has lived here for over a decade.”

“Now on to part two. You ready?” Jack asked, holding out his hand to pull Cate up to standing.

Cate grabbed his hand and let him pull her to her feet. “As I’ll ever be!”

They made their way out of the castle and began the trek to town. They approached the police station and entered. Jack asked to see Randolph, stating Cate wanted to visit with Randolph first then he wanted a few moments with his client.

The desk clerk disappeared into an office for a moment then returned. "Mrs. MacKenzie, if you'll follow me."

Jack gave her a nod of encouragement as she followed the clerk to the interview room.

She drummed her fingers against the table as she awaited his arrival.

Moments later, an officer led Randolph into the room. Still in handcuffs, he plopped into a chair across from Cate.

"Five minutes," the officer warned before stepping out.

"Catherine, lovely to see you, but you should be with Victoria."

"No time to waste with niceties, Randolph," Cate whispered. "We have a plan, I'll explain it quickly, but you must trust me and do as I say."

Randolph screwed up his face. "Plan?"

"Yes, listen carefully. I won't have time to repeat this."

Cate explained the plan to Randolph in as much detail as time allowed. Randolph's jaw unhinged as she described the details. He sat stunned for a moment when she finished.

"And Sonia is safe?"

"Safe as houses," Cate said, using a popular Victorian phrase.

"Catherine, that's one hell of a plan. Do you suppose it will work?"

"I hope so. I had to be creative, you put us in one heck of a mess with your confession!"

Randolph pressed his lips together and cocked his head. "Apologies, dear lady, but I will not allow Sonia's safety to be compromised."

"Admirable, Randolph, but we must also consider your wife's and child's lives. This plan offers everyone a chance at happiness. Now, we just have to hope it works."

The officer returned to the room. "Time's up."

"Take care, Randolph, and listen to Jack," Cate said as she stood and exited room.

She passed Jack as she ambled down the hall on his way to consult with his "client." She reached for his hand, smiling and giving it a squeeze as they passed each other.

"Good luck!" she mouthed.

Jack grinned at her and winked. "Showtime!" he whispered.

Cate pushed through the doors into the chilly autumn day, beginning her walk back to the castle. She would return to provide Victoria with as much

comfort as she could while they awaited the next phase of their plan to play out.

Nervous butterflies flitted in her stomach as she wondered how the events played out in the police station.

She glanced up at the castle standing tall in front of it, hoping for the residents inside today would mark a change in their luck.

She approached the rambling structure, giving the door knocker a solid smack.

Thomson greeted her, guiding her into the house. “Lady MacKenzie will be so pleased to see you.”

Cate followed him to Victoria’s suite.

“Lady MacKenzie, Mrs. MacKenzie has arrived.”

“Catherine! Come in!”

“Hello, Victoria,” Cate said, entering the room and offering the woman a hug.

“Please sit down. Tea?” Victoria offered, motioning to the tea set already on the table.

Cate sank into a chair at the table as Victoria poured her a cup. “Thank you.”

Victoria pressed a shaky hand against her forehead. “I’m so thankful you are here. I’m a bundle of nerves.”

“Jack is at the station now. I hope he brings good news with him today.”

“As do I. I’m so unsure.” Her voice broke as she shook her head.

Cate grasped her hand. “Victoria...” Cate began.

“No, no,” Victoria interrupted, “I must press on. Must keep my head up.” She raised her chin as she selected a biscuit from the tray and nibbled the corner.

“There is nothing to fret over yet. Save your strength, you may not even need to fret! Jack has a plan.”

“Let us hope and pray that is the case. I trust Jack.”

Cate pulled one of the cookies from the tray. “Shall we change the subject?”

“Please,” Victoria said.

They chatted about whatever struck Victoria’s fancy over tea. As late afternoon approached, conversation became intermittent as Cate’s mind became distracted by the lateness of the hour. The women moved to the sitting room, enjoying some time with Ethan. Several more tedious hours

passed. The nanny took Ethan for his evening feeding and bath, leaving Cate and Victoria on their own to pass the time again.

After another hour, Cate feared for her sanity, sure the waiting would drive her mad.

“Should Jack’s plan be taking this long? Oh, what if they’ve charged him?” Victoria cried.

Cate feared the same, but she patted Victoria’s hand and plastered a smile onto her face. “We haven’t any news yet. No news may be good news.”

“But...” Victoria began when there were sounds from the foyer. Cate and Victoria shared a glance, before both of them raced from the room.

Victoria’s eyes widened as she hurried through the doors into the foyer. “Randolph!” she exclaimed, rushing to him. “Oh, my darling husband.”

She threw her arms around his neck in a full embrace. “How are you? Have they mistreated you?”

Randolph wrapped her in a tight embrace. “Victoria, I’m fine, just fine.”

Cate’s heart melted at the scene she witnessed from the doorway. She glanced at Jack with a soft smile, her heart about to burst with excitement. While interested to know the details, the current result satisfied her.

Victoria released Randolph, twisting to pull Jack into an embrace. “How can I ever thank you, Cousin Jack? You have my eternal gratitude.”

Jack patted her shoulder. “We’re not out of the woods yet, to coin a phrase from my wife, but most of the difficulty has passed. The investigation’s focus should move from Randolph. They shouldn’t trouble you anymore.”

Victoria took a step back, wiping tears from her cheeks. “Oh, what a spectacle I am.”

Randolph motioned toward the doorway. “Shall we go into the sitting room? I could use a drink.”

“As could I,” Jack agreed.

Randolph followed Cate inside, aiming for the drink cart. He poured two full glasses, offering one to Jack before he pulled the cord on the wall to summon Thomson.

The butler entered to inquire after their needs.

“Champagne,” Randolph ordered, “four glasses. We are celebrating tonight!”

Thomson, a joyous smile on his otherwise stuffy features, left to oversee the request.

Once delivered, poured, and each of them held a glass, Randolph toasted, "To Jack. Catherine, your husband is a legal genius."

They all raised their glasses to Jack.

"Well, I don't know about that, sir," Jack said, after sipping his champagne. "But you certainly tested my mettle."

"No need to be modest, boy. You got me out of quite a tight spot. I made a serious miscalculation, and you handled it with ease."

"We can never repay you, either of you, cousins," Victoria said. "Catherine, you are to be commended, too. Were it not for you, I wouldn't have survived. And Jack, dear Jack, I cannot thank you enough."

"It is our pleasure," Jack answered for the both of them. "Besides, I had to help Randolph. I needed a favor from him."

"We'll do anything, just name it," Victoria said.

"Thank you for being so accommodating without yet knowing the request," Jack said.

"I know the request and I hardly think we're being overly accommodating," Randolph said.

"You know it?" Victoria asked, cocking her head.

"I do." Randolph nodded. "We had plenty of time to discuss it while the police sorted through things."

"Are you both going to play coy? What is it?"

CHAPTER 32



All eyes turned to Jack as they awaited his request. The last piece of the plan, Cate waited with bated breath for it to fall into place.

Jack pressed his lips together, setting his champagne glass on the coffee table in front of him. "I've just learned my niece, Sonia, my sister's child, has been orphaned. My sister died birthing Sonia, and now my brother-in-law has passed away in an accident."

"Oh, how terrible for the poor child," Victoria lamented.

"Yes, it is most unfortunate. As her next-of-kin, the duty falls to me to look after her. With my need to travel, it may become difficult. While I realize the imposition a request of this magnitude places on you, I beseeched Randolph if she may spend some time at the castle until such time that Catherine and I are settled and can take her in. Perhaps, she could provide companionship for you, Victoria."

Victoria straightened, waving her hand in the air. "Imposition? Nonsense! She is family. There's no imposition at all. We would welcome her. How delightful to meet a new family member."

Randolph eased onto the sofa next to his wife. "I concur. It's poppycock to think it an imposition!"

"What is her age?" Victoria inquired.

"She is nearly sixteen," Jack answered.

Victoria clapped her hands together, a grin forming on her features. "Oh, what fun we shall have! You were right to come to us. She should not be unsettled, traveling about the country at this age. She must be guided,

supported, and trained. We shall make sure she is raised to make a fine match and become a true lady. Do not give it a second thought, cousins. I will see to it all. When will she arrive?"

"In fact, she is already here. I traveled to retrieve her last evening, returning early this morning with Sonia."

Victoria's eyes lit as plans formed in her mind. "Oh, you must send for her at once! And I must send for my dressmaker. We must buy her a new dress or two, perhaps even three, for the upcoming holiday season. We will travel to London. We will attend many holiday parties before and after the new year."

"As you can see, Cousin Jack," Randolph said, "my wife has the situation well in hand."

Jack chuckled at the statement. "Yes. It appears so. In all seriousness, I am fortunate to count you as family."

"Well, I agree with my wife. Sonia should be sent for at once. I shall tell Thomson to set an extra place for dinner. Please, cousin, might you retrieve her tonight?"

"I should be glad to." Jack rose and bowed to them.

"Oh, Randolph, please have Mrs. Carmichael prepare the bedroom down the hall from mine for Sonia. You don't mind if she stays with us beginning tonight, do you, cousin Jack?"

"Not at all. It would be preferable that she become settled prior to our departure. This would give her a few weeks to become comfortable while we are here to visit. I shall retrieve her now." Jack nodded at them again before he strode from the room.

Randolph crossed behind him, ringing for the butler and instructing him to arrange for Jack's niece, Sonia, to join them for dinner and to stay with them going forward.

Cate sat on pins and needles waiting for Jack's return with Sonia. If the current situation with the police held out, this would solve the last issue. It would be impossible to tell until she spoke with Jack how likely it was that the investigation would close without further troubling the MacKenzie household.

After what seemed an eternity to Cate, Jack arrived.

He stepped into the sitting room and tugged forward a waif of a girl. "May I present my niece, Sonia Morgan."

Sonia stepped around him, glancing shyly at Victoria then Randolph.

“Sonia, my dear child, come in. Please, call me Uncle Randolph.”

“I should like that, Uncle Randolph,” Sonia said, her voice barely above a whisper.

Jack guided her forward as Victoria rose.

“Sonia, welcome!” She approached the girl and embraced her, adding a kiss on her cheek. “I am your Aunt Victoria. We are so pleased to welcome you into our family and our home. Please, come and sit down.” Victoria led her to the loveseat to sit. “Your journey was no doubt taxing on you. Are you exhausted from it?”

“I am rather tired,” Sonia admitted.

Cate assumed the source of her weariness was from worry rather than travel.

“Poor child. We shall go to dinner soon, you can retire afterwards to rest. I’ve had a bedroom prepared for you near mine. I look so forward to your stay. We shall have such fun together, Sonia!” Victoria held Sonia’s hands in hers, offering a wide, bright smile.

“Thank you for your graciousness, Aunt Victoria,” Sonia answered.

“There is no need for gratitude, Sonia. We are family. Oh, I hope you enjoy fashion. I cannot wait to have my dressmaker in for an appointment with you. You are a very pretty girl,” Victoria said, fussing with her hair. “Your complexion is light but very attractive. You shall do well in bold colors.”

“I shall be excited to have a new dress of any color.”

Victoria beamed at her. “Oh, no my dear, not *a* new dress. We shall buy many new dresses for you. You shall need them. We shall attend many events.”

Sonia smiled for the first time, a full, genuine smile. Cate found herself also smiling at the scene. Sonia would now live a full life. Victoria would have a friend and companion. She would no longer feel lonely, far from her old life and friends. All that remained was for the police to clear Randolph of all charges and close the case. Cate hoped it was only a matter of time.

The group enjoyed the rest of their evening. Victoria already began her training of Sonia during dinner, prompting the girl to sit properly, holding her utensils as a lady should and how to make light, entertaining conversation. She reminded Sonia that she, one day, would host her own dinner parties as the lady of a household.

Following dinner, Victoria excused herself to settle Sonia in her new room. Cate tagged along to help. Before the ladies departed, Sonia offered Jack a tight hug and a sincere thank you.

“How touching,” Victoria said to Cate. “Do not worry, cousin Jack, she shall be well taken care of. Come, Sonia, let us get you settled in your new bed.”

Cate and Victoria led Sonia to her new room. She marveled at it, asking Victoria if it was really hers. Victoria assured her it was.

Bryson had set out the few items Sonia brought. Victoria assessed them, then sent Bryson to fetch another nightgown from Victoria’s collection, claiming the one Sonia had “simply wouldn’t do.”

After dressing her in the new nightgown, Victoria settled her in bed. Cate gave Sonia a warm hug which Sonia returned along with a thank you. After a few more moments of fussing, Victoria and Cate left Sonia to sleep.

“What a dear child she is,” Victoria said as they returned to the sitting room. “Do not worry, Catherine, I shall check on her in a bit to be sure she is settled. I sometimes find myself unable to sleep in a new location so I shall know just what to do.”

“She is lucky to have you now, Victoria,” Cate said.

“She has not enjoyed the presence of a mother before, poor child, and one can tell. But do not worry, I shall have her up to snuff by next season for her debut.”

Cate smiled as they entered the sitting room, rejoining Randolph and Jack.

“Have her all settled, my dear?” Randolph asked.

“Settled and snug in her new bed,” Victoria answered. “And do not worry, cousin Jack, as I told Catherine, I shall have Sonia prepared to make a fine match in short order. She shall have the upbringing of a fine lady. Oh, Jack, has she any musical training? It is sometimes a good skill for young ladies to possess. It makes them seem clever.”

“I do not believe she has, Victoria,” Jack answered.

“Randolph, we should arrange for her to learn piano-forte. I do hope she might show some skill for it. We shall see!”

Randolph waved a hand in the air. “Of course, my dear. Whatever you suggest.”

“I shall make a list.”

“Wonderful, my dear,” Randolph said before turning to address Jack. “Well, cousin, as you can see, we have the situation well in hand. I hope this sets your mind at ease.”

“It does, sir, it does. I shall feel most comfortable leaving her in your care. You have taken a great weight from my mind.”

“We both appreciate it very much,” Cate chimed in. “We shall take our leave for the evening. It has been a trying day, I’m sure you both would like to relax.”

“Indeed,” Victoria answered, “as has it been for both of you. Please get some rest. Will you visit tomorrow?”

“Yes,” Jack said. “I’d like to see how Sonia has settled. Perhaps we shall stop in the afternoon for tea.”

“We shall look forward to seeing you then,” Randolph agreed. “I shall walk you to the door.”

They left Victoria in the sitting room while Randolph led them to the foyer. “Jack, Catherine, I cannot thank you enough. I shall forever be in your debt.”

“Save your thanks for when we are sure you are cleared of all charges, Randolph,” Jack said.

Randolph clapped him on the back. “All in due time, my boy, all in due time. Now, I shall see you tomorrow. You should have an unfettered path to your destination if you go now.”

“See you tomorrow, Randolph,” Cate said.

They ascended the stairs, winding through the halls to the bedroom closet. They used the timepiece to return to their time.

Jack breathed his customary sigh of relief.

“WOW!” Cate exclaimed, her hands balling into fists that she waved in the air. “I want to hear all about it.”

Jack sighed and shook his head, collapsing onto the bed in the bedroom. “I want to take a nap. Whew, I can’t believe it’s only been an hour.”

Cate’s shoulders slumped and she pouted at him. “Oh, come on, I’ve been waiting all day.”

Jack waved a finger in the air. “Actually, you’ve only been waiting an hour.”

“How are you not excited?”

Jack chuckled as he propped himself up on his elbows. “Okay, okay. I’ll admit it, it felt rather good helping both Randolph and Sonia today.”

“Rather good? That’s it?” Cate asked, raising her eyebrows.

Jack’s face twisted into a happy smile. “It felt pretty damned good.”

“So, out with it!”

Jack tugged at his collar. “At least let me change first!”

“Okay, okay... Library?”

Jack nodded as he pulled himself up to his feet. “As usual, Lady Cate.”

Cate hurried from the room, tearing off her dress and changing into her regular clothes. She gathered the dogs with her and rushed to the library.

Jack joined her moments later. “Wow, Lady Cate, you beat me. You must be anxious to hear this story!”

Cate twisted in her seat, tapping her hands against the back of the chair as he made his way over. “I am! I don’t understand how you did it, Jack. Now, come on, tell me every detail! Don’t leave anything out.”

“Okay, okay,” Jack agreed, sinking into an armchair. Cate perched on the edge of hers with bated breath. “It wasn’t too difficult. Once Randolph stopped insisting he was guilty, I succeeded in convincing the police to consider other suspects.”

“Did it take any convincing on your part?”

Jack threaded his fingers together and clutched them around his neck. “Only an assurance that Sonia was safe. I told him you had seen to it yourself, that you’d never let anything happen to the girl.”

Cate shook her head and shrugged. “And then what? He just told the police to cancel his confession?”

“No, it was more difficult than that. He recanted his statement. The police were not happy. They reviewed his statement over and over from when he confessed and his subsequent questioning. We pointed out all the inconsistencies, which they themselves questioned on both occasions. Then I asked them to review the original statements taken from the night of the party. Randolph’s new statement matched that one and the other witness testimony. They realized, as we did when we went through the same exercise, that it was impossible for Randolph to have killed Andrew.”

“So, he’s off the hook, right?”

“Well, they asked him not to leave the area just yet and they haven’t officially removed him from the suspect list, but I expect it’s only a matter of time. Still, we should check back until he is no longer considered a suspect. Or until the investigation is closed, assuming that’s before the end of the year.”

“Wait, did I just hear you suggest we *should* time travel?”

Jack laughed as he drummed his hands against the chair’s arms. “Yes, my dear Lady Cate, I suggested it. I want to see this through. It’s my first big legal win.”

Cate cocked her head at him, giving him a coy smile. “Yes, apparently you are quite the legal genius.”

Jack jabbed at finger at her. “You know it.”

“Did the police mention any other suspects?”

“Yes, they did. I inquired after telling them I hoped my client would no longer be bothered by this. They said they may poke around the grounds but doubted they would find much.”

“Because it’s been too long since the murder?”

“No, they didn’t presume the murder weapon was on the estate.”

Cate furrowed her brow at the statement. She realized they hadn’t ever found the weapon since she had, but why hadn’t they looked?

CHAPTER 33



Cate raised her eyebrows in surprise. “Really? They don’t think they’ll find the murder weapon?”

“Yes. From the eyewitness accounts of that night, several people told the police they had seen Andrew meeting with another man earlier that evening. The man wasn’t someone anyone was acquainted with, but they had seen him with Andrew once or twice before. They appeared to be arguing. The police assume the man was an associate of Andrew’s and murdered him over whatever they were arguing about.”

“Sonia mentioned seeing Andrew meeting with someone, too.”

Jack nodded at her as he kicked his feet up on the coffee table. “Right. Probably the same man. Based on his description, the police suspect he was a rather disreputable fellow. They assume Andrew was involved in some nefarious things and it cost him his life.”

Cate twirled a lock of hair around her finger. “Wonder what will happen when they find him, and he says he’s innocent. He may even have an alibi.”

“I doubt they’ll ever find him. With the trouble, he’s probably long gone never to return to avoid any suspicion.”

“Gosh, I hope so,” Cate said, chewing her lower lip.

Jack waved a hand at her. “Relax, Cate, we stand a good chance. And a far better chance than we did when Randolph was professing his guilt.”

Cate contemplated for a moment. “Hmm, wow, I still can’t believe this worked.”

He shot a glance at her. "Hey! What do you mean you can't believe it worked? You *insisted* this plan would work!"

Cate pulled her feet up onto the chair with a shrug. "Well, I hoped it would work, but now that it did, I'm shocked it went so smoothly. I mean, Randolph confessed, he was insistent. Then he just recanted, and they accepted it."

"They had no choice. His confession was questionable from the start. That's why I had such an easy time getting them to agree not to charge him right away. Even they questioned if it would stick."

"Wow," Cate whispered, stunned into silence after considering the breadth of the situation.

"Now it's just a waiting game to get the all clear, which I hope comes soon."

"Me, too. You know, we're approaching the end of the year, it's sad to realize we won't be able to visit anymore."

Jack nodded, a wistful expression on his face. "Yes, I can't believe I'm about to admit to this, but I will miss them."

"Me, too," Cate said with a sigh. "Oh, well, I suppose we should start our day... again."

"I suppose so. I'll tell you one thing I won't miss is living two days in the time of only one," Jack said as he hauled himself to his feet.

"You and me both. It's evening to me but we haven't even had lunch yet. At least it's helping my terrible sleep habits. I sleep the entire night!"

"And it only took time travel to cure your insomnia. Who would have ever guessed traveling through time would benefit one's health."

Cate gave him an amused look. "Back to research for me and preparing for Molly's arrival."

"Have you heard from her? I'll bet she is excited."

"I have. She's already sent some of her things."

"I'll bet she would have stayed here and never gone back if she could have."

"I agree. She's counting the days down."

Jack stretched and strode toward the door. "Well, let me know when her things arrive, I'll get them moved. If you need anything else done before she's due here, let me know, I'll get right on it."

"Thanks, Jack."

Jack left her in the library. Cate sat for another few moments, pondering the results of the last few days. After a time, she roused herself from her daze, deciding to take the dogs for a long walk.

After the walk and lunch, she settled in the library determined to make progress on a chapter of her book. Before beginning, she checked her email, finding the latest report from Molly awaiting her.

Hi Cate– More boxes on their way to you. One more round should do it! Gayle also helped me book my ticket. I am arriving in London on December 15 and will take the train to Scotland on December 16. I think she’s planning to contact you to see if it would be best for me to rent a car and drive or have Jack come for me. I’m fine either way, I’ll be on cloud nine, you just tell me which is best for you.

I’m wrapping things up in the office with my “complete inventory.” Soon, I’ll just be finishing my time. Jeff is already interviewing for my replacement so I can train them before I leave.

And I saved the best news for last. I ran into Tom yesterday at the grocery store. He tried to play the nice guy, you know, “hi, how are you, how have you been” blah, blah. I told him great, I don’t think he believed me. So, I informed him why I was doing great. I told him I quit my job and wouldn’t be in my place much longer. Then I dropped the bombshell about my moving to Scotland. I’m not sure who was more shocked, my sister or Tom. I don’t care, but I had a good time telling both of them.

Anyway, only five more weeks!!!!!!!!!!

Molly

Molly’s excitement bounced off the screen. With her arrival less than a week from the Christmas extravaganza, Cate thought it best to have Jack collect Molly rather than fuss with a rental car.

She sent the information back in an email to Molly and pressed send. An email from Gayle arrived moments later, requesting similar information and Cate responded with the same.

While visiting 1856, Cate had discovered several pieces of information that she deemed interesting for her book. Her personal experience in the past gave her a new perspective. Her book would be one-of-a-kind with its unique information.

She spent her afternoon and evening penning a chapter, her mind able to focus after solving the issue with Randolph. Cate turned in early, sleeping without issue given her long day.

The following morning, Cate longed to return to check on the situation in 1856. Concern plagued her. She wondered how Sonia was adjusting, how Victoria was, if there was any further trouble for Randolph.

She questioned how she would handle it when she could no longer visit with them. It was heart breaking for her. Still, as of now, she could visit with them and would meet them today. She focused on this idea as she watched Riley and Bailey frolic near the loch.

After lunch, she readied herself, meeting Jack in the bedroom closet at 3:30 p.m. They slowed the timepiece and returned to Randolph and Victoria's time. They traversed the back passages of the castle to the outside then the front door. Thomson greeted them, showing them into the solarium for tea. They found Victoria and Sonia already seated, discussing a schedule of plans for Sonia's musical education. Sonia wore one of Victoria's gowns. Her hair coiffed in a becoming style with a matching ribbon.

As they entered, Sonia stood, curtsying. "Good day, Uncle Jack and Aunt Catherine."

Victoria smiled and nodded, as the girl took her seat again. She beamed to Cate and Jack, giving them a wink. "Come in and sit down, cousins. Sonia and I were just discussing furthering her education. She is keen on learning an instrument."

Cate and Jack took their seats at the table.

"Hello, Sonia. You look well," Cate said.

"Indeed," Jack added, "how was your first night in the castle?"

"Splendid," Sonia answered. Her eyes sparkled with renewed interest in life. "I slept well. The bed's most comfortable."

"I had Bryson alter this dress for her," Victoria said. "To tide her over until my dressmaker can create some new things for her. The color does well on her. It always made me sallow. Would you agree, Catherine?"

"Quite fitting," Cate concurred.

“I’ve already sent for the dressmaker and to acquire a piano-forte instructor. Sonia may be keen on learning a language, too. She is quite clever,” Victoria said.

Jack smiled at them. “I’m so pleased.”

Randolph strode into the room, joining them at the table. “Well, cousins, I’m so pleased you could join us.”

Jack stood, shaking his hand. “Randolph, Sonia looks well. I am so pleased with Victoria’s plans for her.”

“As am I!” Randolph admitted as both men seated themselves. “I am afraid, however, I have some bad news.”

Cate’s heart skipped a beat and the color drained from her face. “Oh no, what is it?”

“I shall no longer require your legal counsel, Jack. The police have cleared me of the murder and removed me from the suspect list. I know how you shall miss sparring with them.”

“That’s fantastic news, Randolph,” Jack said, clapping him on the back. “Although, I will miss the scrapping.”

“I could do without it,” Victoria noted with a wrinkle of her nose.

“What of the case?” Jack asked.

“They are searching for some dubious character by the name of Simon Dupree. Involved in all sorts of scandal, that one. He was seen on the property multiple times, including the fateful night. I doubt the police will ever catch up with him. Long gone at the first hint of trouble, I’m sure.”

“Undoubtedly,” Jack agreed.

“Please may we speak of something lighter?” Victoria pleaded.

“Agree,” Cate chimed in.

The group of five spent the rest of their meal engaging in light conversation.

A twinge of sadness shot through Cate with each passing moment. With the case settled and the year drawing to a close, she inched closer to being unable to visit with her new friends.

The fact was made even more real when Jack announced his business would conclude within the next two weeks and they would leave the area. Victoria expressed her disappointment but encouraged them to visit. They promised to try, but Cate realized full well this was an empty pledge.

At the conclusion of their evening, Randolph offered to walk Cate and Jack to the door, mentioning he would like a moment alone with the couple

before they departed. They strode to his office, and he closed the door behind them.

“With the year drawing to a close,” Randolph began, “I suppose we shan’t be meeting much more.”

“Sadly, no,” Cate said. “As the new year arrives, the time clock will reset, as I understand it. Therefore, our travels using this specific rip would bring us back to relive this same year.”

“Correct,” Randolph agreed.

Cate was silent for a moment, composing herself. “I... that is, we...” she stumbled. “I wish there was another way. It would be nice to visit.”

“I cannot offer any solutions. But perhaps...” he began.

Cate’s eyebrows shot up. “Yes?”

“You may find it helpful to consult with Douglas. To this day, I do not understand how he tamed the power in this castle.”

“Douglas MacKenzie, the original castle owner?” Jack asked.

“Yes, old Doug, my grandfather. A crafty bugger, that one. If anyone can find you a way, he can.”

“I promise to look into that!” Cate vowed.

Jack slid his eyes closed and shook his head. “Please, sir, don’t encourage her.”

“Ah, laddie, apologies, but my encouragement or lack of will not change her mind.”

“Probably not,” Jack answered.

“Definitely not. She’s a MacKenzie, we’re a strong-willed lot!” Randolph waved his fist in the air.

“You’ve got that right,” Jack agreed.

“I for one am glad of it. Without her willfulness, I may be in prison.”

Jack nodded at him, cocking his head. “Aye, that’s a likely bet, sir.”

“On that note, I wanted to say thank you. Thank you to both of you. I cannot ever repay you for what you’ve done.”

“There’s no repayment necessary, Randolph,” Cate said with a wide smile. “We are so pleased to have helped.”

“Even so, my family and I are indebted to you. And now, before this moment turns maudlin, particularly for Catherine, let us part ways. I hope to see you at least one more time before the year is out.”

“You will,” Cate promised.

“So, it’s goodbye for now, Catherine and Jack. Until we meet again,” Randolph said.

They said their goodbyes, promising to see each other at least once more before Jack and Cate returned to the closet and their own time. Cate spent the rest of her evening glum, knowing they would soon say goodbye for good to her ancestors. She held on to the hope that one day she would meet Douglas MacKenzie and perhaps devise a way to return to visit with Randolph and Victoria as their lives continued.

As the month of November continued, Cate spent most of her time researching and planning for the upcoming Christmas event and Molly’s arrival. With the year drawing to a close, Cate’s time to visit with Randolph and Victoria also grew short. She and Jack found the time mid-month to take one last trip to 1856. Good fortune continued for the MacKenzies of 1856. The police abandoned any hope of finding Andrew’s killer. While the case remained unsolved, it had more or less been forgotten, written off as a senseless tragedy among a den of thieves.

They said their goodbyes, stating that, after a brief tour of Britain, they would return to the United States. Cate’s eyes welled with tears as she said goodbye to Victoria, Randolph, Sonia and little Ethan, presuming it would be the last time she would see them.

After returning home, Cate dug out the folder containing the articles Mrs. Campbell provided her alerting her to the murder. With a shaky hand, she opened the folder. The article titled “MURDER AT DUNHAVEN CASTLE” sat on top of the pile. Cate dug further into the stack of photocopies, searching for the articles discussing the investigation and subsequent trial and conviction of Randolph. She shuffled through the papers. Near the end of the stack, she found what she was hunting. The article that announced Randolph’s conviction now read “MURDER REMAINS UNSOLVED: SUSPECT SOUGHT.” Cate skimmed the article. It reported that after a lengthy investigation, which cleared Randolph of all charges, a new suspect had been sought. A known associate of Mr. Forsythe was the top suspect. Anyone having any information should contact the police.

On the top of the page, an article detailed an upcoming party given in the honor of Sonia MacKenzie, cousin to Lord and Lady MacKenzie, at the castle. Cate smiled at the new headlines. They had made a difference. She

set the papers on her night table, intending to share them with Jack in the morning.

She spent the next several weeks frequenting the portrait gallery, where she felt close to her ancestors. She spent time staring at the portraits of Victoria and Randolph, wishing them the best.

As the month came to a close, Cate filled her time with research, meetings with Mrs. Campbell and preparing for Molly's arrival in two short weeks. Anticipation for Molly's arrival occupied Cate's mind, easing her tendency to dwell on those she had left behind.

During their latest meeting, Mrs. Campbell left a folder with Cate containing another set of articles about Dunhaven Castle's past. That night, Cate climbed into bed. With a dog nestled on either side of her, she opened the folder. It contained several news clippings that Mrs. Campbell put together for Cate's research.

Cate grabbed the first article from the top of the stack. Her eyes widened as she read the headline. The paper, marked from the year 1925, announced in block letters: THEFT AT DUNHAVEN CASTLE. Cate cocked her head to the side. "Well, this looks interesting," she said, settling back to discover her next mystery.

* * *

THE END

HOLIDAY HEIST AT DUNHAVEN CASTLE



A CATE KENSIE MYSTERY

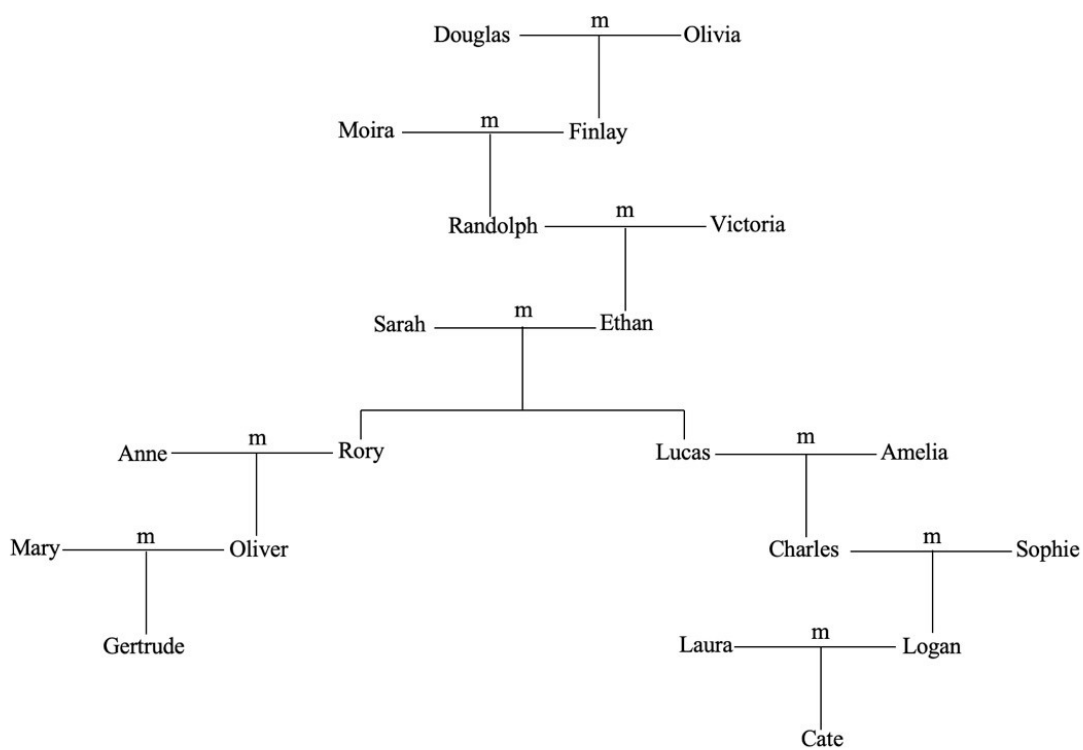
*For Jacob, Arabella and Jillian
Never stop trying.
We only fail when we fail to try.*

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MacKenzie Family Tree



CHAPTER 1



The shadowy figure raced away from the sprawling castle's dark facade. The crescent moon overhead barely lit the form as it crossed the surrounding hills. Only the massive gemstones caught the light as they fled from Dunhaven Castle with the family's heirloom jewels.

Lady Catherine Kensie bit her lower lip as she tugged her cardigan tighter against the chilly December weather, imagining the scene that occurred on a dark winter's night almost a century ago. She chuckled to herself as she realized it probably happened nothing like that.

"What do you think, boys?" she asked her two furry friends, Riley and Bailey, who sniffed a set of bushes edging the path. "Is that how the theft occurred?"

Cate glanced up at the castle rising above her, blocking the afternoon sun. A shiver passed through Cate as the wind blew past her. She shoved her hands in her pockets, her shoulders rising toward her ears.

"Yikes, come on, boys! It's getting too cold out here!"

She entered through the kitchen, greeting Mrs. Fraser who was busy preparing dinner for the evening.

"Brr, it's cold out there!" Cate said as she ushered the dogs into the room.

"Aye, it is. And we haven't even gotten to real winter yet!"

"I hope Molly packed warm clothes. It'll be quite a change for her coming from the States."

Mrs. Fraser set out utensils on Cate's tray. "Less than a week. I bet she's excited."

"She is," Cate answered. "There are more and more exclamation points with every email."

Mrs. Fraser wiped her hands on her apron before she tugged open the oven's door. "Heading up to work on your book?"

"Yes. I'm going to try to get a few paragraphs in before dinner."

"Good luck, Lady Cate!" Mrs. Fraser called as Cate ushered the two dogs up to the library, where she planned to complete work on her book before dinner.

Cate plopped into the desk's chair and tugged her laptop open before she pulled her notebook over. She smiled as she perused her notes, most of which consisted of information from when she'd met her ancestors, Randolph and Victoria MacKenzie, while time traveling with her estate manager, Jack Reid, to solve a centuries-old murder.

With a deep breath, she set the notebook aside and typed up a first draft of her experiences. She closed her laptop as Mrs. Fraser flitted into the room and slid her dinner tray onto the coffee table across the room.

After thanking her housekeeper for the meal delivery, she sank into the supple leather of the armchair near the fireplace. Flames danced inside, warming the two dogs napping nearby.

Cate stared down at the manila folder on the coffee table as she pulled her tray onto her lap. She tugged it onto the chair's arm and flicked it open. A set of articles from Isla Campbell, the town's librarian and historical society president, stared back at her.

She stared at the thick black words making up the headline: THEFT AT DUNHAVEN CASTLE.

Cate re-read the article, detailing a theft that occurred on New Year's Day in 1925. Someone had stolen two expensive heirloom necklaces as the family slept off the New Year's Eve festivities.

Cate flipped through the other articles supplied by Mrs. Campbell, all of them connected to the theft and the subsequent investigation. Neither the jewels nor the culprit were ever found.

As Mrs. Fraser returned to collect her tray, Cate closed the folder. "Oh, thank you, Mrs. Fraser. I wish you'd let me return these myself."

"Nay, I wouldn't hear of it, Lady Cate. Besides, in a matter of days, I can have that whippersnapper, Molly, running up for it." Mrs. Fraser

chuckled, winking at Cate.

Cate grinned at her as she slid the folder onto the coffee table. “Good plan.”

“Aye, no rest for her when she comes. Now, is there anything else I can fetch for you, Lady Cate?”

“No, Mrs. Fraser, nothing at all. Please enjoy the rest of your evening.”

“You do the same, Lady Cate. I plan to pack a few things this evening for our upcoming stay.”

“I’m so glad you and Mr. Fraser decided to spend the holiday season here at the castle. I know the cottage is close, but it will make things so much easier for you. Not to mention that I’m ecstatic to have you here.”

“With the party and the guests, it sure will,” Mrs. Fraser answered. “And I must say, I am quite looking forward to those parties.”

“I am, too, although,” Cate said as she glanced at her phone’s calendar, “I am not looking forward to all these meetings with Mrs. Campbell about it.”

“The first party is only ten days away, Lady Cate. After the new year, you can relax.”

“Yes, the Snow Ball is creeping up on us. And with the New Year’s Eve VIP party right on its heels, my schedule is packed. How did I let her talk me into two major events in two weeks?”

“You’re too soft, that’s how!” Mrs. Fraser said with a wink.

“You’re right.”

“I have no doubts you’ll pull it off, Lady Cate.”

“Gosh, I hope so. Well, have a good evening, Mrs. Fraser.”

The woman bustled from the room with the remains of Cate’s meal. Cate’s eyes fell onto the folder again and she flipped through it one more time. Her mind turned to the upcoming conversation she planned to have with Jack about the theft.

He’d likely want to leave the past in the past. But she couldn’t help but be curious about what had happened.

She flicked the folder closed. It would be an uphill battle to convince Jack to investigate, but she felt prepared to make her case.

She gathered both pups, carrying them to her room and settling in near the cozy fire for a night of reading.

Cate bounded out of bed the next morning, ready to discuss her latest project with Jack. The chill in the morning air chased her back into the

castle after a brief time outside with the dogs. She enjoyed her breakfast, warmed by the fire in the library.

After breakfast, she gathered her materials about the theft and wandered the castle in search of Jack. She came upon him near the ballroom, adjusting a few artificial Christmas trees near the doors leading inside the room.

“Good morning,” she said as he crawled from under one of the trees.

“Good morning, Lady Cate. Would you mind doing me a great favor, lassie?”

“Not at all. What do you need?”

“Tell me, does this tree grouping look acceptable? I don’t want any mistakes before the party czar shows up tomorrow.”

Cate giggled at his nickname for Mrs. Campbell. She stepped back to inspect the tree placement from all angles. “It looks acceptable to me.”

Jack climbed from the floor, dusting his hands off. “No doubt, she’ll still find something wrong about it.”

Cate chuckled as she wobbled the folder back and forth behind her back. “Now that you’ve got your tree placement worked out, could I have a moment of your time?”

“Sure, lassie, what is it?”

Cate whipped the folder out in front of her.

Before she could speak, Jack said, “Oh, no. No, no. If this is about that bloody snow machine the party czar wants, the answer is no. I will not have a snow machine dragged onto these grounds...”

Cate shook her head, waving her hands in the air to stop him. “No, no, it’s not. Although you may prefer it was.”

“Oh, no. Worse than the snow machine?”

Cate crinkled her nose. “Not to me but...”

“The only thing worse than dragging a snow machine through the gardens of Dunhaven Castle is time travel.”

“You’re such a stick in the mud,” Cate complained. “Just take a peek at these articles.”

He waved his hands at her, dismissing her comment, but accepted the folder. He flipped it open, glancing through the articles. He snapped it shut, handing it back to her.

She raised an eyebrow at him. “Well?”

“Well, it appears due to a very unfortunate turn of events, some of your inheritance was stolen, Lady Cate. I dare say you’ll do alright without it. I’ve seen the estate’s financials. You should be able to get by.” He winked at her.

She rolled her eyes at him and shook her head. “You know very well my interest in this has little to do with recovering my lost inheritance.”

“Yes, yes,” Jack replied. “Righting wrongs and experiencing the past by living in it and all that, I know.”

“Oh, come on, you had to have noticed the interesting bit about the missing items at least.”

Jack raised his eyebrows at her. “Interesting bit?”

“Yes, they describe the missing pieces of jewelry in the first article. And the third article has a picture of the items. Notice anything?” Cate asked as she retrieved the pages from the folder.

“They’re very pretty, Lady Cate.”

“No, not that. Look closer!” Cate shoved the picture to his face.

Jack studied it before shrugging his shoulders. “I’m still not getting it.”

Cate frowned at him. “Jack, that’s the necklace I wore to the Halloween Ball that Randolph and Victoria held when we investigated the murder!”

“Ohhhhh,” Jack responded. “Oh, yes, I remember it. It was quite a necklace.”

Cate nodded as she stuffed the paper back inside the folder. “Yes, it was. I recognized it right away when I saw it. It was Victoria’s. It appears the other stolen piece was also hers. It’s the necklace she wore that night.”

“Whoever stole those made off with a fortune.”

“Yes, and it would have broken Victoria’s heart to realize someone stole her jewelry.”

Jack inched one tree a bit to the left. “Yes, it would have. A terrible shame.”

“You know this year is one of the ones we can travel to. Well, the year when they discovered the jewelry was missing. It appears to have been stolen on New Year’s Day. While everyone was sleeping after ringing in the New Year, someone else was busy helping themselves to the family jewels. I wonder...”

“Nay, Lady Cate,” Jack interrupted her. “I don’t like when you wonder. Your wondering gets us in trouble most times.”

Cate shook her head at him. “That’s not true.”

“It is! The last time you wondered, we went back to 1856, became embroiled in a murder investigation, almost got killed and...”

“And solved a murder and saved my ancestor’s life and reputation. Along with the life of a young woman!” Cate finished.

Jack scowled at her. “That’s not exactly where I was going with that.”

“But it’s true,” Cate added. “Wouldn’t it be wonderful to solve another mystery? Stop a theft? Help the family again?”

“Oh, Cate,” Jack replied, shaking his head at her.

“Consider this: whatever progress we make on finding the lost jewels of Dunhaven Castle distracts me from finding a link to Douglas MacKenzie. If I can’t find a link to Douglas MacKenzie, I can’t determine how he’s harnessed the castle’s powers. And if I can’t determine how he’s harnessed the castle’s powers, we’re stuck only traveling to times with locations we know of!”

Jack winced as he reshaped a branch. “You’ve still not got that comment from Randolph out of your head, huh?”

“I haven’t,” Cate admitted. “Randolph was Douglas’ grandson. In two generations, they lost the secret of how Douglas harnessed time travel? Did he never tell them? Was it kept secret? If so, why? Oh! To have a conversation with Douglas...”

Jack shook his head at her. “I’ll never understand your mind, Lady Cate.”

“Oh, come on. You can’t tell me these questions don’t cross your mind.”

“I can and I will, lassie. These questions have never crossed my mind. I’ve no desire to play with a power we don’t fully understand and can cause tremendous damage.”

“I’m not planning to damage the past irreparably,” Cate promised.

Jack took a few steps back, rubbing his chin as he studied the grouping of trees. “Whether you plan to or not, it could happen. We have no idea what might damage the past irreparably. And it’s not just that, Lady Cate. If anyone ever discovers this secret, do you realize the danger the entire world may be in? Not to mention us! I don’t like time traveling to begin with, but we may be damn lucky that we’ve only got a limited ability. Let’s not push too far and chance more things going wrong.”

“So, we’ll just focus on the jewelry heist then?”

Jack threw his hands in the air, flicking his gaze toward her. “Bah, Lady Cate, how do you always manage to turn my adamant arguments against all

your plans into agreement with them?”

A grin spread across her face. “It’s a talent, I suppose.”

“I’d call it something different,” Jack mumbled.

“Anyway,” Cate answered, “there’s nothing we can do now. With this party fast approaching, there’s no time to travel to the past...”

“Thank heavens,” Jack interjected.

Cate grimaced at him. “And I should research more. So, you are off the hook. At least until I’ve done that.”

“Oh boy! I hope you’re busy with no time to research!”

Cate frowned as she consulted her calendar. “I do have the meeting with Isla tomorrow. That meeting will eat up most of my morning. And I’ve got to finish a few things before Molly arrives on Sunday.”

“I never imagined I’d appreciate Isla Campbell so much as I have today,” Jack said, following his statement with a loud laugh.

“Very funny. While I have her here, I’ll ask her about the theft and get some research done, anyway.” Cate arched an eyebrow at him as he frowned at her.

“As long as I live, I don’t imagine I’ll ever understand you, Lady Cate.”

“What’s hard to understand? It’s fun visiting other time periods!”

“I don’t consider it fun to chance radically changing history.”

Cate shook her head, waving her hand at him. “Oh, you worry too much.”

“Somebody’s got to do the worrying! And I’ve got to worry double, once for me and once for you!”

Cate shook her head again, but laughed. “Okay, deal. I’ll do the researching and you do the worrying. And now I’ll leave you to your trees.”

“They’re only *my* trees until they are set up, then they become *your* trees, Lady Cate.”

“I haven’t forgotten! I’m excited to decorate them over the coming week for the party. I hope we have enough lights, garland, and ornaments!”

“We’ve got boxes and boxes, don’t worry about that,” Jack answered.

Cate clapped her hands as she studied the large trees in front of her. “Good! I’ve never had a Christmas tree this big! Riley and I always had small trees in my apartment. Even when I was a kid, our trees were never this large!”

“Nothing like days of decorating to put you in the holiday spirit.”

“And hot chocolate and cookies, courtesy of Mrs. Fraser,” Cate added. “She’s got quite a lot planned for our upcoming decorating parties!”

“I’ll bet,” Jack answered. “Mrs. Fraser’s cookies. Mmm. Now, *that* I can get excited about.”

“Noted. Perhaps I can pack a tin of her cookies for our trips to the past. Maybe then you’ll be excited!”

“Doubt it.”

“Oh, well,” Cate said with a sigh. “I tried! Well, I should get back to work. I’ve a million details to go over before my meeting tomorrow. Have fun with the trees!”

“Will do, Lady Cate.” Jack gave her a quick salute before returning to setting up another grouping of Christmas trees on the opposite side of the doorway.

Cate wandered to the library, her mind in the clouds. Her brain whirled as she imagined outfits for their visits to the Roaring Twenties. Plenty of clothes were stored in the castle by generations past for the purposes of time travel.

She practiced conversations complete with customs and jargon from the time. Despite Jack’s reluctance, Cate’s mind surged with excitement at the idea of time travel. As a historian, she felt fully prepared for the endeavor. And despite her brush with death during their last trip, she experienced no hesitancy about jumping in headfirst with this mystery.

Besides, this one should prove much easier than the last. With only a thief on the loose, how much danger could there be?

CHAPTER 2



Cate took another glance at the folder containing the old articles, her mind flitting to the cold New Year's Day morning. She imagined a figure clad in black sneaking around the castle, slipping into Lady Anne MacKenzie's suite and removing two valuable necklaces.

Who had been the culprit? And how had they gotten away with it?

Cate's mind wandered to who may have been on the estate at the time. She stared at the folder for another moment, trying to piece together information before she wrinkled her nose. With her own parties looming over her, she didn't have time to research 1925 right now.

She shoved her research on the jewelry theft under a stack of papers at the back of the desk. Instead of pursuing her desire to dive straight into that mystery, she opened her party planning dossier. The file had grown from a small manila folder to an accordion file organizer containing several color-coded folders.

With a heavy sigh, Cate withdrew several of the folders to verify detail after endless detail concerning the upcoming event. After this, she mused, she'd have to move on to the other accordion folder, filled with information on the fast-approaching VIP event.

As she ticked off tasks on her party-planning to-do list, Cate marveled at how Mrs. Campbell kept all these details straight. During their meetings, she rarely referenced her notes, able to recall even minute details with ease off the top of her head.

Cate giggled as she read yet another memo from Mrs. Campbell asking Jack and Mr. Fraser to reconsider the use of a snowmaking machine to “add a magical ambiance” to the castle grounds. The note, written in red ink and underlined three times, highlighted the persistence of the so-called party czar. She had requested the machine four times and four times been denied her request. It didn’t seem to matter. She was like a squeaky wheel with the repeated ask.

Cate’s chuckle drew the attention of the two small pups who raced over, certain her utterance signaled a sign of distress.

“Hello, Riley and Bailey,” Cate greeted them as they danced on their hind legs. “Do you have any input concerning the battle of the snow machine?”

Riley cocked his head to the side, staring at Cate. Bailey stood on his hind legs, waving his paws up and down, issuing a high-pitched note that Cate nicknamed “singing.”

“Hmm,” Cate murmured, “I’m not sure Jack would agree.” At the sound of Jack’s name, Riley danced on his hind legs again. She chuckled at him and his love for his newfound friend.

She glanced to the mound of paperwork still awaiting her attention, then back to the two small dogs.

“This can wait until this afternoon,” she told them. “How about a nice walk?” Both dogs danced at the “w-word,” earning another chuckle from her.

She bundled herself and both dogs in warm coats and proceeded outside, ball in hand, for a sojourn around the property to fill the rest of the morning hours. As they walked, Cate took in her surroundings. She shook her head in firm disagreement with Mrs. Campbell. These grounds didn’t need a snow machine to achieve a magical ambiance.

After lunch, both dogs, tired from their walk, lounged near the roaring fire in the library, allowing Cate to finish her party-related tasks. Despite the lack of physical activity, she was spent by the time her dinner arrived.

She stuffed the folders for the VIP event into her accordion organizer just as Mrs. Fraser arrived with her tray.

“Still working on those parties, Lady Cate?” Mrs. Fraser asked as Cate cleared a spot on the desk.

“Just finishing. Wow! There are so many tiny details!”

“With that woman at the helm, there’ll be no shortage of those, without a doubt!”

Cate stood from the desk chair and stretched. “Do you have your gowns ready for both events?”

“Aye, Lady Cate. I’ve a beautiful black ball gown with a plaid sash tied in a bow for the Snow Ball. And, well...” Mrs. Fraser paused, her features reddening, “Mr. Fraser talked me into a black gown with silver sparkles for the New Year’s Eve party. Oh, I’m not sure why I allowed myself to be talked into it. At my age, marching about dressed as a disco ball.” She shook her head at herself.

“I’m sure it’s just beautiful. The sparkles are perfect for that party!”

“Oh, thank you, Lady Cate. I just hope no one considers me dressing too young for my age.”

“I’ve no doubt your gown is appropriate for you! Mr. Fraser has great taste!”

“Aye, aye, he does,” Mrs. Fraser answered with a nod. “I’ve never been to such a party before, Lady Cate. I’m at sixes and sevens about it. I cannae believe at my age I’m attending my first VIP party with the lords and ladies of the country!”

Cate grinned at Mrs. Fraser’s excitement. This made her endless cycle of party work worth it. Molly’s excitement was also building for the two parties.

Cate invited her staff as guests to both parties to allow them to enjoy the castle as she did. While Molly was excited about her new journey, her gushing about the two parties made it obvious how thrilled she was to be included.

Molly’s latest emails babbled about her gowns, being sent straight to Dunhaven, shoes, hairstyles and more. With only days to go before her arrival, Molly’s nervous energy was at an all-time high.

As she ate, Cate checked her email, finding an update from Molly. She stated she had checked into a hotel for her last night in Aberdeen. The following morning, she had an early morning flight to London. With no love lost between Molly and her current home, she was counting the hours until her flight.

Cate snickered as she blew on her soup to cool it before eating. She imagined Molly staying up all night to count the minutes down until she could kiss Aberdeen goodbye. She didn’t blame her. Molly’s surprise

divorce and the subsequent fall out had made life unbearable for the normally chipper woman.

She smiled as she reflected that in a matter of days her friend would join her and settle into her new life. Cate bit her lower lip realizing her excitement for Molly's arrival might temper her enthusiasm for travel to the past. She planned to spend the next two days preparing Molly's new room. She finished her dinner and curled up afterward with a good book to relax for the evening. Her mind fought to concentrate on her book, but it wandered to Molly's arrival and daydreamed of travel to the past.

* * *

Friday arrived before Cate was ready. Despite the full night of sleep she enjoyed, nothing prepared her for Isla Campbell's party-planning meetings. After breakfast, Cate took her usual walk with Riley and Bailey before settling them in the library with a couple of bones. She planned to meet with Mrs. Campbell in the sitting room. Mrs. Campbell, not a fan of animals, would find the addition of two pups unwelcomed, so Cate made other arrangements.

Cate stood waiting at the front door twenty minutes prior to their scheduled meeting time. Mrs. Campbell had a habit of arriving at least fifteen minutes early. Often, to Mrs. Fraser's dismay, if no one was available at the front door, she'd wander through the halls until she came upon someone.

Like clockwork, Mrs. Campbell's car glided down the drive fifteen minutes early. The woman bounded out of her vehicle, dozens of folders, swatches and other party paraphernalia in hand.

Cate greeted her, stepping from the door to relieve her of some materials. "Wow! You've been hard at work."

"With only a week to go, Lady Cate," Mrs. Campbell's Scottish brogue answered, "we cannot be too careful. We must make sure everything matches perfectly. Are the trees set up?"

Cate led the way into the sitting room off the main foyer. She plopped the materials down on the loveseat. "Yes, Jack set them up yesterday. We can take a look after we've finished these details."

Mrs. Campbell nodded her head in agreement. “Yes, there are many details to check and double-check. I will *not* risk another debacle like the one at the Halloween party.” Mrs. Campbell gave her a knowing glance coupled with a grimace.

Cate held back laughter, recalling the so-called debacle. Mrs. Campbell had turned the delivery of red linens instead of burgundy into a Greek tragedy. After the mix-up, Mrs. Campbell was determined to avoid another “costly mistake.”

Cate, too, was determined to avoid one after the tizzy it sent Mrs. Campbell into for Halloween. She retrieved her folders from the nearby table, settling into a small space she carved out across from Mrs. Campbell.

“I wanted to begin with the linens. As I mentioned earlier, I do *not* want another issue. I have checked, rechecked and triple checked with the linen company.”

She groaned, dropping her head between her shoulders and rolling her eyes. “Can you imagine the issue if they bungled the linens this time? Oh! I’ve had nightmares of clashing plaids all week! I will feel so much better once they are delivered tomorrow.”

Cate offered her a smile as she picked up a fabric swatch. “I’m sure we all will. And I hope they get the selections correct. These patterns are so beautiful. They will be lovely for Christmas.”

“There is no room for error!” Mrs. Campbell said, nodding her head in agreement. “Particularly with the tight turn around between the two parties!”

Cate nodded, selecting another swatch and holding it against the first. “And with such different looks!”

Mrs. Campbell nodded as Mrs. Fraser entered the room carrying a tray.

“Can I offer you some tea, Mrs. Campbell?” Cate asked as Mrs. Fraser settled the tray on the coffee table between them.

“Oh, yes, thank you! Hello, Emily.” Mrs. Campbell nodded to the woman. “How are you? Almost out the door, eh?”

“Oh,” Mrs. Fraser responded, “I wouldn’t put it that way. I’ve got a good deal of training to provide the new lassie.”

“Oh?” Mrs. Campbell replied, playing dumb. “Lady Cate, you won’t let her retire until she’s properly trained the staff, is it?”

Cate opened her mouth to answer, but Mrs. Fraser beat her to it. “Nay, you’ve got it backwards, Isla. I won’t retire until I’m good and ready, and

the new whippersnapper has a complete handle on every aspect of the estate and Lady Cate's care!"

Cate smiled at Mrs. Fraser's response. "And I will be happy to have you here every minute, Mrs. Fraser. And once you've retired, I expect you to be here often as my guest!"

"Well," Mrs. Campbell responded with a wrinkled nose, "you'll have good practice playing guest at the two parties."

Cate bit her tongue, hoping they did not need to rehash the discussion about her staff not being "up to snuff" with the VIPs.

"Aye," Mrs. Fraser agreed. "I'm looking forward to them both. Now, is there anything else, Lady Cate?"

"No, thank you, Mrs. Fraser," Cate answered.

Mrs. Fraser nodded to her, shuffling from the room.

Cate poured Mrs. Campbell a cup of tea, handing it to her along with the tongs for sugar. She offered the cookie plate to her next. "Cookie? Mrs. Fraser bakes them, and I've never tasted anything better."

Mrs. Campbell offered a slight smile, pulling one from the plate with her fingertips as though it may poison her. She nibbled a corner, searching for some flaw she could point out.

Cate bit off a chunk of cookie as she stirred her tea. "I swear these taste better with every batch!"

"Mmm, yes, no doubt Emily learned her baking skills from our many excellent neighborhood bakers! Oh, that reminds me, the cookie selection!" Mrs. Campbell dropped the rest of her cookie onto her saucer next to her teacup and placed the saucer on the coffee table. She searched through her folders, pulling a legal-sized paper from a red folder. After sliding it to Cate across the tabletop, she pointed out several starred items.

The women spent the next two hours checking final details, making final arrangements, and wrapping up loose ends. Cate enjoyed several of Mrs. Fraser's cookies as a reward for the tedious work. As they finished these tasks, Mrs. Campbell finished her second cup of tea before asking if she could view the progress on the ballroom preparations.

"Yes!" Cate answered, standing and placing the teacups and saucers onto the tray. "Follow me."

Cate led Mrs. Campbell to the ballroom. As they approached, Jack emerged from the room.

"Ah, Lady Cate, good day!" he greeted her, bowing. "And Isla, hello."

Mrs. Campbell smiled at him for a moment, offering him the briefest of glances. She turned her eyes to the grouping of trees on either side of the doorway.

“As you can see,” Cate said motioning to the trees, “Jack has done a great job getting these ready to be decorated!”

“Hmm,” Mrs. Campbell mumbled, still eyeing the trees. She pursed her lips, squinting at them. “Does this appear... off to you?”

“Ah...” Cate began.

“Lady Cate assured me they were spot on,” Jack answered, giving two thumbs up.

“Perhaps a fourth tree...” Mrs. Campbell suggested, waving a hand in the air.

Jack’s jaw dropped as he searched for an answer.

“I’m not certain that’s necessary,” Cate answered. “Three is a nice number! Four would look too... square.”

“How enlightening your analyses always are,” Mrs. Campbell responded, sarcasm creeping into her voice. “Oh, Mr. Reid, with the trees settled, I wondered if I might bend your ear for a moment.”

“Of course,” Jack answered, offering a polite smile to the woman while casting a sidelong glance at Cate.

“I’d like to make one final plea for the snowmaking machine. We’ve no assurances of snow next week...”

Jack interrupted her, holding up his hand. “I’ll stop you there, Mrs. Campbell. After a lengthy consultation with Lady Cate, we have all agreed a snow machine is inappropriate for the grounds. I realize and appreciate the effect you intend to achieve, however, to pull it off may cause damage to the grounds and we aren’t willing to take that risk.”

“Jack is correct,” Cate added. “We gave it extensive consideration. We both realize how important it is to you. I can assure you we did not dismiss it out-of-hand, but in the end, we were not comfortable with the idea.”

Mrs. Campbell frowned for a moment before responding. “Well,” she began, again eyeing the Christmas tree setup, “I suppose if you’re decided, there is nothing more to say!”

She lowered her voice, mumbling, “Except what good is a Snow Ball with no snow.”

After overhearing her mumbled comment, Cate responded, “The forecast seems favorable for some snow the evening of the event. Maybe

we'll get lucky. Shall we take a peek inside the ballroom?"

"Oh, you Americans, always with the optimistic point of view," Mrs. Campbell replied. "Yes, I'd like to see the tree placement inside."

Jack followed the women into the ballroom to ensure everything was in order. After a few minor adjustments, Mrs. Campbell declared everything acceptable.

"We will decorate over the next week. The next time you see these trees, they will be transformed!" Cate promised.

"And you've got my schematic? Showing how you should place the decorations and colors on the trees?" Mrs. Campbell asked.

Cate patted her folder. "I've got it right here and have already made copies for everyone who will assist with the decorating. We will have everything just as you proposed!"

"Excellent, excellent!" Mrs. Campbell pronounced. "With everything in order, I will see you on Thursday! Jack, keep up the good work. And if you change your mind about the snow machine, call me at once!"

Jack simulated an amused chuckle, finding the comment anything but amusing. "Oh, I will."

"Well, I guess that's everything then. We'll see you again on Thursday," Cate agreed, nodding. "I'll walk you out."

Cate showed Mrs. Campbell to the front door, saying her goodbyes and watching the car pull down the drive. She breathed a long sigh of relief before returning to the sitting room, intending to return the tea tray to the kitchen. To her surprise, Mrs. Fraser had already retrieved it.

Cate glanced at her timepiece. She had a half hour before lunch. She decided to take the dogs for a short walk.

She made her way to the library and pushed through the double doors into the rectangular space. As she entered, she found both Riley and Bailey staring at a bookcase near the door. Her brow furrowed, wondering what held their attention.

"What has you two so interested in that bookcase?" she inquired of the two pups.

Riley glanced at her, then directed his gaze back to the bookcase. Cate wandered over, giving both dogs a scratch on the head. Riley leapt to his feet, approaching the bookcase, then staring at Cate.

"What is it, buddy? Did you lose a toy or bone?"

Cate approached the bookcase, sweeping her hand around the bottom and glancing at the lower shelves. The small dogs couldn't reach much further up the bookcase, so she doubted any of their belongings could have landed higher.

"I don't see anything here," she stated, standing and shrugging her shoulders.

Riley glanced at her again, then returned his gaze to the bookcase, issuing a small whine. Cate screwed up her face, confused as to the dog's interest in the bookcase.

"What are you trying to tell me, Riley?"

The small pup remained silent on the issue beyond his interested gaze.

Cate shrugged again, glancing at Bailey. "I don't suppose you want to fill me in on the details, do you, Bailey?"

The other dog met her gaze with bright eyes but offered no explanation. "Well, since we're at a standstill on this subject, how about a walk?"

Riley whipped his head around to stare at Cate. Bailey jumped to his feet.

Cate chuckled at their behavior. "I'll take that as a yes. Come on, you two."

She strode to the door as the dogs raced ahead of her. She hesitated as she reached it, her fingertips lingering on the doorknob as she spun to stare at the bookcase. A shiver ran up her spine. What had drawn the dogs to it? She wasn't certain, but she didn't have a good feeling.

CHAPTER 3



Cate gave one final glance at the mysterious bookcase, her skin turning to goosebumps before she spun and took a step toward the hall. She almost collided into Jack, who approached the library. “Whoa! Sorry!”

“Oops! A near collision, sorry, Lady Cate! But I’m glad I ran into you, pun intended!” Jack answered with a jovial laugh.

“Very funny,” Cate responded. “What did you need?”

“Do you have a moment? I wanted to vent about the party czar.”

“I’m about to take the dogs for a quick walk. Care to come along?”

“Sure, perhaps the fresh air will soothe my frayed nerves,” Jack answered.

They proceeded to the front door, letting the dogs out and heading toward the side garden.

Jack clasped his hands behind his back as they strolled along. “I just wanted to ensure that we are on the same page with that bloody snow machine.”

“We are. I trust your judgement.”

Jack shook his head as he stared at the horizon. “I cannot believe that woman brought that infernal machine up again. This has to be the fourth time we’ve told her no. I’m sorry for jumping into the conversation, Lady Cate. Perhaps it wasn’t my place, but I couldn’t take anymore.”

Cate’s nose crinkled as she snickered. “It’s okay. I’m not sure how many more ways we can say it before she’s convinced we mean it.”

Jack rolled his eyes and shook his head. "Ah, that damned woman."

The dogs frolicked in around the bushes as she held in a laugh at Jack's last statement. "Careful, you're starting to sound like Mrs. Fraser."

"Aye, Emily and I have the same view of her, I'll admit it," Jack answered.

"You can swap horror stories over lunch," Cate added then called the dogs back to her.

"Oh?" Jack questioned as they turned back to the castle.

"Yes," Cate replied. "Mrs. Fraser brought tea to us for the first part of our meeting and had a small conversation about her retirement with Isla. I'll bet she was boiling when she left the room."

"If the conversation went beyond a standard 'hello,' I'm sure she was."

They entered the castle through the main doors. The dogs raced off to the library as soon as they opened the door.

"What's with them?" Jack inquired.

Cate shrugged as they scurried away. "No idea. I found them both staring at one of the bookcases in the library. I'm not sure what is so intriguing about it, but it seems to have captivated their attention."

"Perhaps they'd like to take up reading."

"Yes, I'm sure that's it," Cate answered. "Sir Riley is really fitting into his role as lord of the manor. He only needs a pipe and a monocle, and he'll be all set."

Jack chuckled at Cate's joke as Mrs. Fraser approached them with Cate's lunch in hand.

"Oh, I can take that from here, Mrs. Fraser," Cate stated, reaching for the tray.

"Enjoy your lunch, Lady Cate," Mrs. Fraser expressed. "I'm sure you'd like a quiet moment now that the ninny left."

Cate chuckled at Mrs. Fraser's nickname for Mrs. Campbell.

"Oh, she could use it. The ninny was even more of a ninny than usual!" Jack said.

Cate grinned at them. "I'll leave Jack to fill you in on the details. I've already told him I was sure your conversation about retirement with Mrs. Campbell exasperated you."

"Oh, you've no idea," Mrs. Fraser admitted. "Come along, young Jack, wait until you hear what that woman said this time!"

Another giggle escaped Cate's lips as she watched them disappear down the hall together. She carried her tray to the library, where she found the two dogs on either side of the bookcase. Two sentinels guarding some unknown treasure. She shook her head at them as she set the tray on the desk.

After opening her laptop, she browsed her emails as she ate. An email from Molly with the subject *On my way!* appeared in her inbox. Cate smiled as she read it. The brief email said Molly's plane was about to take off and she'd be in London by afternoon. She promised to text once she was settled at her hotel. It wouldn't be long before Molly was a permanent resident of Dunhaven Castle.

Cate glanced at her watch. In just over forty-eight hours, Molly would call Dunhaven Castle home. She monitored the second hand as it ticked off the seconds, drawing Molly's arrival ever closer. As Cate reflected on her friend's arrival, her mind swung from the future to the past. The case of the stolen jewelry pushed itself to the front of Cate's brain. Who had stolen the jewelry, and why? Why was it never recovered? Where did the case go cold? Cate's mind turned the limited details from the newspaper articles over and over, searching for a clue.

She found none. With a sigh, she opted to begin her weekend early, curled up with a good book by the room's massive fireplace. After receiving an email that Molly was settled in her hotel room, Cate relaxed into her evening.

She spent the early morning hours of Saturday pacing her bedroom floor. She watched the sun rise over the moors while Riley and Bailey lounged in their beds, too lazy to crawl out in the cold weather. The warm yellow sun painted the sky a rainbow of colors, brightening the frosty morning.

Cate's mind swam with a variety of things, bouncing from topic to topic, planning, pondering, organizing, reminding, listing tasks, and reaffirming her schedule. She cataloged the final details to be completed before Molly's arrival. Some decorating would begin today and last several days.

True to form, Mr. Fraser developed a magical plan for the gardens outside. Even with the cold weather predicted for the party, many partygoers would likely still escape the heat of the interior to enjoy the gardens. The plan promised to provide an ethereal effect, snow or not.

Cate found the design charming, like an enchanting walkthrough light show. She appreciated the fact that Mr. Fraser had captured a nostalgic American holiday display to remind her of home for her first Christmas in the castle.

Her mind turned to another Christmas, one that occurred in 1924. In 1924, the MacKenzie family gathered to celebrate their Christmas and New Year. As they rang in 1925, however, someone robbed them.

Cate plodded into her sitting room, retrieving the folder containing the articles of the theft. She glanced through the articles again. Pencil in hand, she noted a few items in the margin to follow up on. Her overcrowded mind longed to spend a quiet day researching this mystery, but she had many duties to attend to. She glanced at the timepiece.

“Soon,” she promised. “I’ll visit soon.”

She dressed for the day and took the dogs for a quick walk before breakfast. She joined her staff for breakfast, eager to discuss decorating plans. Everyone planned to pitch in, each decorating a tree or more inside and outside the ballroom. Within minutes of arriving in the kitchen, she found herself able to push her longing for research aside, filled with giddy excitement to decorate a Christmas tree.

Mrs. Fraser, who stayed with Mr. Fraser in the castle the night before, arose early and was already baking cookies. Mr. Fraser sat at the kitchen table studying his outdoor design. The aroma of sweet-smelling shortbread cookies filled the room.

“Mmm,” Cate murmured as she entered. “I’m ready to skip breakfast and go straight for the cookies!”

“Not if I have anything to say about it,” Mrs. Fraser told her. “We’ve got a long day of work ahead, and you need your breakfast, Lady Cate!”

Jack chuckled, already seated at the table as well. “I’ve already tried that, Lady Cate. My attempt was a bust, too.”

“There’ll be plenty of time for nibbling on cookies while we decorate. And I’ve already got milk warming for hot chocolate.”

Cate smiled at her, already salivating for the tasty warm drink.

“If you behave yourselves, there’ll be a repeat performance when we decorate our private tree on Wednesday,” Mrs. Fraser promised.

Cate shot Jack a glance, giggling. “I’m excited to decorate this weekend for the party. Although, I’m more excited to spend the day with everyone on

Wednesday! I haven't decorated a tree with anyone other than Riley in a long time!"

"I'm excited for the cookies!" Jack answered, reaching toward the pan as Mrs. Fraser pulled it from the oven.

"Don't even try it," she warned, batting his hand with her oven mitt. "With that done, breakfast is ready!"

"Sit down, Mrs. Fraser. Let me get your oatmeal. You've done enough work this morning." Cate ushered her to the table.

"Oh, what nonsense! I'm capable of retrieving my oatmeal."

"I'm aware of how capable you are, but I insist," Cate asserted.

Mrs. Fraser shook her head but allowed Cate to serve her.

Cate retrieved her own bowl, and sank into a seat next to the woman.

After a quick clean up, they moved to the ballroom for the first round of holiday decorating. Jack and Mr. Fraser had already placed bins of decorations from years past in the room, along with any new purchases. Cate brought the dogs with her, wanting to include them in the festivities.

They began on the trees in the main hall outside the ballroom. Cate reminded them to check their schematic to be sure the color scheme matched Mrs. Campbell's wishes. Jack commented they'd be up the entire night before the party redecorating if her plans were not met.

The morning work went quickly as they strung lights and garland on the trees, adding ornaments and a tree topper to finish. They admired the finished products before moving on to the next set of trees.

Cate and Mrs. Fraser retrieved the cookies and hot chocolate while Jack and Mr. Fraser continued to string lights on the next two trees. They finished both groupings of trees outside the ballroom before they stopped for lunch.

When they returned in the afternoon, they decorated the trees inside the ballroom. The row of dull green Christmas trees standing in front of the windows overlooking the garden came to life with sparkling white and colored bulbs, silver, gold and plaid garland and snowflake ornaments. Riley and Bailey spent their afternoon playing tug of war with a large plaid bow they had stolen from one of the boxes.

Cate stood back, admiring their work as the afternoon turned to evening. She hoped Mrs. Campbell would be pleased. The bright, sparkling trees transformed the ballroom into a winter wonderland. Tomorrow, while Jack drove to Edinburgh to pick up Molly, they would add details to the scene.

Blankets of fake snow, wreaths, wrapped boxes, sleighs, and more would be added to augment the already festive scene.

They finished for the day, gathering in the kitchen for a light meal of sandwiches prepared the day prior by Mrs. Fraser. With the growing excitement for Molly's arrival, Cate hoped she would sleep that night. The day's demanding physical work allowed her to nod off within minutes of her head hitting the pillow. The following morning, Cate felt well rested from a deep sleep.

After breakfast and a thirty-minute walk with the dogs, she began her Sunday by finishing details in Molly's room. She set out a few framed photos on the mantle, unpacked a few personal items, placing them around the room, and laid out a welcome gift basket on the bed. Pleased with her work, she hoped the added touches helped settle Molly into her new home.

She spent the rest of the morning adding more detailed decor to the ballroom with Mr. and Mrs. Fraser. They finished the decorating mid-afternoon, just in time to freshen up before Molly's arrival. Mrs. Fraser hurried below stairs to put the final touches on the special dinner she planned to welcome Molly.

Cate ushered the dogs downstairs and out for a quick walk. As she led them back to the front door, the estate car pulled down the drive.

Riley raced toward the vehicle as Jack climbed from behind the wheel. He bounded to the car, balancing on his hind legs to capture Jack's attention.

Cate approached the passenger door with Bailey as it burst open. Molly spilled out of the car, her excitement overflowing. "CATE!" she shouted, racing to her and throwing her arms around her. "I made it!"

Cate returned the hug. "Yes! The time seemed to drag. It seemed like this day wouldn't arrive, but here it is! I've been excited for days! It'll be so nice to have you settled in the castle."

"I can't wait to get settled! I can't wait to start my new job! How about that, huh? I'm actually excited about work! It doesn't even feel like work!"

Jack retrieved Molly's lone suitcase from the car's trunk. Riley bounded toward Molly to greet her. Molly bent to pet both dogs before they entered the castle.

She hugged her purse to her chest, following Cate into the foyer. "Christmas in a castle! I'm so excited I could burst! How are the decorations coming?"

“Almost finished!” Cate announced as Jack passed them on the way to deliver Molly’s luggage to her room.

“I bet the place looks great. And thanks for waiting for me to get here to decorate the private tree,” Molly replied, placing her hand on Cate’s arm. “It makes me feel like I’m part of the household already!”

“You’re welcome. I’m looking forward to it. These trees have been fun to decorate, but I can’t wait to decorate our tree! And I’m excited for Mrs. Fraser’s hot chocolate and cookies!”

“Me too!” Molly giggled.

“Interested in taking a peek at the ballroom?” Cate inquired. “We have some time before dinner.”

“Sure!” Molly agreed. “I can’t wait to see it! Jack told me your two little rascals absconded with one of the bows yesterday.”

Cate led Molly toward the ballroom, Riley and Bailey in tow. “They did, the little thieves. They had a fabulous time tugging on it until they tore it to shreds.”

As they approached the ballroom, Molly gasped, eyeing the trees. “Oh goodness, it’s beautiful!”

Even unlit, they appeared majestic and festive surrounding the doorway. Cate led Molly inside, striding across the room to turn on the tree lights.

“OH!” Molly shouted from inside the doorway. “It’s incredible! You’ve done a magnificent job! I’ll bet Mrs... ah, what’s her name, will be so pleased!”

“Campbell,” Cate informed her, crossing back to admire the lit trees again. “And I sure hope so. Although Mrs. Campbell has a way of spotting any flaw, no matter how small. I’m sure she’ll demand something be adjusted.”

Molly laughed as Cate hurried across the room to turn off the lights. “Is she still on you about that snow machine?”

“She is. Jack is at his wit’s end with her. She asked him again on Friday,” Cate replied, closing the ballroom doors as they exited. “I’m surprised he didn’t lunge at her.”

“This place looks great with or without snow!”

“I agree!” Cate answered, leading her upstairs to the bedrooms. “Here you are, the Rose Room! I’ll give you some time to unwind and freshen up before dinner.”

“I’m too excited to unwind! I’m super excited to be back here! I feel so at home here, so I’m sure I’ll be relaxed in an instant.”

“I took the liberty of setting some of your things out,” Cate responded, opening the door. “I’m sure you’ll want to shift things around, but at least it’s a start. I unpacked the clothing also, so you don’t have to do it. Especially since you wanted to dive right in with work tomorrow! Are you sure you wouldn’t rather take a few days to settle in?”

“I’m positive!” Molly answered as she followed Cate into the room. “Oh, wow! You made it so homey! You put my photos out! And my blanket!”

“Oh!” Molly exclaimed, seeing the welcome basket on the bed. “Aww, Cate, you shouldn’t have! This opportunity was enough. You didn’t have to do this!”

Molly picked up the new cardigan Cate laid out with the welcome basket, hugging it to her chest. “This is beautiful! Thank you! I love it!”

Cate pulled Molly into a hug. “You’re welcome! I’m glad you like it. See you in about half an hour for dinner?”

Molly nodded. “Thanks. Oh! I almost forgot. I have something for you. Oh, it’s buried in the luggage, I’ll get it out and bring it to dinner.”

“No rush,” Cate noted. “See you soon!”

Cate escorted the two pups from Molly’s room, closing the door behind her, and steered them toward her bedroom suite. When she emerged for dinner, she found Molly waiting in the hallway, a brown bag in hand.

“Found the stuff I brought!” she declared, holding the bag up with a triumphant expression. “I’ll give it to you downstairs. I brought something for everyone!”

They navigated to the kitchen. Molly received another round of welcome hugs as they entered the kitchen. Mrs. Fraser set the last dish on the table, and they sat down to eat.

As they ate their Scottish Berry Brûlée, a special dessert prepared for Molly’s arrival, Molly passed out her gifts. She brought a special Christmas ornament for each of them. Jack and Mr. Fraser each received a bear dressed in a Scottish kilt. Mrs. Fraser received a teddy bear dressed in a plaid dress. Cate received a teddy bear dressed in an eighteenth century ballgown.

“I figured we could hang them on the tree together!” Molly informed them. “I brought my own, too, see?” She brandished a bear wearing

sunglasses and an American flag t-shirt.

A smile spread across Cate's face. "That's such a cute idea," Cate agreed. "Thank you, Molly. It will make a memorable ornament for a memorable Christmas."

Molly smiled and pointed to Cate. "Oh, I have one other thing for you."

She withdrew a trinket box with a coat of arms on the lid from the bag. "This is from Maggie Edwards. You remember her, don't you? She worked for me. I ran into her a few times over the last semester. Remind me to tell you what happened with her, it's wild! Anyway, when I told her I was moving, she made a point of dropping this off for you. She came across it at her shop and thought it would be a perfect gift for you."

"Oh, thanks! It's beautiful!" Cate answered, gazing at the box. "Yes, I remember Maggie. I spoke with her before your last visit. She emailed me and said she ran into you! I promised her a visit!"

"Who's the mysterious Maggie? Some American celebrity?" Jack asked after a bite of his dessert.

"She was a student at Aberdeen College," Cate explained. "She worked as a graduate assistant with Molly. She lives in the town neighboring Aberdeen. She's got a great little antique shop slash bookstore there."

"And a hunky new boyfriend to help her with it, too," Molly added.

"No more Leo?" Cate inquired.

Molly shook her head, swallowing some dessert and washing it down with a sip of water. "Mmm-mmm," she began as she drank. "Nope. No more Leo. Henry now. A gorgeous Aussie. Took her on an around the world adventure, finding her uncle who was kidnapped by grave robbers! It was crazy! Anyway, invite her over, she'll tell you all about it!"

"Ollie Keene was kidnapped by grave robbers?!" Cate shouted, shock in her voice. "What?"

"Yep," Molly assured her, nodding. "Went searching for Cleopatra's tomb and ended up on the wrong side of some nasty people. That's how she met Henry."

"That *is* crazy!" Cate agreed.

"Wow! I never realized how exciting American life is," Jack chimed in. "Lady Cate, you must be so dreadfully bored here."

Cate sighed dramatically. "Yes, nothing ever happens here." She shot a coy glance at Jack who understood her meaning all too well.

“I, for one, am looking forward to an unexciting life,” Molly responded, missing out on Cate’s meaning. “Although I don’t imagine one can call life in a castle dull or boring!”

“I’m with you, Molly. A simple life is the best life!” Mrs. Fraser agreed as she stood and cleared a few dishes from the table.

Without missing a beat, Molly rose, pitching in to clear the table. “I agree! Although I still maintain living in a castle is not what I call a simple life.”

“You Americans really find castles fascinating, don’t you?” Mrs. Fraser queried.

“Yep,” Molly concurred. “I’ll admit I love my new home!”

“And you’re sure you want to start working tomorrow? Don’t want a few days to settle into your new home?” Mrs. Fraser questioned.

“Nope! Cate already asked me, and I already declined. I’m ready to begin! Besides, you all have most of my things unpacked for me! So, I am settled in!”

The two ladies chatted about their upcoming day as they cleaned the kitchen. Cate, Jack, and Mr. Fraser pitched in to finish clearing the table. After dinner, everyone retired to their separate spaces. Cate cuddled with her dogs on her chaise lounge under a thick blanket. Laptop in hand, Cate sent a quick email to Maggie thanking her for the gift, asking about her adventure across the globe, and extending an invitation to the castle.

After sending the email, Cate grabbed her folder with the news articles about the theft. With Molly settled in and a good deal of the decorating complete, the mystery was consuming her mind.

She wrote a few preliminary questions on a sheet of paper and listed a few places to begin her search for the culprit and preparation for traveling to the era.

Cate bit her lower lip as she stared at the notes. One question burned in her mind: who could have committed the crime *and* gotten away with it?

CHAPTER 4



Cate awoke with a start. The mystery of the heist permeated her mind the moment she opened her eyes. Specifically, she wondered who would be close enough to the family to have access to family heirlooms.

As she stretched, her muscles resisted her movement. She winced as she climbed from her bed. The decorating, while enjoyable, took a physical toll. With a groan and a frown, Cate popped the top on her bottle of acetaminophen and washed two capsules down with two gulps of water.

She stretched for a few minutes before enjoying a long, hot shower. She dressed for the day, already feeling some relief from her aches and pains.

Both dogs still lounged in their beds, too lazy to move. Cate grinned at them as she pulled her boots on over her leggings. After kneeling next to them, she stroked each of their heads and prodded them from their beds.

The promise of a long walk roused Riley. At the mention of the special “w” word, he bounded out of bed, offering a small yip and dancing in a circle. Bailey, excited by Riley’s enthusiasm, leapt from his bed, joining the fray.

As she nestled deeper in her coat, she pondered what she may find about her 1925 mystery. She glanced back at the castle, imagining it in the Roaring Twenties. As she did, she flicked her gaze up to the second story.

She drew in a deep breath. Today would mark Molly’s first day of work. Would she enjoy her new position? She hoped Molly found it a welcome change, though she worried she may regret her choice.

She returned to the castle, ushering the two pups into the sweet-smelling kitchen. Mrs. Fraser and Molly readied breakfast.

“Good morning, Lady Cate,” Mrs. Fraser called from across the kitchen.

“Good morning,” Cate answered, waving to both women.

“Good morning, Cate. Oh, Lady Cate,” Molly responded, catching herself and glancing toward Mrs. Fraser with some trepidation. Mrs. Fraser nodded to her.

“Now,” Mrs. Fraser informed Molly, “Lady Cate eats breakfast with us on Monday mornings, so there’s no need to set the dining room. But on the other days of the week, Lady Cate takes her breakfast in the dining room.”

Molly nodded, making a mental note of the schedule. “Right. Mondays with us, all other days in the dining room,” she repeated.

“Yes,” Mrs. Fraser confirmed as Cate seated herself at the already-set table. “Unless she requests otherwise.”

Riley and Bailey found a spot near the warm stove, curling up for a nap to prepare for their morning stroll after breakfast.

“Oatmeal is the normal unless we’re entertaining. In that case, we put out a bigger spread. Well, you’ll see over the holiday. And Lady Cate uses brown sugar and raisins, so we keep the pantry well-stocked. On occasion, I’ll put out other fruit if it appears good at the market. Blueberries, cranberries and the like.”

Mrs. Fraser wasted no time in instructing Molly on the workings of breakfast. Cate found it strange to listen to the instructions about how to prepare her breakfast. She glanced at the table in front of her, pursing her lips as Molly repeated Mrs. Fraser’s instructions.

“Now, I use this server,” Mrs. Fraser instructed, “when breakfast is served upstairs with guests. I fill a bowl for Lady Cate when she eats upstairs alone. When we eat here, we take it straight from the pot. Lady Cate insists!”

“I could save you the wash and take it from the pot every day, Mrs. Fraser,” Cate offered, joining the conversation. “I’m capable of carrying a bowl of oatmeal from the kitchen to the dining room.”

“Now, we’ll have nothing of the sort, Lady Cate,” Mrs. Fraser scolded. “And if you’re going to change the routine, I’ll not allow you to eat down here anymore!”

Cate bit her lower lip, glancing to Molly.

“I’m starting to wonder who’s really in charge here,” Molly whispered as she set a bowl of brown sugar on the table in front of Cate.

Cate giggled as she tugged the bowl to the center. “Me too.”

Mrs. Fraser, a fan of tradition and propriety, preferred to maintain centuries-old traditions established for attending family members in a household such as this. Cate, an American, was unused to the attentiveness of a staff and, having lived a life devoid of such traditions, was still adjusting to them. She appreciated Mrs. Fraser’s dogged determination to maintain the standards of serving a countess, but hated putting the woman out.

“How was your first night in your new home?” Cate inquired of Molly as Mr. Fraser and Jack entered.

“Fabulous,” Molly admitted. “Best night’s sleep I’ve had since I was here last!”

“You’ll have another good night’s sleep tonight, I imagine,” Mrs. Fraser teased. “I’ve got a full day planned for us!”

The statement didn’t dampen Molly’s spirits. She grinned at Mrs. Fraser as she gave the oatmeal one last stir. “I can’t wait! This is all ready.”

Cate grabbed her bowl from her place setting and approached the pot. One of her bargains for breakfast with the staff was serving herself first. Mrs. Fraser insisted, and no one dared approach the pot before Cate, lest they invite the wrath of Mrs. Fraser. Cate filled her bowl, followed by Jack, Mr. Fraser, then Mrs. Fraser and Molly.

They gathered around the table.

“How are the preparations outside coming along?” Cate questioned as they ate.

“Splendid,” Mr. Fraser assured her. “It will be a winter wonderland for the guests!” Proud of his garden design, Mr. Fraser beamed as he answered Cate’s question.

“If only we had snow...” Jack joked.

Cate laughed, shaking her head. “If you’ve changed your mind...” she teased, letting her voice trail off.

“I know just who to call if I have,” Jack answered.

Cate giggled, reminding Molly of the ongoing battle between the household and Mrs. Campbell regarding the snow machine.

“What is your dress like for the ball, Molly?” Mrs. Fraser inquired.

“Oh, bright, Christmas red!” Molly exclaimed. “It has a shawl collar, kind of almost off the shoulders, but not quite. And a big, red bow cinched with a glittery brooch on the side.” She pointed to her right hip.

“Sounds very pretty,” Mrs. Fraser replied.

“I splurged on it,” Molly answered. “I wanted something flashy as a last purchase in Aberdeen. Then I made them mail it here. I’ll bet that got around town with lightning speed!”

They discussed a few additional party details before changing the subject.

“Will you be working on your research today, Lady Cate?” Mrs. Fraser inquired.

“Yes,” Cate answered. “I’m moving on to another time period. Mid-1920s.”

“I thought you were working on the 1850s?” Mrs. Fraser questioned.

“Yes, I was. However, something intriguing came up, and I’d like to follow up on it. I’ll return to the 1850s once I have this sorted out. I’ve done a fair amount of work in that time period already.”

“You don’t say,” Jack replied.

“Well, Lady Cate,” Mrs. Fraser answered. “How you captured the era, the MacKenzies’ very personalities, and made them come alive! I must say, the chapter I perused made it almost sound as though you were on the estate in those times!”

Jack choked on the water he was sipping at Mrs. Fraser’s compliment. He sputtered a cough out as he regained his composure. Cate shot Jack an amused glance, suppressing a giggle.

“I’d believe it,” Molly chimed in, none the wiser to Jack’s reaction. “I’ll bet Cate’s a talented writer!”

“Oh, yes, almost like she’s lived through it, so vivid.”

“Almost...” Jack expressed.

After breakfast, Cate gathered several materials to begin her research, settling in the library with Riley and Bailey. She spread her work across the desk, setting out several blank sheets of paper along with her list of questions from the previous night.

Cate began by consulting the family tree written on the inside cover of the family bible. She traced her finger down the tree, finding the family members alive in 1925.

During this era, Rory MacKenzie, Randolph and Victoria's grandson, and his wife, Anne, inhabited the castle. Both in their thirties, they were joined in the castle by their almost eleven-year-old son, Oliver. Oliver was the father of Cate's benefactor, Gertrude MacKenzie.

The small family was low on Cate's suspect list as they stood nothing to gain from the theft. Short of Oliver playing a childish prank, she could think of no reason for them to have stolen the jewels. As far as Cate was aware, there was no insurance payment for them, so they stood to gain nothing from falsely suggesting they had been stolen.

She turned her attention to anyone else in the family who may have been on the estate during the theft. Rory's father and mother were both deceased by 1925. A large inkblot stained the piece of the page detailing her side of the family.

She still wasn't certain who was responsible for the destruction of the family tree in the bible. However, she had tracked down the information through her attorney's assistant, Gayle Pearson.

She dug through her notes, finding the family tree she'd restore with Gayle's help. This reproduction contained the information that laid under the inkblot. According to her research, or rather, Gayle's, Rory had a younger brother, Lucas. Lucas, Cate's great-grandfather, was six years his brother's junior.

She stared at their names, wondering if they lived in the castle, too, or if they had taken up residence elsewhere. With a limited knowledge of her family, she added it to her list of unknowns.

While she hated to admit it, if they were on the estate at the time of the theft, they were suspects. Motives could be many. However, the one that stood at the top of the list was jealousy. Was Lucas motivated by envy to rob his older brother, Rory, of part of the inheritance that he would never receive?

She hoped this wasn't the case. She felt guilty even entertaining the idea that her great-grandfather could be a thief. A thief she descended from. The idea made her skin crawl, and she hoped to prove it incorrect. Could this be the reason for the inkblot, Cate wondered?

With an abundance of reluctance, Cate created a new sheet titled *Possible Suspects*, and she placed her great-grandfather and his wife on it. They wouldn't welcome their first child, her grandfather, Charles, until later in 1925, according to her family tree.

Based on his birthday, in the latter half of the year, she concluded pregnancy wouldn't have prevented them from traveling to visit family for the 1924 holiday season. While she had no confirmation, they may have been in the castle. Perhaps she could find conclusive evidence that they were not and remove them from the suspect list right away. Perhaps a Christmas card wishing happy holidays and suggesting they would not see the family or family home. She wrote a note to check for any evidence of this, hoping to find something to rule them out.

She stared at her research so far, grimacing as she read the only two names on her suspect list. Disappointment filled her as she realized how likely it was that her direct ancestor may be the culprit.

Two voices interrupted her fretting. Mrs. Fraser and Molly made their way through the door.

"Just as I told you," Mrs. Fraser announced. "Lady Cate often takes her lunch in the library. She's usually here working."

Molly nodded, carrying the tray as Mrs. Fraser directed her toward the set up near the fireplace.

"And how is the research coming along, Lady Cate?" Mrs. Fraser asked.

"Slow," Cate admitted. "I'm shocked it's time for lunch already! I must have let my imagination run away with me and time ran right along with it!"

Mrs. Fraser waved at the messy desk. "It appears you've done a good bit of work judging by the spread on the desk!"

Cate winced as she glanced at the cluttered desk. "Or made a fine mess at least!"

She approached the fireplace and eased into her chair. "And how is the first day going?"

Molly grinned at her. "Great by my marker!" She glanced to Mrs. Fraser who nodded in agreement.

"Aye," Mrs. Fraser concurred. "She's a fast learner and a good worker. You made a fine choice in her, Lady Cate."

Molly beamed with pride at the woman's comments. "Anything else you need, Lady Cate?"

Cate shook her head. "Nope. I'm all set! Have a great lunch, ladies!"

"Thanks!" Molly exclaimed, following Mrs. Fraser from the room.

Cate rose and tossed a few logs onto the fire, then plopped back into her armchairs near the roaring fireplace. She glanced around for the two dogs.

Not finding them laying near the fireplace surprised her. Her brow wrinkled as her gaze swept the room, locking on them laying in front of the same bookcase she found them intrigued with a few days ago. It appeared to have captured their interest again.

“Riley! Bailey!” she called across the room. “What are you two doing over there?”

Riley glanced to her, then returned his gaze to the bookcase. She shook her head. If she didn’t already possess a research plan for the afternoon, she’d have tried again to find out what was so interesting about that bookshelf.

Instead, she was hellbent on searching employment records to add to her list of potential suspects.

She finished her lunch and took the dogs for as long a walk as the chilly afternoon air allowed. The cold temperatures drove them back inside to a roaring fire, stoked and tended by Mr. Fraser while they were out.

The dogs curled near it and Cate left them to their dreams while she searched the castle for employment records from the 1920s. After an hour of hunting, Cate stumbled upon records from the era. She gathered the record books into her arms and hurried back to the warmth of the library’s fire.

Nestled under a blanket in an armchair near the fireplace, she noted the name of each employee working when the theft occurred. When completed, her list totaled over twenty. She stared down at it, deciding she’d narrow it down based on a change in employment status in the months just prior to or following the theft.

She created a new column on her note sheet for employment dates when the library doors popped open. She stared down the names, wondering if one of them could be the culprit. She bit her lower lip as she realized she wasn’t wondering, but rather hoping one of them would be the guilty party.

The alternative turned Cate’s stomach. Could her family have been blotted out of the bible because they were thieves?

CHAPTER 5



Cate pondered the list with a frown when a whimper sounded across the room. She glanced up to find Riley eyeing the bookcase again.

With another whine, he lowered his head to his paws, his almond-shaped eyes fixed on it.

Cate narrowed her eyes at his behavior when two voices interrupting her musing.

“And as you can see, you’ll often find Lady Cate *still* working at dinner time.”

Cate fumbled with her timepiece, her eyes going wide when she noted the hour. She rushed to gather her research into a folder, clearing and cleaning her space. “Oh, I’ve lost track of the time again!”

“Same old Lady Cate!” Molly exclaimed, carrying the tray to Cate’s location. “Sometimes I’d text her to make sure she remembered to go to lunch or class. When she was researching, nothing, and I mean *nothing*, pulled her attention away.”

Mrs. Fraser nodded at Molly’s comment. “Oh, I’ll bet. Lady Cate’s only been here a few months and already I can see how she throws herself into her work! If it weren’t for us, I’d worry she’d not eat!”

“Or eat cereal,” Molly joked as Mrs. Fraser groaned at the idea.

Cate held back a chuckle at the truthful admittance on Molly’s part. “My diet has improved by leaps and bounds since I’ve moved here.”

“I’m glad!” Mrs. Fraser replied. “Enjoy your dinner, Lady Cate!”

“Thank you. Enjoy yours, too.”

Before eating, Cate cleared her area, dumping all her materials on the desk. She returned to the armchair near the fireplace, relaxing into it and pulling the tray onto her lap. She settled after a brief walk with the dogs in her room.

About an hour before she retired, a light knock sounded on her door. She swung her legs over the edge of her chaise, shouting, "Come in!"

Molly's head popped through the door. "Hey, sorry to disturb you, may I come in for a minute?"

"Sure," Cate replied, rising to her feet, "what's up? Is everything okay?"

"Oh, yeah, yeah," Molly responded, waving her back down onto the chaise. "Don't get up. Everything's fine."

Cate plopped onto the chaise between the two dogs as Molly approached her. She perched on the foot of the lounge. She took Cate's hands in hers and said, "I just wanted to tell you how great my first day went and how thrilled I am that you offered me this job. And how happy I am that I accepted it."

Cate smiled at her. "I'm so glad, Molly."

"I didn't want anything more than that and I won't disturb your evening any further. But I wanted you to know how happy I am."

"I appreciate you telling me, Molly. I'll admit, while I hoped you'd love it here, I worried you wouldn't."

"And that's exactly why I came. I know you. I realize you're a worrier! Only you would worry that changing someone else's life for the better didn't make them happy!"

Cate chuckled and pulled Molly into a hug. "No. I worried that I didn't change your life for the better. But I'm so glad to hear that wasn't the case!"

Molly squeezed her back. "Well, I'm going to read and relax in my room. Mr. Fraser built me a cozy fire for my second night here, and I'm going to take advantage!"

Cate grinned at her as they pulled away from each other. "Go put your feet up. Enjoy the Rose Room!"

"Oh, I plan on it! Goodnight, Lady Cate."

"Goodnight. Oh, you don't..." Cate began.

Molly waved her hand at Cate. "I do. Because it's proper, and I'm determined not to let those traditions die. There's really something magnificent about how Mrs. Fraser insists on the pomp and circumstance. Almost magical. I'm proud to be a part of this grand tradition. So,

goodnight again, Lady Cate.” Molly nodded her head toward Cate before striding from the room.

Cate’s eyes followed her across the room. Self-respect and confidence filled Molly’s stride. Never a shrinking violet, Cate had been surprised during her last visit to see how battered Molly’s ego had been. It appeared the change in her circumstances improved Molly’s outlook. Contentment filled her as she witnessed the happiness displayed by her dear friend. She smiled to herself, diving back into her book. She’d sleep well tonight, contented with all her friends close and happy within the castle walls.

* * *

Cate awoke drenched in sweat, gasping for breath. Her heart thudded in her chest at a rapid pace. Her breathing, labored and ragged, made her lightheaded. Her hands trembled as she gulped for air attempting to calm herself.

As her breathing and heart rate slowed, she climbed from her bed. She paced the floor of her bedroom, eventually venturing out into her sitting room to collapse onto her chaise. What had disturbed her sleep, she wondered? What caused her to awaken in such a state?

Cate laid her head back onto the chair’s plump back. A dream, she mused. Yes, that was it. A dream had startled her from her sleep. She tried hard to recall the details. She pushed her mind to reach for any piece of information.

A party, she remembered. She was hosting a party in the dream. Cate stood in the ballroom, in a long sapphire-blue, princess-style evening gown. Randolph and Victoria greeted her with an embrace before taking their place for a waltz on the dance floor. After that, several guests swirled around her with a ceaseless amount of chatter. Her head swam with it as face after face passed in front of her, some smiling, others leaning in to kiss her cheek. Music filled the room, loud and discordant. Cate’s head ached from the off-key noise. Incessant chatter, high-pitched laughter and a swirl of mixed perfumes filled the air. Something about the entire event overwhelmed her far beyond the general anxiety experienced by an introvert at social gatherings.

Needing to escape from the dizzying parade of guests and noise, she excused herself, fleeing from the ballroom and shutting herself inside the library. She gulped for air as she leaned against the library doors, composing herself. Riley and Bailey greeted her, racing toward her. She bent over, gathering both into her arms. Warm kisses raced across her cheeks. As her nerves loosened from the tight knot they were balled in, Riley and Bailey pulled away. Both dogs spun to face the bookcase.

“What is it about that bookcase?” Cate inquired.

The dogs raced to it, Riley yipping at it. Bailey followed suit, tossing his head back and howling in a panic at the bookcase. The dogs became more and more frenzied as Cate approached the bookcase. The windows blew open and an icy wind flew around the room. Cate rubbed her bare arms as she continued across the room.

Riley and Bailey continued their frantic barking, undisturbed by the windstorm in the room. Papers swirled in a whirlwind. She fought through them to the bookcase. As she neared the wall, the bookshelf dissolved, fading away to blackness. A gaping hole yawned in front of her. Icy cold air gusted from the hole. Riley and Bailey ceased barking, backing from the hole, their tails between their legs. They turned and raced to hide under the desk.

Cate’s brow furrowed as she followed their scamper across the room. A noise spun her back toward the hole in the wall. An unearthly groan emanated from the hole. Cate took a step closer to the void. Air wafted from the blackness, accompanied by another groan. This time, it sounded like a voice. “Hello?” Cate called into the darkness.

She stepped closer, squinting into the dark. As she took another step closer, a powerful gust of wind blew from within the cavity. The gale storm wind knocked Cate onto her backside. As she struggled to sit up, a voice growled from within, “BEWARE!”

Cate gasped at the recollection, realizing it was this ominous warning that had awakened her from the nightmare. She struggled to find meaning in the dream. After an hour she gave up. She chalked the dream up to her subconscious mind’s reaction to the stress she experienced from the upcoming parties and her worry over Molly’s arrival. Her mind must have pieced together details from the past few days to create a strange and terrifying experience.

She sighed, chuckling at herself. “What a foolish girl you are, Cate Kensie,” she whispered.

She shook her head. She’d let her fear get the better of her as she had when she first arrived, imagining ghosts lurking in every hall. Embarrassed by her behavior, Cate dragged herself back to bed.

* * *

The sun had already made its appearance over the moors when Cate awoke. She’s slept in after her rough night. She leapt from bed, not wanting to be late for breakfast, entering the dining room just as Molly and Mrs. Fraser appeared with her breakfast.

They exchanged good mornings before Cate settled in for her breakfast. Afterward, she made her way to the library, intending to continue her research on her list of potential suspects. As she entered the room, her eyes slid to the bookcase. She ogled it suspiciously, as though she expected to relive her dream during her waking hours. She shook her head at the bookcase, turning away from it and approaching the desk.

After a moment, unsettled despite her best attempts to shrug off the dream, she decided a walk with the dogs was in order. It gave her an excuse to peruse the gardens off the ballroom and glimpse the progress being made on the outdoor decorations.

Cate spent the better part of her morning outside, despite the chill in the air. Mr. Fraser and Jack transformed it into a winter wonderland, and she found it difficult to tear herself away from it. She circled through multiple times, each time finding something new that she missed before. Delighted with the progress, Cate sought the two men to commend them for their hard work.

Cate returned to the library just as Molly delivered her lunch. “Thanks, Molly!”

“Long morning walk? I’m surprised you’re not frozen solid!”

Cate laughed as she rubbed her hands in front of the blazing fire. “I couldn’t tear myself away from the gardens. Mr. Fraser’s design is magical. It’s like a winter wonderland.”

“Oh, I can’t wait for the party!” Molly squealed. “Until then, I’m excited to decorate tomorrow!”

“Me too! I don’t want to keep you from your lunch, enjoy it!”

Molly nodded to her as she disappeared through the door. Riley and Bailey stretched in front of the blazing fire, soothed by its warmth after their morning outside.

As Cate ate, she stared at the bookcase that was the source of her consternation in her dream. She bit into her pickle, her eyes narrowing at the bookshelf.

After a moment, she rolled her eyes. “Cate, knock it off!” she scolded herself, earning a glance and a sigh from Riley. “It was a silly dream, nothing more. A bookcase does not dissolve away into thin air!”

“Talking to yourself?” Molly inquired, entering the room.

Startled, Cate almost dropped the tray right off her lap.

“I’m afraid I was,” Cate admitted. “Just trying to make sense of my research.”

“Needed expert advice, huh?”

Cate giggled as she handed the tray off. “Yep.”

After Molly exited, Cate wandered to the desk, plopping down on the desk chair. Determined to make more progress, she opened her folders and spread out her notes. She glanced through the employee list. She flipped open the records, ready to track down their dates of employment.

At the top of the list was Lachlan Reid, Jack’s great-grandfather. She did not suspect he was the thief. She had only listed him since he was the estate manager in 1925, so they were aware of all of the players. Lachlan was Stanley Reid’s father.

Cate made a note to ask the elder Mr. Reid about any information his father may have passed along about the theft. She also noted Lachlan was not a suspect and his employment dates were not of interest since he worked most of his life on the estate. She would never dream of insulting Jack, Stanley or the memory of his family by suggesting he had robbed the MacKenzies.

Cate moved on to the remaining list of employees. She scoured the employment records back to front over and over, jotting down hire dates when available, dates of first payments, termination dates and dates of last payments listed. She cobbled together rough dates of employment for each of the people on the list. The project took her the entire afternoon.

Cate admired her handiwork as Riley pawed her leg. A smile spread across her face as she glanced down at the small dog. “Look, Riley! I got

everyone's dates! Are you proud of me?"

Riley glanced quizzically at the paper Cate brandished in front of him.

"Next step is to comb through these dates and determine if anything seems suspicious! For example, someone coming to work just before the theft, or leaving soon after."

Riley's dark almond-shaped eyes stared back at her as though he understood.

"What do you think, Riley? Will I find anything interesting?" she questioned, setting the sheet down as she scooped him into her arms.

Riley gave her a lap on the face, causing Cate to chuckle. "Thanks for the vote of confidence, buddy. I bet you're dying for a walk! We have just enough time before dinner, let's find your brother!"

Cate rose from the chair, carrying Riley with her. She roused Bailey from his peaceful nap near the fireplace. After dressing both dogs in a cozy winter coat and donning one herself, she led them outside for an evening walk before dinner.

She returned to the library just before dinner, snapping her laptop open to check her email before dinner arrived. She found one from Maggie Edwards.

Hi Cate... or should I say Lady Cate?! You're welcome! As soon as I saw the trinket box, I thought of you! I was glad I caught Molly before she left for Scotland so she could take it over. Saved me a trip to the post office! I needed the rest after that exciting trip. I'm sure Molly told you my uncle Ollie (I think you knew him while you were at Aberdeen) was kidnapped. In the end, it all turned out for the best! Not only did we find Uncle Ollie, but we also found Cleopatra's tomb!!!!

I've never been on such a wild ride in my entire life! Henry was my rock through the whole thing! I can't wait for you to meet him! I hope I don't sound too eager, but I'd love to accept your invitation to visit! Maybe in the spring? I bet it's just beautiful there during that season. I bet it's just beautiful there in all the seasons!

I heard from Molly already. She sounds ecstatic about her new job! Gosh, I can't wait to visit and see you both! Let's talk about a spring visit if that's okay with you!

Enjoy the holidays! Maggie

Cate grinned at her laptop screen. Same old Maggie, she mused. Cate always found Maggie's more extroverted nature alien, although she appreciated her forthrightness. Maggie had no qualms to accept her invitation and suggest a date. Spared from the awkward second-guessing of whether to suggest a date or not, Cate was pleased to have Maggie take the lead.

She returned Maggie's email over dinner, agreeing to a spring visit. As Cate finished the email and closed her laptop, she leaned back in her chair, spooning another mouthful of Mrs. Fraser's soup into her mouth.

Cate carried her tray to the fireplace, in a pensive mood. She finished her dinner as she watched the flames dance in the fireplace. After Molly retrieved her tray, Cate settled into her armchair near the fire with a novel.

After a few moments, she found it impossible to concentrate. Her eyes focused on the bookcase across the room. Details of her dream floated back through her mind. She shivered as she recalled the icy wind that had gusted through the room.

She pressed her lips together as she tried to steady her nerves and assure herself that everything was fine. A moment later, she snapped her book shut and raced across the room, calling the dogs after her.

She stared at the bookshelf from the hallway, a frown on her lips as the unshakable feeling of terror descended on her.

CHAPTER 6



Cate swallowed hard as she sucked in breaths. She stared back at the bookcase, recalling the fear she'd experienced in her nightmare. With her unsettled nerves getting the better of her, she elected to relax in her sitting room for the evening. She gathered both dogs into her arms and scurried from the library. Before closing the door behind her, she shot one last glaring look at the bookcase that cost her a good night's sleep the previous night.

* * *

Cate bounded out of bed, excitement filling her. Today, for the first time in years, she'd decorate a Christmas tree with people she considered family instead of alone.

Of course, she never considered herself alone even before moving to Scotland. She'd had her trusty pal, Riley, with her through the holidays. Riley, however, did not often hold up his end of the conversation.

It thrilled Cate to have others share in draping the tree in lights and ornaments. She also looked forward to the warm cookies and hot chocolate Mrs. Fraser promised. Cate wasn't sure if the tree decorating or the cookies excited her more, but either way she felt like a kid on Christmas morning. She could almost taste the buttery flavor of the cookies in her mouth already.

Cate skipped downstairs with Riley and Bailey in tow. The household planned to gather after breakfast and make a relaxing day of tree decorating. Cate brought an ornament she purchased for Riley's first Christmas with her.

She'd tracked down a matching one online and had it sent to add to the tree marking Bailey's first Christmas. She'd also purchased several new toys for the two pups to find under the tree on Christmas morning. This Christmas would also mark the first time in years Cate would exchange gifts with others. She had excitedly shopped for unique gifts for everyone.

Cate was the first to arrive to the sitting room. Evidence of Jack's presence was obvious with the arrival of the live Christmas tree set up near the window. A smiled spread across Cate's face as she eyed the tree. After a spirited discussion weeks ago, Mr. Fraser and Jack had won Cate over from a fake Christmas tree to a real one. Mrs. Fraser, who claimed she had no horse in the race, mentioned enjoying the scent of a real pine to help sway Cate's mind. Cate agreed, confessing she'd never had a live tree before.

"All the more reason to have one now!" Jack concluded after they decided.

Jack joined Cate in the sitting room, carrying two boxes of decorations with him.

"Let me help you," Cate offered, relieving him of one of the boxes.

"Thank you, Lady Cate. I've got two more boxes to bring," he informed her as he set his box down.

Cate dumped hers near the tree. "I'll come with you. I can carry one of the boxes."

"At the risk of Mrs. Fraser having my head, okay. There's a light one you can carry. Besides, I'm sure I can't talk you out of it," Jack mentioned.

"You can't." She followed him from the room, leaving the two pups sniffing the boxes like newfound treasure.

"Oh, while I have you," Cate began as they traversed the hallways to the storage area.

Jack side-eyed her, arching an eyebrow. "Oh, no. I suspected you had an agenda."

Cate huffed at him. "I do have an agenda. It's helping you carry the boxes. And, to kill two birds with one stone, I figured I'd impart the information I found in my search for the missing jewels."

Jack clasped his hands together and shot her a hopeful glance. "Have you solved the case yet?"

"Afraid not. I've got a good list of suspects. I plan to try to narrow it down tonight. I created a list of everyone working on the estate at the time, along with anyone else who may have been in the house visiting for the holidays."

"Anyone look promising as a thief?" Jack questioned as they entered the storage room.

"I'm not sure yet. I spent hours yesterday collecting employment information for each employee whose name appears in the records. I tracked down all the start and end dates, more or less. I plan to check if anyone was a recent addition to the staff just before the theft, or if anyone quit shortly after."

Jack nodded as he tugged a box free. "Sounds like a solid plan. Do you suppose you'll find anything?"

Cate shook her head. "I doubt it, but it's a decent place to start. I assume it's an angle the police or family would have followed up on."

"Possibly. Or they may not have, and you might get lucky."

Cate nodded, her eyes downcast and her lips pressed together in a thin line.

"Something else on your mind?" Jack asked as he handed her a small, light bin marked "Christmas decorations."

Cate shifted the box to balance on her hip as she frowned. "Rory MacKenzie, the master of the castle in 1925, had a brother, Lucas. He's my great-grandfather. Oh! Speaking of great-grandfathers, Lachlan Reid served as estate manager then. He's your great-grandfather. He's Stanley's father! I wonder if your grandfather has any information about the theft. Perhaps his father passed some stories to him."

"Uh-oh," Jack mumbled as he freed another box. "This is serious."

Cate's brows knit together. "What do you mean?"

"You're avoiding. When you avoid, there's something troubling you."

"I'm not avoiding!"

"Oh, aren't you? I suppose that worried expression on your face came from telling me I may run into my great-grandfather."

Cate shrugged and adjusted the box on her hip. "Well, you do hate time travel."

"Cate, what's on your mind?"

Cate stared down the hall as they ambled its length. “Well...” Cate’s voice trailed off.

“Caaaaate,” Jack prodded.

“What if Lucas MacKenzie was the thief?”

“Rory’s brother? Your great-grandfather? Why would he steal from his own family?”

“Because he didn’t inherit the bulk of the estate like his brother, Rory?” Cate conjectured.

“That’s a stretch,” Jack responded.

“It’s not. Family jealousies can run deep. Rory inherits the castle, the title, most of the fortune, most likely because he was born first. It must seem unfair in many instances.”

“Are we sure Lucas inherited nothing?” Jack inquired.

Cate’s eyebrows knit. “I’m unsure of the terms of the will, but I’d be surprised if he inherited anything substantial. Remember, he was my great-grandfather. My family wasn’t wealthy. I’m not saying we weren’t comfortable, we were. But we weren’t millionaires.”

“Okay,” Jack answered, rubbing his chin. “So, Lucas is jealous of big brother, Rory, for inheriting the fortune and steals some of the family jewels. Possible, but I’m still not convinced it’s probable.”

“Probable or not, we can’t rule him out. He’s a reasonable suspect. He has a motive...”

“Potential motive,” Jack corrected.

Cate nodded, then continued. “He likely had means and opportunity, as I doubt they’d keep the family jewels under careful guard from family members.”

“Okay,” Jack agreed with a nod. “You’ve got a point. I agree he should remain on the suspect list for now. But why is it such a worry?”

“If Lucas turns out to be the thief... well...” Her voice trailed off as she slowed to a stop, staring at her feet with a grimace on her lips. “I’ve descended from a thief!”

“Oh, Cate,” Jack admonished gently. “Is that what’s got you worried? So what? It doesn’t make you a thief! Besides, I think it’s a long shot.”

Cate shrugged, remaining unconvinced. “It would explain why my family was blotted out of the family bible. It may also explain the unsolved case. Perhaps Rory figured it out. To save face, he may have kept mum

about it outside of the family, including to the police. But he blotted my side out of his life.”

“We have no confirmation the blot occurred in Rory’s time,” Jack responded. “And isn’t Lucas still listed? The blot only covers his children and their children and so on, right?”

Cate nodded. Lucas’s name was still visible in the Bible. “Right.”

“It’s quite a leap to assume Lucas is the thief. And even if he is, Cate, it means nothing now. What your great-grandfather may or may not have done has no bearing on you. You, Catherine Kensie, are a wonderful, caring, kind person.”

A smile crossed Cate’s face.

“For that matter,” Jack continued. “Perhaps it was *my* great-grandfather who was the thief. And, as you can see, even if it was, it has no bearing on how wonderful I am.” He grinned at her.

Cate giggled as she shook her head. “No. No bearing on your humility either. And, just to be clear, I considered your ancestor, but there’d be no reason for him to steal it and continue working on the estate.”

“That’s not true. Perhaps he had a similar reason of jealousy. Perhaps Pap is hiding those jewels somewhere at home for a rainy day. Perhaps he did it for the thrill. Perhaps Lachlan sold them and set up a trust fund I’m not aware of!”

“Oh, Jack,” Cate responded, shaking her head. “Now who’s reaching?”

“Well, perhaps it is a reach, but my point is let’s not be judge, jury, and executioner for your great-grandfather just yet.”

Cate nodded, agreeing. “Okay, deal.”

“Good, I’m glad that’s settled,” Jack answered as they approached the sitting room door.

“Oh, one more thing,” Cate muttered, screwing up her face as she glanced up to him.

“Uh-oh,” Jack groaned. “That expression is just as bad as the worried one.”

Cate rolled her eyes at him. “We can’t investigate until after the new year. But we could make a quick trip to the past after the Snow Ball to check the lay of the land.”

“Ugh,” Jack groaned. “And here I assumed I had at least two weeks off from time traveling!”

“Perhaps we can rule Lucas out as a suspect. I’d sleep a lot better if we could!” Cate flashed her best pleading glance to Jack.

Jack rolled his eyes at her. “Okay, okay. You tell me when and I’ll go with you. For the sake of clearing your name and your sleep habits, Lady Cate.”

Cate smiled at him. “Thank you. I appreciate that and so do my sleep habits.”

“It’s for my well-being, too. I’ll never win an argument with you.”

They pushed through the doors, finding the rest of the group already sorting through decorations. Molly and Bailey played tug-of-war with a frayed bow. Riley nosed through the bins with Mrs. Fraser and Mr. Fraser worked to unravel a string of lights. Cate beamed at the Christmas card-like scene. No matter what she found investigating the theft, she would not allow it to dampen her spirits.

They spent the rest of the day stringing lights, hanging ornaments, sipping hot chocolate and enjoying Mrs. Fraser’s cookies. Cheese and wine were served in the afternoon as they relaxed and shared memories of Christmases past. To add the final touch, Cate climbed the step ladder and placed the star on top of the tree. Afterward, Jack lit the lights, turning the tree into a glimmering focal point of the room. Applause erupted from the group as they admired their handiwork.

Cate slept like a log that night. She awoke refreshed and ready to greet Mr. Smythe and Gayle, set to arrive later in the day. She even felt prepared to take on the Isla Campbell meeting scheduled this morning. With the party just around the corner, Mrs. Campbell would be brimming with enthusiasm.

With her busy schedule, Cate figured the day would race by. She climbed from her bed, dressing for the day as she hummed a Christmas carol. The dogs enjoyed a brisk walk after breakfast before she herded them into the library with a pair of bones courtesy of Mrs. Fraser. With the pups occupied, Cate met Mrs. Campbell at the front door, escorting her to the decorated sitting room.

“Oh, oh, doesn’t that tree look marvelous!” Mrs. Campbell complimented.

“Thank you! We took a day as a household yesterday to decorate it together.”

“Oh? You mean... with the... staff?”

“Yes! Jack, Mr. and Mrs. Fraser and our newest addition, Molly!” Cate noted as Molly entered with a tray of tea.

“Speak of the devil!” Molly joked, setting the tray down on the coffee table as Cate and Mrs. Campbell settled into their seats.

“Mrs. Campbell, you may remember Molly Williams, our newest addition to the castle. Molly worked at Aberdeen College with me.”

“Oh, hello, Molly!” Mrs. Campbell greeted her, eyeing her from head to toe. “Welcome to the staff!”

“Thank you! I’m excited to be here!”

Mrs. Campbell studied her another moment before turning her attention to the tea tray.

“Thanks, Molly. We’re all set,” Cate prompted, realizing Mrs. Campbell hoped to be rid of Molly to begin their meeting.

“Oh, right! Just give us a ring if you need anything else!” Molly disappeared through one of the doorways, leaving Cate and Mrs. Campbell alone.

“Charming girl,” Mrs. Campbell commented, sounding as though she didn’t mean it.

Cate poured her tea, handing it to her. “She’s a wonderful addition.”

“I’m glad to hear she’s working out. Well, we have a million details to discuss. Shall we begin?”

“Yes,” Cate replied, opening her folder. They covered the remaining outstanding details, discussed the timeline for final setup and double-checked all the particulars. As they finished, Cate mentioned viewing the trees. “I imagine you’ll be quite pleased when you see them. They’re exactly what you wanted.”

“I cannot wait to verify that! Oh, but before we go, I hoped to take a few minutes to discuss the upcoming VIP New Year’s Eve party.”

“Of course,” Cate agreed.

“Oh, I realize we’ll meet again twice before that event, but my nerves are getting the better of me!”

“Well, I’m sure you’ve got everything handled as always, Mrs. Campbell,” Cate assured her.

“Yes, yes,” Mrs. Campbell waved her hand in the air, glancing over her reading glasses at Cate. “Platitudes are comforting but,” she began, pulling her glasses away from her face and shutting her eyes. “This party *must*

come off without a hitch. It's so vital. This is the first time in *years* the castle will entertain VIPs. There is *no* room for error!"

"I understand..." Cate began.

"With all due respect, I'm not sure you do, Lady Cate," Mrs. Campbell interrupted her. "Peerage, lines of succession, et cetera. Americans tend not to be well-versed in these subjects. Word of parties such as these get around. We want them to get around the appropriate social circles and for the proper reasons. We want to be the talk of the town, for all the right reasons! We want everyone who is anyone to seek an invitation to Dunhaven Castle again!"

Cate smiled and nodded. "I'm coming to understand the importance, yes."

"Oh, I apologize if I sound overbearing. But Dunhaven Castle has been no stranger to elites in the past! And we want it to welcome them again! Why, I'm almost certain Dunhaven Castle has welcomed even a duke once or twice before!"

"How exciting!" Cate feigned.

"Oh, yes! To welcome a duke... oh!" Mrs. Campbell shut her eyes as though she was imagining the scene in her head.

Cate indulged her. The parties meant a great deal to the woman, and Cate allowed her to have her moment. "With the work you're doing, I'm certain we'll welcome a duke again. Soon, I'll bet!"

"You're too kind, Lady Cate."

They spent another forty-five minutes going over details for the VIP event. Afterward, Mrs. Campbell and Cate toured the ballroom and gardens outside. After a few minor adjustments, the decor satisfied Mrs. Campbell's picky tastes. Even the gardens received her approval after careful inspection. Mrs. Campbell promised to return prior to trucks arriving with the tables and chairs the following morning.

After seeing her off, Cate shut the door behind her, leaning against it for a moment.

"Exhausting, isn't she?" Jack queried, startling her from her musings.

"Yes," Cate laughed. "But at least she approved everything with minimal changes."

"But she couldn't resist mentioning that bloody snow machine one last time."

Cate chuckled, glancing at her timepiece. “Almost lunch time. Good thing. I’m starving!”

“Party planning makes you hungry, does it?”

“It does. But first I’d better take the pups outside.”

“Where are the poor little pups? Shut away from the party czar?”

Cate chuckled as she led Jack to the library. “Yes. Shut away in the library with a few bones courtesy of Mrs. Fraser.”

She popped open the door, searching the room for Riley and Bailey. She spotted the bones discarded on the rug near the fireplace. After scanning further, she found both dogs in their new favorite spot.

“That’s odd,” Jack noted.

Cate stared at it for a moment, swallowing hard as he tried to understand why it was that drew both her and her dogs to the bookshelf.

CHAPTER 7



Cate's eyes focused on the bookshelf. A shiver shot up her spine again as her heart thudded in her chest.

"Yoo-hoo, Lady Cate?" Jack inquired.

Cate raised her eyebrows and sucked in a deep breath. "Sorry. Yeah, the dogs have been at that bookshelf for days, but I hadn't found anything of interest. I'm going to have to follow up on it later."

"Let me know if you find anything," Jack requested.

"I will," Cate answered. "If I get a chance after the party, I'll give it a thorough search."

"Speaking of, anything else that needs taken care of before the party or before Mr. Smythe and Ms. Pearson arrive today?"

Cate shook her head. "No, we're all set!"

"Okay," Jack answered. "I'll meet you out front when they arrive to help with the luggage."

"Thanks! Come on, Riley and Bailey, let's go for a walk!" At the offer, both dogs bounded toward Cate. Cate indulged them in a walk both before and after lunch, feeling guilty for keeping them contained all morning. By mid-afternoon, they were tired enough for a quick nap before the rest of Cate's guests arrived.

The rest of the day flew by with Cate greeting Mr. Smythe, the estate's attorney and his assistant, Gayle, in the late afternoon and enjoying a dinner with her guests before they retired early, both tired from their long journey. Cate turned in early also, hoping to get a solid night's sleep before the final

set up tomorrow. She slept soundly, her dreams filled with balls, dresses and entertaining royalty.

* * *

Cate's alarm screamed through the morning air, startling her awake. Cate bolted upright, surprised she hadn't awoken before it as usual. She must have been more tired than she realized from the commotion in the house yesterday. At least she had slept, she figured, as she climbed from her bed, yawning.

She plodded to her en-suite bathroom to shower and dress for the day. She hopped outside for a few brief moments with the dogs before breakfast. Frosty morning air greeted her, and she snuggled deeper into her coat. It signaled a cold snap moving into the area. The latest weather pattern was predicted to bring snow with it, just in time for the party.

After breakfast, everyone met in the ballroom to await the arrival of the tables, chairs, and other last-minute furniture items for setup. Mrs. Campbell arrived moments before the trucks pulled up. With everyone's help, they were unloaded by late morning, and they completed the final setup by late afternoon.

Cate was returning to her suite with the dogs for a cozy night of reading when Jack caught her in the upstairs hallway.

"Lady Cate," he called, flagging her down. "Do you have a moment?"

"Sure, what's up?" Cate asked as Jack scooped Riley up for a petting.

Riley offered an appreciative lick to the face as Jack scratched his ears.

"I just wanted to tell you when I checked on these little rascals earlier in the day, I found them staring at that bookshelf again."

Cate's brow furrowed. "I do not understand what keeps them so interested!"

Jack shrugged his shoulders. "I'm not sure either. I did a cursory glance over it. Nothing jumped out at me. The only reason I bring it up is because with the frequency that you've mentioned them interested in the same spot, we may want to have it looked into by an exterminator."

Cate pulled her lips back in a grimace. "An exterminator?"

"Yes, to ensure there are no vermin."

“Vermin?” Cate queried further, a deeper frown setting into her delicate features.

Jack chuckled at her reaction. “Yes, vermin, Lady Cate. Not very regal, but nevertheless, sometimes an issue in these old places.”

Cate wrinkled her nose at the notion but nodded. “Perhaps after the party, no sense in worrying about it right now. We’ve all got enough going on. Besides, I haven’t spotted anything, so, with any luck, it’s just a minor problem, if that’s the issue.”

“Right, I agree. Hopefully it isn’t the issue, but if it is, better to take care of it sooner rather than later. I’ll call on Monday to set up an appointment. It can’t hurt to have it checked.”

“Sounds like a plan. You can do it right after our trip to the past!” Cate exclaimed.

Jack rolled his eyes at her. “Don’t remind me. I’d rather the vermin than the time traveling.”

Cate made a face at him before they said their good nights. Jack returned Riley to her, and she and the pups disappeared down the hall into her suite. With the day’s work, she slept well when she retired. Not even the mice of the castle roused her. When Saturday morning arrived, she awoke to a winter wonderland outside her window. Overnight, several inches of snow had fallen. It dusted the landscape in a pristine white blanket. The sun crested the moors, creating a sparkling effect on the ground below. The white diamond blanket gleamed under the brilliant sun. It was a perfect winter scene for the party later.

Cate almost hated to step out into the unspoiled display and ruin it with footprints, but the dogs required their bathroom break before breakfast. She stood under an eave as she watched the dogs frolic around in the white powder. Aberdeen didn’t receive vast amounts of snow, so the sensation was new to Riley. He enjoyed it, bounding through mounds of snow with a goofy grin on his face. Both dogs nuzzled their faces into the cold, wet snow, pushing and rolling it around with their snouts. When finished, Riley wore a white beard of snow that clung to his fur in clumps.

Cate, a dog under each arm, pushed through the kitchen door. “Oh my!” Mrs. Fraser exclaimed. “What have we here?”

“They were a little overzealous in the snow,” Cate commented. “I don’t want them creating a melted mess in here.”

Mrs. Fraser lifted Riley from Cate's arms as Molly retrieved a towel. Together, they towed off both dogs before allowing them to settle in front of the warm stove.

* * *

Cate donned her dress for the party. Her black velvet bodice met her flowing plaid ankle-length skirt with a large plaid bow. Cate smoothed the fabric of the skirt as she gazed in the mirror. "What do you boys think?" she asked Riley and Bailey.

Both dogs, each sporting matching plaid bow ties, gazed at Cate, a quizzical expression on their faces.

Riley ventured over, sniffing at Cate's skirt, then cocking his head to the side and staring at her. Bailey, who didn't care for his new attire, rubbed at his face in an attempt to pull the tie off.

Cate ushered the two pups from the room, meeting Molly along the way. She scooped Bailey into her arms and Cate gathered Riley into hers. Together they made their way to the ballroom to await the guests' arrival. Mrs. Campbell arrived moments later, spending most of her time assessing the decor and making adjustments. She finished by giving a list of orders to the catering staff. After sending them on their way, orders in hand, she rejoined the group.

"Well, everything now seems to be order," Mrs. Campbell noted. "Is everyone ready?"

Everyone nodded, dressed in their finest and ready to receive guests. Jack held Riley and Mrs. Fraser carried Bailey, leaving Cate free to meet and greet guests.

"Are you sure the dogs will be... uh, that is, won't they be anxious through this?" Mrs. Campbell inquired.

"Oh, they'll be just fine. We'll put them to bed before the music and entertainment begins," Cate assured her. "It'll be fun for people to meet them."

"Oh," Mrs. Campbell glanced toward them, a disdainful look on her face. "I'm sure it will be."

Chimes sounded throughout the castle.

“Ah, that must be our first guests arriving,” Cate announced. “Places everyone!”

Nervous chuckles escaped her as she departed with Mrs. Campbell.

The ballroom filled up within fifteen minutes of the first guest arriving. When Cate reentered, leaving her post at the front door guarded by historical society volunteers, a buzz of chatter filled the air. Several people grouped around Riley and Bailey and their caretakers, fussing over both boys. Riley, secure in Jack’s arms, enjoyed the attention. Bailey played gracious host well as Mrs. Fraser encouraged him to “shake hands” with each guest.

Cate joined them, checking on both dogs before moving on to make her rounds around the room. She greeted each guest again, spending a few moments with each to discuss holiday plans, weather, hobbies, and a myriad of other small talk options. She tried to make everyone feel welcome and ensure they were enjoying themselves. Despite her introverted nature, Cate found this party easier than the Halloween Ball. It appeared her hostess skills were growing.

After greeting all her guests a second time, she returned to her two best buddies, suggesting they depart for a good night’s sleep. With Jack’s help, she returned them to her suite upstairs, removing their bow ties and settling them in their beds. They returned to the party within a few minutes.

Mrs. Campbell stormed toward them as they reentered. “*There* you are!” she exclaimed as though she’d been searching for hours.

“Is everything okay?” Cate inquired. “We just stepped out to settle the dogs.”

“I suppose it is now that I’ve found you. The orchestra is ready to begin.”

“Oh, great!” Cate exclaimed.

Mrs. Campbell nodded expectantly at her.

Cate glanced around the room, unsure of the meaning behind Mrs. Campbell’s stare. “Is there something else?”

“Of course, you should lead off the dancing, Lady Cate! Set the tone for the evening. Everyone will expect it of you.”

“OH!” Cate exclaimed. “Oh, no, I don’t think that’s necessary. Oh, it’s fine to just begin. I’m sure everyone will realize.”

“Nonsense, Lady Cate,” Mrs. Campbell dismissed, waving her hand in the air. “It wouldn’t be proper at this event to allow the guests to ‘join in’

whenever they'd like. The lady of the house *must* lead the first dance!"

"Well..." Cate hesitated, seeking a way out of the situation. "Perhaps Mr. and Mrs. Fraser. They're a lovely couple and they'd do great starting the dancing off!"

"But *they* are not the Countess of Dunhavenshire!" Mrs. Campbell tittered.

"But I..." Cate tried again.

"Nonsense, nonsense. No excuses. Who will you choose as your dancing partner? Have you someone in mind?"

"Ah..." Cate floundered, eyes wide as she searched the room.

"Lady Cate," Jack chimed in, bowing extravagantly, "might I have the pleasure of the first dance?"

Cate chuckled at him, breathing a sigh of relief. "Yes."

Mrs. Campbell eyed him up and down. "Well, I suppose he'll do. He's a nice strapping lad. I hope you have good form. And don't step on her toes."

"I wouldn't dream of it," Jack assured her.

Mrs. Campbell offered him an annoyed glance. "I shall make the announcement, then you lead Lady Cate to the dance floor to begin."

"Thanks for the save," Cate whispered as Mrs. Campbell departed for the small stage near the orchestra. "That threw me."

"You're welcome. I have a feeling the party czar is less than thrilled. If she had her way, you'd at least be dancing with someone equal in station."

"Or a duke," Cate said with a chuckle.

Mrs. Campbell tapped on the microphone. "Oh, hello, is this on? Ah, yes it is! Good evening, everyone. Thank you for attending the first annual Snow Ball at Dunhaven Castle! I hope you are enjoying yourselves and are as excited to be here as I am. I'd just like to take a moment before we begin the dancing to thank Lady Catherine Kensie, Countess of Dunhavenshire, for offering her lovely home for the event."

Cate held in a giggle, recalling it as less than an offer and more of a demand.

"The gardens outside have also been decorated for your enjoyment, please take a moment to enjoy them if you need a breath of fresh air. They are quite the winter wonderland! We're about to get underway with our entertainment and dancing, so I won't take up much more time! So, without further adieu, our Lady Cate will start us off, escorted by Mr. Jack Reid. Please join in with her after she sets our tone!"

Jack led Cate to the dance floor after she encouraged Mr. and Mrs. Fraser to join in after they began.

Cate smiled at Jack as she placed her hand in his and her other hand on his shoulder. He gripped her waist, a nervous grin on his face.

“I must confess, Lady Cate, I doubt I’ll be as good a partner as Randolph MacKenzie, but I’ll try not to step on your toes.”

Cate chuckled as the music began. Her mind flitted to her nightmare of a few nights ago. She swallowed hard as she hoped the music didn’t have the same dizzying effect it had in her dream.

CHAPTER 8



Cate sucked in a deep breath as they swirled around the dance floor. Images of her nightmare flitted through her mind, and she worried that she'd have a similar reaction. The music ramped up and she swallowed hard. Her heart beat hard in her chest. She glanced up at Jack with a tentative smile, trying to stop her lower lip from trembling.

She blew out a deep breath as she suffered no ill-effects after the first thirty seconds.

"Listen, I'm no dancer either," she admitted with a nervous grin.

"You made it look so easy with Randolph!" Jack noted as the orchestra played.

"Randolph made it look easy. He was the one who had to drag me around the dance floor," Cate said as they began to sway to the music.

They circled the dance floor once more before others joined in. Mr. and Mrs. Fraser joined next. The ever-outgoing Molly had already found a partner in Mr. Smythe to join with for the first dance. Gayle partnered with a local business owner, and was followed by Mrs. Campbell and her husband. Several others joined in as the music continued. Cate relaxed as the dance floor filled and she ceased to be the main focus of the group. The music, perfectly tuned, did not have any disorienting effects.

The song ended and everyone applauded. Despite enjoying the dance, Cate left the dance floor, relieved to have finished her duties as hostess.

"We made it through without me breaking your toes!" Jack exclaimed in triumph.

“And I didn’t trip you either! Although I am pleased to be finished with that duty.”

“My dancing’s that bad, is it? And here I thought I won you over.”

Cate blew out a relieved sigh and a chuckle. “It’s not. And as thoroughly enjoyable as that experience was, I’d have preferred it without everyone gawking at us.”

“Ah, I’ll keep that in mind. Lady Cate prefers private dances.” He smiled at her and winked.

Their conversation ended as a gentleman approached and asked for a dance with Cate. She obliged him, allowing him to lead her back to the dance floor. She spent the next several songs bouncing from partner to partner, though she found each experience enjoyable.

She left the dance floor to retrieve a drink, parched from the effort of the dances.

Jack sidled up to her as she floated at the room’s edge. “You say you’re not a dancer, Lady Cate? You seem to be doing a fine job of it for the last hour or so, lassie!”

“I’ve had a good set of partners.”

“Speaking of a good partner, Lady Cate,” Stanley Reid began approaching his grandson, Jack, and Cate, “would you fancy a dance with a real partner?”

“A real partner?” Jack questioned. “She’s already done that. Didn’t you catch the first dance? We were on full display, Pap.” He offered a playful clap on the older man’s back.

Molly approached the trio as they spoke.

“Oh, I saw it, that’s why I’m offering her a real dance. Poor lassie with you and your two left feet dragging her around the dance floor.”

“Two left feet, bah!” Jack replied.

“I would be happy to dance with you, Mr. Reid,” Cate answered with a chuckle.

Molly wrapped an arm around Jack’s shoulders with a giggle. “How about your two left feet dragging me around?”

“I’d be happy to,” Jack answered, offering her his arm.

“Watch your toes,” Stanley warned Molly with a wink as each couple made their way to the floor.

As the next song began, Cate marveled at Stanley’s smooth moves on the dance floor. He grinned at her. “I told you I was a good dancer.”

“Very good!” Cate agreed. “Lots of practice?”

“I’ve had a fair amount,” the older man admitted with a wink. “Enough to make that young laddie look like an amateur.”

Cate laughed as Stanley deftly spun her around. “Jack’s not a bad dancer either.”

“Learned everything he knows from me.” Stanley spun Cate around, flinging her away from him before pulling her back. “But I kept a few tricks to myself.”

Cate eyed him sideways, her grin on her face. “Poor Jack. You kept him in the dark on the best moves!”

“Aye,” Mr. Reid answered with a knowing nod.

As they came together in closed position, Cate glanced at him. “Do you mind if I ask you a question not related to dancing?”

“I don’t mind at all, lassie.”

“I’ve been reading about the theft that occurred here at Dunhaven Castle. The one back in 1925. I was wondering if you had any information about it.”

“Ah, the infamous theft. Yes, happened when my father was the estate manager here.”

Cate nodded at him as they swayed with the music. “Yes. That’s right. Did he ever mention it or anything about it?”

“Aye, he mentioned it all right. Never solved it. Said it was a real shame someone stole those jewels. Beautiful pieces, a real loss to the family.”

“Yes, the pieces were beautiful. I’m surprised the police never solved the case.”

“Looking into it, are you?” Mr. Reid asked, a twinkle in his eye. “One of the rips goes back to the year when the theft was discovered, doesn’t it?”

Cate smiled and nodded. “It does. And I’ll admit, I’d like to investigate it.”

“Jackie fighting you tooth and nail?”

“You know him so well. He isn’t pleased, but he’s willing to try at least.”

“Progress!”

The music ended, and the two left the dance floor to finish their discussion over a cool glass of punch. Jack wandered to them after a brief word with Molly.

Stanley sipped his punch and shook his head. "Well, I wish I could tell you more, lassie, but I'm afraid there wasn't much information available to solve the crime."

"Ah, she's hit you up for information on the theft, eh, Pap?" Jack queried, grabbing a glass of the cool beverage.

"Aye. We were discussing it while we floated across the floor. Did you see how it's done, Jackie?" Stanley arched an eyebrow.

Jack sipped at his glass. "Very funny, Pap. Now, is there anything you can tell us about this theft so Lady Cate can stop with her harebrained schemes to travel to the past?"

Stanley shook his head. "Fraid not. No one ever found the jewels. It's still a mystery. And a terrible shame. My father told me the jewels were stunning."

Cate sucked in a breath, arching an eyebrow. "So, he did talk to you about it?"

"Aye," Stanley responded, nodding again. "He shared this story with me once. I asked about it after reading it in an old newspaper article."

"And?" Jack prodded.

The corners of Stanley's lips turned down as he shrugged. "And nothing. The jewels went missing after a New Year's Eve party. They didn't return the jewelry to the safe that night. Nothing out of the ordinary. Figured they would be safe. They never imagined a theft would occur!"

"No suspects?" Cate questioned.

"Oh, they considered everyone on the estate. But they never found the jewelry and never built a strong case against anyone. Dad said after a while Rory refused to speak of it any further. He assumed it was too painful since they were his grandmother's jewels that had been lost. No one ever brought it up again. The mystery faded into oblivion, just like the jewels."

Jack shook his head. "Damn. I hoped you had the inside track."

"Thank you for the information," Cate replied.

"Sorry I couldn't be of more help," Stanley lamented. "I'm afraid those jewels are lost forever."

"Oh! *There* you are!" Mrs. Campbell shouted above the din of the room, waving to Cate. A tall, thin gentleman followed her. "Lady Cate, please meet Lord Dickinson. He'll be attending our VIP event. He traveled early to attend the Snow Ball. He's fascinated with your home!"

“Oh, thank you,” Cate voiced, smiling at the man as she shook his hand. “I’m pretty smitten with it myself.”

“How charmingly American of you,” he commented, bursting with laughter before whisking her away for a dance. Afterward, Mrs. Campbell cornered Cate to discuss the experience, gushing over the coup of having the likes of Lord Dickinson for not one but two events on the estate.

As the dancing wound down, Cate made another round through the party, chatting and conversing with each of her guests. The party started to wind down around midnight and guests overwhelmed Cate wishing to express their goodbyes and thank yous.

After the last guest had departed, Mrs. Campbell chattered to Cate about the rousing success of the event. With another event a little over a week away, she already had her next project to focus her excited energy on. Mrs. Campbell reminded Cate of their upcoming meeting on Friday. Only after Cate assured her she had not forgotten about the meeting did she judge it appropriate to depart.

Cate found the rest of the group snuggled around the Christmas tree in the sitting room.

She dragged herself into the room, slipping her shoes off as she sank next to Molly on one of the loveseats. “Whew,” she groaned. “I’m exhausted!”

“It was a lovely party, Lady Cate,” Mr. Smythe replied, nursing a nightcap.

“Oh, I agree,” Gayle echoed. “You’re getting good at this.”

Cate offered a weak smile. “I’m not sure about that. Mrs. Campbell is a pro at these things.”

Mrs. Fraser guffawed at the mention of Isla Campbell’s name. “And she’ll have this place rented out every chance she gets, I’m sure.”

“Not if I can help it!” Cate commented. “While I love to share this castle with anyone who wants to enjoy it, I value my privacy!”

“It sounds like she plans to milk this for all it’s worth,” Molly agreed with Mrs. Fraser. “She hasn’t stopped yammering on about having the ‘upper crust’ of society here.”

“She’s planning to put Dunhaven on the map, all right,” Mr. Smythe added. “I must agree the VIP party was a splendid idea.”

“She’s full of those,” Cate admitted. “Although, I have to say again, she’s quite good at this and her ideas are well-planned.”

“Except for the snow machine,” Jack interjected.

Cate nodded, grinning at him. “Except for the snow machine, yes.”

“Well,” Gayle announced as she stood, “I had a splendid time! And I am looking forward to the next party! But for now, I’m looking forward to stretching out in my bed. So, I shall say good night to everyone.”

Mr. Smythe finished his drink. “Yes, I will also take my leave.”

“You’ve both got the right idea,” Cate admitted. Everyone agreed, exchanging good nights and retiring for the evening.

As Cate changed into pajamas, she reflected on the evening. Another successful event was under her belt. She even enjoyed herself, feeling less overwhelmed than she had at her first party. A smile crossed her face as she went over the night’s events.

As she turned the bathroom light’s off, padding across her room to climb into bed, she recalled her conversation with Stanley Reid. While he could not provide much information, something he mentioned rattled through her mind. The elder Mr. Reid commented that, after a time, Rory refused to speak of it. He surmised it was too painful a memory. Cate wondered about the validity of that statement.

Perhaps there was another reason Rory MacKenzie refused to speak of it any further. Perhaps he learned the fate of the jewels and wanted the story buried lest the family name be impugned. Perhaps it was Cate’s ancestor who was the thief. Perhaps Rory MacKenzie preferred not to speak of it not because it was his grandmother’s property stolen, but because his own flesh and blood was responsible. The idea blazed through Cate’s mind as she struggled to sleep. She chewed her lower lip as she stared at the ceiling, one question burning. Was she descended from a thief?

CHAPTER 9



*A*nervous excitement drove Cate from her bed on a cloudy Monday morning. Trepidation over her ancestor's potential involvement in a theft had filled most of her night. But today, she may find an answer.

Despite entertaining guests, the time differential would allow Cate and Jack to disappear into the past for several hours and not be missed.

As she dressed for the day, Cate marveled at the trick of time travel, appreciating the anomaly today. With the trip taking less than an hour by her estimation, they would be back to the present in less than five minutes.

If she could determine if her grandparents were at the castle for the 1925 Christmas season, she may be able to rule them out as suspects.

Cate bit her lower lip as she considered it, hoping the poking around they did revealed some clue.

She met Jack in the library around ten. Most of the household, both past and present, should be occupied around this time, allowing them to make their trip unnoticed.

Riley bounded toward Jack, leaping into his arms as he approached.

"Good job, laddie!" Jack praised the little pup as he caught him mid-leap.

Bailey pranced across the room, interested but not quite as sold as Riley on Jack's appeal.

"He's really taken to that new trick you've taught him," Cate said.

"Aye, he has. He's a good little laddie, aren't you, Sir Riley?"

Riley answered with an appreciative lap on Jack's face.

“And you’re a good laddie, too, Mr. Bailey,” Jack assured the other dog, giving him a pat on the head.

Cate raised an eyebrow at him, her eyes sparkling with excitement. “Are you ready? I set the clothes out from the 1925 trunk in the usual place for you earlier. I think they’ll fit! I left them in your usual spot. All we have to do is change!”

“Nay, but I don’t suppose I have a choice.”

“Don’t be a stick in the mud. This is the easiest trip we’ll ever make! No talking to anyone. No stories to tell.”

“Speaking of stories. What is the cover story this time? In case we need it. Oh, please, let’s not make me a lawyer. The last time we pulled that number I ended up almost getting a man sent to death row.”

“First, you didn’t almost get him sent anywhere. Randolph did that on his own. Second, you ended up getting him released and the case against him dismissed. And third, we don’t need to say you’re a lawyer this time. People traveled more during the 1920s than the 1850s.”

“Hmm,” Jack pondered a moment, setting Riley on the floor. “True, but it makes most sense to continue the charade of being family. It gives us the best access to the family and the house. Although, on this trip, there is no reason to say we’re staying in Dunhaven. They had cars then! We could be traveling from town to town!”

“Good point. We don’t need to be traveling for business. So, there’s no reason for you to be a faux lawyer. Instead, we could be on vacation!”

“On vacation? The last time we spent weeks coming and going. Is that wise? Vacations are usually short term.”

“Hmm,” Cate murmured. “What about...”

“Land deals! We’re traveling in the area to consider properties for clients. I’m a land agent, seeking properties for wealthy clients whose information I cannot disclose because of confidentiality.” Jack puffed his chest out at the suggestion.

Cate pursed her lips. “It should work. Many estates had fallen on hard times before and during this era. It would make sense.”

“Perfect. That’s our story then. While in the area, I decided to look up my distant MacKenzie cousins and pay a call on them. This is my lovely secretary, Cate.”

Cate’s jaw dropped, a look of dismay on her features. “Secretary? Come on! Why do you always get to play the relative?”

“Because even in the 1920s, an American cousin sounds fishy. And what else would you be? Oh, you could be my wife again,” he added with a wink.

Cate shook her head, tapping her chin as she considered the options. “I’ll take wife. Even in the 1920s, a secretary traveling with her boss would look too forward. It might raise too many eyebrows. I’ll have to dig up that fake wedding band again, I suppose.”

“Okay, Cate. Shall we change and meet in your sitting room at eleven?”

Cate nodded. “Yes. I plan to leave the dogs there, too. The rip exists in the bedroom so they should be safe, and it’ll be easy to tell which era we’re in when we open the bedroom door.”

“Oh, that reminds me, before we go, I called the exterminator this morning. He’s going to stop by tomorrow. I realize it’s the day before Christmas but better sooner than having vermin running about all over the castle days before the VIP party.”

Cate wrinkled her nose. “I agree. Tomorrow’s fine. Okay, I’ll see you soon!”

Cate ushered the two dogs to her suite. They settled near the fireplace, playing with a few toys Riley pulled from his toy bin. Cate disappeared into her bathroom, doing her best to pull her hair into an acceptable style for the 1920s. After she was satisfied, she pulled on her day dress, which fell just below her knee and featured a drop-waist characteristic of the period. She paired it with t-strap pumps, also common for the era.

Cate glanced in the mirror, fussing with her hair until a knock sounded at her sitting room door. She rushed to the door, opening it, and waving Jack into the room.

He entered, wearing his British wool suit Cate selected for him. “These clothes are much more comfortable than the last getups, but they still leave something to be desired.”

“These are *much* more comfortable than the 1850s hooped skirts. I am not complaining in the slightest.”

“Yes, it appears much less unwieldy. If you fake a fainting spell again, I can easily drag you around the castle! Ready to get this over with?”

“Just a minute,” Cate replied, dashing from the room. She returned a moment later, shoving a gold band onto the ring finger of her left hand. “Now I am. Can’t forget my fake wedding ring!”

“No, we can’t forget that!”

Cate gave each pup a pat on the head and a kiss goodbye.

Jack tugged at his collar before shooting Cate a glance. "I must say, Lady Cate, I'm flattered you picked posing as my wife over my secretary. What a boost to my ego!"

Cate rolled her eyes at him. "Let's get going. That is, if you can fit through the door with your boosted ego."

"Okay, okay," Jack agreed, following Cate into the bedroom.

He placed his hand around Cate's as she clutched the timepiece. Together they rubbed the watch's face with their thumbs. The timepiece's second hand slowed, signifying interaction with the time rip. Within moments, the second hand crawled across the face, barely moving.

Cate spun to eye the room. "We made it!"

Jack pressed his hands over his chest in various areas. "I guess so."

Cate pointed across the room to an empty spot. "The dog beds are gone. We're in 1925!"

"Stop sounding so excited about it," Jack responded, creeping to the door. He inched it open and peeked into the sitting room. "All clear."

"Let's go!" Cate answered, pushing past him into the sitting room.

"Cate!" he hissed.

"What? No one should be in this wing. Gertrude used this bedroom well after the 1920s. If the ancestors in this era kept to the plan, they kept this room and hallway clear since a time rip leads to this year."

"Still, we should be careful!" he warned, hurrying to catch up and pass her. He approached the doors leading to the hallway. He twisted the knob inch by inch, easing the door open and peering into the hallway. "Clear."

He shut the door again, twisting to face her. "Cate, are you sure about this?"

"Yes!" she exclaimed just above a whisper. "It's two days before Christmas, the house is likely abuzz with Christmas preparations. Any holiday guests should have already arrived. Let's just have a peek around."

Jack wiped a bead of sweat from his brow. "Okay, okay. Let's get this over with."

He opened the door, stepping into the hall. Cate skirted around him, toward the intersection with another hallway of bedrooms. She turned the corner before retreating instantly and shoving Jack backward. She held her finger up to her lips and nodded her head to the other hallway as she signaled to peer around the corner.

They both leaned around it, staying as hidden as possible. A couple disappeared into a bedroom halfway down the hall. Raised voices floated down the hall, though no specific words could be made out.

Within a few moments, the man emerged, storming down the hallway. A moment later, the woman appeared, sniffing, and wiping her nose with a handkerchief before shoving it up her sleeve. She sighed before heading in the opposite direction from their hiding spot with a determined step.

Cate narrowed her eyes, glancing to Jack. He shrugged his shoulders in response. She motioned for them to continue down the hall. Cate noted the bedroom the couple used, planning to check it for any clues when she returned to her time.

They reached the end of the hallway and Cate sped down a back set of stairs. She hurried along the corridor toward the main staircase.

Jack raced behind her. "Cate, where are you going?"

"To identify that couple. They must have been headed down here. Perhaps to the sitting room or the library. Let's see if we can overhear a conversation!"

They spent a few moments skulking around the common areas of the castle. They found nothing. A lone woman read in the library, her feet propped on an ottoman. The slit between the doors allowed no other information about who else may be in the room, if anyone. They spotted the man from the bedroom scene walking outside alone. Another woman sat in the sitting room, working on needlepoint.

"Shoot!" Cate groused, stamping her foot as they hid around a corner near the main staircase.

"Sorry, Cate. No conversations to overhear. Let's head back."

Cate pressed her lips together in a thin line as she nodded. Jack led her down the hallway to the backstairs. They ascended the staircase, turning into the hallway containing the 1925 couple's bedroom, on their way toward Cate's suite. Halfway down the hall, a footman rounded the corner from the hallway containing Cate's bedroom.

Jack and Cate stopped dead as did the other man. For a brief moment, they stared at each other, each party hesitant and questioning. Time seemed to stand still.

Cate's eyes went wide, her jaw hung open in shock. Her pulse quickened and she swallowed hard. The easy trip had just turned dangerous. They'd been spotted. And they were cut off from the return point.

She glanced at Jack as the man called, “Oi! Who are you two?”

Cate grasped Jack’s arm, tugging him in the opposite direction.

“Hey! You two stop right there!”

Cate raced around the corner, Jack in tow. She ran full speed, veering around another corner.

“Quick!” she shouted. “To the back hallway!”

They ran headlong down the next hall, approaching the windowed corridor overlooking the back gardens. Cate skidded to a halt, out of breath and puffing with effort.

She grabbed Jack’s hand, placing the time piece in his palm. After placing her thumb on his thumb, she wrapped her hand around his. She forced his thumb to rub the face. “Come on, come on!” she implored as the second hand speeded up.

They both glanced up as the footman rounded the corner. Cate’s eyes widened and her heart thudded against her ribs. Her knees wobbled underneath her as she wondered if they would escape.

CHAPTER 10



Cate gasped as the footman narrowed his eyes at them. He stalked forward, his sights set on them. “There you...”

Within seconds, he disappeared before their very eyes as they slipped back to the present time.

“Oh!” Jack gasped, grabbing his chest as he collapsed against the windowsill.

Cate breathed a sigh of relief, propping herself against the neighboring windowsill. “That was close.”

Jack issued her a troubled glance. “*That’s* what you call close? That man almost caught us! We disappeared right in front of that man’s eyes! Thank goodness you remembered this hallway is a universal return point.”

Cate nodded as she caught her breath. “Yeah, or we’d be toast!”

“We already are, aren’t we?”

“What do you mean?” Cate inquired.

“That footman got a good look at us. He’ll recognize us if we go back.”

Cate shook her head. “Only if we go back this month. If we travel in January, he wouldn’t have seen us yet. The year resets. Since he saw us in December of 1925, and we’d be traveling back to January of 1925, he hasn’t seen us yet. We’re in the clear to investigate after the new year.”

Jack tapped his hands against the stone sill as he needed. “Oh, right. I never keep that straight.”

“Good thing I do,” Cate said with a grin.

“Oh, yeah,” Jack said, his voice still shaky. “Good thing. Now we’re clear to take our life in our hands again.”

“Next time we won’t skulk around. We’ll just sneak from the house and ‘visit’ with the family!”

Jack pushed himself up to standing, running a shaky hand through his hair. “Oh, is that all?”

“Very funny.”

“So, we’re agreed no more trips to the past until after the new year at least?”

Cate nodded with pursed lips. “Agreed. We can’t chance getting caught again and we can’t introduce ourselves to anyone. We’re chained to the present until after the new year.”

“I prefer to call it safe until after the new year,” Jack countered.

“Well, on the bright side, it gives me over a week to plan our next trip! Now,” Cate said, straightening from her lean against the wall, “time to change!”

“First suggestion I’ve agreed with in this whole situation!”

Cate eyed him as he chewed his lower lip. “You okay? Need a hand?”

Jack heaved a deep breath and wiped a bead of sweat from his brow. “My heart is just settling to normal rhythm. One day you’ll be the death of me, Lady Cate.”

“I certainly hope not!” Cate said with a giggle.

They threaded their way through the back hallways, avoiding her company and returning to their respective bedrooms to change. As Cate removed her 1920s frock, she reflected on their journey. Who was the couple they spotted in the hall? Was it her ancestors, Lucas and Amelia? Their presence on the estate in late 1925 would suggest they had been invited back the following holiday season. Which led Cate to surmise there hadn’t been a falling out. Or had that been when Rory discovered they were the jewel thieves and refused to speak of the incident further? Too many questions stirred in her mind. Those questions piled on top of the close call would likely make for a sleepless night later.

She considered the chance meeting. Jack and she had been in the wrong place at the wrong time, stumbling upon the surprised footman. Her palms dampened with sweat as she recalled their race through the hallways to escape since the lone footman barred their pathway to the rip point.

A long sigh escaped her as she folded the dress and set it aside in her bedroom. Their first visit to 1925 was a bust. They gained no information. They couldn't visit again until after the new year. Cate sank to her bed, perturbed by the situation.

After a moment, she rose, unable to solve anything and unwilling to sit still and fret. Instead, she decided to visit the room they had spotted the couple in after lunch. If she was lucky, perhaps she would find a clue to their identity. If she was even luckier, perhaps she'd find the missing jewelry. Cate chuckled to herself as she rounded up the dogs for a pre-lunch walk. She wasn't *that* lucky. Then again, she had inherited a castle...

* * *

After lunch, Cate enjoyed a long walk with Gayle and Mr. Smythe around the property. They parted ways for an afternoon respite. Cate seized the opportunity to search the bedroom she flagged during their visit to the past.

At first glance, the bedroom didn't appear to hold any secrets. Cate spent her time poking around any hidden areas she found. She peered under the bed, shining her cell phone's flashlight into every nook and cranny. She searched through drawers, most of which were empty. She slipped her hand between the mattress and box springs, feeling around blindly for any scrap of evidence. She found nothing.

Cate sat back on her haunches, sighing. She glanced around the room again. Undeterred, she made another search, this time peering behind furniture, checking underneath drawers, pressing decorative features on the walls and anything else to find a secret compartment or hidden message.

She finished, hands on her hips, glaring at the room with narrowed eyes. It told her nothing. She hadn't expected to find much, but she was still disappointed. She trudged back to her bedroom to freshen up before dinner, frustrated.

* * *

Cate gasped, shooting up to sitting as she caught her breath. Her heart raced and sweat beaded across her forehead. Another nightmare, she recalled. A shaky hand reached for the clock, checking the time. It was two in the

morning. Cate collapsed back into her pillows. She closed her eyes, but after a moment, they snapped open again. She couldn't sleep yet, not with the memory of the nightmare running through her mind.

She recalled the details, allowing her mind to process it in an attempt to calm herself. In the dream, Cate entered the library, intent on doing work. She carried dozens of folders in her arms, brimming with papers. She struggled through the door. Riley and Bailey greeted her on the other side. As she entered, the two dogs burst into a barking fit. Riley's shrill howl mixed with Bailey's raucous baying. The sound startled Cate and she lost her grip on her research materials. The folders fell to the floor, their contents dumping in a chaotic array in front of her.

"Shoot!" she mumbled, stooping to collect the papers. She glanced toward the dogs as they continued their ear-piercing ballad. As she raised her eyes to them, her jaw dropped open. The source of their panic obvious, she sprang to standing, her eyes unwavering from their target. A gaping hole stared back at her where a bookcase had been. She swallowed hard, digging deep to find the courage to approach the dogs and shoo them away from it. As she stepped toward them, a gust of wind blew through the room, rustling the spilled papers. The air smelled of musty dampness. She continued a few more steps, now fighting the growing windstorm. The contents of the dumped folders swirled around the room in a dizzying eddy. She held her arms in front of her face, shielding it from the flying papers that threatened to slice her cheeks with their razor-sharp edges.

The sweeping wind reduced Cate's eyes to slits. An odd sound met her ears, causing her to open her eyes wider and lower her arms. She stared into the black abyss yawning in front of her, straining to make out any sound. Then it hit her like a wall of water. An unearthly disembodied voice warned her to beware. She clapped her hands over her ears, squeezing her eyes tight as she doubled over. Her heart pounded, her pulse raced, and she held her breath. Then she awoke.

Cate shook her head at the dream's memory. She concluded she was nervous about what the exterminator would find. She rolled over, staring at the moonless sky. Even with the stars, the sky seemed as black as the gaping void in her dream. She shivered, reminded of the phantom voice emanating from the hole. She was glad the exterminator was coming today. Perhaps then she could put one mystery to rest.

* * *

Cate paced the floor of the library, waiting for the exterminator to arrive.

“You’re going to wear a hole in the floor, Cate,” Jack warned.

“I can’t help it. I had another dream about that bookcase. I can’t wait to get these results!”

After the exterminator arrived, Cate continued her nervous traipsing about the room, anxious to hear the man’s report. After two hours of poking around the library and other various locations in the castle, the man, whose uniform name tag read Duncan, noted a few things on his clipboard, then glanced to Jack and Cate.

“Well, what’s the verdict?” Jack questioned.

“Everything appears in order. No signs of infestation, droppings or anything of the sort,” Duncan answered, his Scottish accent thick.

“Really? Nothing?”

“Don’t look a gift horse in the mouth, Lady Cate. I, for one, am glad we don’t have mice or bugs.”

Duncan put his hands in the pockets of his gray overalls. “It appears you don’t. I’ve no idea what’s intriguing the little rascals. I’ve found nothing. Which is excellent given the size and age of the castle. I placed a few traps around, just in case. I can return on Friday to check on them. If there’s nothing in them, I’d say you’re all clear.”

“Well, I suppose it is good news,” Cate admitted with a sigh.

“Yes, it is,” Jack agreed. “Friday is fine.” He reached out to shake the man’s hand. “You can leave your bill with me, and I’ll show you out when you’re ready.”

Duncan retrieved his bag, stowing his clipboard inside after tearing off the top sheet and handing it to Jack. He slung it over his shoulder and reached for Cate’s hand. “Lady Cate, enjoy the rest of your day.”

“Thank you,” Cate answered as she shook his hand.

Duncan turned to Jack and said, “Lead the way, Jackie.”

Cate chuckled at Jack’s nickname, one used by his grandfather and evidently his former high school classmates.

Jack appeared a few moments later, stuffing the paperwork into his estate folder. “Well, barring any finds in the trap, we don’t have to worry about any creepy crawlies in the castle.”

Cate nodded in agreement. “Thank goodness! That’s not a subject I’d like to discuss just before lunch!”

“Me too! I’d hate to have my lunch ruined. I’m starving!”

* * *

After lunch, drizzly rain kept everyone indoors. Mr. Smythe had brought two jigsaw puzzles to pass his holiday. “A lovely puzzle, wouldn’t you agree?” he asked Cate as she admired the picture on the box. “Reminds me of a winter in Dunhaven in olden times with the horse-drawn sleigh and the snow-covered streets!”

“A little too many snow-covered everythings,” Gayle quipped, not as pleased with the one-thousand-piece puzzle as Mr. Smythe.

Cate imagined Mr. Smythe’s assessment was correct, figuring the town looked similar to this in bygone eras. She glanced outside the window. Cold rain drizzled from a gray sky, washing away the snow. Cate lamented the loss of the white powder, but a Christmas Day storm promised a white Christmas again by mid-morning.

“Whew,” Gayle sighed, hands on her hips. “Cate, I dare say we need you to more than dabble if we plan to finish this puzzle before we depart!”

Cate laughed, staring at the partially built puzzle, consisting of an outer ring of edge pieces and a blank center. Gayle attempted to build the horses, sleigh and its passengers but didn’t have much luck.

“Mmm, yes, this is thoroughly challenging,” Mr. Smythe agreed. “But we’re up to the challenge! If we begin with the snowy pieces...”

“Begin with the snowy pieces?” Gayle cried. “Why that’s *all* the pieces!”

Cate snapped her book shut and inched closer to the table. “Okay, I’ll play.” She began on an unoccupied corner, starting with the snow-covered ground.

Hours later, with cricks in their necks, they left the puzzle in favor of dinner. It remained half finished, but they had made significant progress on the snow-covered ground, much to Mr. Smythe’s delight.

After their evening meal, which they shared as a group with staff and guests alike, they gathered again in the sitting room, lit only by the roaring fire and lights from the Christmas tree. They enjoyed each other’s company,

swapping stories of Christmas' past before bed. The easy evening relaxed Cate, allowing her to fall into a tranquil sleep.

Christmas morning brought snow from the day's first light until mid-morning. After playing in the white powder, Cate settled Riley and Bailey near a warm fire in the sitting room. The household met to exchange gifts over a light meal.

Out of everyone, Riley and Bailey received the most.

"We may need to put another room on the castle for all these toys," Cate joked, eyeing the spread under the tree after the gifts were unwrapped.

"Those two cuties are too fun to buy for," Molly commented.

"I agree," Gayle chimed in. "And I deleted a few items from my cart before I purchased, I'll have you know."

"I preferred edible presents," Mr. Smythe responded, handing each dog a treat. "You only need to store those until they are eaten."

Cate offered a wry smile at Mr. Smythe's practicality as she sipped her hot chocolate.

"Aye, they'll be out of those in no time," Mrs. Fraser confirmed. "Those two rascals are always begging for a treat."

"Reminds me of someone," Stanley, who had also joined them for Christmas, joked as Jack snagged another cookie from the cookie tray.

"Those laddies take after the perfect specimen," Jack retorted. "And why pick on just me. Lady Cate's been sneaking cookies all day!"

"Lady Cate is allowed because she is the lady of the house," Mrs. Fraser answered.

"Hey!" Cate exclaimed. "Stop counting my cookies!"

Molly grabbed another cookie from the tray and refilled her hot chocolate. "Yikes, I hope you haven't been counting mine."

Gayle agreed, nodding her head.

"Okay, okay," Jack said, holding his hands up in defeat. "Stop picking on me, ladies, I haven't been counting anyone's cookies!"

"You need to keep a better eye on him, Stan," Mr. Fraser suggested with a chuckle. "Jackie's going to get himself in trouble one of these days with those girls."

"Don't worry." Mrs. Fraser patted Stanley's hand. "I've got my eye on him. The moment he steps out of line..."

"Please, don't continue," Jack answered. "I've learned my lesson. And weren't we talking about the laddies and their love for treats?"

Jack poured a few more from the bag, handing them out to Riley and Bailey.

“Nice dodge,” Cate responded.

“How about a few Christmas carols?” Mr. Smythe suggested. He seated himself at the piano to accompany the singing. The group passed the rest of the afternoon with hot chocolate, cookies, and Christmas carols.

Dinner brought a fantastic feast, courtesy of the catering company Mrs. Fraser contracted. The amount and variety of food left everyone full and sluggish. They gathered again around the Christmas tree in the sitting room for a lazy evening.

Cate climbed into bed, satisfied with her first Christmas in the castle. The gifts she received brought a smile to her face, each for its own unique reason. However, Cate felt as though she needed no gifts this Christmas. Her new home and family were gift enough.

The next day, Cate joined her guests and staff for a day of post-Christmas shopping in town. It allowed her staff an additional day of rest since the group dined in town for both lunch and dinner after enjoying a quiet morning on the estate. They enjoyed the town’s picturesque, charming nature and the post-Christmas sale prices. Molly joked she may need to request a raise after her purchases, many of which were gifts she planned to send home. A nice reminder to her sister of her new life, she stated.

They returned to the castle in the early evening. Cate dumped her packages in her sitting room and retrieved the dogs for an evening walk. She contemplated her upcoming day. A meeting with Mrs. Campbell topped her to-do list. Preparations for the upcoming VIP New Year’s Eve event must begin after clearing away the Snow Ball set up and decorations.

The past few days had been idyllic, a wonderful relaxation after the bustle of the party. Ready to take on the next event, she climbed into bed for a solid night’s sleep before her planning and work meeting tomorrow.

* * *

Cate sat at the library desk. A blank cursor stared back at her. The penning of her chapter on Douglas MacKenzie, the castle’s first proprietor, stalled. She pawed through her notes, searching for information to add to the chapter. As she searched, the words blurred on the page. She blinked a few

times, trying to clear her tired eyes. She stared at her notes, finding them incomprehensible. Letters jumbled together into meaningless nonsense.

She shook her head, shutting her eyes. When she opened them, the words on the page appeared to be moving. Disgusted, she shoved the papers away from her, realizing the movement wasn't words but bugs. The insects scattered in all directions, hiding from the light in any dark corner they found on the desk.

Cate pushed back from the desk, standing and retreating a few steps away. While she contemplated what to do, a breeze rustled her hair. She snapped her head in the wind's direction, surprised to find an open black hole in place of one of the bookshelves in the room. Her pulse quickened as she stared at the hole. Despite her better judgement, she approached the opening, trying to make out anything within. She spotted nothing except blackness.

She stood at the edge of the opening. Cool air drifted from the space hidden by the bookcase. She peered into the darkness. A musty smell filled the air inside.

"Hello?" she called.

A roaring sound barreled toward her. It filled the air around her, sounding like a train barreling ahead of rushing waters. She retreated a step as a new sound filled the air. Light and fluttering, she barely detected it after the barrage of noise moments earlier.

She shrieked and held her arms to cover her face as papers flew out of the space like bats from a cave at dusk. The black hole continued to spit papers into the library at a terrifying rate until they obliterated the room's floor.

She swallowed hard as the last few pages drifted through the air before settling in a lazy dance to the floor below. One paper wafted near her as it sailed through the air, landing at her feet. Black lettering, bold and thick, appeared on the upside-down page. She reached for it, turning it over to read it.

As she turned the page, the black letters turned scarlet red and dripped from the paper. In horror, Cate threw it down, realizing blood formed the letters. A chill shuddered through her body as the image of the single, blood-red word burned in her mind: BEWARE.

CHAPTER 11



Cate clutched her pillow, moaning in her sleep as she writhed in bed. She bolted upright, holding back a scream. Her eyes darted around the room as panic filled her. She trembled all over, clutching at the bedsheets.

She spotted familiar things: her wardrobe, a chest of drawers, two sleeping pups in their beds, a moonless sky beyond a draped window. As her heart rate slowed, Cate caught her breath and sighed, running her fingers through her hair. She glanced at the clock. Blue digits glowed 1 a.m.

She collapsed back onto the pillow behind her. Another nightmare. This one more terrifying than the last. Cate's tired mind attempted to rationalize her dream, determining the bugs were a remnant from the exterminator's visit. The indiscernible words were a metaphor for her stalled research while she entertained guests. After a while, she gave up, deciding not to pursue the impossible task of rationalizing what her subconscious mind cobbled together.

Instead, she tossed and turned for another hour, still too unsettled to fall asleep. She chided herself for her foolish behavior, but even still, she found herself unable to relax. She climbed from her bed, pacing the length of her sitting room. After several laps, she wandered from her room into the hall. Without realizing, she wound her way through the halls to the library. She hesitated for a moment, hovering at the room's entrance. Still unsure, she ventured one step into the room, then a second. On her third step, a random

groan emanated from the centuries-old castle, sending her scrambling out of the room and up the staircase.

As Cate clung to the banister as she caught her breath, her mind scolded her childish behavior. She felt like a youngster who, afraid of what may lurk in the darkness, raced up the basement stairs before anything captured them. Still, nothing compelled her to return to the lower level to explore the library.

Instead, she ambled down the hallway toward her bedroom. As she rounded a corner, she bumped into a dark figure. She bit back a scream, stumbling back several steps as she swatted at the dark figure looming in front of her.

“Lady Cate?” Jack whispered. “Cate! It’s me!”

“Jack?”

“Aye,” Jack replied, his face lighting up as his cell phone’s light lit the dim hall.

Cate placed her hand on her heart, breathing a sigh of relief. “Oh, thank goodness.”

“Who did you imagine it was?”

“Oh, I don’t know,” Cate answered, fluttering her hand in the air to dismiss her foolishness. “A ghost?”

Jack screwed up his face. “A ghost? Is that what has you roaming the halls in the wee hours of the morning, lassie? Searching for ghosts?”

“I’m ashamed to admit it but, sort of.” The dim light hid the rising red color on her cheeks. “What are you doing roaming the halls in the wee hours of the night?”

“Investigating a noise. Must have been you. Or perhaps that strange man with the cobwebs on his clothes and menacing red eyes I passed on my way here.” He glanced over his shoulder with a shudder.

“Very funny, Jack,” Cate replied, crossing her arms and shaking her head.

Jack grinned at her, his smile appearing more smirky in the cell phone’s dim light. “Now, what’s all this about searching for ghosts?”

Cate rolled her eyes, mostly at her own behavior. “I had a nightmare. I feel foolish now, but I got up to search around for anything unusual.”

“Unusual? Why don’t we talk about it over a warm cuppa to settle your nerves?”

Cate hesitated.

“I know where Mrs. Fraser hides the cookies,” he said, sweetening the deal.

“Sold,” Cate replied.

They made their way to the kitchen where Jack set about making two cups of tea. He set a steaming teacup in front of Cate and an open tin of Mrs. Fraser’s best shortbreads.

“Now that I’ve plied you with tea and cookies, will you tell me what odd thing you were searching for at 2 a.m.?”

Cate swallowed a chunk of her cookie. “I told you. I had a bad dream. I couldn’t sleep after it, so I went to the library - that’s where my dream took place - to figure out what caused the nightmare. Stupid, really.” She tapped her fingertips on her cup as she rolled her eyes at her own behavior.

“What was your dream about?” Jack inquired, biting into a cookie as he leaned across the kitchen’s island toward Cate.

Cate sipped her tea before launching into her tale. “I was in the library trying to work on my research. I stared at my papers, but nothing made any sense. It was like I couldn’t read any of my notes. I tried to clear my eyes, but when I glanced at the papers again, bugs covered them. I backed away from the desk, trying to decide what to do when I noticed a gaping hole where one of the bookcases used to be.”

“Gaping hole? Where *the* bookcase is? The one the dogs are so interested in, you mean?”

Cate nodded. “Yes, *the* bookcase. Only the bookshelf wasn’t there anymore, instead it was just a big black hole. For some dumb reason, I approached it and yelled down the hole and then there was a loud noise and papers flew out of it. They were everywhere, flying around the room like crazy! One of them landed near my feet and when I picked it up it said ‘beware’ in blood.”

“‘Beware’ in blood, huh?”

Cate nodded again as she munched on another cookie. “Yep.”

Jack nodded his head, his lips tightening to a line. “Well, this is an easy one to solve, Lady Cate. I’ve already pinpointed the meaning of your dream.”

“You have?” Cate inquired, her eyes growing wide as she fidgeted on the stool.

“Mmm-hmm,” Jack murmured, bobbing his head up and down.

“What is it? What does it mean?”

“It means you, my dear Lady Cate, have been watching too many movies about ghosts.”

“Ah!” Cate scoffed. “That’s not funny! And I haven’t been watching any ghost movies for the record.”

Jack chuckled at her reaction. “Oh, come on, Lady Cate, it’s quite funny. But on a serious note, I don’t imagine it’s anything to worry about. Your mind is likely processing the events of the past few days. The dogs’ reaction to that bookcase, the exterminator, your inability to work on your research with all the excitement in the castle. It makes sense, right? Getting nowhere on your work, bugs, the bookcase.”

“What about the paper that says ‘beware’ in blood?”

Jack shrugged. “Perhaps beware of letting the party czar talk you into more parties.” He grinned, a twinkle in his eye.

Cate stared into her teacup, tracing the rim with her finger.

“Aw, Lady Cate, I was only teasing you,” he continued, taking her hand in his.

Cate offered a weak smile. “Yes, I realize that, but I’m not convinced it’s as simple as you’re making it.”

“Listen, dreams rarely have any real meaning. Only to those strange folks on TV who want to take your money for them to tell you some mumbo jumbo about how it means your life will change or you’ll come into money.”

“This is the third dream I’ve had about that bookcase, though.”

Jack bit into a shortbread. “Have all of them been the same?”

“Not identical. But they all have had a black hole where the bookcase is, and two of them have warned me to beware.”

Jack pondered it for a moment as he chewed his cookie. “I still don’t imagine it’s anything to worry about. You’ve been anxious about the bookcase since the dogs reacted to it. The dreams are your subconscious trying to parse through your apprehension.”

Cate sighed, still far from accepting Jack’s simple solution. However, the tea, cookies and conversation alleviated her nerves.

She stretched and yawned. “Maybe you’re right.”

“Of course, I am!” Jack exclaimed. “I’m always right!”

Cate flashed him an amused smile. “Even if you’re not, I feel much better. I’m ready for bed!”

She yawned again, shuffling to the sink with their teacups. “Better wash these first before Mrs. Fraser finds them in her sink and we get in trouble for messing up her pristine kitchen!”

“You’re right. You wash, I’ll dry.” He pushed the cookie tin back into its hiding spot high on a shelf behind a basket, then grabbed a tea towel to dry the cups and saucers before putting them away. “There, no evidence, not even a crumb.”

Cate nodded in approval. “We’d make great burglars. Not a trace of us!”

Jack walked Cate to her suite. “Good night, m’lady,” he said with an extravagant bow.

“Good night, Jack. And thanks,” she replied, smiling at him. She disappeared into her sitting room, crossing it, and climbing into bed. She pushed the replay of her dreams and their conversation regarding them from her mind, determined to sleep.

* * *

Still groggy, Cate dragged herself from her bed the next morning. While she’d slept after her tête-à-tête with Jack, the hours of interrupted sleep left her drained. She groaned as she slogged into the bathroom, showering on autopilot. The steamy shower helped her to wake up. She toweled off, applied her makeup, pulled on her clothes, and greeted her dogs, ready to take them for a morning walk prior to breakfast.

After breakfast, Mr. Smythe suggested they move the puzzle table to the library so he and Gayle could continue work on the puzzle while Cate used the sitting room for a pre-party meeting with Mrs. Campbell. Gayle suggested settling Riley and Bailey with them, too. If they were lucky, Mr. Smythe mentioned, they would finish the puzzle today and could try for a second one-thousand-piece puzzle depicting fireworks over the London Eye on New Year’s Eve. Gayle groaned at the challenge, but Mr. Smythe seemed thrilled by the prospect. Cate left them to their puzzle-building, returning to the foyer to await Mrs. Campbell.

At 9:15 a.m., Mrs. Campbell’s car blazed a path down the drive. Cate, prepared for the fifteen-minute early arrival, met Isla at the door.

“Oh, Lady Cate! I am still buzzing with excitement from the Snow Ball. I’ve received nothing but compliments!”

“As well you should, Mrs. Campbell. You did a fabulous job with the planning!” Cate said with a smile as she ushered the woman into the sitting room.

“Thank you! Even the snow cooperated, and we didn’t need the snow machine. I am so glad that wasn’t an issue!”

“As am I,” Cate admitted.

“Now,” Mrs. Campbell said, plopping on the loveseat, dropping her folders on the cushion next to her, “this upcoming event is *quite* different. We must be prepared for the dissimilarity, so the event comes off without a hitch. There is, again, no margin for error. Some of the country’s most affluent, upscale figures will be in attendance.”

Cate nodded as she scanned the latest copy of the guest list. “You have outdone yourself with the guest list.”

Mrs. Campbell pinched her face into a curt smile. “Speaking of the guest list, are you certain your staff wants to attend?”

“Yes, they are looking forward to it!” Cate assured her.

“Of course,” she responded, sounding dejected by the answer. “I only wanted to be sure they weren’t uncomfortable. The guest list can be overwhelming!”

“I’m certain they will handle it with ease and grace.”

Mrs. Campbell offered another pithy glance to Cate. “If you’re sure. Let’s move on to discuss final menus and flow of the party. We begin with a seated dinner in the dining room.” Mrs. Campbell went over the details of the party, having it planned minute by minute as far as Cate could tell. Cate was surprised she hadn’t suggested talking points at each juncture for Cate.

Mrs. Campbell shared the seating chart, pointing out the intricate details of how she had positioned the guests. Mrs. Campbell, adept in the intricacies of how dinner parties at estates of this position must be conducted, had expertly placed individuals according to their station and to maximize conversation flow. Despite her at-times boorish nature, it pleased Cate to have someone so knowledgeable leading the planning efforts.

The party was an ambitious undertaking, however, for the guest list, a party of this degree would be expected. Cate guessed most of the guests turned down other offers to attend this party, probably out of curiosity since it had been years since the castle entertained VIP guests.

After reviewing the details, Cate and Mrs. Campbell met Jack in the ballroom to go over changes to the decor. Thankfully, there were few,

however the trio removed the linens from the Christmas party and placed them in Mrs. Campbell's trunk. The plaid linens, while perfect for the Snow Ball, were "unsuitable" for the New Year's Eve party. They would be switched for gold and silver, which would arrive the day prior to the party.

They made a few adjustments to the placement of the tables and chairs before Mrs. Campbell was satisfied. After perusing the dining room and commenting on the decor for the event, Mrs. Campbell decided they had covered everything. She bid Cate farewell just prior to lunch, reminding her of their next scheduled working meeting on Monday.

Cate pushed through the doors to the library, exhausted by her lack of sleep and morning meeting. Gayle waved Cate over to show her the progress on the puzzle. Mr. Smythe surmised they would finish this afternoon.

Cate greeted the two dogs lounging near the fireplace. After rousing them from their slumber, she suggested a walk before lunch for them. Riley leapt to his feet, excited to go.

"Oh, that reminds me, Cate," Gayle mentioned, glancing up from the puzzle. "Both pups were intrigued with that bookcase. They stared at it for a good part of the morning, smelling and pawing at it." Cate followed the line of Gayle's finger. She pointed to the bookcase that filled Cate's nightmares.

Cate did her best to fluff off the comment, shrugging nonchalantly. "Yeah. They seem very interested in that. Enough that Jack called an exterminator. He found nothing. Guess they're seeing things!"

"Guess so!" Gayle chuckled, returning to fitting her piece into the puzzle.

"I'll see you both in the dining room as soon as I take these little rascals for a short walk!"

"Have fun, Riley and Bailey!" Gayle called as they left.

Cate walked the perimeter of the castle with the dogs before lunching with her guests. In the afternoon, they retreated to the library. Mr. Smythe's sole mission centered around the puzzle's completion. He preferred to begin the second puzzle fresh the next morning. Cate chuckled at his work ethic as he pushed Gayle to focus. Cate, flanked by Riley and Bailey, settled into an armchair near the fireplace, laptop in hand.

Cate opened her book document, intent on penning a few words in her latest chapter. Instead, she became distracted by the bookcase across the

room that haunted her dreams. She stared at it with narrowed eyes over the top of the laptop.

The light conversation concerning the puzzle faded into the background as she replayed her dreams in her mind. Her head sank back into the chair behind her as she ruminated. In each dream, a gaping hole replaced the bookshelf. An idea struck her. She snapped the laptop shut, setting it aside, and strode to the bookcase.

Riley and Bailey were quick to follow her, glancing between the object and Cate as though trying to communicate something.

“Everything all right, Cate?” Gayle inquired.

Cate nodded, glancing back at them. “Yes. Just curious to determine what Riley and Bailey find so interesting about this bookshelf. They’ve been at it for two weeks!”

“I’m sure it’s nothing,” Gayle assured her.

“It must have a smell that intrigues them. Perhaps another dog,” Mr. Smythe suggested.

“Yes, it’s probably something simple,” Cate agreed. “But I’m not making much progress on my work, so I figured I’d distract myself.”

“You could finish this puzzle,” Gayle commented.

“And steal the joy of finishing the job away from you? I wouldn’t dream of it!”

“I’d live,” Gayle whispered, shielding her lips from Mr. Smythe with her hand.

“I heard that,” he murmured, his eyes never leaving the puzzle.

Gayle made a face at Cate before letting a giggle slip and turning her attention back to the puzzle. Cate returned her gaze to the bookshelf. She peered at it, studying it from top to bottom. With some hesitance, she approached it closer. She read a few book titles from the shelf as she ran her fingers along the beautifully bound but aging books.

Riley and Bailey stayed behind Cate, settling to the floor, peering at Cate as she studied the contents. She sniffed the air near the shelf, not noticing any scent. Although Riley’s and Bailey’s noses were far more adept at detecting odor than hers. At random, Cate pulled a few books from the shelves, flipping through them before replacing them.

After thirty minutes, she gave up, gleaned no information from her search. She returned to her armchair and forced herself to write a paragraph in her book. After many deletions, rewrites and edits, she was satisfied with

the work and closed her laptop for the day. She opted to take the dogs for another walk after reviewing the progress on the puzzle. By her estimation, Gayle and Mr. Smythe would finish by the time she returned from her walk.

Outside, Cate and the dogs made the trek to the ice-ringed loch. Leafless trees waved in the distance, their bare branches reaching toward the cloudy gray sky. A light drizzle drove them back sooner than she expected. She returned to the library to witness the triumphant finish of the thousand-piece winter scene jigsaw puzzle. Mr. Smythe snapped a picture with his cell phone for posterity prior to dismantling the puzzle to ready the table for tomorrow's venture.

They followed dinner with a nightcap and Cate turned in early, exhausted from her previous sleepless night.

Saturday brought a bright, sunny, cold day to Dunhaven. Cate, wrapped in a warm coat, gloves, scarf and hat, spent a good bit of her morning outside walking with Riley and Bailey, both sporting their tartan coats. Gayle and Mr. Smythe joined her for part of her excursion before returning to the castle to begin their second puzzle.

Cate's mind hovered between her two mysteries as she circled the property. Days away from the new year, the theft crept ever closer. With no clues, she was no closer to solving it than she was when she discovered the mystery. She'd found nothing obvious in the employee records to suggest any staff member was involved. Still, she had some work to do inspecting the records to discover if any interesting anomalies existed. She grimaced, concluding her ancestors remained the prime suspects.

Her mind flipped to the bookshelf in the library. She'd taken a closer glimpse at it yesterday. Nothing stood out. The shelves held a variety of books. Nothing seemed of particular interest to her. She found no evidence of bugs or other creatures that may have stirred the dogs' interest. Were her dreams about the bookcase purely driven by stress? Or were they a warning?

Cate glanced down at the two pups, nosing around a nearby bush. "I don't suppose either of you is willing to discuss your interest in the bookshelf?"

Riley glanced up at her, his head cocked to the side. His eyes twinkled as though he held a secret. "Yes, little Mr. Riley," Cate added, reaching down to scratch his chin. "What has gotten you so interested in that one spot?"

Riley gave Cate's hand an appreciate lick, then returned to sniffing the ground. "I guess neither of you is talking, huh?"

"Talking to ourselves, Lady Cate?" Jack questioned, rounding the corner.

Cate jumped, spinning to face him. "Oh! You startled me!"

"On edge? And now talking to yourself. Tsk tsk, Lady Cate. If you're not careful, you'll be in a looney bin soon."

"I was talking to the dogs."

"Oh, I see. Talking to the dogs, eh? Did they answer?"

Cate offered him an unimpressed stare. "No, they didn't, thank you. They refused to discuss the bookshelf in the library."

"Are you still on about that bookshelf, lassie? The exterminator said it's right as rain. Nothing found in the traps either when he stopped yesterday. We're in the clear."

"In the clear from vermin, yes."

Jack's brows scrunched together, and he glanced sideways at Cate. "What other possibilities were we considering?"

Cate shrugged as she eyed the dogs milling around. "Nothing in particular. But the dogs were at it again yesterday, according to Gayle. *Something* has got them bothered. And then there are my nightmares. Three of them, all similar, all revolving around that bookshelf."

"And likely stemming from your overwrought mind. Between the parties and the guests, your quiet little country life is upside down."

"I enjoy having Gayle and Mr. Smythe here."

"Yes, but as enjoyable as you may find it, it's still quite a change to your normal, quiet routine. That coupled with the dogs' interest and your mind is concocting all sorts of strange manifestations."

"Perhaps. Or perhaps it's a warning."

CHAPTER 12



Jack furrowed his brow and scratched his head. “A warning? Of what?”

Cate shrugged again. “I’m not sure, but this seems more meaningful than just something my excitable mind cooked up. The dogs’ reactions paired with the ‘beware’ messages in my dream can’t be coincidence or conjecture.”

“But beware of what, Cate?” Jack inquired as they returned to the castle, with Riley and Bailey leading the way.

“No idea. But why would my brain add a strange detail like that?”

“Once I dreamt my teeth fell out, but look,” Jack responded, grinning, “they’re still all here! Who knows why our subconscious minds do what they do!”

They arrived at the castle door, pushing through into the warm, aromatic kitchen.

“And what is our subconscious mind doing?” Mrs. Fraser inquired, catching the tail end of Jack’s comment.

“I’m afraid mine is scaring me,” Cate admitted sheepishly. “I’ve had a few nightmares in the last week and can’t seem to decide if they’re just a creation from my stressed mind or a warning.”

“A warning?” Mrs. Fraser questioned, stopping dead and staring at Cate. “Why, Lady Cate, whatever of?”

“Same question I had,” Jack responded. “My conclusion was a warning not to agree to any more parties with the party czar.”

Mrs. Fraser chuckled. "Well, I daresay that's why your mind is frenzied. That woman would drive a saint from heaven to cast off his halo and swear like a devil."

Cate giggled at their mutual dislike of Mrs. Campbell.

Molly nodded at Mrs. Fraser. "I agree. I've only met her a few times, but she puts out an unpleasant vibe."

"She isn't my favorite person either, however, she's a pro at party planning. And I must admit, the parties are a positive thing for the castle in my opinion. This place deserves to be a showpiece, admired far and wide!"

"Aye, I can't argue with your last statement, Lady Cate," Mrs. Fraser agreed. "But your health comes first. If you're fretful because of the parties, we'll have to do something to fix that! Tell you what, I'll make you a special tea after dinner tonight. You'll sleep like a baby."

"I appreciate that, Mrs. Fraser," Cate responded. "But really, I'm fine, don't trouble yourself."

"'Tis no trouble at all! I'll have it ready with the dessert."

"Thank you! Well, I won't say no to a good night's sleep, that's for certain."

"As well you shouldn't," Mrs. Fraser agreed. "Now, off you go to get ready for your lunch. Leave the pups with me, I've got a few bones for them."

Cate nodded, leaving Riley and Bailey to receive their treat from Mrs. Fraser. She ascended the stairs, heading for the library but found it empty. She found Mr. Smythe and Gayle in the sitting room setting out pieces of their latest jigsaw puzzle. They had built the edge, and they worked to group pieces together to fill in the middle.

"Here you are!" Cate greeted them, plopping next to Gayle on the loveseat. "You've made quite a good start."

"Yes!" Mr. Smythe exclaimed. "Building the edges is the first step toward success!"

Cate deemed this the most excited she'd ever seen the man.

"Seems like an appropriate time to break for lunch."

"I agree," Gayle commented. "I am famished."

"I suppose it's a good time. We'll start the fireworks section when we return," Mr. Smythe responded.

They left the puzzle behind, lunching in the dining room before separating, with Cate going to the library to complete some work while

Gayle and Mr. Smythe returned to the sitting room for their afternoon puzzle session. Cate settled into the chair behind the desk. She spread her notes over the desk's surface, opening her laptop in front of her.

She took a deep breath as her document loaded, glancing over her notes. After a moment, she stared at the blinking cursor marking the spot her next character would be placed. An eerie sensation passed over her and she shivered. The scenario too closely resembled the events of her latest nightmare.

She glanced over her shoulder at the bookshelf before spinning back toward her laptop and adjusting herself in the chair. She cleared her throat, placing her hands on the keyboard. After squaring her shoulders and tightening her jaw, she raised her eyebrows and typed the word "The." After a few breaths, she typed "castle." Her creativity ran out after those two words. She sighed, her shoulders drooping.

Her eyes flitted around the room, perusing everything but her work. Her gaze finally settled on the bookshelf. She slammed the laptop shut and stalked across the room, staring at the bookcase.

She scanned the shelves again. The bookcase, built of dark, solid wood, contained decorative accents around the edges. Cate pushed on the bookcase. It didn't budge. Next, she tried pulling on the bookshelf. Again, nothing.

Cate stood back, frowning at the bookshelf. She felt around the edges, pushing and pulling the decorative pieces. No movement, no clicks of secret panels opening, nothing. Cate sighed. "That always works in the movies," Cate bemoaned.

A notion crossed her mind. Perhaps a fake book triggered a secret panel or prompted the bookshelf itself to open.

"Only one way to find out!" she stated aloud.

She began with a middle shelf, expecting the trigger, if it existed, to be there. Starting on the left, Cate pulled each book out, removing it from the shelf and piling them near the armchair. The number of books forced Cate to split the stack into two before she ended up with a wobbly tower of books that threatened to collapse.

With the shelf empty, Cate examined it closely. She ran her hand across every available surface of the shelf and its surrounding area. She brought her eyes level with the shelf, inspecting it for any anomalies. She examined every aspect of the shelf. Nothing stood out to her.

She moved to the shelf below. Book by book, she emptied it, creating another two stacks on the floor. Again, she examined every inch of the shelf, her fingertips probing the entire surface. Nothing generated any reactions.

Cate stood, glancing at the growing mess around her. Before continuing, she put a note on each stack marking the shelf number and side of the shelf where the books originated.

After logging the locations for her current piles, she knelt on the floor, tackling the bottom shelf. One by one, she removed and stacked the books next to her on the floor.

Halfway through, Jack popped his head through the door, knocking. "Lady Cate?" He glanced around the room, not finding her where he expected at the desk.

"Yeah?" Cate answered, placing a note on top of her newest stack.

Jack stepped into the room, his brow furrowing, his face contorting into a questioning expression. "This is a new spin on your research."

"I'm afraid I wasn't getting very far on that. I typed two words and one of them was 'the.'"

"So, you decided to tear apart the bookshelf instead, huh?" Jack inquired, sidling up to her, still staring at the mess spreading out around her.

Cate stood, dusting her hands off. "Pretty much. I tried to open it or determine if there was a secret panel or something, but so far, no luck. Now I'm removing every book in case it triggers a hidden mechanism. Or in case the books are covering a trigger point."

Jack nodded, pulling his mouth into a thin line. "Well, I suppose I'll leave you to it. I just wanted to make sure there wasn't anything else that needed taken care of before the next party."

Cate shook her head. "No. We'll just have the linens to do when they arrive Monday and the balloon drop will need set up the day of the party. But Mrs. Campbell has her own crew of 'experts' setting that up."

"Okay, great." Jack glanced around at the piles of books. "Well, if you need any help here..." His voice trailed off as though unsure he wanted to offer help.

"I'll be okay," Cate replied, stooping to the bottom shelf to continue her work.

Jack knelt down next to her. "Where are you putting this stack?"

Cate smiled, handing a book to him and pointing to her most recent stack. "Put it next to that one."

"Got it."

Together, they created an assembly line to remove the books and shuttle them to a stack. When they cleared the shelf, Cate examined it.

"Anything?" Jack questioned as he marked the stack of books.

"Nope, nothing," Cate responded with a shake of her head.

"Four more shelves to go. Top shelf next or move to the next empty shelf?"

"Let's move to the top. We'll keep those books closer to the shelf to make it easier to remove them."

"Good plan, Lady Cate," Jack replied, pushing one of the library's ladders to the bookcase. "I'll do the climbing and hand the books down to you."

"Okay," Cate agreed. "I hate to send you up the ladder but..."

"But I'm more used to a ladder than you. We can't have Lady Catherine Kensie falling and breaking her leg mere days before the VIP party."

"True," Cate replied, nodding, "Mrs. Campbell would never forgive either of us."

"No, she would not," Jack added, climbing the ladder and pulling the first few books from the shelf. Cate reached high overhead, grasping the books between stretched hands. "Got 'em?"

"Yep," Cate breathed, straining as she juggled them and lowered them to the floor with a wince. "Maybe less next time, though."

"Okay. No problem."

Jack handed the books down two by two, and Cate stacked them as close to the shelf as she could with the other stacks. She marked the two stacks as Jack climbed down from the ladder.

"I figured you would want to scour that shelf yourself for a mechanism."

"You figured right!" Cate answered, mounting the first step of the ladder. She climbed to the top, inspecting the shelf. The smooth wood showed no flaws or imperfections consistent with a hidden mechanism. Still, she ran her fingers over every inch. She probed the sides of the bookcase, the top and any decorative elements at the top.

"Anything?" Jack called up to her.

Cate shook her head. “Nope,” she answered, deflated. “Three more to go!” She climbed down off the ladder, sending Jack back up for the second shelf from the top.

“Looks like there might be some interesting volumes in that stack,” he said, ascending the ladder.

Cate glanced down at the piles. “Hmm. I will check them out as we put them back.”

She accepted the first set of books Jack handed her, beginning a new pile. Cate placed this stack a few steps away as the stacks began to crowd them. She shuttled the books away from the shelf, scurrying back and forth until the shelf was empty.

They switched places, with Jack waiting below as Cate ascended to the newest empty shelf for a careful inspection. Again, she found nothing. Two shelves remained, and Cate’s hopes dwindled with each book they removed. Careful inspection of the last two shelves offered no clues, hidden mechanisms or anything else of interest.

Arms crossed, Cate stared at the empty bookcase with a disheartened sigh. In one last effort, Cate pushed and pulled the now-empty bookshelf, hoping it may move after being relieved of its load.

“Help me push,” Cate appealed to Jack, grunting as she leaned her full weight into the shelf.

Jack obliged, pushing and pulling the shelf with Cate. They pushed forward, side to side, and pulled back. The shelf didn’t budge.

“I doubt this solid old bugger is going anywhere,” Jack said, giving the bookcase a pat.

Cate sighed again, frowning at the bookshelf. She threw her arms in the air as she shook her head. “Nope, you’re right. I must have been wrong. I was sure we’d find something. Sorry I wasted your time.”

“It wasn’t a waste, Lady Cate. Should we return these to their rightful place?”

Cate checked her timepiece and shook her head. “It’s getting close to dinner. We’ve managed to waste the entire afternoon! I’ll tackle it tomorrow. Thanks for your help!”

“We’ll tackle it tomorrow morning. I helped make this mess, I’ll help you clean it up.”

Cate chuckled as she waved her hand to decline. “More like I forced you to help make the mess. You can have your Sunday off.”

Jack shook his head. “Nay, Lady Cate. I’ll help you. We’ll tackle it tomorrow morning. I’ll still make dinner with my grandfather. This won’t take that long.”

Cate smiled a thank you at him. “Okay, if you’re insisting, I’ll not turn you down twice. Thanks.”

He nodded to her before giving her a deep bow. “Of course, m’lady.”

Cate rolled her eyes as she giggled at his theatrical display. “You’re such a ham. Well, I better run the dogs out before dinner.”

“Okay. Meet you tomorrow morning around nine?”

“That sounds perfect!”

Cate navigated below stairs, finding Mrs. Fraser and Molly abuzz with activity as they made final dinner preparations. Riley and Bailey gnawed on bones near the warm stove.

“You two seem quite content with those bones,” Cate said, ruffling the fur on the tops of the heads.

Mrs. Fraser ladled soup into a tureen. “Aye, perfect angels, they’ve been, Lady Cate.”

“Did you make a lot of progress on your book, Lady Cate?” Molly inquired.

“I made a lot of progress on books, but not mine. Jack and I ended up removing all the books from the bookshelf Riley and Bailey have been so interested in. We found nothing,” Cate continued, shrugging, “but it took the better part of the afternoon.”

“What were you hoping to find?” Molly questioned as she bustled around the kitchen. For less than a week on the job, it appeared as though she’d been working these kitchens for years.

“Nothing in particular, I guess. I’m not sure what I expected. But the dogs are unrelenting with their interest in that shelf. That coupled with a few nightmares I’ve had about it made me curious enough to examine it.”

“Nightmares?” Molly queried further.

“Yes,” Cate responded with a sheepish nod to her head. “I had a few bad dreams about that stupid shelf. So, my overzealous mind concluded the shelf held some secret.”

“It’s not a reach in a big old castle like this. You never know where a secret passage might be hiding!” Molly replied.

Mrs. Fraser considered the statement. “Nothing comes to mind about that library. Course hidden nooks and crannies exist in a few areas, but not

there that I'm aware of."

"Well, we made a thorough test of that hypothesis, and you are correct, Mrs. Fraser. There is nothing there."

"At least now you know and can put that to rest," Mrs. Fraser answered with a nod of her head.

Cate nodded in agreement. "Okay, boys," she said, turning to Riley and Bailey. "How about a walk before dinner?"

* * *

As the sun crested the moors, Cate stretched, working out the kinks in her arms, legs and back. Her sore muscles complained with every movement, but after a few extra moments in bed, her aching muscles obliged her and moved her to her bathroom for a steamy shower. She dressed for the day, ready to clean up the mess she created in the library.

How foolish, she chided herself. Not everything was a mystery for her to solve. Some dreams were just that, dreams. Perhaps Riley and Bailey spotted a shadow on the bookcase and imagined something was there.

She stepped into the chilly morning air with the two pups, bundling deeper into her knee-length coat. Pleased to return to the warmth of the house, she climbed the stairs, arriving in the dining room with Mr. Smythe and Gayle.

Gayle exclaimed over breakfast that she had convinced Mr. Smythe to accompany her into town for a shopping trip. They'd lunch in town but planned to be back for dinner. While Mr. Smythe itched to get back to his jigsaw puzzle, he agreed to the break.

Cate saw them off as she took the dogs for their morning walk around the property. She returned to the castle in time to meet Jack in the library for their morning task.

"Good morning, Sir Riley!" Jack exclaimed as Riley leapt into his arms. Bailey trailed behind him, accepting a chin scratch from Jack. "And good morning to you, too, Mr. Bailey. And a hearty good morning to you, too, Lady Cate."

"Good morning! Ready to help me clean up my folly?"

"I am," he assured her, setting Riley on the floor. "I built a fire for good Sir Riley and Mr. Bailey to curl up by while we work."

“They’ll enjoy that,” Cate replied, as Riley approached the fireplace and curled into a ball near it. “Where shall we start?”

“Top,” Jack suggested. “I’ll climb the ladder while I’m still fresh! Then, when we’re good and tired, we can sit on the floor and work.”

Cate nodded and waded through the stacks of books to the two marked “TOP SHELF.”

“We’ll work right to left.” She fanned through the pages, holding the book open to the floor before handing it off.

“What are you doing, speed reading?”

“No, just checking the books to see if there’s anything interesting stuffed inside,” Cate informed him, thumbing through the next book before handing it up to Jack.

“You’re really intent on finding something, huh?”

Cate shrugged one shoulder, trying the next book. “While we have the books down, it doesn’t hurt to check. I’m no longer convinced anything is here but...”

“But you’re convinced something is here.”

“No. I just remain skeptical that the dogs’ reaction and my dreams are meaningless.”

“Fair enough. We’ll find out soon enough if your hunch is correct.”

Cate continued her cursory search of each book before handing it up to Jack. The careful examination of each book slowed the work, however, she persisted. They finished the first stack. Her fastidious review of each book slowed the process. She glanced up to the half-filled top shelf, realizing this task would take them all morning.

“Sorry,” Cate apologized, her eyes flitting to Jack for a moment as she searched the next book.

“No apology needed,” Jack assured her. “I’ve got all morning.”

“I didn’t intend to take up your entire morning though.”

“I don’t mind, Cate. I’d rather do it now than have an encore.”

She tried to move faster with this stack. However, several small books made the process tedious. They finished the stack, finding nothing. Cate sighed under her breath, her hopes deflating with each book. Jack descended two steps on the ladder, ready to restore the next shelf.

Cate moved to the first stack for this shelf, searching the first book, then handed it to Jack. With nothing found, they wrapped up the second shelf with five more to go.

“One more then I’ll need a breather,” Cate informed Jack.

“Sounds good to me.” He climbed off the ladder, pushing it away, able to reach the remaining shelves from the floor.

With both of them searching through the books, the task went faster. Three shelves in and they had nothing to show for it but sore fingertips and dusty hands.

Cate collapsed into a leather armchair near the fireplace. Riley lifted his head, eyeing her through narrowed eyes. Satisfied everything was well, his head dropped back to the rug below him with a deep sigh.

“We’ll make quick work of those last four shelves,” Jack assured her. “Between the two of us, we’ll tear through those stacks.”

Cate nodded without answering.

“Too tired to answer?”

Cate gave him a weak smile. “No. But with every book that passes, I feel more and more foolish.”

“It wasn’t all for naught, Lady Cate!”

“No?” Cate queried. “How do you figure?”

“It gives me something to tease you about for years to come. That makes it worth it in my book, pun intended!” He issued a devilish grin aimed her way.

Cate offered a wry look in return. “You’re right. That makes it all worth it.”

Cate paused for a few long breaths. “Well, I suppose we should get back to it.”

“Okay,” Jack groaned, pulling himself from the chair.

They approached the next two stacks, sorting through the books, checking them one-by-one, and replacing them on the shelf. They moved on to shelf number five. Four books in, Jack thumbed through a book, shaking it upside down. A yellowed envelope fluttered to the ground from between the pages. Excited, Cate dumped her empty book on the shelf and raced to retrieve it.

“What is it?” Jack inquired. “Note written in blood warning you to beware?”

Cate grabbed it, turning it over in her hand, searching for any markings. “I’m beginning to worry you may quit your job in favor of stand-up comedy.”

She joined Jack with the envelope. “There’s nothing on the envelope. No address or salutation.”

“Anything inside?”

Cate opened the aging envelope. Two handwritten papers had been folded and stuffed inside. She unfolded them. Black cursive handwriting filled the yellowed paper.

Jack peered over Cate’s shoulder as they read the note. She swallowed hard, her eyes widening as she read each line. She shuffled to the next page, scanning the text scrawled on it. When she finished reading, she twisted to face Jack, her mouth hanging open, aghast.

“Cate, don’t jump to any conclusions.”

“Don’t jump to any conclusions? Did you read it?”

“Yes, I read it. And I already realize the scenario your hyperactive mind is creating.”

Cate sank into one of the armchairs, the letter still in her hand. Her other hand propped her chin up as thoughts raced through her mind. Hypotheses were created, accusations were produced, and conclusions were formed in seconds. The warnings made sense. But they hadn’t been calling her to investigate, but rather warning her to stay away. That she wouldn’t like what she found if she kept searching.

CHAPTER 13



Jack tugged the papers from between her fingers, folding them and setting them aside. “Cate,” he said, perching on the edge of the armchair nearest her, “we don’t know what that letter refers to. It could be to anyone about anything. It could mean nothing.”

“And it could mean everything,” Cate countered.

Jack shook his head. “You’re jumping to conclusions. Even if you’re correct, it has nothing to do with you. Let’s put it aside, finish the work here, sleep on it and discuss it tomorrow.”

“But...”

“But nothing. We both read it. We both interpreted it differently. It’s vague. Leave it, let’s discuss it tomorrow.” Jack paused for several breaths. “Plus, there’s only a few more days until we can investigate the theft. Then we’ll figure out if this has any meaning for ourselves.”

Cate brightened at the prospect of time travel. Jack bringing up time travel, anticipating the trip, not complaining or disagreeing marked progress, even if he was only doing it to humor Cate and get her mind off the disturbing note.

Cate nodded her head in agreement, poking a finger at him. “Okay. But only because you promise we can investigate at the first opportunity

“I promise!” Jack answered, right hand on his heart, left raised in the air. “Now let’s get at these shelves. I’ve got a dinner date!”

“I do *not* want to keep you from your date!”

“No,” Jack replied, standing and pulling Cate to her feet. “You’ll never hear the end of it from Pap if you do.”

They left the note on the coffee table as they returned to their work. Despite the findings already made, they continued to check each book for anything it may contain. Book by book, shelf by shelf, they finished the task.

As Cate placed the last book on the shelf, Jack breathed a sigh of relief, wiping at his brow. Riley, who had joined them as they knelt on the floor working on the bottom shelf, leapt to his feet. Cate assumed he, too, was excited to be finished with the task.

Instead, the little dog narrowed his dark, almond-shaped eyes, glaring at the bookcase. After a moment, he backed up two steps and emitted a long, high-pitched howl.

His boisterous bark awakened a sleeping Bailey who climbed to his feet, racing to Riley’s side. He glanced at the bookcase as Riley continued to back away, still barking. Bailey joined in the fray, adding a raucous yipping to Riley’s yapping.

She shushed them a few more times before they quieted, shaking her head at them.

Riley, still vigilant, sat on his haunches, ready to leap into action at the first sign of distress or danger. Bailey stood at his side. He stared at the bookcase, his mouth opening and closing, ready to bark at a moment’s notice.

“Perhaps it’s the books they hate,” Jack mentioned.

Cate twisted back to the bookshelf, eyeing it. After a moment, she shrugged her shoulders. “I don’t—” She stopped short, her brows knit together in confusion. She put her hand out in front of her, moving it around.

“What is it, Cate?” Jack asked, his eyes toggling between her and the bookcase.

“Air.”

“Air?” Jack questioned.

“Yes, here. Put your hand here.” She waved her hand to pinpoint where he should place his. “Do you feel it?”

After a moment, Jack shook his head. “No, I...” He paused. “Wait, yes! A draft, slight but there.”

He glanced around the room. All the windows were closed and many of the curtains drawn to help keep the cold at bay. None of the curtains rustled, signifying no air leaking from the windows.

Cate climbed to her feet. She raced to the desk drawer, pulling it open. She retrieved a box of matches kept there.

“Good idea, Lady Cate,” Jack said, as she knelt next to him.

She struck one of the matches, holding it in front of her. It flickered, the flame blowing away from the bookshelf. Cate waved the flame out and crawled closer. She peered at the edges of the shelf, running her fingers around its frame.

“There’s definitely air coming from this bookcase. The question is: why? What’s behind it?”

“Let me have a look,” Jack said.

Cate sat back on her haunches, allowing him to access the bookcase.

Jack pawed at the edges of the shelf. He shook his head. “You’re right, there’s air coming from here.”

“That’s what’s driving the dogs crazy. There must be some scent on it. Outside, perhaps?”

“How is the outside air getting here? This isn’t an outside wall,” Jack responded, still staring at the shelf.

“Leaky chimney? The chimney for this room doesn’t abut this bookcase. Is there another chimney from another room?”

Jack shook his head. “Not that I’m aware of. There isn’t a chimney anywhere near this bookcase.”

Cate tightened her lips in speculation. “Perhaps there’s something there we don’t realize. Maybe an old chimney. Perhaps there were renovations that left behind remnants of a previous iteration of construction.”

“As far as I recall, the library hasn’t changed. In fact, it appeared almost identical when we were here in 1856.”

“Yes, I agree. If there were changes, they weren’t perceptible. Are there plans for the castle we could consult?”

Jack nodded. “Yeah, there are. I’ll dig them out as soon as I get back from dinner with Pap and we can check them out tomorrow.”

“Okay,” Cate agreed as she checked her timepiece. “Oh, speaking of, you better get going or you’ll be late!”

“Mm, yeah,” Jack responded, checking his wristwatch. “Damn, I’d prefer to solve this now!”

Cate grinned at him. “Enjoying sleuthing on the mysterious case of the leaky bookshelf, are you?”

“No. But I’m concerned about what air is leaking from where. In an old place like this, we don’t want any minor problems to turn into major ones that may become expensive to fix.”

“All business as always, huh? And here I assumed you were ready to crack a case and find a secret passage lurking behind here, brimming with jewels and treasure.”

“I doubt that, Lady Cate. Likely just some strange issue that will need fixing before we’ve got a freezing cold library, or worse, a flooded one.” Jack climbed to his feet and Cate stood.

“We’ll look at it first thing in the morning,” he promised.

“Okay.”

“Until then,” Jack warned. “Don’t let your imagination run wild, okay? No pirate treasure or ghost’s gold.”

“You’re no fun!” Cate cried jokingly.

“No, I’m not. And I like me just fine that way.” He dusted his hands and gave a parting ruffle to each dog’s fur. As he spun to leave the room, he spotted the letter on the table. He snatched it on his way toward the door.

“Hey! Where are you going with that letter?”

“Oh, you saw that, huh?” Jack inquired, spinning to face Cate, a sheepish grin on his face.

“I did,” she replied, one eyebrow raised at him.

“Figured I’d take it with me so you couldn’t read it over and over and obsess over it.”

Cate stalked to him, pulling the letter from his hands. “I won’t obsess. But I will read it again. A few times. And take some notes. Jot down some ideas.”

“Obsess over what it means,” Jack concluded for her.

“I won’t obsess, I promise. I’m not even going to read it again until later. I’m planning to spend the afternoon puzzle building with Mr. Smythe. I figured I’d give Gayle a break, take her place.”

“Ah, that sounds like a perfect way to spend the afternoon. Let your brain solve a safe, innocent, straightforward puzzle.”

“Exactly.” She folded the letter, placing it back in its envelope and setting it on the desk. “Say hello to your grandfather for me.”

“Will do, Lady Cate. See you tomorrow morning.” Jack stepped to the door. As he bowed extravagantly, he said, “M’lady.”

* * *

Cate spent the afternoon bent over the Fireworks over London jigsaw puzzle. Gayle nearly tripped herself fleeing from the puzzle table and grabbing a book to spend the afternoon reading.

As Cate worked to build the London Eye with a bursting red firework over top, her mind wandered to the letter retrieved from the mysterious leaky bookshelf. She’d promised not to dwell on it, but her mind could not let it rest. Still, she pressed on, helping Mr. Smythe complete a good amount of the puzzle before dinner.

In his estimation, they would finish the puzzle tomorrow just in time for the New Year, the party and their imminent departure. It was obvious he couldn’t be more pleased with himself.

Cate considered it the first time in seven months of knowing William Smythe that she’d ever seen him enjoy himself outside of work. Wonders never cease, she reflected.

After dinner, Cate curled up with a book in her sitting room. She’d tucked the letter into the pocket of her cardigan earlier and removed it, placing it on the side table in her sitting room when she retired to her suite. Now, as she tried to focus on the words filling the page in front of her, the small, yellowed envelope beckoned to her like a siren to a seaman.

Her eyes drifted sideways, staring at its frail, aged countenance, its yellow-white color a stark contrast to the deep, rich wood of the table. She shook her head, returning to her reading. No, she chided, she would not dwell on it. Not before bed. Otherwise, she’d be treating herself to a night full of postulating, theorizing, fretting and sleeplessness.

Cate read another sentence. The words passed through her brain as though it didn’t exist. Two sentences later, she found herself staring at the small, unmarked envelope. She hadn’t a clue what she’d read, her mind unable to retain any of the context. She snapped the book shut, trading it for the envelope.

After sliding the thick papers out, she glanced at them. Despite the words they held, there was something extraordinary about holding

something so personal from another era. Another individual, one within her family, had held these pages, written their thoughts. The written word was rare in this day and age. People rarely wrote hand-written notes or letters anymore, relying on the speed and ease of typed communication.

Cate turned the pages over in her hands, noting the feel of the paper, the stylized cursive handwriting, the thick, black ink, the care, and time put into folding the pages. Even given the note's contents, she appreciated the nearly century-old piece of history she held in her hands. If the note hadn't suggested something vile, she'd have been giddy to reread it multiple times.

Regardless of her opinions on it, the note existed. It recorded history. Her history. With a big sigh, she re-read the note, painful as that history was to acknowledge. The letter contained no salutation, beginning in a frank and curt manner.

I include no salutation for you know who you are, and I cannot bear to write your name. I can barely bear to acknowledge that you exist. What you have done to me, this family, your own family is a travesty. You should be ashamed, regardless of the excuses you gave for your abhorrent behavior.

What you have stolen from this family is far more precious than you realize. Or perhaps more precious than you wish to acknowledge. While you believe it is "due" you, it is not.

My husband warns me not to let my anger get the better of me, but I am so filled with rage and loathing toward you, I wonder if it is even possible for me. Perhaps my husband is of a better disposition than I am, however, it may be, perchance, that he is better suited at hiding his true feelings. Although, those feelings run more to heartbreak than anger.

There is nothing more to be said. But know with your theft, you have robbed this family of more than valuable keepsakes. You have stolen trust, faith and loyalty also.

Should we ever meet again, and I sincerely hope we never do, I would cross the street rather than look at you. If you ever return to this household, I will have you arrested at once, regardless of my husband's inclination to turn a blind eye to your wicked ways.

I wish you all the happiness I'd wish unto my worst enemy.

I hope your bounty smothers you and crushes your very soul under its weight.

Anne MacKenzie

Cate heaved a sigh after reading the emotionally charged letter. Anne, Rory's wife, displayed strong feelings for someone. While she never sent the letter, the words contained within showed her level of anger and frustration with the unknown recipient. Cate scanned it again. The words "stolen," "theft" and "robbed" leapt off the page. These couldn't be coincidental. Anne's letter must refer to the theft of the precious family heirlooms.

The other unmistakable component was the reference to the thief's origins. Anne claimed the person robbed their own family, implying a family member had been the culprit. This brought a frown to Cate's face. Rory's immediate family consisted of his wife, child, parents and his brother, Lucas. Of course, there were cousins, distant or otherwise. However, Anne's reference to being "due" something would suggest a family connection at a closer level. She had a sinking feeling her original fear and suspicion was correct. Lucas MacKenzie, her great-grandfather, had stolen the jewels. The letter seemed to confirm her suspicions. She was descended from a thief. One willing to rob his own family.

CHAPTER 14



Cate startled awake, glancing around the dimly lit room. She swallowed hard, getting her bearings as her sluggish brain raced to awaken. Riley and Bailey lay near the fireplace, sound asleep. She had drifted to sleep pondering and fretting over the meaning of Anne's letter. The pages, now strewn across the floor after falling from her limp hand, reminded her.

She reached down and scooped the papers off the floor. A forlorn feeling swept over her as she glanced at them. Her ancestors were thieves. No wonder someone blotted them out from the family bible. Now Cate owned the castle. Anne MacKenzie was probably rolling in her grave.

She folded the note and tucked it back into its envelope. She set it on the side table on top of her discarded book. As she swung her legs over the side of the chaise, intent on retreating to her bed, the memory of her dream flooded back to her.

The dream had awakened her with a start. Her confusion upon waking distracted her, but now it all came rushing back. Another nightmare about the bookshelf. Generations of the family surrounded her in the sitting room. They introduced themselves with bewildering speed. When Rory introduced himself and Anne, Cate explained she descended from Rory's brother, Lucas. Anne MacKenzie dropped Cate's hand, an expression of disgust on her face. Cate recalled the letter, and the emotions expressed by Anne. Generations worth of gaps between her and her great-grandfather had not quelled the fury the theft stoked within her.

She spun, stalking away from Cate, her face a mask of rage. She whispered in the ears of Victoria and Randolph. Shocked expressions crossed their faces. They gasped, their eyes flitting to Cate.

The information branched through the generations of the family. Everyone gaped at her, their eyes glaring with acrimony and distrust. Cate backed away, speechless, unable to explain away anything. She closed the sitting room doors behind her. Tears streamed down her face. She ran to the library, seeking the comfort of Riley and Bailey. She trusted her two dogs would not turn their backs on her.

As she entered the library, a strong gust of wind blew the doors from her grasp. Her eyes narrowed as her hair twisted in the air. She stepped further into the room, seeking the source of the wind. She studied the windows, all closed.

She glanced across the room, her eyes widening. A gaping hole stood where the bookshelf used to be. Cate marched toward it.

With Riley and Bailey nowhere to be found, concern filled her they had stumbled into the void. "Riley! Bailey!" she called.

A booming voice answered back, stunning her, and causing her to fall backward. "BEWARE!"

Cate shuddered at the memory of the dream, specifically at the disembodied voice shouting its ominous warning. She shook her head. What was it about that bookshelf that haunted her? Perhaps she would find out when she and Jack checked the plans for the castle.

It would need to suffice. She needed sleep. It was already after midnight and her snooze on the chaise left her cramped with a crick in her neck. Besides studying the castle plans, most of the setup for the New Year's Eve party must be completed today. She needed all the energy she could muster.

After carrying each pup to their bed, she dragged herself to her own, climbing in and stretching out. By shifting her shoulders back and forth, she eased the kink in her neck. The rhythmic motion lulled her to sleep.

* * *

Cate met Jack the following morning before Mrs. Campbell was scheduled to arrive. He carried a cardboard tube, pushing the library door open for her to enter first.

“Those the plans?” Cate inquired.

“Aye,” Jack confirmed.

Cate cleared a space on the desk. “Let’s see what’s behind that bookcase, shall we?”

Jack popped the top of the tube, extracting the plans and spreading them across the desk. The blue pages contained detailed drawings of the castle. Cate stared at the crisscross of lines, marks, numbers, and words, finding the plans disorienting even though she lived in the castle.

She searched for a space matching the library. Jack found it first, pointing it out. He’d had no trouble reading the plans.

“Here’s the library. Windows here, door here, fireplace here.” He tapped locations on the drawing. “That would put our bookcase right about here.” He tapped another location twice.

“So, what’s behind it? Secret passage? Hidden chamber?”

“A hallway.”

“What? There has to be something between the hallway and the bookcase!”

Jack shook his head. “Nope, there’s nothing on the plans.” He shuffled through a few other pages containing the schematics for the other floors. “Nothing above it or below it that would lead to air leakage.”

Cate wandered to the bookshelf, her finger on her lips. “Something is causing the air flow.”

“No chimneys, no outer walls, no pitch changes in the roof.” Jack shuffled the papers again. “Nothing I can identify to cause air flow.”

Cate continued to stare at the bookshelf. “What is your secret?”

“I’m not sure it holds one, Lady Cate. There’s nothing behind it.”

“Are you sure they noted secret passages and rooms on those plans?”

Jack nodded. “These are updates of Douglas MacKenzie’s original plans. Copies of his personal copy. He included all the secrets of the castle on his plans to make sure they were built to his specifications. A lot changed during the last renovation. Some of those secret spaces were converted to bathrooms to update the castle.”

Cate meandered back to the desk. Jack pointed out a few “secret” rooms, now bathrooms. Cate grimaced as Jack rolled the plans up and stowed them back in the tube. “Sorry, Lady Cate. No secret pirate gold for you.”

“Darn,” Cate answered, snapping her fingers. Something nagged at her in the back of her mind, but she pushed it aside. The plans told a different story than her imagination created. Facts didn’t lie or exaggerate, unlike her overly inventive mind.

“I guess that’s that,” Cate said with a shrug as Jack slid the top back on the document tube. “Meet you in the ballroom?”

Jack nodded and waved the tube in the air. “I’ll see you there as soon as I return these to the office.”

They parted ways, with Cate collecting Mrs. Campbell from the front door before escorting her to the ballroom. The trio spent the rest of their morning making final adjustments to the layout, setting out the linens and finishing adjustments to the decorations.

* * *

Cate slept in on the last day of the year. The promise of a late night chock full of hostess duties meant she’d need to log the extra sleep. She spent a lazy day trying to relax before the party. With the party beginning with a late evening sit-down dinner, she had plenty of the day to enjoy with her guests.

Much to his delight, Mr. Smythe finished his puzzle, snapped a picture for posterity, and dismantled it, careful to break apart the pieces so the next player could “enjoy the full experience.”

The castle would be too quiet after they left, Cate mused. She would miss their quiet presence after their holiday stay. Still, she hoped her time travel adventure would distract from missing her guests.

When late afternoon arrived, Cate began dressing for the evening’s event. As she slipped into her gold-sequined, trumpet-style, floor-length gown, thoughts crowded into her mind. Last New Year’s Eve, Cate was holed up in her small apartment in Aberdeen with Riley. She’d bought a mini-bottle of champagne and chocolate covered strawberries to ring in the new year with sweatpants and sweets. In a well-worn Aberdeen College sweatshirt, athletic socks, and a messy faux-bun created with an old scrunchie, she parked herself next to her pup with a bowl of popcorn. She’d fallen asleep on her couch before midnight, a romantic holiday-themed comedy streaming on the television.

Cate chuckled, reminded of how different her life had been then. Fast-forward one year and she stood staring into a floor-length mirror within her bedroom suite in a gold-colored evening gown, her hair coiffed in a chic updo, evening make-up complete with smoky eyes and red lips.

The suite alone surpassed the size of her apartment by a hundred square feet at least. The remaining castle dwarfed the apartment building she'd called home. She, too, had changed, morphed into a new version of herself.

She stared into her own blue eyes, noting the changes both physical and mental. She recalled her awkwardness at social events. Now a countess, she didn't have the flexibility to shy away from social settings or shut herself off from the world. While she still enjoyed her privacy, Countess Cate was becoming more at ease with entertaining, becoming accustomed to playing the role of gracious hostess.

She smoothed her dress a final time before slipping on her shoes. Her mind shifted gears, from her own journey less than a year ago to the events of almost a century ago. As she buckled the ankle strap, she imagined her counterpart one hundred years ago, doing the same thing.

Anne MacKenzie, then the Countess of Dunhavenshire, was likely dressing for her own New Year's Eve party. Perhaps donning a floor-length ballgown like Cate or perhaps a shin-length dress with a drop-waist. Had she worn her hair up or in the popular finger waves of the time?

Cate imagined she wore a headband, popular during the Roaring '20s. She'd donned some of Victoria MacKenzie's jewels, removed from the safe for the evening. Which necklace had she chosen to wear, and which was left in her room for the evening, Cate wondered?

When she attended Victoria's Halloween Ball in 1856, Cate had borrowed Victoria's sapphire necklace. Victoria, gifted a new ruby necklace by her husband, Randolph, had worn it as a perfect match to the color of her ballgown. Which was Anne wearing tonight? In either case, both of them would be gone by morning. Stolen away in the wee hours of 1925.

Cate glanced to the timepiece she wore around her neck. Mere steps away was the rip that could take her to 1925. After the clock struck midnight, she could travel back to the moment the jewels were stolen. Perhaps she should. Perhaps after her own party wound down, she should convince Jack to travel back and catch the thief red-handed.

The memory of her last attempt to catch someone red-handed flashed through her mind. She'd ended up being tossed into the loch and nearly

killed. She escaped thanks to Jack's good timing. He fished her out before she drowned.

No, she thought, perhaps catching the thief red-handed was a bad idea. Besides, who would she say she was when the confrontation occurred?

Would she admit to Anne and Rory she was a time traveler from the future, there to stop the robbery? Rory would realize the truth, but would Anne? That was assuming she could stop the thief without meeting an unfortunate end. Surely someone willing to steal was willing to do other nefarious things.

She'd also have no guarantee they'd arrive in time to stop the thief. Anne MacKenzie said she retired for the evening around 1 a.m. The theft occurred sometime between then and when Lady MacKenzie's ladies' maid noticed the jewels missing around eleven the following morning.

If her party lasted longer than the MacKenzie party of the past, they could miss the theft. Then again, if the theft occurred later in the morning, they could be hanging around the halls for hours, increasing their odds of being discovered.

Cate shook the silly idea from her head as she slipped the timepiece beneath her dress. She'd have to let the theft happen and investigate it from there.

She crossed her bedroom to the sitting room. Sprawled near the warm fireplace, both pups laid chewing bones provided by Mrs. Fraser. She stroked their backs with each hand. Riley lifted his head from his prize, giving her a quick sniff.

"Yes, I'm all dressed up, buddy. Not my usual leggings, huh?"

Riley stood on his hind legs, reaching for her face with his tongue.

"Thank you for the kiss, but I'm not going anywhere. Just downstairs for a party. You hold down the fort with your brother, Bailey. I'll be back as soon as I can!"

Cate gave the two dogs another scratch before leaving them to their bones and heading downstairs.

The doorbell chimed as Cate arrived at the foot of the stairs.

Jack pulled it open after a wolf whistle. "You clean up nicely, Lady Cate," he said, grinning.

"As do you," Cate said as Mrs. Campbell pushed through the door, her black formal gown's sequins shimmering with each step.

“Oh!” she exclaimed, stopping short mid-step and leaving Jack unable to close the door. “Don’t you look elegant, Lady Cate. How befitting the golden gown is on our newest Countess.”

“Thank you,” Cate answered, looping her arm through Mrs. Campbell’s to lead her to the sitting room where pre-dinner drinks were being served. Mr. and Mrs. Fraser, along with Molly, were already present. “And your dress is also lovely. What beautiful detailing with the subtle shimmer of sequins.”

Mrs. Campbell giggled. “Yes, well, I succeeded in finding something suitable for the occasion without being overdone.”

Jack followed them into the sitting room as Cate offered a drink to Mrs. Campbell. She took a small sherry. “Oh, Jack, shouldn’t you be at your post?”

“My post?” he asked, sipping his scotch.

“Yes, aren’t you filling in as butler this evening?”

“Oh, no!” Cate exclaimed, a giggle escaping her with her words. “One of the waitstaff we hired is handling that. Jack just happened to be in the foyer when you arrived. He’s a guest tonight, remember?”

“Oh, yes,” Mrs. Campbell replied, her voice brusque. “How could I forget?”

“In case your memory is failing you,” Jack chimed in. “This is my grandfather, Stanley Reid. He’s also a guest tonight.”

“Yes, I do remember Stan. Good to see you again. Forgive me, I had quite forgotten about Lady Cate’s guest list with so many other details swimming through my mind.”

“Of course, Mrs. Campbell,” Cate responded. “I just mentioned earlier this week the fantastic job you’ve done in putting together these events. Everyone on my guest list has been most excited to attend.”

“I’m sure,” Mrs. Campbell noted, her voice still dry. Mr. Smythe and Gayle arrived moments later, requesting a drink from the waitstaff, and joining in the conversation. Soon afterward, guests began to arrive, were shown in for cocktails and introduced. Cate met several lords and ladies, even a fellow countess, although her husband, the count, was no longer alive. An up-and-coming industry titan who was recently knighted by the Queen also was in attendance.

Cate’s head swam with details of who was who, who knew who, where they were from and why that mattered. She wondered if she’d really grown

into her role of Countess, as she'd thought she had only an hour ago. As she struggled to keep up with the witty banter, dry British humor, and dizzying array of intricate peerage, the dinner announcement was made.

Cate breathed a sigh of relief as the group headed for the dining room. Her everyday, no-frills dining room had been transformed into a scene from a movie. Crisp, white linens covered an intricately set table. Lit candles beamed from the center where pine sprigs and cones surrounded them. The place settings were delicately laid, perfectly spaced, and the silverware gleamed. She wondered if she had wandered onto the set of *Downton Abbey* by mistake.

"Oh gosh, it looks so great in here. I feel like royalty," Cate overheard Molly say to Mrs. Fraser.

"Aye," Mrs. Fraser agreed. "Dunhaven Castle has entertained many a gentleman and lady through the years."

"Yes, even a Duke here and there!" Mrs. Campbell exclaimed with pride as she pushed past the women into the ballroom, leading a lord something-or-other to a place setting next to Cate's.

As everyone was seated, Cate spied her staff near the far end of the table. She smiled forlornly to the group, separated from her by what seemed like miles of table. Molly waved to her, chattering to Mr. and Mrs. Fraser, gesturing to the decor. The elder Mr. Reid chatted to the woman sitting to his right. If Cate recalled, she was the daughter of one of the VIPs. She giggled at whatever Mr. Reid told her, his hands gesturing in the air.

Everyone seemed to be enjoying themselves. Cate made a short speech thanking everyone for attending prior to the meal being served. Mrs. Campbell had arranged a meal fit for a king, with seven courses. The food never seemed to end. The meal, lasting several hours, concluded well into the night, leaving less than two hours before midnight.

After dinner concluded, drinks and music flowed in the ballroom until midnight approached. As she eyed the time passing, she pondered the MacKenzies of 1924. With only minutes left before midnight, they hurled toward an unstoppable event. While not as devastating as the murder that occurred sixty-some-odd years earlier, it still would leave a scar. Its effects would ripple through time.

As the moment approached, champagne flutes were distributed, and the crowd counted down the final few seconds until the clock chimed midnight. Balloons cascaded from the ceiling. Gold and silver globes showered down

around them, floating across the floor as people exchanged hugs, kisses, handshakes and well-wishes for a happy and healthy new year.

A loud cannonade of sound drew the revelers to the back gardens. “Oohs” and “aahs” rose among the group as fireworks exploded overhead, showering the onlookers with colored lights. Despite the chilly air, almost every guest lingered outside for the entire show. An explosion of applause resounded after the final firework sparkled overhead.

The party wound down around 1 a.m. with most guests saying their goodbyes about twenty minutes past. By quarter to two, everyone had departed, including Mrs. Campbell, promising to contact Cate “very soon” about the next event. Cate joined her staff in the sitting room for one final toast to the evening’s success before everyone retired, exhausted from the evening.

Cate climbed into bed around 3 a.m., two exhausted pups nestled in their beds below. As she drifted to sleep, Cate wondered if the jewels were already stolen in 1925 or if the nightmare had yet to unfold.

CHAPTER 15



Eate opened her eyes to bright sunshine late the next morning. A sinking feeling filled her as she realized almost a century ago, her ancestors were waking up to a nightmare.

She stretched out in bed before venturing out, choosing her bathrobe instead of dressing. She bundled the robe tighter around her neck as the cold struck her when she let the dogs out for a few moments.

Despite her late rise, no one else was awake. She ushered the dogs back to her suite after their breakfast, tiptoeing through the halls with the cold breakfast she'd retrieved for herself from the refrigerator. She settled on her chaise, balancing her bowl of fruit and cereal on her lap as she pulled a blanket across her legs. Riley and Bailey leapt onto the chaise, nestling into the blanket on either side of her.

She ate her breakfast, her mind wandering to the events of 1925. In two hours, Anne's maid would discover the missing jewelry. The house would be turned upside-down, the guests and staff would be questioned, and a full police investigation would be launched. During that investigation, something would come to light that would cause Rory to refuse to speak of the incident and Anne to pen the letter sitting on her side table. But what?

It had to be that a family member had stolen the jewelry. This wouldn't be the first time the MacKenzie family covered up a dark secret. Emilia MacKenzie, Randolph's younger sister, died birthing her first illegitimate child. The family listed her death as caused by influenza and kept her child

locked in the tower room. While Randolph loved the child, she had been kept a secret, a blemish on the family name.

A jewelry theft from a family member would possibly evoke a similar response. Cate imagined the family Bible, the ink splotch over her side of the family. She envisioned Anne staring at her branch of the family, enraged. With a contemptuous expression, Anne poured ink over that branch, blotting them from her memory and the family.

Cate planned to continue her investigation into the staff today, but all signs pointed to her great-grandfather, Lucas. Cate sighed, her spoon rattling around the empty bowl on her lap. The effect echoed the thoughts rattling around her brain.

She set the bowl aside, laying her head back. Tempted to read the letter again, Cate rolled her head to the side, staring at the small envelope. Her fingers reached out and touched the envelope, the texture rough on her fingertips.

The grainy texture mirrored the harsh words contained inside. She swallowed hard, pulling her hand away. The enmity and acrimonious language disturbed her. She didn't blame Anne for her reaction. She understood her emotion of betrayal. She experienced something similar when her tenure-tracked request had been denied by her old workplace. She'd felt the same sense of betrayal, the same wish to lash out. This betrayal, from a close family member, must have stung even worse than hers. But she refused to read it again. She'd dwelled on it enough.

She must focus on changing things. The theft had occurred, but could she solve the mystery? Could they find the missing jewels and return them? Was it possible to do this before anyone was any the wiser about the thief's identity? Or, at least, could the strained relationship between the family members be salvaged if the jewels were returned?

Cate was determined to answer these questions. She returned her bowl to the kitchen, washing, drying, and putting it away. It appeared no one else had ventured down yet. The stack of bowls set on the island remained untouched, six spoons still splayed next to them. On her way back to her suite, she stopped in the library, picking up her research folder.

She paused for a moment before exiting the room, eyeing the bookshelf. The bookshelf, the source of the disturbing note, still held a secret. At least in her mind it did. Even after finding the note, it still haunted her dreams. The air escaping from behind it must signify something. She refused to

believe it resulted from a loose shingle or leaky chimney. Her mind maintained something else caused this.

But what, her analytical side mused? The plans showed nothing behind the bookcase. No secrets lurked on the other side. Cate sighed, frowning at it before she departed, heading for her sitting room.

She met no one in the halls as she made her way back to her suite. Everyone was enjoying a long, luxurious sleep, leaving the castle quiet. Cate's anxious mind put a stop to her sleeping ability. The theft that occurred on this day nearly one hundred years ago filled her mind the moment she awoke. She'd soon be able to investigate in person, and she wanted a solid understanding of who Jack and she should pay close attention to.

Cate snuggled under her blanket, opening her folder. She shuffled through the papers, locating her suspect list and her staff list. She studied the list of names, searching for any clue that may hint toward them being a thief.

No one had left the employ of the MacKenzie family immediately following the theft. However, she reasoned a quick departure of an employee would call suspicion, so the thief, if they were a member of the staff, would probably stay long enough to cast away any suspicion from themselves.

Several staff members had been employed long before the theft and remained so long after the theft. Cate placed check marks by those staff members' names. They would be low on the suspect list. It wasn't probable that a loyal staff member would steal from the family they served, nor that they would stay around to continue their job afterward.

The remaining list consisted of five individuals. Two maids, a groom, a footman and an under-butler. Cate noted their arrivals and departures. Most of them had arrived at least a year prior to the theft, except the footman. William Barrow, the footman, had arrived nine months prior to the theft. Their departure dates were all within one year of the theft. Alice Huxley, a scullery maid, left the employ of the MacKenzies four months after the theft. The other maid, Bertha MacIntyre, worked until September 1925. William Barrow ceased to be listed in the employment register around the same time as Bertha. The groom, Thomas Gould, was last paid by the estate in June. And the under-butler, Charles Forsythe, departed in May.

Cate noted these five staff members on her suspect list. She placed them below her great-grandfather's name. The evidence gathered thus far continued to support a case against him. She listed her reasons for suspecting them next to their names. Near Lucas' name, she wrote *Motive: limited inheritance, Evidence: Anne's angry letter, Opportunity: ? Was Lucas at the castle then?*

Next to the staff's names, Cate jotted a note that their arrival or departure suggested they may be connected to the theft. It was weak, but it made Cate feel better to include it.

Perhaps she could find out more about the staff prior to her journey to the past with Jack. She doubted much information was kept about them, but perhaps she could dig up something to help eliminate one or more of them or provide more evidence to include on her suspect sheet.

She climbed from her comfy perch and dressed for the day. Thoughts tumbled around her mind like clothes in a dryer as she dressed and pulled on her boots. As she took the dogs out for a walk around the property after bundling both herself and both pups in winter coats, her mind created fantastical theories about the culprit's identity. Her logical side shot down every one of them, concluding the prime suspect continued to be Lucas MacKenzie.

Dejected, Cate entered the castle through the kitchen door, shaking off her cold coat.

"Up and about already, Lady Cate?" Mrs. Fraser inquired. She stood in the kitchen, a plaid bathrobe wrapped around cozy flannel pajamas.

"Yes," Cate confessed. "I've already enjoyed my first walk of the new year with the dogs."

"I took full advantage of my sleep-in! I don't mind getting up early, but I will admit the luxury of a long, lazy morning was welcome." Mrs. Fraser fixed two bowls of cereal and fruit.

"Need help carrying them up? Or can I bring a cup of tea to you with your breakfast?"

"Nay, I've got it, Lady Cate. But thank you." The woman disappeared into the hallway. Cate noted three bowls remained. One other person had claimed their cold breakfast. Cate wasn't certain, but she guessed it was William Smythe.

Her guess was confirmed as she stripped off the dogs' coats. Mr. Smythe, already dressed in a casual outfit, wandered into the kitchen,

placing his bowl in the sink, and setting about washing it.

“Good morning, Cate,” he said in his usual tone. If Cate hadn’t known she wouldn’t have guessed he’d had a late night.

“Good morning. I hope you slept well and enjoyed a late morning,” Cate answered, picking up a towel to dry the bowl and spoon and put them away.

“Yes,” he responded. “And I plan a leisurely day. I spotted a detective novel in your library and with any luck, I will polish it off in one day! If I manage it, this shall have been one of the most successful leisure trips I’ve ever taken! If I’m needed, I shall be in my room.”

“I won’t hold you back. Enjoy your book!”

Mr. Smythe gave her a curt but genuine smile before disappearing down the hall. Cate marveled at the man. He considered completing two one-thousand-piece jigsaw puzzles and polishing off a detective novel the definition of a successful trip. What a unique individual.

Cate ushered the dogs upstairs to her suite. The rest of the household still slumbered, and she intended to retreat to her room with the employment and household records for 1925 to determine if she could discern any additional information about her newest suspects.

She retrieved the records along the way and fished out the two bones Mrs. Fraser had provided for the pups the night before. A pleasant fire warmed the sitting room when she returned. Mr. Fraser must have built the fire while Mrs. Fraser fetched their breakfast.

Cate appreciated the simple gesture, which brought a measure of calm to the room. She settled the dogs with their bones near the fireplace and plopped down next to them. She laid out each item in a semi-circle around her, setting her note sheets and pen in her lap.

She picked up the employment ledgers first, studying them in depth around the dates when each employee departed. She scanned the pages for notations, differences in payments, anything that may suggest a reason for leaving.

There were no special notes listing reasons for departure for any of the five employees Cate flagged. She didn’t expect there would be. She hoped to get lucky, but luck was not on her side. She tossed the book aside, sighing and staring at the pile of other records she’d retrieved. She’d spend her afternoon digging through these, looking for a needle in a haystack.

As she contemplated the work ahead of her, a quiet knock sounded at the door.

“Come in, it’s open!” she shouted as she shuffled through paperwork.

The door opened and Molly slipped inside.

“Good morning, Lady Cate,” Molly greeted her, joining her on the floor.

“Or, gosh, afternoon, I guess!”

Cate chuckled, setting the papers on the floor. “Good day. Did you sleep well?”

“I did,” Molly responded, stretching. “What a party!”

Cate nodded, raising her eyebrows. “Yes. Last year for New Year’s Eve, I was asleep before the ball dropped. How life changes.”

Molly agreed, nodding. “Last year, I was married,” she lamented.

“O-Oh,” Cate stuttered, her voice dropping to a whisper. “Molly, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean...”

Molly waved her hand in the air, interrupting Cate. “No, no. I didn’t mean that as a bad thing. I wasn’t reminiscing of better times. I was recalling a *worse* time.”

Cate offered a tight-lipped smile, grabbing Molly’s hand.

After a few breaths, Molly continued, “That’s part of the reason I came here today. It’s been a couple of weeks since I arrived. I just wanted to let you know how happy I am you offered me the position and I accepted.”

Cate gave her a fuller smile, her face brightening at Molly’s admission.

“That party was like a fairytale. And I’m *loving* the job here. I get to cook and bake, which is one of my favorite things to do. I live in a *castle*! The grounds here are beautiful. It’s like I’m living a dream.”

“The only problem is that nasty boss you have,” Cate quipped.

Molly burst into laughter, throwing her head back and holding her stomach. “Yes, her. She’s just terrible. She makes Jeff look like a saint.” Molly wiped a tear from her eye as she collected herself.

“Oh my,” she said with a final chuckle. “In all seriousness, though, I love it here. *Thank you* for offering me this position.” She grabbed Cate’s hand, squeezing it.

“I’m glad it’s working out for you, Molly. It’s a big change. I love it here, but that doesn’t mean it’s for everyone. Scottish country life is quiet. Some people would hate it here. I’m glad you don’t! And I’m glad you told me. You know me, I’d worry about your acclimation otherwise.”

Molly nodded. "I realized that. That's why I wanted to tell you how I felt. I'm in love with my life now. For the first time *ever*. And I mean that. I wasn't this happy even when I was a newlywed."

Molly sighed, staring into the fireplace. "In retrospect, I suppose I realized then Tom and I weren't right for each other. But I just kept on clinging to that idea that we were."

She shook her head. Her eyebrows raised, and a smile brightened her face. "But everything worked out, everything is corrected. Perhaps I had to suffer through that to realize where I was supposed to be. Otherwise, maybe I wouldn't have had the courage to move to a new country."

"That's a good attitude to have."

"It's easy to look at it that way when it's the best decision of my life!"

Cate pulled her into a hug. "I'm so glad this worked out and we're both happy here!"

Molly squeezed her back in the embrace. After they let go, Molly stared at the mess on the floor. "Research?"

Cate nodded as she scanned the mess. "Yeah. Figured I'd spend a lazy day in front of the fire sorting through some records for my book."

"Only you consider this a lazy day. I remember finding you sprawled at a library table many a day like this at Aberdeen."

"It's mindless work to do while I'm still sleepy."

"Did you get any sleep?" Molly inquired.

"Yes, I did. But I was awake early. Residual energy from the party, I guess," Cate responded with a shrug.

Molly gave her a coy smile. "You are turning into quite the countess."

It was Cate's turn to roar with laughter. "Oh, right. I'm such an outstanding partier."

"I'm serious! You are the picture of grace. Composed, polite, kind, and beautiful."

Cate blushed at the string of compliments. "Thank you."

"Your dress last night... stunning. So elegant, so perfect."

"Thanks," Cate answered, color rising in her cheeks from the compliment. "Your dress was great too. You looked like you came right off a magazine page!"

"I sort of did," Molly admitted. "I bought a knock-off of a dress a celebrity wore on the red carpet! I will not ask for a 'Who wore it best' poll, but..."

“Well, I’d vote for you! You looked like a million bucks! And those shoes were to die for!”

“A million pounds here. Oh... wait, that sounds bad.” Molly chuckled at her own joke.

Cate giggled, too.

“Anyway, you are really the definition of aristocratic breeding, even if you didn’t grow up in it!”

“You may be going too far. But I appreciate your sentiments. I’ve really grown up since I’ve come here. It’s been easy though, like you said. I’m living most people’s fantasy.”

“No one deserves it more than you, Cate.”

“Speaking of fantasies,” Cate said after a pause, changing the subject. “I emailed Maggie. She’d like to visit in the spring. So, looks like we’ll be entertaining again in a few months!”

“That will be fun! She’ll *love* this place. What with that antique shop? She’ll be exploring your house like it’s an auction. May want to check her suitcase before she leaves, in case she tries to smuggle anything to her shop.”

Cate laughed. “I’ll hide the silverware.”

Molly pulled her phone from her pocket as she chuckled at Cate’s joke. “Here’s the picture I snapped of us last night. We should send it to Maggie. I’m going to have it printed and framed.”

Molly faced the phone’s display toward Cate. Cate studied the screen, recalling posing for the selfie with Molly. Their smiles beamed back at her. Their arms around each other, cheeks together, they appeared the vision of happiness. Molly’s assessment was correct. The photo documented a great memory.

“Aw. Can you print one for me too? I’d like to frame it and put it on my mantle. I love it! Our first holiday!”

“Sure thing! When I was scrolling through my pictures from last night, I fell in love with this one. Well,” Molly said, slapping her hands on her thighs. “I’ll let you get back to it. I just wanted to express my gratitude again and make sure you realized just how happy you made me.”

Cate smiled at her. “I’m so glad! And you don’t have to keep thanking me. I’m just as grateful you’re here. So, thank you for taking the job! You were always a good friend to me while I was at Aberdeen College, glad I could return the favor.”

Molly pulled Cate into a tight hug. “Have fun with your restful work.” She giggled as she climbed to her feet, shaking her head at Cate’s version of relaxation.

Cate’s eyes followed her as she exited the room, pulling the door closed behind her. The exchange left Cate contented and upbeat. She dove back into her work with renewed enthusiasm.

She spent the entire afternoon and early evening pouring over the records.

As Cate munched on a cold roast beef sandwich, she studied a personal accounts book. Number after number floated past her eyes. Dress expenses, personal investments, allowances. Her eyes glossed over. As week after week, month after month passed, Cate began to doubt she’d find anything. When she reached August, she considered giving up. She figured since she was over halfway finished, she’d press on and finish the book.

As Cate worked through the September records, she found an entry that almost made her drop her sandwich.

CHAPTER 16



Riley's head popped up, hoping for a bite of the roast beef if it landed on the floor after Cate bobbed her food. She caught it before it hit the floor.

Listed in the register book was the entry *Wedding Gift - Mr. and Mrs. William and Bertha Barrow*. The names seemed familiar. She shuffled through her papers, locating the suspect list she'd made. She scanned it and found William Barrow and Bertha MacIntyre. It couldn't be a coincidence. William and Bertha departed in the same month. And in that same month, the MacKenzies of 1925 gave one William Barrow and his new wife, Bertha, a wedding gift.

Cate smiled at her paper. The two staff members had likely met, fallen in love, and married, leaving the estate for another opportunity after their marriage. This lowered them on the suspect list, given the obvious reason they departed. Cate noted it, pushing them to the bottom of the list and placing a large question mark next to them to signify her doubtfulness as to their guilt.

The list was narrowing. Unfortunately, her ancestors remained at the top. Still, she'd made good progress. Satisfied with her work, she snapped the register book shut. She and Jack would have a good start on their investigation. They'd concentrate on the individuals on this list when they returned to 1925 to investigate.

Cate cleaned up the mess she'd created, returning all her sources to the office files. She used the rest of the evening to relax with a movie.

She rose early the next morning. Breakfast would be served early to accommodate Mr. Smythe and Gayle's early departure.

Cate met them in the dining room. "Good morning."

"Good morning, Cate," Gayle responded. "I was just mentioning to Mr. Smythe how sad I am to leave. It was a lovely visit with two lovely parties included."

"I'm so glad you enjoyed it. I'll miss you both, but I'm glad you enjoyed your stay."

"Most enjoyable!" Mr. Smythe agreed.

"Did you finish your mystery novel?" Cate inquired.

"Yes. Quite a good whodunit. I polished it off early last evening. So that's two puzzles and a novel I've completed. Not a bad take for this trip in my estimation. A perfect holiday," Mr. Smythe replied.

"I'm so glad you consider it a success," Cate answered.

"I consider it a success despite those tedious puzzles," Gayle added, chuckling.

"Those puzzles keep your wits sharp!" Mr. Smythe assured Gayle.

"Molly seems to be settling in well," Gayle replied after a quick eye roll at Mr. Smythe.

"Yes. She is. I spoke with her yesterday and she mentioned how at home she felt and how much she loved the new job."

"Mrs. Fraser seems quite pleased with her," Gayle added.

Cate nodded. "Yes, they get along well and Molly loves working in the kitchen as does Mrs. Fraser."

"She seems a valuable addition to the staff," Mr. Smythe agreed. "I'm so pleased it worked out so well."

"And your new addition, Bailey, seems to have settled right in, too," Gayle mentioned.

"Oh, yes! He's really coming around. And Riley is delighted with his new friend!"

Gayle ruffled the fur on Riley's head. "This little pup is a darling."

"Thank you," Cate answered. "He loves life, that's for certain!"

"He seems thrilled with his new yard!" Mr. Smythe added.

"With the parties over, how will you fill your time?" Gayle questioned.

The mystery of the missing jewelry flitted across Cate's mind as she shrugged. "Oh, I'm sure I'll find something to fill my time!" She paused a

moment, then added, "Plus, I'm certain Mrs. Campbell will soon have the next party lined up!"

Gayle chuckled at Cate's comment. "Well, I, for one, am sad they are over. And look forward to another!"

"I look forward to having you back at the castle soon. But you don't need a party to plan a visit. You are both welcome anytime. Please just let me know when you'd like to stay, and we'll arrange it!"

"How generous of you, Cate," Gayle replied.

"I've had such a lovely time, I may take you up on that sooner rather than later."

"Please do! I'm glad you found your time here relaxing and pleasant!"

They finished their breakfast, continuing light conversation before Cate saw them off about an hour after. She offered a wistful wave as they pulled down the drive, sad to see her guests go. She consoled herself with a long walk of the property with her dogs. Despite the chill in the air, she settled on the banks of the loch for a few moments of quiet reflection.

"Well, Riley and Bailey, tomorrow we'll start exploring the theft. What do you expect we'll find?"

Riley stared back with quizzical eyes while Bailey offered a small whine.

"I'll admit," Cate continued, "I'm not as excited to tackle this mystery as I was the last one. I'm a little nervous about what I'll learn about my ancestors."

As if in response, Riley climbed onto Cate's lap, settling in with a kiss to her cheek. Bailey cuddled next to her. Perhaps the dogs sensed her apprehension and hoped to assuage any trepidation on her part.

Cate wrapped her arms around both pups. "You're right. No matter what I find, it'll be okay. But I'm still nervous. Don't tell Jack though," she confided, winking at them.

"Don't tell Jack what?" Jack inquired, appearing behind her.

Cate shook her head. "Nothing, just vetting some ideas out loud to the dogs."

He settled on the ground next to her. "Did they have any worthwhile commentary?"

"I'm afraid not."

"Perhaps you should try a human audience."

“That’s not a bad suggestion. It might provide more feedback than a kiss on the cheek.”

Jack motioned for her to continue. “So, let’s have it.”

Cate sighed before plowing into her latest research. “Well, I spent yesterday researching employment records and noting anything unusual or suspicious.”

“And?”

“And... it appears my ancestors are still the most likely suspects. I found five staff members whose departures were within a year of the theft. Hardly damning evidence against them, but enough to consider them above others who stayed on for years.”

“Seems fair enough.”

“Of those five, it appears two of them left the MacKenzie employ because they married.”

Jack’s brow knit. “Each other?”

Cate nodded as she stared out over the rippled waters. “Yes. At least, it seems so. A maid and a footman departed the same month. Also during that month, I found a note in the private ledger entry stating an amount was paid out of that account for a wedding gift. The first and last name matched the footman, and the first name matched the maid.”

“Okay, that seems a fair assumption then,” Jack agreed with a nod. “So that leaves us three staff members whose departures still make them suspicious.”

“Yes,” Cate replied. She provided Jack with the information about the remaining staff members.

“All right,” Jack answered when she finished. “Those are the folks we’ll concentrate on when we begin our investigation tomorrow.”

Cate nodded in agreement. “Wow, Lady Cate quiet about time travel? Not brimming with excitement? Are you ill?”

“I’m not. I’m just still nervous about proving my ancestors are thieves. Solving the mystery if that is the end result seems...” Cate’s voice trailed off, unable to finish the sentence.

“We have no confirmation they are the thieves. Let’s start with an open mind. Perhaps we’ll be proving they *aren’t* thieves!”

“Open mind, right,” Cate repeated.

“We have no confirmation that letter from Anne MacKenzie refers to this incident. It could be anything!”

“That’s a stretch, but you’re correct. We have no confirmation the letter refers to the theft.”

“Of course, I’m right. I’m always right,” Jack added with a wink. “I’m also freezing. I’m heading back.”

“Me too,” Cate replied, accepting Jack’s hand to pull her to standing. “I guess we’ll find out soon enough if you’re right!”

“Care to make it interesting? Put a little wager on it?”

“What? Twenty bucks I don’t descend from a line of thieves?” Cate inquired.

“Twenty pounds maybe. You live in the UK now, remember?”

“Right. Okay, twenty pounds says my ancestors committed the crime.”

“You’re on!” Jack replied, thrusting his hand at her. Cate grasped it, shaking on the deal.

Cate, Jack and the two pups returned to the castle, warming themselves near the kitchen stove.

“Are you planning to clean up the ballroom today?” Cate questioned Jack as Mrs. Fraser and Molly finished lunch preparations.

“Yes. We’re starting inside. We’ll take two days with that, then move outside. The weather’s supposed to improve next week. It will be easier to clear the gardens in the milder weather.”

“I’d like to help with the interior at least. I’ll meet you after lunch in the ballroom.”

“It’s not necessary, Lady Cate,” Jack responded. “But I’m sure I can’t talk you out of it.”

Cate shook her head. “Nope. I got us into this, and I’ll help to get us out. At least with the interior decorations!”

“Drawing the line at the outside work?”

“I am. Your version of milder weather is still cold for me!”

Mrs. Fraser put the finishing touches on Cate’s tray, which Cate picked up before Molly could. “I’ve got it, Molly!”

Molly glanced to Mrs. Fraser, who nodded at her. “Often Lady Cate is too ambitious, and we let her carry her own tray.”

Cate offered a wry smile at Mrs. Fraser as she called the dogs to follow her upstairs. She lunched in the library, studying notes from her book at the desk while she ate. The dogs remained quiet, napping near the fireplace, tired after the long morning walk.

Despite their quiet demeanor, Cate still eyed the bookcase across the room with suspicion. Distracted from her work, she approached the bookcase. No air flowed from it today. She began to question what she and Jack had experienced the other day. Were they mistaken? Nothing in the castle plans pointed toward any structures behind the bookshelf that could cause such a phenomenon. Perhaps they were barking up the wrong tree in searching.

No, she concluded with a shake of her head, the dogs noticed the phenomenon as well. That was what called their attention to the issue to begin with. Surely the dogs were not mistaken. Their senses were superior to her human ones. Plus, the match implied air flow also. No, an air leak existed behind this bookshelf. There was no doubt.

She checked her timepiece, reminded that she would use it tomorrow to begin unraveling another mystery on the estate. It was already a few minutes past one. Jack and Mr. Fraser would be in the ballroom working, having finished their lunch fifteen minutes earlier.

She rushed to clean up her paperwork on the desk and hurried from the room, glancing back at the two dogs, sleeping on the area rug near the fireplace. As she did, something caught her eye. Her brows knit together as she performed a mental calculation, glancing between the hall and the library.

She was pulled from her mental machinations by Molly, who skirted past her into the library.

"Excuse me, Lady Cate. Something wrong?" Molly inquired, retrieving the empty tray.

"Oh, no. Just considering if I should move the dogs to my sitting room or leave them napping here."

"Well, you know what they say, Lady Cate," Molly began.

Cate nodded.

"Let sleeping dogs lie," they said in unison.

She closed the doors behind them as they both departed, parting ways with Molly heading downstairs to the kitchen and Cate heading down the hall to the ballroom.

"Sorry I'm late!" she announced, entering the ballroom.

"You're not late, Lady Cate," Jack assured her as he and Mr. Fraser attempted to fold a table linen. "You can't be late to a job that's not required."

Cate chuckled, more at their attempt to fold the linen than Jack's joke. "Why don't you let me take over the linen folding and you can dismantle the tables and move them?"

"Aye," Mr. Fraser agreed. "I'm afraid Emily would faint dead away if she spied our folding abilities."

Cate laughed louder at this admission. "I agree. Don't worry, my lips are sealed. I won't give away your secret."

"Thank you, Lady Cate," Mr. Fraser replied.

Cate laid the tablecloth back on the table, straightening it then set about folding it into a neat square. She placed it in a nearby bin provided by the linen company. She continued around the room, folding table linens, napkins and runners as she went, dragging the bin behind her.

Jack and Mr. Fraser followed her, deconstructing tables and setting them aside for the rental company to pick up.

With that work finished, they folded chairs, stacking them against the tables before finishing for the day. They planned to remove the decorations from the Christmas trees tomorrow and dismantle those to return to storage.

Cate returned to the library to collect the dogs for a pre-dinner walk. Both dogs were excited to see her after her absence, showering her with kisses and wagging tails. Cate finished her day with a relaxing meal and a movie in her sitting room.

Time travel pervaded her thoughts, crowding into every corner of her mind. She and Jack planned to travel to 1925 the following afternoon, hoping to introduce themselves to the family and gather some preliminary information.

The movie on Cate's laptop played on without Cate hearing it. Her mind ran wild with excitement and nervous anticipation. Cate doubted she'd sleep tonight. Still, she would try. After closing her laptop, Cate took the dogs for one final walk before crawling into bed and squeezing her eyes shut in her best attempt to go to sleep.

She tossed and turned for hours, practicing greeting family members from an era gone-by. She rehearsed feigning shock at the unfortunate news of the theft. Midnight came and went, leaving Cate still wide-eyed and worried. She bit her lower lip, wondering if she'd shake hands with a thief tomorrow.

CHAPTER 17



Tears streamed down Cate's face. She wiped at them with the back of her hand, feeling ridiculous and childish. As silly as it sounded, she was glad to still have Molly, the Frasers and Jack staying in the castle. Their presence, despite being asleep and rooms away, calmed her frayed nerves. She'd slept only two hours before the nightmare woke her.

Her hands still trembled from the experience. But her heart rate and breathing had settled into a normal rhythm. The stress must be playing tricks on her mind, Cate thought. She recalled the details of the dream as she tried to process it.

It centered around the bookcase in the library again. A black hole filled the spot where the bookshelf once stood. Cate approached it as wind swirled around her, blowing from the void. Eerie, haunting sounds emanated from the space. She peered into the blackness, unable to see anything.

She grabbed a nearby flashlight, training the light into the hole. At first, she spotted nothing. Then a light beam blinded her, glaring back as though she'd turned the flashlight into her own eyes. As she squinted against the light, she lowered her flashlight, discovering a mirror in front of her.

She stared at the mirror, careful not to shine the light in such a way as to blind herself. Something was odd about the reflection. Cate glanced down at her attire. She wore a simple ensemble of leggings, a tunic, and cable knit cardigan. Her brows scrunched together as she returned her gaze to the mirror. Her reflection wore a low-necked blue and gold-striped gown with a

skirt opening to show her petticoat, a style traditional of the late 1700s. Her hair was piled high on her head with curls trailing down her neck.

The reflection stared back at her, tears streaming down her cheeks. Her mirror image's mouth opened and closed as though trying to impart some words to Cate. A shadow passed over the mirror and her reflection glanced behind herself as did Cate. She snapped her eyes back to the mirror after finding nothing lurking behind her. Her reflection continued to search behind her as darkness crept across the mirror.

Within moments, an ear-piercing shriek shattered the silence surrounding her. The noise, emanating from her reflection, splintered the glass in the mirror. It crumbled, littering the floor with shards of glass. She peered at the pieces, noting movement in them. Hands trembling, Cate lifted a shard from the rubble, watching a tiny portion of the scene she witnessed in the full mirror moments ago continue to unfold.

Fireballs rained from an unknown source, landing and exploding with a spray of flame and earth. Her reflection passed by, racing away from the unknown attacker. She watched for another few breaths before she dropped the shard.

The ground shuddered beneath her, and a deafening noise tore through the room. Her ears rang from the sound, and she pushed herself up to sitting from where she had fallen when the foundations of the castle shook. Disoriented, she tried to stand, but a second explosion knocked her off her feet again as it blasted through the castle's exterior wall.

She crawled to the window, gazing out at the hellish landscape. Black clouds blocked out the sun. Fires raged across the grounds. Bolts of lightning streaked across the sky. Her eyes widened as a large fireball hurled straight toward her.

The dream ended before she was struck but still prompted her to bolt upright, her chest heaving and heart pounding. Tears flowed from her eyes as she clutched her bedsheets. The realization set in that it had only been a horrible nightmare. She recovered, gulping down a few deep breaths while chiding herself about her foolish reaction.

Still, her mind remained troubled as she eased back into the pillows. She'd never struggled with nightmares before. This continued obsession from her subconscious mind regarding the bookcase baffled her. What was her mind trying to impart?

Or was this preoccupation with the bookshelf a misdirection, a trick of her subconscious mind. Was she focusing on an easy target while her mind attempted to wrap around other stressors?

Perhaps her uneasiness about her ancestor's involvement in the jewel theft was causing this. Perhaps she remained fixated on the bookcase because it held the secret unsent letter from Anne MacKenzie highlighting the family member's involvement in the episode.

Still, Cate pondered, staring out of the window at the moonlit sky, this seemed rather extreme. And why the strange clothes? If the center of her stress was the theft, why was she not dressed in clothing from the 1920s. Instead, she saw herself in clothes from a much older period. What was the connection?

She shook her head, returning her gaze to the ceiling above her. Perhaps she was crazy for even trying to make sense of her nonsensical dream. Often, there was no explanation, no reasoning or sense. Perhaps her overstimulated mind pasted together a variety of things to create the scenario, and it held no meaning.

She tried to convince herself of that idea. She repeated to herself that it was just a dream, that it had no meaning. Like a child afraid of the dark, she placated herself with these platitudes until she fell asleep.

* * *

Cate crawled from her bed the following morning, yawning as she plodded her way to the bathroom for a shower. Still tired when she emerged, she hoped the wintry morning air would awaken her. She gathered the dogs, taking them out before breakfast. After breakfast, she left them chewing fresh bones with Mrs. Fraser in the kitchen and made her way to the ballroom to finish assisting with the dismantling of the party decorations.

She yawned as they pulled ornaments from the tree and placed them in bins to be put away for another year.

"Late night, Lady Cate?" Jack inquired as she yawned a second time.

Cate shook her head before answering, weighing how much to say. "Something like that."

Jack peered down at her from the ladder he stood on to reach the top of the gigantic tree in the ballroom. "Uh-oh, I feel like there's more to the

story.”

Cate stared ahead, her mind churning about not only her dream but their upcoming trip to the past.

“Cate?” Jack questioned when she didn’t respond.

“Wound up about the visit to the past later, I guess,” she answered, shrugging.

Jack narrowed his eyes, staring at her.

“What?” she asked, shrugging again.

Jack didn’t respond, handing her another ornament without averting his gaze.

“Okay, okay,” Cate caved. “I had another nightmare about that stupid bookshelf.”

“The bookshelf again?” Jack queried, climbing down from the ladder while juggling a few ornaments.

Cate sighed as she tossed ornaments in the bin. “Yes, the stupid bookshelf again.”

“Same thing? An open hole there?”

“Yes and no. Same thing with the gaping hole there. But then it took a weird turn. In the hole was a mirror. But when I glanced at my reflection, it wasn’t me. I mean, it was me, but I wasn’t dressed in the clothes I was wearing. I had on a dress characteristic of the late 1700s. Then I noticed my reflection was crying. She glanced behind her, and I thought I saw something, so I did the same. Then the reflection of me started screaming, and then the mirror broke into pieces. But in the broken shards, I could still see what was happening to my reflection. There was fire everywhere. Then the next thing I knew, I was on the floor and my ears were ringing. The whole castle shook all over. I crawled over to look out the window and fire surrounded us all over the property. It was like a hellscape. It was horrible.” Cate shook her head again, her brow furrowing as she recalled the terrifying dream.

Jack listened to each detail before speaking. “I’m not discounting how awful that must have been, but I wouldn’t put too much stock in it, Lady Cate. We all have nightmares. As unpleasant as they are, they rarely mean anything.”

Cate nodded in agreement. “Yes, I realize that. That’s what I kept repeating to myself last night. But…”

“But?”

“But I keep experiencing these dreams. They’re getting harder and harder to discount as nothing when they continue to crop up.”

Jack nodded at her. “Yes, I understand that. Perhaps it has something to do with the investigation we’re about to embark on. Maybe once we get a better handle on it, they’ll die down.”

“I hope so. We can’t begin soon enough.”

Jack grinned at her. “Ah, there’s the Cate I know! Excited to time travel!”

Cate chuckled, returning his smile. “Yes, despite it all, I’m excited.”

They spent the rest of the morning boxing decorations and dismantling artificial trees. Mr. Fraser had made good progress on some of the trees leading into the ballroom. They helped him finish them before lunch.

“We’ll haul these up to storage this afternoon, Jack,” Mr. Fraser suggested as they broke for lunch.

“Sounds good. I’ll meet you here as soon as I finish the estate business with Lady Cate after lunch,” Jack fibbed.

Cate opted to have lunch in the dining room, attempting to avoid the library. Despite Jack’s assurances, she preferred not to encourage her subconscious mind with more fuel. She consumed her lunch in record time, excitement growing for her trip to the past. She hurried upstairs, dressing in a tailored ladies’ travel suit for the occasion. Jack appeared in a men’s traveling suit, knocking at her door within thirty minutes of lunch.

Cate greeted him with a grin.

“Ah, Lady Cate, your mood has improved, I see.”

“It has! I must admit I’m excited to go. And you’re right, whatever the outcome, it has nothing to do with me. It may be a disappointment, but I’m grateful for the opportunity to immerse myself in the culture.”

Cate closed the door to her sitting room behind them. “The Roaring Twenties! What an exciting time to go to. The world was changing, modernizing and having a fabulous time doing it! Flappers, Jazz...”

“Gangsters,” Jack commented.

Cate stopped dead. “In America!”

“Still too close for comfort,” Jack responded.

Cate rolled her eyes at him. “Come on, let’s go.”

She waved him into the bedroom, holding out the timepiece.

“I’m glad you’ve gotten over your angst,” Jack responded, wrapping his hand around hers.

Together they rubbed the watch face. Within seconds, the second hand slowed. It continued to stall until it crept along, keeping time in the present, not in the past.

When the second hand reached its slow crawl, Cate glanced around. “We’re here,” she said, pointing to the missing dog beds.

Jack adjusted his collar and wiped a bead of sweat from his forehead. “So we are.”

Cate stepped to the doors, flinging them open to the sitting room. She crossed the room, Jack following behind her.

“Wait up, Cate,” he whispered as they crossed the room. “We’re going down the back stairs at the end of the hall, correct?”

“Correct. Then sneak around the corner and head straight to the main entrance. Fingers crossed we’re well received!”

“Fingers and toes. I’m crossing everything I’ve got,” Jack quipped. “Last time was a spectacular fail. We were caught in our backstory almost right away!”

“It should be easier to blend in this time,” Cate noted, as they cracked the door to peer into the hall. “The Twenties are much less formal than the 1850s!”

“At least there’ll be no waltzing. All clear. Let’s go.”

Jack pulled the door open, and they hurried down the hall, disappearing in the stairway at the end of the hall. They descended and exited the castle unseen.

Rushing around the corner, they slinked past the front windows, ducking when needed to reach the front door.

Jack lifted the lion’s mouth door knocker. “You sure?”

“Positive,” Cate responded. The last time she hadn’t been, but this time her confidence was bolstered. Not only by their previous experience, but also because the time period was far closer to their time than the previous. It should make blending in easier than when they traveled to 1856.

Still, nervous butterflies flitted around Cate’s stomach as the door opened. “May I help you?” a large man with a deep voice inquired.

“Mr. and Mrs. Jack MacKenzie to see Rory MacKenzie. I’m a distant cousin.”

The man raised thick eyebrows, questioning, “Are you expected?”

Jack shook his head. “We didn’t send a letter, as we weren’t sure if my schedule would allow us to visit. Lucky for us, it did! So, we took a

chance!”

The man frowned but stood aside. “Please come in. I will announce you to Lord and Lady MacKenzie.” The butler ushered them into the sitting room.

“He didn’t seem pleased,” Jack noted as the doors closed behind them.

“No,” Cate admitted. “I hope Rory and Anne are friendlier.”

“You and me both or our investigation may be finished before we start it.”

The doors swung open, interrupting their conversation. A tall man entered the room, his athletic form hidden under a men’s day suit. Thick, dark, curly hair topped his head and piercing blue eyes, deep set in his face, stared at them. He had a friendly countenance. There was no mistaking him as a MacKenzie. Cate saw the resemblance between this man and his grandfather, Randolph. Would he be as cold as his butler?

CHAPTER 18



“Cousin Jack,” the man greeted them, holding his hand out as he stepped toward them. “Rory MacKenzie.”

Jack took his hand, giving it a long, firm shake. “Jack MacKenzie, distant relative. Very distant. Pleasure to meet you! And this is my wife, Cate.”

“Mrs. MacKenzie,” Rory said, turning his attention to her.

“Lord MacKenzie,” Cate returned, taking his hand in a light handshake.

“Lord MacKenzie was my father. I’m Rory,” he answered. “My wife, Anne, should be along any moment, I’d expect. What brings you to Dunhaven?”

“Land,” Jack answered.

“In the market for a castle?” Rory asked with a chuckle.

Jack laughed. “Not quite. But I’m in land management. I search for properties that might interest my clients. They hire me to do their legwork. We were in the general area and hoped to stop in. I wasn’t sure how long my business would take. Some of the clients can be picky.”

“How fortunate your latest clients allowed you time to visit us. Are you able to stay long?”

“Given the conclusion of my last land deal, we were hoping to take a vacation in the Scottish countryside for a week or two. Perhaps discover some of my heritage.”

The doors reopened, and a woman entered. In a day dress, she wore her dark hair swept into a low bun at the nape of her neck but full around the

face.

“Ah, please meet my wife, Anne,” Rory introduced them. “Anne, this is a cousin of mine, Jack MacKenzie and his wife, Cate.”

“Pleased to meet you,” Jack and Cate echoed to the woman.

“Have you ordered tea yet?” Anne inquired of Rory.

“Not yet.” Anne traveled to the wall, pulling a cord to ring for the butler. “Won’t you both have a seat, and we can get better acquainted? Anne, Jack was telling me they plan to vacation in the countryside for a week or two after the conclusion of a successful land deal.”

“How lovely,” Anne answered, taking a seat opposite Jack and Cate who had settled on a loveseat. The frowning butler entered the room and Anne ordered tea from him, calling him Benson.

They made small talk regarding the castle and neighboring town until Benson returned with a tea tray. “Excuse me, m’lord,” Benson said, clearing his throat. “Might I have a brief word outside?”

“Please excuse me for just a moment,” Rory said as Anne poured and offered tea to Cate, then Jack.

Anne asked how Cate enjoyed Scotland, recognizing her accent as American. After Cate answered, assuring her she found the country charming, Anne informed them that Rory’s brother, Lucas, was staying at the castle for the holidays. She assured them he and his wife would be interested to meet Jack and Cate.

Cate’s pulse quickened at the mention of his name. Not only her great-grandfather, Lucas was also her top suspect. As she attempted to settle her racing pulse, Rory returned. Anne gazed at him with questioning eyes.

“My sincerest apologies, you’ve caught the household in quite the uproar, I’m afraid,” Rory explained.

“It’s my turn to apologize,” Jack responded. “We took a chance on visiting and with no notification, appear to have caught you at an inopportune time.”

Rory waved his hand in the air, dismissing Jack’s concern.

Anne glanced to the floor before making eye contact with Jack and Cate. “We’ve suffered an unfortunate incident.”

Jack pressed his hand to his chest. “Oh, there’s no need to rehash any details on our account.”

“You’ll read about it in all the local papers, sure enough,” Rory assured him.

“Yes, it’s a tawdry story that’s quite captured the town’s interest, I’m afraid,” Anne admitted. “Following our annual New Year’s Eve party, some of the family’s more precious jewelry pieces were stolen. Quite the story in these parts, a brazen theft right from under the family’s nose.”

“The police are still mucking about the estate, searching for the culprit.”

Jack feigned shock. “How terrible. Have they any leads?”

Anne shook her head as Rory responded, “No. The police have done nothing thus far but wave their hands and inconvenience my holiday guests.”

“Yes,” Anne agreed. “The poor Richardsons were scheduled to depart today and have been asked to stay for several more days. I daresay any future guests may shy away from us with this fiasco.”

“Don’t fret over it, Anne, fair-weather friends are not friends.”

“I understand. However, I feel terribly responsible. It was I who suggested we secure the jewelry the following day rather than immediately following the party. Careless of me, I realize.”

“Anne, it was not your fault,” Rory assured her.

Anne pressed her lips together, tilting her head as though considering the idea. Then she shook her head as though dismissing it. “My apologies for seeming curt, but if you’ll excuse me, I’d like to lie down. I am not feeling at all well.”

Jack stood as Anne rose from her seat. “Not at all, Lady MacKenzie. I hope you recover soon.”

“Thank you. And please, call me Anne.” Anne left the room as Cate took another sip of her tea.

“Again, apologies,” Rory said as the doors shut behind Anne. “Anne has taken the theft quite badly. It upsets her to no end.”

“Understandable,” Jack answered, reclaiming his seat next to Cate. “Ah, if you don’t mind me sticking myself where I don’t belong, my wife, Cate, is quite the amateur sleuth. Perhaps she could help solve the case. She’s even helped the police in solving a murder once.”

Rory’s eyebrows raised, glancing to Cate. “Really?”

“Yes,” Jack answered for her, placing his arm around Cate’s shoulders. “Cleared an innocent man’s name!”

“Bravo, Mrs. MacKenzie,” Rory responded.

“Please, call me Cate,” Cate answered. “And thank you. I seem to have a knack for mysteries. I’d love to assist in any way I can. Especially if it can

help ease Anne's nerves. Poor lady."

"Oh, but I wouldn't dream of asking you to spend your travels lurking around the depths of our castle in search of lost jewels."

"I can't imagine a trip more interesting or memorable for my Cate," Jack responded with a loud laugh. "It's the least we can do for showing up on your doorstep unannounced."

"No, no. Do not trouble yourselves about that. We're happy to have met you and hope to entertain you more than once over your stay here. I suppose if you'd find the challenge entertaining, I've no objections. Typically, I'd decline your kind offer, but poor Anne has herself tied in knots over this. Perhaps you'll be more effective than these bumbling detectives The Yard has sent." Rory rolled his eyes.

"I've never met a mystery I couldn't solve, so I hope to have the jewels back in your possession in short order!" Cate exclaimed.

"Tell you what, why don't you stop by tomorrow? The detectives will return in the mid-afternoon. You can discuss the details with them over afternoon tea," Rory suggested. "Unless you have plans for the day already."

"That sounds perfect. We've no solid plans for our stay yet," Cate informed Rory.

"Well, then allow me to get onto your schedule again before it fills. If you'd join us for dinner on Monday, you can meet more of the family. My brother Lucas and his wife, Amelia, are staying with us."

"How charming, that sounds lovely, thank you," Cate answered, glancing at Jack.

"Yes," he added, "a most gracious invitation. We would be happy to join you. Is 6 p.m. appropriate to arrive?"

"Yes, that should be perfect," Rory answered. "Are you staying in town?"

"No," Jack informed him. "We're in neighboring Canberry."

"Ah," Rory answered. "That seems a bit of an inconvenience for you. What with the traveling back and forth. Why not stay with us?"

"We couldn't possibly inconvenience you that way," Jack replied.

"Inconvenience? Hogwash! Your wife has just offered to help solve the theft, and I've pressured you both into being here over the next two days! The least we can do is offer you a room."

“There’s no guarantee how long this may take, we’d prefer not to take the chance of wearing out our welcome,” Jack dodged.

“Nonsense! Have your luggage sent for, you’ll stay here.” Rory strode to the wall, pulling the bell alerting the servants.

“Oh...” Jack’s voice faltered as he searched for words to rescue them from the situation.

Cate’s jaw dropped open as she glanced wide-eyed at Jack. She shrugged as Benson entered the room.

“Benson, Mr. and Mrs. MacKenzie will be staying with us going forward. Mrs. MacKenzie is an amateur detective and has taken on our missing jewelry case. Prepare a room for them. Perhaps the suite at the end of the unused hall. It should allow Mrs. MacKenzie sufficient privacy and room to conduct her investigation.”

“Yes, m’lord, very good.” Benson disappeared from the room to handle Rory’s request.

“This is very generous, Rory,” Jack said, standing. “But please, there’s no need to send for our luggage. We’ll stay the night in Canberry and return tomorrow following lunch.”

“If you’re sure,” Rory replied. “Whatever you judge is best.”

“Well, we should be off,” Jack announced, glancing at Cate who set her saucer and teacup down on the coffee table and stood. Jack extended his hand to Rory. “I can’t tell you what a pleasure it was to meet you, cousin.”

“The pleasure is all mine,” Rory assured him, grasping his hand. “And quite a stroke of luck! I hope your wife can assist us.”

“I’ve no doubt she can.”

Cate said her goodbyes. Rory walked them to the front door, seeing them out. Cate and Jack walked down the drive, silent at first.

As they passed a row of hedges, Jack cut in behind them, making the circle back to the castle. “Should we...” Cate began.

Jack raised his hand to halt her speaking. “Later.”

Cate bit her tongue as they approached the castle. Using a back entrance, they snuck inside and crept unseen to what would become Cate’s bedroom. Without a word, they used the timepiece to return to the present.

Once returned, Jack dropped the time piece, wandering away while exhaling a loud breath. He doubled over, hands on his knees.

“Should we talk about it?” Cate inquired.

Jack snickered. “Talk about what a bad turn the situation just took.”

Cate sighed as she paced the floor. "Or how we're planning to pull this off. I mean, staying at the castle? There's no way we can be present for everything, meals, family time, the works."

"And there was no avoiding it. He didn't give us a choice. I had to accept."

"Yes, I know. You didn't have a choice."

"At least I bought us some time until tomorrow."

"I hope it's enough to figure this out."

"Look, Cate, perhaps we should just quit while we're ahead. Never return, just leave things go," Jack suggested.

Cate glanced up sharply at him. "What? No! No way!"

"Cate," Jack cautioned, his hands on his hips, "this is way beyond what we can pull off. We can't go missing from the castle in either time and we can't keep dancing back and forth between past and present. We'll run ourselves ragged between the time added to our days and the constant costume changes."

Cate nodded her head. "I agree. This presents us with quite the sticky wicket."

Jack remained silent.

"But I don't agree that we can't find a way around it."

"You're being a little too optimistic."

"And you're being too pessimistic. We'll figure something out. We have until tomorrow afternoon. If we don't find a solid solution, my vote is we go back and take things as they come. It's not like we can't return if things get too difficult. We'll be in the castle! It'll be easy to slip away and head back."

Jack dropped his head back between his shoulder blades. "Oh, Cate," he groaned, shaking his head, "I'll never understand how your mind works."

"What? I'm just pointing out that it's not the end of the world. We may be able to pull this off after all. And if we can't, so what? We just come home! And we're already in the castle to do that!"

"You're right about that. At least we'll have easy access to the time rip. Okay, I'm convinced. We'll go back tomorrow as planned. You speak with the police, and we'll figure things out from there. If worse comes to worst, we can always feign sightseeing or some other nonsense to get us out of family obligations."

“That’s the spirit!” Cate replied, grinning at him. “Plus, things have taken an interesting turn in terms of suspects. Who are the Richardsons? Could they have reason to steal the necklaces?”

“I suppose we’ll find out, won’t we?”

“We will! Well, I suppose after I change, I had better pack us a few suitcases that we can carry with us tomorrow.”

“Suppose so,” Jack answered with a sigh.

They parted ways to change and, after an afternoon walk with the dogs, Cate spent the remaining time before dinner packing for their stay at Dunhaven Castle in 1925. She filled the luggage with multiple items for each of them, ranging from day clothes to evening wear. They could then leave the suitcases in the past, adding to their ruse of staying at the castle.

She hoped they could pull off the subterfuge. Despite her trepidation about identifying her ancestor as the culprit, she still hoped to solve the mystery.

Cate bounded from her bed with a mix of excitement and anxiety filling her. She cursed having to wait until afternoon to travel. She attempted to spend most of her morning keeping busy, either with trekking around the property with Riley and Bailey or working on her research. She spent her work time in the sitting room, still avoiding the library. While she felt foolish, she explained it away to herself and Mrs. Fraser as a need for a change in scenery to motivate and assist her in making progress.

The move failed to effect much change. Her progress remained slow, her mind distracted by her upcoming travel. After lunch, Cate hurried to her room, dressing for the trip. She fussed with the finger curls she put in her hair, trying her best to style them like Anne’s. She changed clothes to a 1925-appropriate outfit and waited for Jack’s knock at her sitting room door.

She perched on the edge of her chaise, gazing at the two pups who chased each other around, play-fighting over a toy moose. She blew out a long breath, catching Riley’s attention. He pranced over to Cate, sniffing her clothes then staring at her as though demanding an explanation.

Cate smiled at him, ruffling the fur on his head with her fingers. “What do you think, Riley? Do I look like I belong in the Roaring Twenties?”

Bailey joined them while Riley eyed Cate. “Care to give your opinion, Bailey?”

Neither dog offered their thoughts. “I guess I’m a little early,” Cate admitted, drumming her fingers on the chaise’s seat. “Jack and I got ourselves into some hot water yesterday and I’m not sure how we’re going to handle it, so I’m a bundle of nerves.”

Riley cocked his head to the side. “Yes. I’m not sure how we’re going to handle this, but I’m determined to try.”

A knock sounded at the door.

“That must be my partner in crime now!”

The pups stared at the door as Cate hurried to open it. Jack entered and Riley raced toward him.

“Hello, Sir Riley,” Jack called as Riley leapt into his arms. “Have you talked Lady Cate out of her crazy plan?”

Riley offered a lick of Jack’s cheek in response. “I’ll take that as a no. How about you, Bailey?” Jack asked the other pup who stood at his feet.

“It’s a no.”

“I figured as much. So, it’s up to me, I guess. Cate, are you sure about this? Rory seems... savvier than Randolph.”

“He may be, but he seemed friendly enough. If things go wrong, we come back and we don’t return. Simple as that.”

“I have the impression it will not be ‘simple as that’ when it comes down to it.”

Cate shrugged, as she led him to the bedroom. “I’ve got suitcases packed. We can leave them there to keep up the ruse we’re staying. That should help with our cover up.”

Jack blew out a breath. “I should have said we were staying in Dunhaven.”

“No, the other town was a good call. That’s what gave us away to Randolph. We said we were staying in town and no one in town knew us.”

“Yes. But we landed ourselves in a world of trouble, anyway.”

“At least we’ve not gotten ourselves caught yet! See, we’re improving!”

“I *really* need your optimism, Lady Cate. Well, I suppose if we’re going to do this, we may as well go.” Jack held out his hand for the timepiece.

Cate grinned at him. Despite the danger, excitement brimmed in her. Instead of the timepiece, though, she offloaded a suitcase into his hands. She grabbed her own along with another case, jostling them into one hand’s grasp. Then she offered the timepiece.

Jack sighed, closing his hand around hers; they activated the mysterious mechanism controlling the time rip. As the second hand slowed to a crawl, Cate and Jack slipped back into another era.

Cate glanced around the room, confirming it was devoid of her personal effects. "We're here."

"For better or worse," Jack replied. "I hope we can sneak out with these things without any trouble!" Jack waved the suitcase in the air.

"It's not too heavy. I can still hurry."

"Give me yours," Jack insisted.

Cate opened her mouth to protest, but the expression issued by Jack stopped her. She handed the suitcase off, keeping her train case.

"Okay," Jack answered with a nod of his head. "Here we go."

They exited the bedroom, crossing the sitting room. Jack eased the door open, peering through the crack. He held a finger to his lips, motioning with his head toward the hall.

Cate nodded, understanding his signal to mean someone was in the hallway.

They waited a few moments in silence. Cate held her breath, afraid even the sound of light breathing may give them away.

After a few moments, Jack peered through the opening between the doors again. This time he offered a thumbs up. They proceeded down the hall, hurrying to reach the stairway. They scrambled down and were able to exit the castle.

As they circled toward the front entrance, Jack wiped a bead of sweat from his brow. "Too heavy?" Cate quipped, motioning toward the suitcases.

"This whole situation is too heavy."

They reached the main entrance and Jack used the door knocker to summon Benson. The butler showed them into the sitting room, assuring them he would have their luggage placed in their room.

Cate and Jack waited. Jack's leg bobbed up and down. Cate placed her hand on his knee to steady it.

"Sorry. I'm nervous."

"You don't say."

He wiped at his brow again. "I can't believe you're not."

"I didn't say that. I'm just better at hiding it."

The doors to the sitting room swung open and Rory entered. "Jack, Cate," he greeted them, approaching with his hand out. Jack rose and shook

his hand, then Rory embraced Cate. “Glad you made it. I didn’t hear a car.”

“Oh, we walked from the property edge,” Jack explained.

“Ah. Carrying luggage? Your American wife must be made of strong stuff!”

“That she is,” Jack assured him.

“Well, allow me to show you to your room. You’ll find it suitable, I’d imagine, to continue your work.”

Rory motioned for them to exit the room. They stepped out into the hallway and waited for Rory to lead them upstairs.

“Thank you again, cousin, for offering the room. It is very generous of you to welcome us this way.”

“Not at all,” Rory replied as they made their way up the main staircase.

They traversed the halls with Rory leading them to the hallway they had just navigated to sneak from the castle. As he marched down the hall toward the room they had just come from, Cate hoped the surprise on her face was not apparent. Could he be placing them in the exact room she used nearly a century later?

She glanced at Jack, who gave a slight shrug to acknowledge the strange situation. Sure enough, Rory led them to Cate’s suite’s doors. He opened them, stepping inside and motioning for them to enter. “I hope you’ll find this suitable.”

Cate swallowed, stepping into the room and pretending to the best of her ability to act as though it was the first time she saw it. “It’s lovely!”

“Yes,” Jack agreed.

Rory closed the doors behind them. “And I believe best suited to your travels back and forth between here and your own time.”

CHAPTER 19



Cate's stomach somersaulted, and she glanced wide-eyed at Jack.
"Ahhhhh," Jack began.

"You are time travelers, aren't you?" Rory pressed.

"Time travelers?" Jack repeated as though unfamiliar with the concept. He creased his brow, playing confused.

Cate followed his lead. "What an interesting concept. Most entertaining!"

Rory chuckled, narrowing his eyes. "Let's not play coy. I'm not outraged at your presence. Quite the opposite, I'm thankful. If you can help solve the mystery and set Anne's nerves to rest, I should be grateful."

Cate swallowed hard. She glanced at Jack and, with a shrug, said, "Okay, you caught us. We can't tell you much else, but yes, we aren't from this time."

Rory nodded, a smile on his face. "I knew it. My instincts were correct."

"But how?" Jack questioned.

"Two things," Rory explained. "First, your names. Jack and Cate MacKenzie. When I was a boy, my grandfather told me a fantastical tale about two time travelers that saved his life. He told me one day I'd understand more about the story, but when I was a child, the legend of these two time traveling heroes filled my imagination. Their names: Jack and Cate MacKenzie."

Jack rolled his eyes at their foolish gaffe of using the same names as when they had visited Rory's grandfather, Randolph MacKenzie's era in

1856.

“And the second thing?” Cate inquired.

Rory paced the room in front of them. “I’ll admit, after hearing your names I was suspicious, but I wasn’t sure until you told me the second piece of information.” He spun to face Jack. “You, Jack, mentioned Cate helped solve a murder and saved an innocent man’s life. That coincided with my grandfather’s story. I put the pieces together and bet you were the same two who’d helped him.”

Cate and Jack shared a glance. “That makes it official then.”

“Official?” Rory queried.

“Yes. We are officially the worst time travelers ever.”

Rory burst out laughing. “It can’t be easy maintaining your cover when the castle’s proprietor is aware of the secret. Oh, on that note, my brother, Lucas, is unaware of the astonishing secret protected within these walls.”

“Understood,” Cate answered, nodding. “We don’t plan on spreading that information. We were only hoping to help solve the mystery.”

“And again, I am most grateful. I’m afraid Anne’s taken the loss badly. She feels responsible for the loss of the keepsakes. They were my grandmother’s jewels. Oh, but you probably realize that. You were acquainted.”

Cate nodded again. “Yes. In fact, I wore one of the necklaces to the Halloween Ball she hosted.”

“How fascinating. I must admit, I’m not as adventurous as my great-great-grandfather, Douglas, nor as you, Jack and Cate. I don’t do much time traveling.”

“It’s not all it’s cracked up to be,” Jack admitted, tugging at his collar.

Rory offered a small chuckle. “If I am correct, this room leads to this year. So, you may use it as a conduit to shuttle back and forth between times. This should make your comings and goings easier.”

“Yes, it will. Thank you,” Cate answered.

“Well, with that settled, I’ll leave you to discuss your plans before the police arrive. They plan to be here midafternoon. You may speak with them then about the investigation. I shall tell them to provide you with any information you request.” Rory strode to the doors leading to the hall. “Oh,” he mentioned, turning back, “will you be dining ‘in town’ this evening?”

“Yes,” Cate replied. “But we will still join you for dinner tomorrow if the offer still stands.”

“It most certainly does. I shall tell Anne that you plan to take in sights in the area whilst here, that will explain your absences without trouble.”

“Thank you, Rory,” Cate answered with a smile.

Rory exited the room, closing the doors behind him.

Jack collapsed onto the chaise lounge, exhaling loudly. “Oh, you’ve got to be kidding me!”

Cate sank onto the chaise next to him, her hands clasped as she leaned on her thighs. “We really are the worst time travelers ever, aren’t we?”

Jack gave her a sidelong glance. “Yes, we are. We are oh-for-two on these trips.”

“Using the same name was not that smart in retrospect.”

“No. We should have made up different names. Like Hank and Beth MacKenzie or something.”

Cate wriggled her nose. “Hank and Beth?”

“Yeah, Hank and Beth.”

Cate shrugged. “Oh well. At least, it worked out. Rory was extremely accommodating. And it only makes our work easier!”

“Lucky us!” Jack retorted.

“Now all we have to do is prove my great-grandfather isn’t a thief. Then we can chalk this up to another successful venture!” Cate stood. “Come on. Let’s see if the police have arrived.”

“Ugh,” Jack grumbled but climbed to his feet. “My heart is just returning to normal speed.”

Cate giggled at him. “Oh, come on, you need some excitement in your life!”

Jack and Cate traversed the halls, arriving in the foyer as Rory escorted the police from his study.

“Ah, how fortunate! This is the woman I was speaking of,” Rory informed the officer. “I’d appreciate it if you’d fill her in on any details. Her reputation at solving crimes is most exceptional. You can speak in the sitting room.”

The officer studied Cate up and down with a grunt. “Follow me.”

Cate and Jack began to follow the man through the doors when he stopped short.

“You too?” he questioned, jabbing a finger toward Jack.

“If you don’t mind,” Jack responded.

The officer rolled his eyes. “Anyone else who’d like to discuss the private details of the case?”

“No, thank you, Officer MacCullough,” Rory replied, a perfect example of non-reactionary British breeding.

With another roll of his eyes, Officer MacCullough led them into the sitting room.

“Shall we sit?” Cate requested, motioning toward the setup near the fireplace.

“I suppose so, Mrs., ah, MacKenzie was it?”

“Yes, that’s correct. Catherine MacKenzie, Cate for short. This is my husband, Jack.” Cate extended her hand to shake his, as did Jack.

“And how are you related to Lord MacKenzie?” the officer asked after grazing her hand with his in a limp handshake.

“My husband is a distant cousin,” Cate explained.

“I see. Well, Lord MacKenzie asked that I share the current information about the case. Before I do so, I want to make it clear, Mrs. MacKenzie, that I prefer you do not interfere with the investigation. This is serious police business.”

“I don’t plan to interfere, but, as Lord MacKenzie may have mentioned, I’m good at mysteries. I’d like to assist. Poor Lady MacKenzie is beside herself.”

Officer MacCullough offered another eye roll in response before continuing, reading from his tiny notebook. “I suppose you’ve heard the story, but here it is again. The jewelry was removed from the safe on 31 December. Lady MacKenzie selected the piece she would wear for the party and left the other piece on her dressing table. When she returned to her room following the party, the other piece of jewelry was still there. She removed her necklace and earrings, setting them next to the others in their case. She retired around 1 a.m. and when she dressed the following morning at eleven, the jewelry was discovered missing.”

“Thank you for the recap, I am aware of that. What of the investigation?”

With a sigh, the officer flipped a page and continued to read. “We interviewed everyone. No clear suspects emerged.”

Cate’s jaw dropped. “That’s it?”

“Yes, Mrs. MacKenzie, that’s it. We’re working with very little information here. Most people were asleep during the robbery. No one has a

clear motive. For all we know, someone snuck in, grabbed the jewelry, and ran off!”

“While that’s a theory, I’m not sure how plausible it is. This would imply someone knew that Lady MacKenzie would leave the jewelry on her dressing table and could navigate to her room to retrieve it while she slept.”

“Thank you for that adept analysis, Mrs. MacKenzie, but it doesn’t rule out the possibility.”

“No, it doesn’t, but it makes it more likely that the culprit is right under our noses in the house.”

The officer appeared vexed, as though his patience with the amateur detective was wearing thin. “We’ve interviewed everyone. Nothing’s stood out. We continue to check on the statements we’ve taken, verify details and so on, but nothing has pointed to anyone.”

“No leads? Not even a conjecture?” Cate questioned.

“We have no solid leads, Mrs. MacKenzie. If you ask me, I’d say her ladies’ maid did it. The opportunity the young woman had alone makes her the primary suspect.”

“That’s rather prejudicial, wouldn’t you say?”

Officer MacCullough let out a sigh. “Nothing else points to anything solid. Often hunches provide the best avenues in my experience.”

Cate narrowed her eyes at him, guessing his experience was not all that vast. After a moment, she nodded. “Thank you, Officer MacCullough, for the information.”

He nodded to her and turned to leave. As he reached the doors, he faced her again. “Oh, and just a reminder, Mrs. MacKenzie, I don’t want you interfering in my investigation.” With that, he pulled the doors open, exiting the room.

“Well, wasn’t he just a big bowl of sunshine,” Jack commented after he left.

Cate nodded in agreement. “He does not seem pleased about us butting into his case.”

“What case? The man’s done less investigating than you have, Cate.”

Cate chuckled. “You may be right. And his theory that it’s Murray, Anne’s maid, is absurd. Based only on conjecture with nothing substantiated.”

“I didn’t remember her name appearing anywhere on your suspect list,” Jack admitted.

“No, it doesn’t. Although, I may be wrong,” Cate answered with a shrug.

“I doubt it. His entire case is based on the fact that it was convenient for her to have stolen the jewelry. Yet I’m sure he has no answers about how she’s disposing of it or why she’s never had sticky fingers before. Certainly this isn’t the first time she’s handled pricey items for her ladyship.”

“I agree. The case is weak. I doubt it’s her.”

They were silent for a moment.

“I don’t know what we expected to be honest,” Cate admitted. “We already realized the case goes unsolved. So, it isn’t any wonder the police have zero theories.”

“No, you’re right. Looks like we have our work cut out for us then. The police won’t be of any help.”

“Yes. Well, perhaps we should take our leave for the day. It’s almost time for the dinner gong and we’re supposed to be ‘dining in town’ tonight. We should disappear to our room and return to our time.”

“Okay, Cate,” Jack agreed, happy to return to the present.

They navigated to the room. Before leaving, they unpacked a few items from their suitcases to make the room appear lived in. Cate also rumpled the bedsheets so the maids would find the bed “slept in” when they tidied the next morning. With their work complete, they returned to the present.

When they returned, Cate reminded Jack that despite Rory’s invitation to dinner Monday, their dinner plans were tomorrow, Sunday, in their time. Jack thanked her for the reminder before leaving to change.

After changing and eating dinner, Cate spent her evening writing notes about their journey. She tried to include all relevant details she had gleaned from the police detective, which had been few. His supposition about the maid seemed more a guess than a theory. Still, Cate noted the direction the investigation seemed to be heading.

She compared her new findings to the notes she had made prior to the trip. The new information did nothing to augment her current hypotheses regarding the guilty party’s identity. The maid didn’t even appear on her list of probable suspects. And Cate wasn’t about to add her name, either.

The notion made little sense. It was only a step away from the old “the butler did it” theory. The only names she added to the suspect list was that of the mysterious Richardsons. She wrote a note asking who they were and if they could have any motivation to have committed the theft. It was

around this time that many families found themselves unable to keep up their lifestyles. Perhaps the Richardsons were one of these families. Perhaps a jewel heist would provide enough funds for them to maintain their home. It was a wild theory, but no less probable than the theory of the maid committing the crime.

Cate sighed, staring at the note sheets spread in front of her. Try as she might, willing them to provide more information failed. Frustrated, she stuffed them back into her folder and tossed it on the nearby side table. Her head sank back onto the chaise. Perhaps she would find out more information tomorrow at dinner. She would meet the rest of the family then. She'd also meet the Richardsons. Perhaps then she could shore up or dismiss the case against them.

Cate awoke the following morning with her mind in a knot. Her two trips to the past had clarified nothing. Instead, they'd only added two names to her list. Two names, she reminded herself, that did not represent family members, at least not to her knowledge.

She'd added the Richardsons to the list, but Anne's damning note spoke to their innocence. In her blind desire to make the criminal anyone but her ancestor, she'd listed them on her suspect sheet the previous evening. But now, in the cold light of day, she questioned her decision to do so. It was likely unfair, but she'd leave it for now.

Cate wandered the property with the dogs after breakfast. Her investigation weighed on her mind. With no leads from the police, she'd be going it alone. So far, she'd not made much progress. With any luck, meeting everyone at dinner would provide some enlightening information. But what information could she glean from light conversation over cocktails or at the dining table?

Her mind attempted to concoct a plan for retrieving information. However, she couldn't see a way to fish for information without being obvious, especially without knowing the players involved, their personalities, and how they might react to her. Furthermore, her introverted nature made her a less-than-proficient conversationalist.

Cate imagined scenario after scenario in which she might elicit information from someone without being obvious. She sighed as she stared out over the loch, frozen at the edges. None of these conversations would

occur the way her mind created them. No amount of preparation would help her. Tonight, she would have to wing it.

She returned to the castle, using her time after lunch to search for any details about the Richardsons of 1925. She found none.

To fill the time, Cate opened the manuscript for her book. She focused long enough to type a description of Rory and Anne MacKenzie into the document. Pleased with her ability to complete even a small amount of work, she saved the document and closed her laptop. After checking the time, she realized it was nearly time to return to the past. They planned to dress for dinner in 1925 with the clothes she packed. However, she changed into a suitable dress before they departed.

Jack met her in the late afternoon, sneaking into the castle so as not to run into the castle's other occupant, Molly. He had already changed into period-appropriate clothing before they made the trip back.

"Whew!" Jack exclaimed, wiping sweat from his brow as 1925 settled around them. "I was so afraid we'd appear in front of a maid."

Cate glanced around the room. The bed was made, and the suite tidied. "If I'm not mistaken, they'd tidy the room in the morning, so we must be careful if we pop back then."

"Well, I suppose we should change for dinner. Would you like to go first?"

"Thanks," she answered, pulling a dress from her suitcase. Cate entered the bathroom, fixing her hair into an updo. She touched up her makeup with the few supplies she brought with her. After slipping out of her day clothes, she pulled on the dinner gown she selected for the evening. With a bodice filled with silver beads, the dress weighed heavily on her. Frills cascaded to the floor from the drop waist and flutter sleeves caressed her arms. She finished the look with a choker, popular in this era. She pulled on her shoes and emerged from the bathroom.

"Your turn," she announced.

"Wow, that's some dress!" Jack replied as he grabbed his evening clothes.

Cate lifted her chin with a smile. "Thanks. I thought it was rather pretty, too!"

Jack's process went much faster than Cate's. She waited for him in the sitting room, pulling on her elbow length black gloves. He emerged from the bedroom, pulling at his collar. "Could they make these any stiffer?"

“Stop complaining, you look great!” Cate answered, standing.

“That has less to do with the clothes and more to do with my stunning good looks, Lady Cate,” Jack quipped, flashing her a grin.

“And your humility,” Cate retorted with a wink.

“Aye, humble to a fault, that’s me,” Jack said, broadening his grin. He offered Cate his arm. “Shall we?”

Cate accepted, and they sauntered to the sitting room where the family and their guests met for cocktails before dinner.

When Cate and Jack entered, Anne and Rory were already present. Another couple sat on the loveseat across from Anne. The man rose as Cate and Jack came in.

“Ah, there you are. You see, Anne, I told you they’d be dining with us,” Rory said as they entered.

“Oh! Yes, I was worried when you weren’t at any of the earlier meals. I wondered if the nasty business with the police put you off.”

“Not at all,” Cate assured her. “We’ve been taking in some sights around the countryside.”

“Yes,” Jack added. “We left early this morning. We are early risers.”

“Please allow me to introduce you to my brother, Lucas, and his wife, Amelia,” Rory announced, guiding them to the other couple in the room. “Lucas, this is our distant cousin Jack MacKenzie and his wife, Cate.”

Jack shook hands with Lucas and Amelia, who remained seated.

“A pleasure,” Lucas replied as he shook their hands.

Cate swallowed hard as she gazed into the eyes of her great-grandfather. She searched them; the momentous moment tainted by her conjecture about him being a thief.

CHAPTER 20



Lucas smiled down at Cate as she tried to steady herself, wondering if she was shaking hands with a thief.

He stared for another moment before tearing his eyes away to speak with Jack as he lowered himself onto the loveseat next to his wife, Amelia. “And how are you related to us, cousin Jack?”

“Oh, ah, I’ll attempt an explanation, though I’m never good at familial connections of this nature,” Jack stalled. “My great-great-great... or is it great-great...”

The appearance of another couple interrupted Jack’s attempts at an explanation.

“Good evening,” the older man greeted them. On his arm, a much younger wife.

“Ah, good evening Bryce.”

Cate noted the first name, Bryce Richardson. She’d search any records she could find on him when she returned. Rory made introductions, presenting Cate and Jack to the Richardsons.

She learned Bryce’s wife’s name was Eleanor. Stories like Eleanor’s were familiar to her as a historian. Eleanor, also an American, was a “dollar princess.” New money who married into British nobility. Eleanor gained a title and status while Bryce gained a fortune to keep his estate running. It was unlikely that these two had stolen the jewelry unless they had suffered some recent misfortune that resulted in the loss of Eleanor’s money.

Judging by the jewelry Eleanor sported, a large ruby necklace, rings on many fingers and a cascade of sparkling bracelets, this wasn't the case.

Cate surmised she could cross the couple off her suspect list. At least it made conversation with Eleanor easier since it thrilled the woman to no end to have found another American to talk to.

During dinner, Jack's connection to the family came up once again. Jack, looking like a deer caught in headlights, stared at Lucas as he commented, "Jack, you never finished your explanation of how you're related."

"Didn't I?" he answered, his brow furrowing as though confused. "Oh! How thoughtless of me. Well, as I began to mention, we share a..."

"Great-great-great-great-grandfather," Rory finished for him. "I believe you missed one of those greats earlier, Jack. Yes, Douglas is our common relative. Jack descends from Finlay's brother."

"Oh, yes, quite distant then," Lucas responded.

"Quite," Jack answered, nodding.

"But still carrying the MacKenzie name," Lucas added. "How interesting! How close and far we all are."

"Yes," Rory agreed. "And how fortunate to have met our relative. We are pleased you are staying with us."

"Yes. I hope to get to know you better," Lucas commented.

"Will you be staying on long?" Cate inquired.

"Lucas and Amelia planned to stay through next weekend," Anne informed her. "This dreadful investigation has stranded Bryce and Eleanor here. Oh, how we've ruined your plans."

"Think nothing of it, dear lady," Bryce assured Anne. "Paris will still be there in a few days' time."

"And how exciting to be caught up in a real mystery!" Eleanor exclaimed.

"How gracious you both are," Anne replied.

"It sounds as though we'll have the opportunity to get acquainted," Lucas followed up. "I understand you'll be staying at least a week."

"Yes," Jack assured him. "And we'd like to spend some time getting to know everyone."

Dinner conversation continued discussing various small talk items. Afterward, Cate departed with the ladies to the sitting room, allowing the

men to enjoy a brandy and cigars. She made polite conversation, hoping to have a discussion with Lucas.

After twenty-five minutes, the men joined them in the sitting room. Cate touched base with Jack before circulating around the room to speak with others. She made her way to Lucas after speaking with Rory for a few moments.

“Jack and I are both pleased you were here for the holidays. When we chanced stopping by, we hoped to meet at least Rory. We were so fortunate to meet you both!” Cate began.

“I’m pleased to have been here to meet you also,” Lucas responded.

“Do you often spend the holidays here?”

“We have since our marriage, yes. Amelia enjoys winter on the estate over the hustle and bustle of the city.”

Cate nodded in understanding. “It is charming here. I see the appeal.”

“So, you are enjoying our little hamlet? How does it compare to the States?”

“I am enjoying it very much,” Cate answered. “Life seems so very settled here.”

Lucas sipped at his drink. “Do you find us very quaint compared to life there?”

“Not at all. A refreshing change!”

“Where are you from there, Cate?”

“Just outside of Chicago. What about you? Where do you call home?” Cate sipped at her sherry, a bundle of nerves as she tried to glean information from Lucas.

“London, at the moment,” Lucas responded.

Cate raised an eyebrow. “At the moment?”

“Yes. We spend most of our time there, anyway. We spend the Christmas holiday in Dunhaven and we summer at Amelia’s family estate.”

“Oh, how lovely,” Cate commented. “The English countryside is enchanting. I’m sure the summers are truly restful.”

“Indeed,” Lucas agreed. “Amelia’s family’s country home is most charming.”

“Will the property come to you?” Cate pressed, hoping she didn’t overstep.

“No. Amelia’s inheritance is most generous but does not include the country estate. That will go to her brother, who will also inherit the title of

Earl.”

“How interesting. I hope you don’t find me too forward, but I’ve little idea about how these things work here. In America, we have no restrictions on passing property to daughters. I understand that to be entirely different here.”

“Oh, it is. Land can be passed but not title. And the title only goes to one person. As with myself and my brother, Rory. He inherited Dunhaven Castle, along with the title of Earl of Dunhavenshire. As second-born, I did not.”

“This is so fascinating to me. Lines of succession do not exist in the States. I imagine this may lead to some... jealousy in some families. With assets being split and titles being passed to only one son.”

“Oh, it can cause quite the uproar in some families, you can be sure!”

“Hmm, it seems to have caused no strife in yours. What a wonderful testament to your parents.”

“Oh, none at all,” Lucas assured her. “Father provided well for each of us, I’ve nothing to be jealous of. And to be frank, the burden of care of the castle and the county is better laid on my brother’s shoulders than mine. He was always more serious than I. I was a dreamer!”

Cate smiled at him. “And are you still?”

“I’ll admit, I’ve quelled most of my childish fantasies, but I still enjoy the freedom afforded me by being the younger brother.” He winked at her.

Cate chuckled as she tapped her fingertips against her glass. “There’s nothing wrong with that. It is fortunate that you enjoy your role. Many people would allow displeasure to build inside them over it. I find it frustrating. A person can change many things, but family is not amongst them.”

“Very true, Cate. And family is too important to spend life bickering with. What about your family? Do they miss you terribly with your move here? I assume with Jack’s business you reside in the country?”

Cate nodded. “We do, yes, at the moment. We, too, are a bit of two rolling stones. We haven’t settled just yet.”

“Perhaps you’d prefer life in the States nearer to your family?”

“I have no family. My parents passed when I was younger, before I met Jack. I have no siblings.”

Lucas pushed out his lips in a frown. “Oh, how tragic for you. It must have been very jarring and frightening to be orphaned at a young age.”

Cate offered a closed-mouth smile. Her great-grandfather summarized her true feelings when her parents died in the tragic and unexpected car accident. Strange, how he read her reaction to her father and his own grandson's death so well.

"I've upset you," he continued, reading her expression. He set his drink down, placing a hand on her arm. "My sincerest apologies. Do you need to sit down?"

Cate shook her head, shaking the feelings from her heart as well. Enough time had passed that, despite the temporary sadness that swept through her, she could recover without descending into an emotional wreck.

"No, no," she responded, waving her hand at him, "I'm fine. It has been several years. But your description is accurate."

Lucas nodded, giving her a pitying expression. After a moment, he suggested they change the subject. They chatted for several more minutes about the country and a few recommended attractions Cate and Jack may like to visit while staying at the castle. Cate thanked him for the suggestions before continuing to circulate the room.

After another hour, Cate and Jack announced they would retire for the evening. They promised Anne to join them for dinner the following day, informing her they'd be off on another day trip to some of the sights Lucas suggested.

They traversed the halls to their room, changed from their evening clothes to something more suitable to appear in the following day prior to dinner. As Jack changed, Cate again mussed the bedsheets and laid out a few items around the room to give the appearance of a couple staying there. When they finished, they used the timepiece to return to the present time.

Jack gave his customary sigh of relief when they returned. "

Glad to be home?" Cate inquired.

"Yep. I'm always nervous when we time travel. I'm with Rory on this, not adventurous."

Cate giggled at his faint-heartedness for time travel. She checked the timepiece. It was only late afternoon. Despite the hours they'd spent in 1925, only minutes had passed in the present. "Would you mind comparing notes after we change?" Cate inquired of Jack.

"Not at all. I'm curious to hear what you learned. I spotted you talking to Lucas."

“And you must share the secrets you learned during the cigar and brandy men-only session,” Cate chuckled, rolling her eyes.

“Oh, no, no, no, Lady Cate,” Jack chided, waving his finger at her. “Those secrets of the universe can never be shared to someone outside of the male gender!”

Cate offered him a wry glance as he backed out of the room, winking at her. “Meet you in the library in a few.”

Cate sped through changing, then gathered the dogs, two cups of hot tea, and headed for the library. When she arrived, Jack was already lounging in an armchair near the fireplace. Riley raced over to leap onto his lap for attention. Bailey trailed behind, staying on the floor.

“Hello, Sir Riley!” Jack greeted him. “And Mr. Bailey, too!”

“He’s starting to come around,” Cate noted as she sank into the chair opposite Jack’s.

“Aye, he is. Poor little fellow, he’s so shy, but he’s learning from his big brother that there’s nothing to be afraid of. Aren’t you?” Jack ruffled the fur on Bailey’s head. “So, what did you learn from Lucas? Did he confess to the crime?”

“No,” Cate answered with a shake of her head. Her brows wrinkled as she went over their conversation in her mind. “And to be honest, it would have surprised me if he did it.”

“Really? Isn’t he your prime suspect?”

“He was. He is.” Cate shrugged and sighed. “I don’t know anymore.”

“What about your conversation with him leads you to think he may not be our guy?”

Cate pondered the question. “Well, several things. First, one would assume the motivation for a theft is money. Assumedly the thief will profit. It appears that Lucas isn’t in need of money. Unless he’s squandered it all and is putting on a good show. Or his motivation is wanting to make Rory unhappy. But that doesn’t seem to be the circumstance. He stated his father left him a generous inheritance, as did Amelia’s father. He also admitted he preferred not to be lord of the manor. He considered it a burden and regards his brother’s personality as better suited for the role.”

Jack raised his eyebrows as he digested the information. “Sounds as though he was reasonably open with you. How’d you get that information from him?”

“He mentioned Amelia’s family holds the deed to a country home that they summer at. I asked if the property would pass to Amelia. When he said it didn’t, I feigned ignorance in the ways of how British property and titles pass and allowed him to explain that they typically go to the first-born sons and titles cannot pass to daughters. Then I pretended to consider the information and concluded that this may cause strife within many families. I tried to guide the conversation to determine if there was any hint of jealousy between my great-grandfather and my great-uncle.”

“No hints?”

“None. He seems to hold to the belief that family is most important, and it’s senseless to spend life arguing with them.”

“Anything else?”

“He was very kind when we spoke about my parents’ deaths. I’ll admit I found that conversation bizarre considering we were speaking of his grandson’s death. Anyway, his general nature doesn’t seem to coincide with a jewel thief.”

“So, is he officially off the suspect list?”

Cate curled her legs underneath her on the chair. “No. Perhaps he’s a fantastic liar. Perhaps all his familial sentiment and openness about his feelings regarding his brother’s inheritance are a cover.”

“He didn’t strike me as a liar. He seemed very genuine when I spoke with him. Even during our secret man meeting.”

Cate chuckled at Jack’s last statement. “You’re really not going to tell me what went on during the secret meeting, are you?”

“Lady Cate, I’m bound by centuries of tradition and trust not to. What is discussed over brandy and cigars after the ladies have left is privileged information. Like a confession or attorney-client privilege.”

Cate rolled her eyes at him. “Well, as long as it doesn’t affect our investigation, I’ll leave you to your secrets. My other reason for not removing him from the list is Anne’s letter. She clearly calls out a family member. Perhaps it pertains to this theft, perhaps not, but it’s our biggest clue. And Lucas is the only family member present.”

Jack tapped the chair’s arm. “Again, she never references the jewelry or anything specific. It could refer to anything.”

“What are the chances a letter that discussed being robbed and something being stolen refers to something outside of the major jewelry theft at the estate.”

Jack flung his arms in the air. "I'm not a statistician."

"I don't think you need a doctorate in statistics to realize the event is unlikely."

"Okay, okay, but given the information you just shared, I'd try to keep an open mind as we proceed. Don't get stuck on that one bit of information."

"You're right. And like I said, I'd be surprised. If Lucas is the thief, he's also an exceptional liar."

"Perhaps it's Amelia," Jack suggested. "Anne may consider her family being her sister-in-law."

Cate considered the new idea, her eyebrows raising. "Maybe. What would Amelia's motivation be? It appears she was also well-provided for. They aren't wanting."

"Perhaps she is motivated by jealousy? Lucas may not have wanted to be king of the castle, but perhaps Amelia wanted to carry a title."

"It's a possibility," Cate agreed, "although something doesn't scan to me."

"Why's that?"

"Amelia would have realized it was unlikely for Lucas to inherit the castle. If she wanted a title, she could have married a man sure to receive one."

"Perhaps she didn't have any offers."

Cate sipped at her tea. "Perhaps."

"But you don't believe that."

"No, I don't. But you have a point. Both she and Lucas need to stay on the suspect list. However, we'll keep an open mind about other suspects."

"You've still got a few staff members on your list, right?"

"Yes, and the Richardsons, however, they don't seem likely either. First, they aren't family, so Anne's letter doesn't make sense. And even if we disregard that, unless they've lost a great deal of money quickly, they probably aren't doing it for the cash. Plus, if you noticed the amount of jewelry on Eleanor, I doubt they're hurting."

"That could be fake. And how do you know they've got a fortune?"

"Eleanor is American. It's probable she's a dollar princess."

Jack sipped at the hot liquid, screwing up his face. "A what?"

"A dollar princess. She was an American heiress. Eleanor married Bryce to gain a title and a place in society. He married her to salvage his

estate from financial ruin. It happened quite a bit just prior to the twenties. Given their age difference, I'd say that's what happened."

"Interesting," Jack responded, rubbing his chin. "So, with the infusion of cash, it's not likely they are broke."

"No, unless he made some poor investments. However, that doesn't seem to be the case. I know people can present the illusion of wealth, but with their frequent travels, I'd say it's more than an illusion. I'll try to spend some time with Bryce and Eleanor at dinner tomorrow and see if I can extract any information."

"Okay, good plan."

"I don't agree, but it's the best we've got. The only thing I'm certain of is that Anne's ladies' maid didn't do it."

"Certain?"

Cate nodded. "Yes, she'd been with Anne since she was a child. She was a maid in her parents' household who became a ladies' maid to Anne as she aged and married Rory. She's had plenty of opportunities to steal from both families and never did. Why would she do it now?"

"Did they have some kind of argument? Is Anne looking to replace her?"

"No," Cate answered with a shake of her head. "According to Anne, she feels terrible over the position the girl is in. She's adamant that Murray did not steal from her."

"Ah, did you learn this in your secret girls only meeting?"

"I did. Unlike you, I'm willing to share the secrets of the universe despite centuries of tradition."

"Well, then I suppose we continue on checking out the other guests and the few staff members we've got on the suspect list."

"Yep, that's about all we can do. You're off the hook until around four tomorrow afternoon, I guess."

"All right, then. I suppose I'll head home and enjoy life in the present."

Cate nodded as Jack stood. "Enjoy the rest of your day off."

"I will. See you tomorrow." Jack ambled to the doorway, turning back before he left. "Oh, I almost forgot. Have you had any more dreams about the, you know?" He pointed to the bookshelf.

"No. I haven't. Hopefully it was just a fluke caused by the drafty castle."

“I hope so, too,” Jack answered with a smile. “Good night, Lady Cate. Sleep tight, don’t let the bookshelves bite,” he called as he proceeded down the hall.

“Very funny,” Cate shouted after him. She sat for a few more moments in the library pondering the case or lack thereof she was building. Finding no additional information after going over the conversations in her mind, she chose to retire to her room. She gathered Riley and Bailey and exited the library. Despite no more disturbing dreams, Cate had no desire to remain in the library. She shuddered as she gave the bookcase one final look, still disturbed.

CHAPTER 21



Cate drummed her fingers on the desk as she stared at the cursor on her screen. A frown formed on her lips.

She'd spent most of her morning searching for information on the Richardsons. She'd found a few news articles mentioning them and one announcing their marriage.

Based on the information in the article, her guess was correct, Eleanor was a dollar princess. The infusion of cash into Bryce Richardson's estate allowed him to keep the house until his son sold it later in the century. They did not appear to be suffering from a lack of money. Cate concluded they could be removed from the suspect list.

After lunch, Cate spent the few hours before she and Jack planned to travel back to 1925 working on her book's manuscript. She found she possessed neither the interest nor the concentration needed to make any decent headway. Instead, she gaped around the sitting room, searching for anything to divert her attention from the task at hand. She'd chosen to work in the sitting room again, remaining apprehensive about spending time in the library. It was foolish of her, she realized, but her instincts still preferred to avoid the room until her subconscious mind stopped obsessing over it.

Cate closed the document on her laptop. Anything she wrote today she'd likely delete the next time she worked, so there was no sense in wasting time. Instead, Cate browsed around a few shopping sites and checked her email. She found a few personal emails and sent responses to each sender. When she finished the last response, she checked her

timepiece. She had enough time to walk the dogs before changing for her trip to the past.

After the walk, Cate paced the floor of her sitting room with time to spare even after changing. Time seemed to stand still as she waited for Jack to arrive. Finally, a soft knock sounded at the door. Cate raced to open the door, waving Jack inside.

“Anxious?” he asked with a chuckle.

“Very. I hate waiting all day.”

“Okay, let’s get going then,” Jack replied as they entered the bedroom.

They used the timepiece to activate the time rip, sending them back to 1925. Cate glanced around the room, noting it had been tidied. A note on the night table bearing her and Jack’s names caught her eye. She dashed to it, tearing it open.

“Who is it from? What does it say?” Jack asked, peering over her shoulder.

“It’s from Rory. He says they have canceled formal dinner. Anne is too upset because... oh my gosh!” Cate exclaimed with a gasp. “Murray has been arrested and charged with the theft!”

“With what evidence? Where is the proof of her guilt?”

“I’m not sure, he doesn’t mention anything else. He says to seek him out when we arrive to discuss the situation.”

“This is a good thing.”

“A good thing?” Cate questioned, spinning to face him.

“Yes, I won’t have to wear the monkey suit tonight,” Jack responded with a grin.

Cate grimaced at him. “It’s not that bad!”

“It is! You try wearing a starched collar all night! It has rubbed my neck raw!”

“The beaded dress isn’t exactly the height of comfort, you know,” Cate informed him. “But comfort aside, I rather like the monkey suit.”

“Yes, it makes me look rather dashing, doesn’t it?”

“I appreciate the value placed on formality in eras like this. People were fervent about customs and traditions. Things like dinner took on special meaning.”

“If you had money,” Jack pointed out.

“Yes, I suppose you’re right, but my romantic side clings to the pomp and circumstance of it all.”

“My romantic side clings to my plaid pajama pants and a well-worn hoodie,” Jack quipped.

“Funny. Well, no need to change. Should we look for Rory?” Cate queried, waving the note in the air.

“Guess so. Let’s find out what’s going on so we can adjust our plan.”

Cate and Jack left the bedroom, navigating to the office where they supposed Rory may be working. Despite the late hour, since there was no need to change for dinner, they found him there.

“Ah, Jack, Cate, please come in. You received my note, I trust.”

“We did. How terrible for Anne and Murray!” Cate replied.

“Yes, I’m afraid Anne is taking it badly. Hence the canceled dinner. I hope we haven’t inconvenienced you in that way. I can have a tray sent up.”

“Not at all,” Cate replied, “we don’t need a tray. What evidence do the police have that prompted the charge against Murray?”

“Little, it seems. She has the best means and motive according to Officer MacCullough.”

“That’s no reason to charge the poor girl,” Jack chimed in.

“I agree,” Cate concurred.

“Despite both my and Anne’s protestations, Officer MacCullough continued forward with the arrest. I’m afraid there’s little to be done.”

“I’d like to speak with her,” Cate replied, pacing the room. “We’ll go as soon as we’ve finished speaking.”

“To what end?” Rory questioned. “Murray maintains her innocence. I’m not sure what details she can provide to you to assist.”

“Perhaps none,” Cate admitted, “however it may do her good to realize more than you and Anne are on her side.”

“I’m sure she will appreciate your support, yes,” Rory agreed.

“Is there anyone you suspect, Rory?” Cate questioned.

“Suspect? No, there isn’t anyone. This turn of events shocked me, to be honest. It gives me chills to conclude a thief lives among us.”

Cate’s heart dropped as she considered at the top of her suspect list was Rory’s own brother. Poor Rory could barely accept that there was a thief within his household. How shocking would it be to realize the thief was a member of your own family? No wonder Anne wrote the scathing letter. The disappointment they both experienced must have been soul-shattering.

Cate reminded herself she hadn’t yet solidified the case against Lucas. Perhaps she’d be proven wrong, though she didn’t see how. “What about

the Richardsons? Is there any reason to suspect them?"

"Bryce and Eleanor?" Rory inquired. "You must be joking!"

Cate shrugged. "I'm not accusing them. But we've got to eliminate some people to zero in on the correct person."

"Their reputation is above reproach. And what would be their motive?"

"Financial?" Cate posed it as a question.

"With Eleanor's fortune, I shouldn't expect they'd need money."

"So, her fortune is intact? It's not been lost?"

"Lost?"

"Yes. No gambling problems or bad investments?"

"None that I am aware of. And those tales do get around."

"Okay," Cate said, throwing her hands in the air, "so we can clear them of any suspicion."

Rory nodded in agreement. "I'm quite at a loss, Cate. But I do appreciate your help with this. Thank you for trying."

"There's no need to thank us. We're happy to help." Cate glanced at Jack. "Well, I suppose we should head to town. If we learn anything worth passing along, we'll share it with you before we return to our time."

"Thank you. Can I send you in a car? Make the journey a little less taxing?"

Cate considered it. "If it's no trouble, that would be preferable."

"No trouble at all!" Rory responded, pulling a cord on the wall to call Benson.

Within moments, a servant arrived at the door. "Yes, m'lord?"

"Ah, Forsythe, please arrange a car for Mr. and Mrs. MacKenzie to go to town. They're visiting the police station. Have Williams wait with them and bring them back."

Cate recalled the name. Charles Forsythe was the under-butler and on the suspect list. She side-eyed him, trying to assess his character with a glance. His dark hair was slicked down to his head and his mouth seemed set in a permanent scowl. Did his dark eyes hold secrets behind them, Cate wondered?

"Very good, m'lord. I'll make the arrangements at once. I shall have Williams bring the car 'round to the front." The under-butler gave a slight bow and left.

"What happened to Benson?" Cate questioned when the man departed.

“He’s likely busy attending to ensuring meal trays are delivered. Forsythe is our under-butler.”

Cate nodded, recalling the detail from her research. “Well, we’ll leave you to your work.”

She and Jack departed. “I just need to collect my coat upstairs. I’ll bring yours, too.”

She hurried up the stairs, navigating the halls to her room and retrieved the coats they wore when they arrived. She pulled hers on, fastening it before returning to the foyer with Jack’s.

By the time he’d donned his, the car arrived in front of the house. They stepped into the chilly air climbing into the backseat and confirming their destination with the chauffeur. He pulled the car near the station and informed them he’d wait there until they were ready to return.

They crossed the street, entering the building.

Jack and Cate MacKenzie to see Lillian Murray,” Jack told the clerk at the desk.

“One moment,” the clerk replied, disappearing into a back room. He returned, saying, “I’m afraid Miss Murray isn’t permitted visitors.”

“We’re not visitors,” Cate insisted. “Please speak with Officer MacCullough. I’m sure he’d inform you we have permission to see her.”

The clerk offered an annoyed glance to Cate. “Mr. MacKenzie, please understand...”

“My wife is correct. If you’ll check with MacCullough, you’ll find we are not mere visitors.”

“Sir, I...”

“No!” Jack exclaimed, raising his voice a bit. “I’ll not hear excuses. Now I’ve explained as has my wife that we’re approved to see the prisoner. Please arrange our visit at once!”

The man appeared startled but complied. “Wait here just a moment.”

He disappeared again, then returned. “Right this way.”

He signaled them to follow down the hallway. Cate and Jack were familiar with it, having traversed these halls almost seventy years ago when freeing Randolph from prison.

“Good going,” Cate whispered as they followed the clerk down the hall.

“Thanks. Same to you for scoring the car ride!”

Cate raised her eyebrows, smiling at him. The clerk showed them into the same room they had met Randolph in, instructing them to take a seat.

“Weird, huh?” Cate inquired, as they sat down.

“Definitely. I hold such fond memories of this room.”

Cate chuckled and tapped his chest. “I’ll bet.”

The door opposite them opened, and a woman appeared, her hands in handcuffs. The woman’s hair hung around her face, having long since escaped the low bun she’d placed it in. She wore a haunted expression, the shock of the situation apparent in every worry line. She sank into the chair across from them, making no eye contact.

“Hello, Lillian,” Cate began once they were alone.

The woman didn’t respond. Cate’s heart broke for her. She reached across the table, taking the woman’s hand in hers. “Lillian, we’re very sorry this happened to you, but we don’t believe you are guilty. We’re here to help.”

The woman raised her tear-filled eyes to Cate’s. Confusion crossed her face. “Help?”

“Yes,” Cate reiterated. “We believe you are innocent. We want to help, to prove your innocence.”

Lillian’s brow furrowed, and she slid her eyes between Cate and Jack. Tears spilled down her cheeks, and she clung to Cate’s hand with both of hers as she wept. They allowed her the moment of emotional release.

Cate rose from her seat, approaching the woman and wrapping her in an embrace and stroking her hair. “Shh, Lillian, it’s all right.”

Jack pulled Cate’s chair around the table, allowing her to sit next to Lillian as the woman composed herself. He offered her a handkerchief.

Lillian accepted it, drying her eyes as she choked back her sobs. “I’m ever so sorry, Mr. and Mrs. MacKenzie.”

“It’s fine, Lillian. We understand,” Cate assured her.

“It all happened so fast,” Lillian choked. “I was preparing Lady MacKenzie’s dress for dinner when the police burst in and took me into custody.”

“It must have been very traumatic for you,” Cate agreed.

Lillian nodded. “It was not me,” she insisted. “I didn’t take the jewels!”

“No, I’m sure you didn’t. And we plan to prove it.”

Lillian sniffled, glancing between them. “I’m afraid I can’t pay you.”

“We don’t want any payment,” Cate informed her, shaking her head. “We just want the guilty party caught.”

“And we don’t want to see an innocent person accused,” Jack added.

“Right,” Cate confirmed. “Now, if you’re up to it, Lillian, could you tell us anything you remember about the night before and the morning after the theft?”

Lillian nodded, swallowing hard and composing herself. “Lady Anne... er, Lady MacKenzie,” she corrected, “retired around one in the morning. I tended to her. She informed me to place the jewelry on her dressing table and leave it for the morning. I did as she instructed.” A sob escaped her. “If I’d only taken them to the safe for Mr. Benson to put away right, then...” her voice trailed off.

“No,” Cate asserted, “you did nothing wrong. This isn’t your fault.”

Lillian nodded. “I put them on the dressing table and placed her dress over the chaise to be inspected and cleaned the next morning. I left and retired for the evening.”

“Did you place the jewelry in its case?”

“Aye,” Lillian responded. “I placed it into the velvet bag.”

Cate lowered her chin and inquired further, “And the bag was placed on the dressing table?”

“Aye,” Lillian said with a nod.

“Did you see or hear anyone as you returned to your room?” Jack inquired.

“Nay,” Lillian answered. “Not a soul.”

“Anything unusual when you returned to your room? Odd noises? Doors closing later than they should have?” Jack inquired.

“None that I recall, sir,” the maid answered.

“And the next morning?” Cate questioned.

“I went to her ladyship’s chambers to retrieve the dress for cleaning. It was then I noticed the dressing table empty. I asked Lady MacKenzie if she’d returned the jewelry herself or asked another servant to do it. She said no, and we searched her room, figuring maybe they’d fallen onto the floor or the like, but we didn’t find it. It was then they called for the police.”

“Okay, Lillian. Thank you for the information,” Cate answered. “Can you recall anything else uncommon about that night? Anything at all, whether or not you presume it’s related. Anything that wasn’t within the normal operations of the household?”

Lillian pondered a moment, her brow furrowing in thought. She shook her head as though to signal a negative response. Then she sat straighter.

“What is it, Lillian?” Cate encouraged her.

“Might be nothing. But that night, Lord MacKenzie’s valet took ill. Mr. Benson ordered him to bed right after the staff dinner. Said he’d tend to Lord MacKenzie himself if he had to.”

Cate considered the information. “So, Lord MacKenzie’s valet went to bed for the night, leaving someone else to tend him. Yes, that might be useful. Thank you, Lillian.”

Cate glanced at Jack who nodded. “Okay, we’re going to go now. We’ll try to visit tomorrow or the next day. If you think of anything else, hold on to it or write it down and we’ll follow up on it.”

Lillian nodded and squeezed Cate’s hand, offering a tight-lipped smile. “Thank you ever so much, Mr. and Mrs. MacKenzie. It means so much to me that someone is willing to help. I know Lord and Lady MacKenzie to be on my side, but it lifts me to no end to have more folks believe in me.”

Cate squeezed her hand back. “Take care, Lillian, and try to get some rest. We’ll try to have you out of here as soon as we can.”

Cate and Jack stood to leave. As Cate moved to skirt the table, Lillian leapt from her seat, throwing her handcuffed arms around Cate in a tight hug.

Cate returned her embrace. When she pulled back, she saw something new in Lillian’s teary eyes: hope.

They exited the police station, crossing the street to the car. They refrained from speaking until they were alone in the castle’s foyer. Even then, Cate held up a finger to silence any conversation. “Let’s find Rory and give him a brief update, mention no names, then regroup when we’re alone,” Cate whispered.

Jack nodded in silent agreement. They proceeded down the hall to Rory’s office, finding it empty.

“Try the sitting room?” Jack queried. Cate nodded, and they backtracked, checking the sitting room, finding it empty. “Now what?”

Cate pulled the ribbon on the wall. “Let’s ask Benson.”

They waited a few moments until Benson appeared in the sitting room doorway. “Yes?” his deep voice questioned.

“Oh, Benson,” Cate answered. “Have you seen Lord MacKenzie? He asked us to speak with him upon our return, but we’ve not been able to locate him.”

“If I’m not mistaken, he is with Lady MacKenzie. She’s taken ill, shock from the events of today. I’m sure you understand. Shall I disturb him?”

“No,” Cate answered, shaking her head and strolling to the desk in the room. “Please don’t disturb him. I’ll leave a note you can deliver to him when convenient.”

Cate scribbled a note onto the paper there, folding it and handing it to Benson. He placed the note in his breast pocket.

“I shall deliver it when we speak next. Is there anything else you require for the evening? A tray from the kitchen for dinner, perhaps?”

“No, nothing, thank you,” Cate replied. “We plan to retire for the evening.”

“Very good, Mrs. MacKenzie. I shall see you are not disturbed.”

“Thank you,” Cate answered.

She and Jack returned to the bedroom and used the timepiece to return to their time.

“Same drill?” Jack questioned. “We’ve got some time before dinner.”

“Yep. See you in a few.”

Cate changed and gathered her notes and her two furry friends. She entered the library, finding Jack in his usual spot.

Jack slouched in his seat. “Oh, what a mess we have on our hands, Lady Cate.”

“Indeed,” Cate agreed, slumping into the chair next to him.

She opened her folder, spreading the materials across her lap. She uncapped her pen, preparing to jot down notes as they spoke.

“Okay,” she muttered, pen cap between her teeth. “Lillian Murray has been accused and arrested. But we’re sure she didn’t do it.” Cate shuffled the papers around, finding her suspect list. She stuck the pen cap on the pen’s end and continued. “We can cross the Richardsons off. They didn’t do it. We’ve got multiple reasons to remove them, agreed?”

Jack rubbed his chin. “Okay, agreed.”

“What’s your hold-back?” Cate asked, noting his hesitation.

“Nothing, just weighing how sure I am.”

“And?” Cate inquired.

“I’m sure enough. According to Rory, they have no money problems, and their reputation is above reproach. I can come up with no motivation for them to steal from Rory and Anne. I’m certain the police would have searched for the necklace, and they didn’t find it with them.”

Cate nodded as she scratched their names from the list. “Rory’s right about their money. They keep their estate until his son sells it much later, so

that seems right.”

“Okay,” Cate murmured, scanning the list, “there’s no one else we can remove right now.”

“Anyone we should add?”

“The valet, perhaps,” Cate conjectured. “And Benson.”

Jack’s eyes went wide. “Benson? Lady Cate, whatever for?”

CHAPTER 22



Cate shrugged her shoulders at Jack's shocked expression. "I don't actually imagine he did it, but according to Lillian, on the night of the party, the valet was too ill to attend Rory and Benson sent him to bed and said he'd take his place if no one else could attend Rory."

Jack screwed up his face. "How do you figure that makes either a suspect? The valet was sick, and Benson filled in."

"The valet's illness seems convenient. What if he faked it to steal the necklace later but have a good alibi?"

"Point taken. Okay, add the valet. But why Benson?"

"What if Benson poisoned Rory's valet, so he was out of commission, sent him to bed and attended Rory so he was nearer to Anne's bedroom to steal the jewelry?"

Jack rubbed his chin again. "Hmm, that's quite a theory."

"Again, I doubt it's correct, but let's list Benson with a big question mark. The other thing I'll note is he said he'd attend Rory if he needed to, but we don't know if he did or someone else did."

"Who else would have?" Jack questioned.

"A footman... or Forsythe, the under-butler. He'd be the more likely one."

"And he's on your suspect list."

"He is," Cate answered, circling his name. She wrote *Find out who attended Rory on New Year's Eve* on her note sheet. "Anything else?"

Jack pondered for a few moments. “No. Lillian didn’t have much information to offer.”

“No, she didn’t. But we’ve got a few leads to follow. When should we return to do that?”

“Tomorrow afternoon? Right after lunch, perhaps?”

“Sounds great. I’ll try to catch Anne for afternoon tea. Perhaps she’ll open up more one-on-one.”

“I suppose I’ll drink a brandy and smoke a cigar in the sitting room.”

“Might be a good time to meet your ancestor, Lachlan. You haven’t run into him yet.”

Jack firmed his jaw. “No, I haven’t. I’m not sure how I feel about that.”

“What do you mean?”

“My grandfather’s father. It’s just odd. Although, I suppose it’s the same for you. You mentioned the strangeness of discussing your parents’ deaths with your great-grandfather. The poor man was discussing his own grandson’s death and never even realized it.”

“No, and it is odd. But also monumental, unforgettable.”

“I can imagine,” Jack agreed.

“If you do meet him, enjoy it.” Cate paused a moment. “We really are lucky. No one else gets to meet their ancestors. The people whose decisions were responsible for their very existence.”

“It truly is a gift. I’m starting to understand the appeal you’ve always recognized.”

Cate smiled at him.

“Don’t give me that look, Lady Cate. I’m still not completely keen on this whole thing.”

“Well, I suppose we must keep trying until you are!”

“I was afraid you’d say that. And on that note, I’m going to leave you to your notes.”

Cate began shoving her papers back into the folder.

“No more theorizing tonight? I’m shocked.”

“Oh, I’m going to do plenty of theorizing, but not in this room!”

“Oh?” Jack questioned.

“Still not keen on the creepy library with its unexplainable, leaky bookshelf.”

“Lady Cate, I didn’t realize you were such a ‘fraidy cat.’”

Cate frowned at him. “Neither did I! But after that last dream,” Cate uttered with a shrug, “I’m just uneasy every time I’m in here.”

“Well, you have plenty of other rooms to use, I guess,” Jack quipped as they walked from the room.

“I’ve no shortage of those,” Cate replied, shoos the dogs into the hallway as she shut the door.

Following dinner, Cate retired to her suite, curling up on her chaise with her notes spread. She’d focus on the other servants in her discussion with Anne tomorrow. They were the only remaining suspects outside of her great-grandfather. As unfair as it was, she hoped against hope to find something to ease her suspicion of her ancestor.

The following morning, Cate stared at her suspect list again. Fresh eyes offered no aid in solving the mystery. Today they would visit 1925 in the early afternoon, hoping to catch the household for afternoon tea. Cate planned to discuss the staff with Anne. She’d glean any details she could hoping to make a definitive decision on some of the suspects on her list.

She shoved the list into her folder, setting it on her side table. She returned to her laptop, pushing herself to continue work on her manuscript. Despite her distracted mind, Cate made some progress on her book. Pleased with herself, she shut the laptop and took the dogs for a walk to the loch before lunch.

Again, Cate found herself practicing for conversations that, in all likelihood, would never occur. She determined creative ways to solicit information from Anne without singling any particular person out as she dressed for her trip back.

When she finished, Cate checked the time piece. She had plenty of time to spare prior to Jack’s arrival. Cate sank onto her chaise, reviewing the suspect list for the umpteenth time. No new information leapt out at her.

Jack arrived right on time. Cate folded the suspect list and shoved it in her pocket. “Ready?” he asked as he slipped into her suite.

“I am. Ready to get more information!”

“Okay, let’s go.”

“Wow! You’re raring to go today!”

“I’m getting used to this. It’s weirdly becoming normal.” Jack shook his head. “Wow, I can’t believe I just said that. Never imagined I’d utter the phrase time travel is becoming normal.”

Cate chuckled as they stepped into her bedroom. "I'm glad you're getting used to it. Soon you may even admit it's fun!"

"I wouldn't go that far, Lady Cate," Jack cautioned as he wrapped his hand around hers. They activated the timepiece and arrived in 1925.

Cate approached her suitcase, rummaging through it. "What are you doing?"

"I want to change. I wore this yesterday," Cate responded.

"Oh, right, I forgot."

Cate selected another dress and disappeared into the bathroom. She emerged in her new dress, folding the other one and returning it to her suitcase. Jack had also selected another outfit, swapping places with her to change. When he returned, she suggested he find Rory.

"Yes, I plan to needle any information I can from him."

"Okay, good. I'll do the same with Anne. Afterward, we should visit Lillian at the police station. I don't want her becoming despondent. She was so upset yesterday."

"Yeah. Poor woman. I hope we can help her."

"Me too. Well, let's get to it."

Jack and Cate emerged from the suite and made their way downstairs. They found Rory in his office.

Cate inquired as to Anne's whereabouts, informing Rory she hoped to take afternoon tea with Lady MacKenzie. Rory agreed it would be an excellent idea since Anne still harbored many emotions over the arrest of her ladies' maid.

Cate left the men to talk and followed Rory's directions to Anne's room. She knocked at the door but received no response. She tried again, but still received no answer. After trying the doorknob, she found the room unlocked. She pushed the door open a few inches, sticking her head through and scanning the room. Anne lay on her chaise, staring into the fire in the nearby fireplace.

"Anne?" Cate whispered. The woman didn't respond.

"Anne?" Cate tried again, this time raising her voice louder.

"Oh!" Anne answered, snapping her head to look at Cate. "Oh, Cate. I'm sorry, I didn't hear you. Please come in. Although I'm afraid I won't make for much company."

"That's all right," Cate assured her, entering the room and closing the door behind her. "Rory informed us about the predicament with Murray.

I'm so sorry to hear about that. What a terrible mess."

A tear fell to Anne's cheek. Her hand rushed to wipe it away. "Yes," she replied, attempting to steady her voice. "The poor girl is in quite... a predicament." Her voice broke as she finished the statement.

"Oh, Anne," Cate replied, putting her arm around her shoulders. "Please try not to fret."

Anne wiped at her tears again, sniffing. "Silly, I realize. The girl is a servant. However, I believe she is earnest in what she says. She insists she is innocent."

"It's not silly. I also believe she is being truthful. And I do not consider your worry for her silly."

"Thank you," Anne answered, patting Cate's hand. "Yes, Murray is quite a confidant. Almost a friend, actually. She came with me from my father's home, she's been with me quite a long time."

"Which is why I regard the police's current course of action with great suspicion. No doubt if Murray planned to steal from you, she's had many other opportunities to do so. Why now? They have nothing to suggest any motive on her part."

"No, I quite agree."

"I'm not sure if Rory confided to you, but Jack and I are investigating on our own. I hope to help clear Murray's name."

"He did not but thank you."

The two were silent for a moment.

"Perhaps you'd like to take some afternoon tea in the tearoom," Cate suggested. "It may lift your spirits."

"Oh, what a terrible hostess I am. I'm sorry, Cate. However, I'm not sure I'd provide good company."

Cate was about to respond when a knock sounded at the door, and it popped open.

"Knock knock!" Amelia called in, peeking into the room. "Oh, Cate! Hello!"

"Hello, Amelia," Cate answered.

"I didn't realize you were in here. I came to retrieve my sister-in-law for tea."

Anne offered a brief smile. "Thank you, Amelia, but as I just explained to Cate, I'm not very good company this afternoon. Why don't you two go along without me?"

“Nonsense!” Amelia replied. “Getting out of this room is exactly what you need. Now, come along, let’s work on improving your mood.”

Amelia’s optimism seemed infectious.

Anne offered a wider smile. “All right, you’ve convinced me. Just allow me to fetch my shawl. The tearoom is sometimes cold at this time of year.”

Amelia nodded as Anne disappeared into her bedroom.

Cate smiled at her great-grandmother. “Great job convincing her. She was adamant about not leaving the room when I tried.”

“It’s the best thing for her,” Amelia responded.

“I agree.”

“Poor thing! What a terrible mess this all is.”

“Yes.”

Amelia swept a lock of her hair back. “First the missing jewelry, then her ladies’ maid accused. I don’t suppose it’s true, but if it turns out to be, it’s a terrible abuse of trust.”

“I don’t expect it to be true either,” Cate responded as Anne emerged from her room.

“Ready?” Amelia asked in a cheery voice.

The ladies made their way downstairs to the tearoom and within fifteen minutes were served hot tea with finger sandwiches and scones. Amelia kept the conversation light and flowing. Her sunny disposition made things easy.

“Well, Cate, tell us about yourself,” Amelia encouraged as Anne poured tea.

“There’s very little to tell, I’m afraid. I’m not that interesting a person,” Cate admitted.

“Nonsense! How did you meet Jack?”

“We were seated together at one of my aunt’s dinner parties,” Cate fibbed, sticking to the backstory they created before their first-time traveling excursion.

“I see,” Amelia responded. “And how do your parents feel about your moving to another country? They must miss you terribly. Do you visit often?”

“My parents passed away before I married Jack.”

“How sad, what of your siblings? Do they miss you, particularly since your parents are gone?”

“I haven’t any siblings. Therefore, the move was easy. It allowed Jack to stay near to his family, and since I have none, there was no worry about mine. What about you, Amelia?”

“I’ve two older brothers,” Amelia said with a roll of her eyes.

“I’ll bet that was a challenge growing up!” Cate exclaimed.

“Quite. Always teasing me about my dolls and the like. I prayed for a sister every night.”

“Were you very disappointed when you didn’t receive one?” Cate queried, biting into a cucumber sandwich.

Amelia glanced to Anne. “No, because I received one.” She reached to Anne, grasping her hand.

Cate smiled at the gesture. “How lovely.”

“Indeed,” Amelia agreed. “When I married Lucas, I could not have asked for a better sister-in-law. We are like sisters despite there being no shared blood.”

“I am lucky to count you among my family, Amelia,” Anne agreed.

“Do you have other siblings, Anne?” Cate inquired.

“Yes, three. An older sister and two younger siblings, a sister and a brother.”

“Are you very close with them?”

“Only with my younger sister,” Anne responded. “We are close in age. A surprise we got along so well. One tends to find sisters that close in age sparring over dresses, men and so on, but Clara and I get along well.”

“What a pity you’ve no siblings, Cate. Did it bother you very much growing up?”

“No,” Cate admitted following a moment of introspection. “I suppose I didn’t know any different. When my parents passed, though, I’m sure it would have been easier to bear with siblings.”

“But then you met Jack. How fortunate. It is obvious he adores you,” Amelia declared.

Cate smiled at her. “Yes, funny how life works.”

Their conversation continued, discussing winters at Dunhaven, Amelia’s summer estate, travel and other small talk items. Cate’s mind whirled as the women conversed, trying to piece together their relationship and ferret out any reason for Amelia to have committed the theft. At the conclusion of their tea, she could find no reason that Amelia would have committed the

crime. Was Amelia good at covering up a secret jealousy of Anne, or was she not the guilty party?

Deflated, she waited in the foyer to meet Jack whom Forsythe had been sent to retrieve. When he returned with Jack in tow, he asked them to wait in the sitting room before proceeding to town. Lady MacKenzie requested them to carry a note to Murray.

As they settled on the loveseats near the fireplace, Jack inquired if Cate had uncovered any information.

“Not really,” Cate admitted, her voice lowered. “Although, it appears Amelia genuinely cares for Anne. Unless she is a fantastic liar, I can’t imagine she’s our thief either. Did you find anything of interest?”

Jack raised his eyebrows. “Get ready to be impressed. I found out who filled in for Rory’s valet on New Year’s Eve.”

Cate’s breath caught in her throat as she waited to learn who the guilty party would be. Would it bolster their suspect list or tear it to shreds?

CHAPTER 23



Jack grinned at her as he withheld the information for a moment with a coy grin. “It wasn’t Benson!”

“No? Who was it?” Cate asked, her eyebrows raised.

“Forsythe, the under-butler.”

“Forsythe,” Cate repeated, pulling her suspect list from her pocket. She hurried to the desk and noted the new information on her sheet. “I’d say we can cross off Benson then. He was a long shot, anyway. And if he wasn’t playing valet, then the theory that he poisoned the valet in order for his presence upstairs to be accounted for is no longer valid.”

“I agree,” Jack answered. “And put a question mark near Amelia since, given your experience with her, we can’t find a motive for her either.”

Cate complied, and they studied the reduced list.

Jack tapped his fingers against the list. “That leaves three servants at the top of the list.”

“Yes. The groom, the scullery maid and the under-butler. But this list calls into question our largest piece of evidence. The letter from Anne.”

“We aren’t even sure that letter concerns this investigation.”

“We need more information about these three. Perhaps we should ask Rory after our visit with Lillian.”

As they considered the list, Forsythe returned, note in hand. “I’ve had the car brought ‘round for you. Here is the note from Lady MacKenzie.”

“Thank you, Forsythe,” Cate responded, accepting the note.

She and Jack proceeded to the front entrance, finding the chauffeur waiting for them just outside the door. He drove them to the police station, again waiting for them outside.

Cate and Jack entered and secured a visit with Lillian Murray. Cate reiterated their support of the woman and reassured her that Anne also believed her version of events. They passed along the note and were pleased to find that it brought Lillian some measure of comfort.

“We’re still working on searching for clues and information,” Cate asserted.

“Thank you,” Lillian responded.

“How are you holding up? Are they treating you well enough?”

Lillian sniffled. “They continue to drag me from my cell all hours of the night. They ask me over and over to repeat my story or encourage me to admit to my wrongdoing. But I didn’t do it! I cannae admit to something I didn’t do.”

“And you shouldn’t have to,” Cate agreed. “We will discuss the matter with the police. You shouldn’t be harassed like this!”

“Oh, please, don’t put yourself out on my account, Mrs. MacKenzie. ‘Tisn’t any trouble. I’ll survive it.”

“It’s nonsense! You’re exhausted. Their continued harassment will take a toll on you. They hope to coerce you into a confession to make their jobs easier. It’s unacceptable.”

“I’ll admit, I would enjoy a night’s peace even if it is in a jail cell.”

“We will speak to them on our way out,” Cate assured Lillian. “Now, was there anything else that you’ve remembered since we spoke last?”

Lillian shook her head. “No, I searched my brain, but I came up with nothing. I’m sorry.”

Cate grasped her hand and squeezed. “Don’t apologize. We have generated some leads we will continue to work on. I hope to have some good news for you soon.”

Lillian offered a slight smile. “Thank you again, Mrs. MacKenzie. And please, if you see Lady MacKenzie, thank her for her kind note and apologize on my behalf for the trouble.”

“I will.” Cate squeezed Lillian’s hand again and offered her a smile before leaving.

As the maid walked down the hall, Cate glanced at Jack. “We must speak with someone about her treatment.”

“Aye, that’s terrible. Poor girl.”

“I’ll ask to see Officer MacCullough.”

They approached the clerk’s desk and Cate requested a meeting with the officer.

“Just a moment.” The clerk sighed, disappearing into another room. He reappeared, motioning for them to follow him. “This way.”

Cate and Jack followed him into a room filled with desks. Officer MacCullough sat at one of them, reviewing a document.

“Thank you,” Cate said, storming toward the officer. “Officer MacCullough, I demand you cease at once with your poor treatment of Lillian Murray. The girl is being badgered at constantly.”

“I beg your pardon, Mrs. MacKenzie?”

“She’s being awoken all hours of the night and harassed. That, Officer MacCullough, is coercion and is grounds to have any information you receive from her thrown out of court.”

“Are you now an attorney, Mrs. MacKenzie?”

“I am well-versed in matters of the law enough to know what you are doing is borderline illegal.”

The man rolled his eyes. “Mr. MacKenzie, control your wife, please!”

“Control my wife?” Jack exclaimed, stepping in front of Cate. “I’ll do no such thing! She is correct. I’ve a background in law, though I’ve given up my practice. But if I must resume practicing law to see Miss Murray is given fair treatment, I will. You are not to question her unless I or another attorney is present. Any straying from this and I shall sue you and this entire police department.”

Jack wagged his finger at the man. “Don’t tempt me, Officer MacCullough. Your so-called investigation is shoddy and full of questionable practices. It would be an easy case, a laddie fresh out of law school could win it with his eyes closed.”

“I’ve a right to conduct my investigation as I see fit, Mr. MacKenzie. And if I…”

“No, that’s where you’re wrong, sir. You’ve not the right to conduct it as you see fit, only as the law allows. Now, I shall return tomorrow and if I’ve heard you have put Miss Murray through the same machinations she’s undergone in the last twenty-four hours, I will go to the judge myself and see that you lose your badge!”

Officer MacCullough set his face into a scowl. “Fine, Mr. MacKenzie. But if your wife keeps poking her nose into my investigation and I’m stopped from finding out the truth... so help me, I’ll...”

“You’ll *what*?” Jack queried, his eyes narrowed at the man. After a few breaths of silence, Jack added. “As I thought. Good day, Officer MacCullough.”

He grabbed Cate’s arm, dragging a stunned Cate from the police station and to the waiting car outside. They drove home in silence, not wanting to give too much away in front of the driver.

When they entered the foyer, Cate stopped Jack from proceeding to find Rory. “Wow! That was some speech!”

“That’s what he gets for telling me to control my wife. The jerk.”

Cate offered him a wry smile.

“What? The man clearly has a problem with women. Consider how he’s treating poor Lillian.”

“It is awful. They hope to pressure her into a confession and wrap up the case with a nice bow.”

“They have no interest in solving the case, only closing it,” Jack agreed.

Cate crossed her arms and flicked her eyebrows up. “I didn’t realize you were going to resurrect your law career.”

“Neither did I, but it seemed an appropriate time to dust off my law degree.”

Cate giggled as they strode down the hall. “Perfect timing.”

“So, shall we find Rory?”

“Yes. I’d like to ask him a few questions about the staff members.”

“He should be in his office still. Oh, by the way, I met Lachlan. And yes, it was staggering.”

Cate smiled at him, happy he met his great-grandfather. They reached Rory’s office and Jack knocked at the door.

“Come in!” Rory called, writing a note in his ledger. He glanced up. “Ah, Jack, Cate, how is Murray?”

“Holding up,” Cate responded. “Despite some poor treatment at the hands of the police.”

Rory frowned at the statement. “Oh no. How terrible. Is there anything we can do?”

“I’ve spoken with Officer MacCullough,” Jack chimed in. “I hope the behavior won’t continue. They are trying to coerce a confession from the

girl using any means possible.”

“Oh, I do hope the behavior stops now that you’ve brought it to Officer MacCullough’s attention.”

“So do I. We’ll check back tomorrow.”

Rory nodded at them.

“In the meantime,” Cate added, “I was wondering if we might ask you a few questions?”

“Of course,” Rory agreed, setting his pen down. “What is it you wish to know?”

“Lillian maintains her innocence and I believe her. But someone within this household stole that jewelry. Is there anyone who you’d suspect, even if in the slightest?”

“Why, no, no one. As I mentioned, the event shocked me.”

“Can you recall anything out of the ordinary in the days prior to the theft? Or in the days that followed? Any unusual behavior, unexplained disappearances, anything?” Cate questioned further.

Rory shook his head. “Not that I am aware of. Benson would have better information on staff whereabouts, but surely you don’t suspect—”

“Rory,” Cate interrupted, “someone stole that jewelry. Either a guest in your house or a staff member. We must use whatever we can, no matter how small the clue, to determine who that was.”

“Perhaps if you speak with Benson...” Rory began, seemingly at a loss with the conversation.

“All right,” Cate agreed. “We’ll follow up with Benson. Would it be suitable to speak with him now?”

“Yes. I’ll ring for him,” Rory said, strolling to the wall cord and pulling it.

“Thank you. We’ll meet him in the sitting room to discuss the matter,” Cate suggested.

“Very good. And thank you.”

Cate and Jack exited the room, traversing the halls to the sitting room.

“He’s in some serious denial,” Jack said as they entered the room.

“Yes,” Cate answered. “He’ll be heartbroken if it turns out to be Lucas. He can barely fathom it being a member of his household staff.”

“He looks at the world through rose-colored glasses.”

Cate nodded in agreement. “Yes, he’s a bit sheltered in his view of the world.”

The doors opened, interrupting their conversation, and Benson strode in. "Mr. and Mrs. MacKenzie. Lord MacKenzie informed me you are working on investigating the theft. Lord MacKenzie said you have some questions you wish to ask me. A terrible business, this."

"Indeed," Cate answered. "Yes. We are hoping to aid Lillian Murray in proving her innocence."

"I shall answer anything. But..." He paused. "Never mind," he said after a moment, shaking his head.

"What is it, Benson?" Cate inquired.

"Nothing, Mrs. MacKenzie. I was only concerned you may believe me to be the culprit. I have worked hard to keep my reputation above reproach, ma'am. I hope you don't find my comments out of turn but..."

"Not at all," Cate assured him. "And no, we did not ask to speak with you because we believe you are the thief. Lord MacKenzie suggested we speak with you because you would know the staff whereabouts better than he."

"Ah, very good, Mrs. MacKenzie, and I am most grateful you've found no issue with my character."

Cate smiled and nodded at him before she proceeded. "Benson, was there anything unusual that you noted in the days just prior to or just following the theft? Any odd behavior or unusual requests? Any staff members requesting time off, for example?"

Benson pinched his brow in concentration. "No, none that I can recall."

"What about the night of the theft? Lillian Murray told us Lord MacKenzie's valet was taken ill?" Jack inquired.

"Yes, Mr. Calhoun took a sudden turn following the staff meal. I sent him to bed."

"Any chance he was faking his symptoms?"

Benson shook his head as he clutched his lapel. "None. The man was white as a sheet. He retched all over the staff dining hall floor. Poor Alice, the scullery maid, had to clean it up. I don't expect he moved out of his bed after that."

"I see," Cate replied, tapping her chin. "And who filled in his role?"

"Forsythe. I intended to do it, but he offered since I had several other things to attend to."

"Mr. Forsythe hasn't been with the household long, has he?" Cate questioned.

“Mmm, the better part of a year,” Benson responded.

“Did he come with references? He seems young to be an under-butler.”

Benson glanced down at his well-polished shoes, his lips forming a frown. “I did not review his references. I am not sure, Mrs. MacKenzie.”

“Who did?” Cate queried, finding it odd the butler and head of the staff did not handle the hiring of his under-butler.

“Lord MacKenzie himself, Mrs. MacKenzie.”

Cate’s forehead wrinkled as she processed the information. That was odd. Why would Rory handle the hiring of the under-butler? He’d have approved Mr. Benson’s recommendations, but he’d not have taken it upon himself to go through the intricacies of hiring lower staff.

“Is there anything else you can tell us that you deem may be relevant?” Cate asked after a breath.

“No,” Benson replied after a moment. “I am shocked this occurred, to be honest. My theory is the thief snuck into the castle in the wee hours of the morning and absconded with the jewelry, never to be heard from again. At least that is what I hope happened.”

Cate smiled at him. He, too, preferred not to suspect a member of his own staff. He presumably felt any fault within the staff reflected on his own character. “Thank you, Benson. I hope we have this sorted soon and you are correct. Lord MacKenzie prefers to imagine none of his guests or staff are thieves.”

“And what do you think, Mrs. MacKenzie?”

“I’ll reserve any comment until I have all the facts at my disposal,” Cate answered.

Benson wagged a finger in the air, a grin crossing his lips. “Very wise, Mrs. MacKenzie. Is there anything else?”

“No, Benson, nothing. You may go.”

“Another dead end,” Jack commented after the butler departed. He ran his fingers through his hair in frustration.

“Perhaps, perhaps not,” Cate said with a coy grin.

CHAPTER 24



Jack stared at her with his brow furrowed. “What do you mean? Did I miss something from that conversation?”

“The fact that Rory hired Forsythe.”

“So?”

Cate paced around the room. “It’s rather unusual in a staff this size that Rory would have a direct hand in the hiring of a staff member like the under-butler. The butler, yes, his valet, yes. But an under-butler? I’m surprised he took that on himself. Mr. Benson should have been the one to interview and go over his references.”

Jack considered it for a moment. “It could mean nothing. There are a million reasons Rory could have hired Forsythe. Perhaps he offered him a job as a favor to a friend, or he stole him from another wealthy friend because he liked his attention to service or something.”

“There is one way to find out,” Cate replied.

“Ask Rory,” they said in unison.

Jack led the way down the hall to Rory’s office.

They knocked at the ajar door, entering after Rory called for them to come in. “Jack, Cate, did you speak with Benson? Was he of any help?”

“We did,” Cate answered. “We’re still sorting through what he’s told us. We had one follow up question for you, though. Benson mentioned that he didn’t hire Forsythe, the under-butler, but that you handled the hiring. Was there a particular reason for that?”

“Surely you don’t suspect Forsythe?” Rory questioned.

Cate kept her expression and response neutral. "I didn't say that, but I found the detail odd. We're just following up on anything that seems irregular."

"There's really nothing to it," Rory explained it away, glancing at his desk as he waved his hand in the air. "He came recommended from a friend. He needed a position, and I provided it. I took him on in London when I was on business there. Benson wasn't with me, otherwise he'd have handled it."

Cate nodded, parsing the information.

Rory glanced up at her, raising his eyebrows. "I can assure you his character is above reproach."

Cate nodded again, adding a smile. "Thank you, Rory. That answers my question."

"Unless there is something else, I'll return to my ledgers," Rory responded.

"No, nothing. Good night, Rory."

"Good night."

Cate and Jack left Rory to his work, returning to the bedroom and their own time. It remained early afternoon despite the hours they'd spent in 1925.

Cate paced the floor from the moment they returned. "Did that seem strange to you?"

Jack shrugged and shook his head. "He seemed to have an explanation for why he handled the hiring."

"Before he gave the explanation. His initial reaction to my question."

Jack pondered it a moment. "I guess he seemed evasive."

"He didn't answer it. He immediately jumped to the conclusion that we may suspect Forsythe."

"Which we do," Jack added.

"Correct, but we didn't say that. His reaction seemed odd."

Jack considered it again. "You could make that case. Although it's a bit of a stretch."

"A stretch?" Cate questioned.

"His reaction wasn't *that* odd."

Cate chewed her lower lip. "No, it wasn't bizarre but... it struck me as a strange response. Again, it's nothing major, but nothing we've learned so

far has been major. We're piecing together a puzzle with only the nubs of each piece instead of whole piece."

"Rory judges Forsythe's character to be irreproachable. How good a judge of character is he, do you imagine?"

Cate pondered it a moment before throwing her arms in the air. "No idea. If we went by Rory's estimation, then Mr. Benson's theory is correct. Some unknown sneaked into the house, pocketed the jewelry and escaped."

"Come on, Cate, you don't honestly believe that, do you?"

"No, I don't. It's a ridiculous theory. So that leaves us with the fact that Rory has misjudged someone. Perhaps it's someone he doesn't know well enough to judge."

"I guess I'll change and get back to work. Don't sweat it, Cate, we'll figure it out."

"Yeah," she murmured, still consumed by her thoughts.

Jack strode to the door, turning back before he exited. "Hey, Cate?"

"Yeah?"

"Let it rest for the night. We'll start fresh tomorrow."

Cate nodded. She spent the rest of the afternoon attempting to read a book. Perhaps Jack was correct. She was overtaxing her mind, and it was getting her nowhere fast. After dinner, she settled to watch a movie. The movie played on in the background as her mind churned through all the information they learned, or lack thereof. She came to no new conclusions.

The next morning, Cate set her open laptop in front of her on the floor of her sitting room. She spread her notes around her. Riley and Bailey stared at her, curious about what she was doing. Cate studied the papers, willing them to provide her with more information.

"What do you think, boys?" she inquired of her furry friends. "Who is the guilty party?"

Riley and Bailey stared at her, each with dark, questioning eyes. "Nobody strikes you as the culprit?"

Cate frowned. "Me neither. Let's review what we know so far."

Riley laid down in front of her, as though waiting for the presentation to begin. Bailey remained on his feet, staring at Cate.

"The suspects still on the list are Lucas and Amelia, my great-grandparents. Why are they still on the list? Anne's letter provides damning evidence against one or both of them, assuming her letter refers to this theft, which we can't confirm. But it's safe to assume that."

Cate paused, considering the information again. “Yet neither of them seems to have any motivation to commit this crime. They both appear to care for Rory and Anne. Though it’s possible they are faking. So, we can’t cross them off the list.”

Bailey took a seat as Cate continued to her next group of suspects. “Rory assured me the Richardsons are innocent. Although Rory’s judgement may be questionable. However, they have since left the estate so we’ve no way to continue investigating them. And, to be honest, boys, they had no motivation. That leaves us with the staff. I’ve flagged the groom, the scullery maid and the under-butler.

“The groom and scullery maid were likely nowhere near the area, nor did they have any reason to be. Although, I suppose I should check on their alibis. Forsythe would have had opportunity, but what is his motive? If Rory employed him as a favor, would he return that favor by robbing him? Perhaps.”

Cate sighed, sinking her head into her hands. “I suppose it could be anyone of them or another staff member not listed. I have no idea! This investigation is going nowhere! I have the sinking feeling we may not solve this. Which means poor Lillian Murray may never clear her name. Ugh! What are we missing?”

After a moment, she recovered, grabbing her laptop. She typed in the names of each servant, one-by-one, beginning with the scullery maid. Alice Huxley didn’t generate many results, but after a good deal of scouring the web, Cate found a death notice. The woman had died at sixty-three, having worked her way up from scullery maid to assistant cook at Dunhaven Castle.

Next, Cate tried the groom, Thomas Gould. Thomas had married in 1932 to a woman from London. He’d lived until seventy, fathering five children. Nothing of note jumped out to Cate.

She tried the last name on her list, Charles Forsythe. Cate combed through every resource she found, however, none matched the time frame to fit with the man living on the estate in 1925. She searched news articles and death notices, finding none that fit.

She sighed, slamming her laptop shut. Another dead-end.

Riley, who had fallen asleep as Cate searched the web, lifted his head to eye Cate.

“Nothing new to report, buddy.” He lowered his head back to the carpet below.

A knock sounded at her door. “Come in, it’s open!”

“Hi, Lady Cate! Lunch is served!” Molly announced, carrying the tray to her coffee table. “Wow! Look at all that work. How do you keep everything straight?”

“I’m afraid I’m not keeping much straight on this subject,” Cate answered.

“Is this for your book?”

Cate nodded. She hated lying, but she couldn’t explain. Plus, it wasn’t exactly a lie. She’d likely write about this in her book. “Thanks, Molly!”

“You’re welcome. Just remember who serves you your lunch when you’re a famous author!”

“I’d never forget!”

Molly smiled at her, almost bumping into Jack as she tried to exit the room. “Oops! You have a visitor! Hey, make it snappy, lunch is ready downstairs!”

“Will do,” Jack promised. “I just have a quick question for Lady Cate.”

Molly exited, leaving them alone to talk.

“What’s up?” Cate asked, climbing to her feet.

“I wanted to make a suggestion.”

“Okay?”

“Let’s head back and check the staff alibis after lunch. It might turn up nothing, but perhaps we can find some clue that will lead us in one direction or another.”

“Wait. Is this Jack Reid suggesting we time travel?”

“Very funny, Lady Cate. You should take your act on the road. The Comedian Countess.”

“Okay, I won’t look a gift horse in the mouth. Let’s try it. It won’t hurt to ask each of them.”

Jack scanned the mess spread across the floor. “I’m assuming you have gotten nowhere?”

“No,” Cate admitted. “I’m getting nowhere, just staring at the same information. I even Googled the staff members, but I found nothing. I don’t know what I expected to find, but...”

“Googled them? Did you find anything at all? It’s not like they were on social media in 1925!”

“Just death notices. Although I couldn’t find one for Forsythe. But we have no idea where he went after he left Dunhaven, so I may just be missing it.”

“Well, perhaps we’ll find something this afternoon. Meet you at one?”

“Sounds good. Now you better get down to your lunch before Molly and Mrs. Fraser have a fit!”

“Okay, see you soon, Cate.”

Cate settled in, polishing off her lunch as fast as possible. She left her tray, cleaned up her notes, and retreated to her bedroom to prepare for their trip. At 1 p.m., she overheard a commotion in the sitting room as both dogs scurried to greet Jack at the door.

“Come in!” she hollered. “Your fan club awaits!”

“Hello, hello!” Jack greeted the dogs as he came in the door. He entered the bedroom, carrying Riley with Bailey trailing behind him. “Are you ready, Detective Cate?”

“I am,” Cate assured him. “And my fingers are crossed that we find something. Although, what are the chances of that? The police didn’t.”

“The police probably didn’t even ask the staff, judging by Officer MacCullough’s detective skills.”

“Good point,” Cate admitted.

“Speaking of, we should go to the police station. Make sure Lillian isn’t being mistreated.”

“Okay. It might take a bit to question all the staff. Do you want to split our efforts? You go to the police station while I question the staff?”

“I hate to split up, but it might be easier that way. We’ll discuss our findings when we’re back.”

Cate nodded as she held out the timepiece. “Okay, sounds like a plan. Let’s go.”

Together, they used it to slip back to nearly a century earlier. After arriving, Cate and Jack sought Benson. Jack requested a car to town while Cate inquired if she could question the staff about their whereabouts on the night of the theft. Benson approved both requests, telling Cate to use his office to speak with each staff member. He then left her, taking Jack with him to retrieve a car for his trip to town.

Cate scanned the staff list Benson provided her. Most of them were finishing up their lunch when she arrived. Benson had asked them to stay until she had spoken with them. She called the first few kitchen maids,

asking them where they were between the hours of 1 a.m. and 11 a.m. For the first several hours, they all reported being asleep. Most of them shared a room with someone else, and neither party recalled hearing the other slip in or out during the night. The scullery maids spent the rest of the morning in the kitchen.

Cate moved on to the cook, whose story was similar. She then worked her way through the maids and footmen. No one's stories drew any red flags. All reported being asleep until early morning, when they began their chores. They worked in pairs which provided them with solid alibis.

Cate moved on to Charles Forsythe. She found him in the silver storage room, pulling several pieces from the shelves to be polished.

"Sorry to interrupt. Do you have a moment?" Cate inquired.

"Yes, Mrs. MacKenzie. It's no interruption. I am checking the silver pieces used over the holiday have been properly polished."

"We can speak here if you prefer so you may continue your work."

"If it's convenient and no trouble to you."

"No trouble at all."

Cate asked the standard barrage of questions. She received the answers she expected. Mr. Forsythe's only difference was he did not share a room with another staff member. A privilege of being the under-butler. Other than that, his story matched the other staff members: he was asleep until early morning, when he arose to begin his duties. Several people saw and spoke to him that morning. Cate thanked him for his time, checking his name off her list.

She then moved on to her last group of people. She interviewed the grooms. Nothing in their stories seemed suspicious. The last name on her list was Rory's valet. He had been mending an overcoat and finished as Cate searched him out. "May I have a moment to ask a few questions?"

"May I return this upstairs first?" he questioned.

"It won't take but a moment," Cate assured him. This was the second time the man avoided her request. "Can you return it after?"

The man dithered a bit before nodding his head. "All right, Mrs. MacKenzie."

"Thank you. If I'm not mistaken, you took ill the night of the theft, is that correct?"

"Yes, it is."

"And did you spend the entire night in your room?"

He glanced down at his feet as he answered. "No."

Cate glanced up from her note sheet. "No?"

Still avoiding eye contact, he provided more information. "No. I left my room from 3 a.m. to four-thirty."

"May I ask where you were?"

"My stomach still experienced fits. I didn't want to keep my roommate awake, so I came down here. I returned around four-thirty and fell asleep until seven. Then I arose and began my normal work."

Cate narrowed her eyes. No one had mentioned their roommate being absent. "Who is your roommate?"

"Thomas, the groom."

"Did anyone see you downstairs?"

The man pursed his lips. "No, I'm afraid not."

"Was Thomas abed when you left?"

"Yes, I believe so. I didn't check for certain."

"And when you returned?"

He nodded. "Yes. Again, I believe so. It was dark, and I didn't check."

"Thank you, Mr. Calhoun. That's all."

The man left the room. Cate checked her notes. Thomas Gould mentioned Robert Calhoun being his roommate, but he omitted hearing him leave. Was Calhoun that quiet? Or was Thomas Gould not there to realize he'd left? Robert Calhoun specifically mentioned he did not check and was not certain that Thomas was in the room. Thomas Gould was a name on her suspect list. Was he the thief?

CHAPTER 25



Cate's mind swirled with questions as she climbed the stairs, navigating to the sitting room. She collapsed on the loveseat there to wait for Jack's return.

She attempted to piece together a situation in which Thomas Gould was the thief. After building the case against him, she played devil's advocate, trying to poke holes in her theory and identify weak points. Next, she tried to create a scenario in which Robert Calhoun stole the jewelry.

He had no solid alibi and admitted being out of his room. But why admit it when he easily could have lied and stated he was in his room the entire night? Perhaps he was afraid Thomas Gould realized his absence and reported it. Or perhaps he admitted it to throw investigators off the scent. To appear upfront and honest as he covered his tracks.

Jack's entrance into the room interrupted her thoughts. "Well?" Cate asked as she rose to her feet.

"She had a good night. They left her alone. They still won't release her, but at least we've succeeded in assuring they won't harass her into a confession."

"Good. One thing settled. For now."

"No hits on the servant query?"

Cate held a finger up. "Nothing solid, but something interesting."

"What's that?"

"Our sick valet admitted to being out of his room between three and four-thirty."

Jack's eyebrows raised as he sank onto the loveseat. "Really? Did he say why? Maybe tell you he was stealing a few necklaces?"

"Nothing quite that definitive," Cate answered with a chuckle, easing onto the cushion next to him. "He said he was downstairs in the servants' dining hall. Said he was sick and didn't want to wake his roommate. No one saw him. No one can corroborate the story."

"What about the roommate? Can he at least confirm the times? That he was gone from three to four-thirty?"

"That's interesting, too. His roommate is Thomas Gould."

Jack arched an eyebrow. "One of our suspects."

"Yes, and he never mentioned the valet's absence. So, either he didn't know, or he's lying."

"To protect Calhoun?"

Cate tilted her head, pressing her lips together. "Or because he didn't realize he was gone because Thomas Gould wasn't in the room but rather was stealing the jewelry. Robert Calhoun couldn't be sure Thomas Gould was in bed when he left or when he returned. He said the room was dark, and he didn't pay attention, he assumed he was there."

"Hmm. That's the first solid lead we've had. Two people without alibis during the time the theft may have occurred."

"I wouldn't say solid, but it's something!"

"Yes. Let's concentrate on those two. Perhaps we can dig something up on where Thomas Gould gets himself off to and trace things from there."

"Okay, I'll research it tonight. Should we plan to return tomorrow morning? Perhaps float any information we have past Rory?"

"You want to speak with him now?"

Cate shook her head. "No. We don't have much. I'd rather try to find something more substantial. Rory doesn't want to believe one of his staff did it. We'll need something to convince him."

"Okay, let's go home then."

Cate agreed, and they returned to the bedroom, slipping back to the present. Jack sighed with relief as they returned. "It's good to be home. At least we made some progress on this trip though!"

"A little," Cate said with a nod. "I'll keep searching, maybe we can make something stick. And at least Lillian is having an easier time."

"Yeah. Shame I couldn't have her released."

Cate arched an eyebrow at him. "Losing your legal skills?"

“Well, I haven’t applied them for almost seventy years! I’m rusty. I’ll try again tomorrow.”

Cate chuckled at his poor joke then grinned at him. “You’re a good guy, Jack Reid.”

“And you are quite a lady, Lady Cate,” Jack responded, bowing to her. “Text me if you find anything in your research.”

“I will.”

She set up camp in her sitting room for the rest of the afternoon. She performed an Internet search for both men’s names, seeking any additional information available on them. There wasn’t much, but she pieced together that Rory’s valet passed away in his late sixties in a neighboring village. He’d owned a small farm there he’d purchased after leaving the life of service with money he’d saved. Cate noted it, wondering if he’d used money from selling the stolen jewelry to purchase it.

Thomas Gould, the groom who’d left Dunhaven Castle months after the theft, died years later in London. He’d owned a restaurant there in partnership with another man, an Italian. The restaurant was well known for its pasta. How did Thomas afford to buy the restaurant? Was his fortune changed by stolen items?

Cate continued to search for more information about either man’s change of fortune. She also consulted the household records to determine if she could glean any additional details from them. She worked through dinner, scouring every resource she could find.

After hours of work, she tracked down information on Robert Calhoun’s land purchase. The land was owned by the MacKenzies. She noted it, wondering if Rory had given the man a break on the price after years of loyal service.

She continued, seeking information on Thomas Gould’s restaurant. As she searched, her eyes became heavy. Despite the early hour, she fought to stay awake. The extra hours being crammed into her day were catching up with her.

She let her head drop back onto the chaise for a moment. Within seconds, she drifted to sleep.

She startled awake. Darkness surrounded her. She must have fallen asleep and stayed asleep for a few hours. Outside, only starlight shined in the sky. She reached to the lamp, flicking it on. Nothing happened. She tried

again but met with the same result. The power must have gone out, she surmised.

She searched the drawer of the table for a flashlight, finding none. She stumbled from the chaise into her bedroom, feeling her way to her night table. She kept a flashlight in the drawer for just such occasions, ever since the power went out on one of her first nights in the castle.

She wrapped her fingers around it, flicking it on. Its dim light shined onto the wall in front of her. The clock on the night table was dark, confirming further her theory about the power outage.

She checked her timepiece. Midnight. No sense in worrying about the power failure at this hour. She didn't want to wake anyone for the problem. Instead, she'd go back to bed and hope to sleep.

She headed back to the sitting room to collect Riley and Bailey. Before she called them, her sitting room doors blew open. A chilly wind circulated the room.

Cate shrugged her cardigan tighter around her shoulders as she crossed the room to determine the source and close the doors. As she grabbed hold of both door handles, a noise sounded. It began as a deep growl and seemed to originate from somewhere down the hall. She strained to listen. As she turned her ear toward the sound, it changed.

"CATHERINE," a deep voice growled.

Startled, Cate leapt back a step. The voice's owner was unknown, and Cate did not recognize it as belonging to anyone she knew.

Cate took a deep, steadying breath. "You're going batty, old girl," she told herself aloud, trying to remain calm.

Her heart thudded in her chest so hard it echoed in her ears. "It's an old house, there are lots of noises," Cate continued, "you're imagining things."

She grabbed the door handles again, intent on closing the doors and going to bed. As she pushed the doors shut, the sound occurred again, this time, louder.

"CATHERINE!" the voice roared as though displeased by being ignored.

This time the sound was unmistakable. Cate was incapable of talking herself down. This noise was not the random groaning of an aging castle. It was a voice. Someone called to her. Who?

Cate shined the flashlight beam down the hall, her pulse quickening. "Who's there?"

She took a tentative step into the hallway, shining the beam around. It failed to penetrate the length of the hall. Cate swallowed hard and took another few steps.

“Hello?” she called again into the darkness. “Jack? Mr. Fraser?”

Though she realized the voice did not belong to either of them, she hoped by some strange set of circumstances they were in the castle.

A wave of fear passed over her as a chill filled the air. Her breath shone in a fog as she breathed. Something was not right. She would text Jack despite the time of night. She could not shake this foreboding feeling.

She retreated a step, continuing to keep her eye on the end of the hall. After a few steps backward, she turned and ran toward her suite like a child running up their basement stairs from the monsters they presumed hid in the darkness below.

As she reached the doors, they slammed shut, preventing her from entering her room. She turned the doorknob, pushing against the door, but it didn’t budge. She pounded against it, pushing with her shoulder, but it was shut tight.

Cate turned her back to the door, leaning against it as she lamented the fact that her cell phone lay behind the doors, preventing her from texting Jack.

She’d go find Molly. She should be asleep in her bedroom at this hour.

As her mind parsed through ideas of what to do next, the floor shook, winds blew through the hall and the voice spoke again. “CATHERINE!”

Cate held her hands over her ears, squeezing her eyes shut. She slid down the door behind her to a sitting position.

“Stop!” she shouted back.

Silence fell over the castle and the air calmed.

Cate removed her hands from muffling her ears. Another noise sounded throughout the castle.

Jack’s voice called to her. “Cate? Lady Cate?”

“Jack!” she shouted in response. She climbed to her feet and raced down the hall toward Jack’s voice.

“Cate!” he called again.

“Jack! I’m here,” she answered, turning the corner toward the main staircase.

Jack’s voice sounded again below, though he seemed further away.

“Jack!” she yelled again. “Don’t move, I’m coming to you!”

Cate scurried down the stairs, arriving at the foyer. She splayed her light around the area, searching in all directions for a sign of Jack.

“Jack?” she called into the darkness around her.

“Lady Cate!” his voice answered from her left.

“I’m here! Stay where you are, I’ll come to you!” she shouted back.

Cate traversed down the hall. Light shined from inside the library. Jack must be inside. Cate hurried toward the room, entering and toggling off her light. The power was on in this room. Lamps were lit across the space.

Jack stood near the bookshelf. He stared at it, his back to her.

“Jack! There you are!” Cate exclaimed. “The power is out everywhere but here!”

He did not respond, nor did he move.

“Jack?” Cate questioned. She stepped toward him.

“Jack?”

She received no response.

“Jack,” she said again, growing irked by his lack of response. “This isn’t funny.”

She paused. “Come on, I’m serious. Some weird stuff has been happening and I’m a little scared.”

She closed the gap between them, tapping him on the shoulder. “Jack?”

The figure twisted enough for Cate to realize this was not Jack. He grasped her arm, pulling her in front of him. His other arm squeezed around her waist, pressing her against him and leaving her no room to escape. She wriggled in his grasp but couldn’t pull away.

“Hello, Catherine,” the man hissed.

“Who are you?” Cate choked through tears.

She received no response. The bookshelf in front of her dissolved away, leaving only a black void. Her captor pushed her toward it.

“No!” she struggled against him. She dug her feet into the floor, but he pushed her as though she were only a doll.

“NO!” She shrieked again.

As blackness closed around her, she cried for help, but none came.

CHAPTER 26



Cate shot upright. Sweat beaded on her forehead and her heart pounded. Tears streamed down her cheeks, and she gulped for air.

She glanced around her surroundings. She was sprawled on her chaise in her sitting room. The side table lamp lit the room. Fresh tears fell as Cate realized she'd only been dreaming. She clutched at her blanket as her heart slowed. She wiped her tears with the back of her hand, once again feeling foolish.

She collapsed back onto the chaise behind her. Why were these dreams so taxing on her, she wondered? She was well beyond the age where nightmares should cause this much stress. Stress, yes, perhaps that was the cause. These would disappear once she'd solved the mystery of the jewelry theft, she assured herself.

Cate reached for her phone to check the time, finding it was only ten. A texted message from Jack appeared on the lock screen. After toggling her text app open, she read his message: *Find anything interesting?*

Perhaps it was too late to return his texted, but she decided to answer anyway, hoping the distraction would calm her nerves. She typed back: *Maybe... found both of our new suspects made larger purchases after leaving the estate... not exactly a smoking gun but maybe enough to look into further*

Cate set the phone down on her lap. Despite the normalcy around her, Cate's nerves remained unsettled. Her phone's text alert made her jump. She fumbled with the device to open the text from Jack: *Interesting... we*

should follow up on it tomorrow... I was wondering where you were... thought you fell asleep on me

Cate smiled at the message and responded: *Yes... we should... and I did, sorry... fell asleep and had another nightmare... ugh :(*

Within a minute, Jack returned a text: *That stupid bookshelf again?!*

Cate responded with an affirmative and waited a few breaths before the next text arrived: *Sorry, Lady Cate... I hope we solve this mystery soon... you need a good rest! Do you think you can sleep now?*

Cate pondered the question. Tiredness surged through her, the reaction to the nightmare only lent toward her fatigue. She responded: *Yes... I think so*

Jack replied: *Good. You can tell me all about the latest version of your nightmare tomorrow... for now, get some rest. :) Good night, Lady Cate.*

Cate replied with a similar sentiment before toggling her phone off and gathering the dogs for bed. After a short trip outside, she retired, able to fall asleep despite her frightening experience.

The sun creeping over the moors awakened Cate the following morning. She rose with a groan, cursing the nightmare for having spent her energy. Still, she was eager to follow up on her leads gathered from her day of research.

Cate passed the morning searching for any other information she could find about the purchases made by the valet and the groom. She found Thomas Gould purchased and opened his restaurant only a few months after leaving Dunhaven Castle. Cate noted the information, finding it suspicious. Where did he get the money to purchase a restaurant so soon after working as a groom?

She moved her staff lunch to today since she had spent the day researching yesterday. After lunch, Cate requested a few moments to speak with Jack concerning some estate business.

They proceeded upstairs and she started to climb to the next floor to change and return to the past.

Before she could ascend the stairs, Jack grabbed her arm. "Wait," he said. "Do you want to talk about your nightmare?"

Cate stepped back onto the landing with a shrug of her shoulders. "It's becoming more of an annoyance now than anything. Silly, really. I wake up with my heart pounding, sometimes in tears."

Cate shook her head. "I feel ridiculous. Like a child."

“It’s not silly. Nightmares can happen to anyone. Was it the same thing as before?”

“This one was different, but it still involved the bookshelf.”

“What happened?”

“I was in my sitting room. I must have been asleep because the dream started when I woke up. The lights were out. I thought the power was off. I was on my way to bed when the doors to the room blew open. I went to close them, and someone called my name. They continued to call me. I walked down the hall to determine where it was coming from and the doors to my sitting room blew shut. I tried to open them, but I couldn’t. While I was figuring out what to do, I heard your voice calling me. I followed it and you were in the library. Or at least I thought it was you, but it wasn’t. It was someone else. They grabbed me and the bookshelf disappeared, and they shoved me into the black hole. Then I woke up.”

Cate shrugged again. “I don’t understand what my fixation is with the bookshelf, but something about it bothers me.”

Jack rubbed his chin. “Hmm, I still think this is stress. We found the note you’re fixated on in a book on that shelf. That’s why your mind is dwelling on it.”

“I’m hardly fixated on it, but I think it’s an important clue!”

“Either way, it came from the bookshelf. Your mind is associating that with all the stress of assuming your great-grandfather is a thief.”

Cate nodded and sighed. “I hope that’s it. There’s only one way to determine that: to solve the case. Let’s go try!”

“Okay, Lady Cate. I’ll change and meet you in your suite.”

They climbed the stairs, parting ways to dress for the time period they’d soon find themselves immersed in. Jack knocked at the sitting room door as Cate pulled on her second shoe.

“Come in!” she shouted.

Jack entered as Cate fastened the buckle and stepped into the sitting room to meet him. “Ready?”

“Yes. Do we have a plan? Talk to the two servants again? Or Rory?”

“What about Forsythe or Benson? They’d have the most information about the servants. Perhaps we should consult with them and determine if we can find any additional information that clarifies the future purchases they made. Thomas Gould, the groom, purchases his restaurant soon after leaving Dunhaven, which is only a few months after the theft.”

“Interesting timing,” Jack noted as they strolled into the bedroom. “Perhaps he had the funds to make such a large purchase from a little black-market jewelry sale.”

“I’m wondering the same thing. That puts him square at the top of our suspect list!”

“All right then, we have our plan. Away we go,” Jack stated, holding his hand out for the timepiece.

They arrived in 1925 and exited the suite, descending below stairs to find Benson or Forsythe. Benson’s office was empty, but they found Forsythe in the mending room. Cate knocked at the door jamb.

“Mr. and Mrs. MacKenzie,” Forsythe answered, standing. “Is there anything wrong? May I help you?”

“I was hoping to have a few more minutes of your time,” Cate responded. “We’ve a few questions about two staff members you may be able to assist with.”

“I’d be happy to. Please, let us use Mr. Benson’s office for privacy.” He ushered them down the hall to the office, closing the door behind them. “How did your inquiry go yesterday, Mrs. MacKenzie? I hope it proved fruitful. Murray’s situation has upset us all.”

“All of you but one,” Cate replied.

Forsythe’s brows knit together. “But one?”

“Whoever is the real thief. They probably don’t care.”

“Ah, I see your meaning. And you suppose one of the staff is the culprit?”

Cate shook her head. “I don’t suppose anything just yet. But there were questions raised yesterday that bear following up on.”

“I shall assist you in any way I can,” Forsythe assured them.

“Thomas Gould and Robert Calhoun share a room, is that correct?” Cate inquired.

“Yes, that is correct,” Forsythe confirmed.

“And Robert Calhoun was the ill staff member the night of the theft?”

Forsythe nodded as he stood behind Benson’s desk. “Correct. Mr. Benson sent him to bed following our dinner. The poor man was ill.”

“According to Mr. Calhoun, he remained ill. And in the wee hours of the morning, he exited his room and came to the servants’ dining hall so as not to wake his roommate.”

Forsythe arched an eyebrow. "Interesting, I assume no one can confirm his story."

"No, which leaves two of the servants without an alibi during the hours the theft occurred."

"I see. That is concerning. Do you suspect one of them?"

"I'm not well enough acquainted with either to accuse them and their lack of alibi is no proof of guilt. Perhaps you can tell us more. Is there any reason to suspect either? Perhaps a financial issue that may have prompted them to do something so desperate?"

"We're not looking to accuse anyone, we just want the truth," Jack added.

Forsythe remained silent for a moment, rubbing his chin. "I'm not aware of anything, but if you'll give me a day, perhaps I can track down some information that may help confirm or refute any suspicion against them."

"All right," Cate replied with a nod. "That would be most helpful. Thank you."

"Shall we agree to meet here around this time tomorrow?"

"Yes, we'll see you then, thank you."

"Yes, thank you," Jack added. "Would you be able to arrange a car for a trip to town?"

"Yes, I shall do so at once, Mr. MacKenzie. You may wait in the sitting room. I'll have the car brought 'round."

"Thank you," Jack answered.

Cate and Jack departed the office, climbing the stairs to the main floor.

"Going to check on Lillian?" Cate inquired as they entered the sitting room.

"Yes, I think we should."

"I hope she's had another peaceful night. Well, as peaceful as possible in a jail cell."

"Me too, otherwise I'll have to flex some legal muscle," Jack quipped, flexing his own muscle in a ridiculous pose.

The car passed the window, rolling to a stop outside the front door. "There's our ride," Cate said, standing from the loveseat.

They proceeded to the car and into town.

The clerk's shoulders sagged as they entered the police station. "I'll get her, go ahead back," he waved them on as they approached the desk.

“Thank you,” Jack answered, proceeding down the now-familiar hall to the interrogation room. They settled into the uncomfortable chairs as they waited for Lillian. A uniformed officer led her into the room, handcuffed.

“Hello, Lillian,” Cate greeted her as she sat down. She reached across to take her hand. “How are you holding up?”

“All right under the circumstances, Mrs. MacKenzie, thank you.”

“Have they let you rest?”

“Mostly, aye,” Lillian nodded.

Jack stared at her until she made eye contact. “Lillian, has something happened?”

She shook her head, averting her gaze.

“Lillian,” Cate prodded, squeezing her hand tighter, “you can tell us anything. It’s important you are honest with us so we can help you.”

“Have you made any progress?” Lillian queried.

“A little,” Cate admitted. “We’re following a few leads, but we have nothing solid yet. Lillian, don’t avoid the question. If the police have mistreated you, you must tell us. Jack can handle them to be sure they don’t trouble you further.”

“I’m a terrible burden, complaining when you’re already doing so much to help,” Lillian replied, a tear rolling down her cheek.

“You’re no burden, Lillian,” Jack assured her. “I’ve a legal background and if they’ve done anything since our last visit, even talked to you without someone else present, we should know.”

Lillian glanced between them both. “They questioned me again.”

Jack groaned.

“They didn’t harm me, only made me answer questions again.”

“They’ve no right to do that I’ll see that you’re not bothered again. Stay here with her, Cate.” Jack stood and stormed from the room.

Cate squeezed Lillian’s hand. After a breath she said, “While we wait, perhaps you can give me some information on two of the servants in the house.”

“I’ll help in any way I can, Mrs. MacKenzie.”

“We’ve learned there are two servants without alibis. We’re not suggesting they are guilty, but we are following up on any leads like this. The two are Thomas Gould and Robert Calhoun. Do you know much about either?”

“Mr. Gould, no, I’m not well acquainted with him. But I’ve spent some time with Mr. Calhoun. Our schedules are often similar, being that we serve Lord and Lady MacKenzie. So we’ve spent some time together mending and the like. Surely you don’t suspect Mr. Calhoun. I can’t imagine him stealing from his lordship. He has a heart of gold.”

“As I mentioned, we’re not pointing the finger at anyone, but he was alone for a time the night of the theft.”

“He was ill in his room.”

Cate nodded. “Yes, but he left his room in the wee hours of the morning so as not to wake his roommate. He went to the servants’ dining hall, but no one saw him there. That left both Mr. Calhoun and Mr. Gould alone for almost two hours.”

Lillian furrowed her brow, considering the information. “Do you imagine Mr. Gould could have done it in that time? Oh, how cruel I must sound. I hate to accuse him, but I’m innocent and someone had to do it!”

Cate shook her head. “You don’t sound cruel. And you’re right. Someone did it. We have to explore every avenue!”

Jack’s return interrupted their conversation. He brought with him Officer MacCullough and another uniformed officer.

“Remove the handcuffs,” Jack instructed.

“Just a moment,” Officer MacCullough replied, holding his hand up. “There are terms Miss Murray must be apprised of.”

Cate glanced between Jack and MacCullough, confusion on her face.

“By all means,” Jack responded.

“Miss Murray, your attorney, Mr. MacKenzie has arranged for your release. During this time, you may not leave town for any reason. You should confine yourself to the estate—”

“Ah,” Jack said, holding up a hand to interrupt him.

“Calm down, Mr. MacKenzie, I said should, not must. You are still our primary suspect, Miss Murray. You’d do well to remember that.” He motioned to the officer. “Go ahead.”

The officer stepped forward, unlocking the handcuffs and removing them.

“You’re free to go, Miss Murray. For now.” The officer turned on his heel and strode from the room, the uniformed officer trailing behind him.

“Come along, Lillian, you’ll sleep in your own bed tonight. You can ride back with us,” Jack said, helping her to her feet.

Lillian stood as though in a daze, and Cate wondered if she may collapse. She hoped Jack had a firm hold of her arm. She rose, too, in the event that Lillian fainted.

CHAPTER 27



Cate winced as she watched the pale face of Lillian Murray staring into space, devoid of color. The woman stood silent for a moment before throwing her arms around Jack's neck. Tears streamed down her face, and she squeezed him tight.

After a minute she pulled back, wiping at her face. "Oh, I'm so sorry, Mr. and Mrs. MacKenzie. I realize how untoward that was, but I never pretended to be a high lady! If I possessed any less grace, I'd have kissed you right on the cheek! I'm ever so grateful for this. My own bed tonight, I can't tell you how that feels!"

"You're welcome, Lillian. Remember, we've got an uphill battle still to fight. But at least you'll be able to get proper rest."

"Can we go? I've no desire to stay in this place another minute."

"Of course. After you," Jack agreed, motioning Lillian to precede him. He offered his arm to Cate. She grasped it, giving it a squeeze as they stepped into the hall.

She beamed at him. "I do not understand how you do it, Jack, but you are an amazing attorney!"

"A legal genius, you might say."

"You very well may be! One thing's certain: you're that girl's hero!"

"And I nearly scored a kiss for it, too!"

"Is that the price tag for bail these days?" Cate queried.

"The smile on her face and yours was enough payment for me, Lady Cate."

They emerged from the police station. Lillian glanced up to the gray winter sky overhead, smiling at it with tears in her eyes. "Never expected to see it again. Oh, Mr. MacKenzie, I cannae thank you enough. But there is one issue."

"Issue?" Jack questioned as they crossed the street.

"I'm afraid I cannae afford your services. I've nothing to pay you with," Lillian confessed.

"Don't you worry about that. This is pro bono," Jack assured her.

"Pro bono, sir?" Lillian questioned before climbing into the car's front seat next to the driver.

"No charge, Lillian. No charge. Don't worry about it."

"Oh, but I couldn't, sir!" Lillian objected.

"Yes, you can, and you will," Jack assured her, easing her into the car and closing the door. "And I don't want to hear any more about it," he added, as he slid into the backseat next to Cate.

Lillian smiled at him but said no more as the car pulled away from town, heading toward Dunhaven Castle. Lillian offered another smile to both of them as the car swung onto the drive leading to the castle and eased to a stop outside the front door. Jack and Cate let themselves in the front door, bringing Lillian with them despite her protestations about using the inappropriate door.

"Just this once won't hurt, Lillian," Cate assured her as she led her to the sitting room. "We'll inform Lord MacKenzie you're back, wait here."

Cate followed Jack to Rory's study, where they found him reviewing paperwork for nearby land holdings.

"Jack, Cate, any news?" he asked, glancing up from his paperwork.

"Yes," Jack informed him. "I've managed to get Lillian released from jail for the time being while the case is still open. She's not permitted to leave town, but at least she can return here and sleep in her own bed."

Rory's eyes went wide. "Released? However did you manage that?"

"I've a background in law. The treatment she was receiving was beyond questionable and would ruin most of their case against her. It was in their best interest to release her pending the conclusion of the investigation."

"Have they any new information?"

"No," Jack responded. "They have pursued little beyond hounding Miss Murray for a confession."

“Poor girl,” Rory murmured, tossing his paper onto his desk. “I’m glad you got her released. Is she here?”

“Yes,” Cate chimed in with a nod, “I’ve asked her to wait in the sitting room. I wasn’t sure if you or Anne would like to speak with her before she returns to her quarters.”

“I am certain Anne would like to see her, yes,” Rory answered, pushing himself up to stand. “I shall inform her at once.”

“We’ll wait with her until Anne arrives,” Cate stated.

“Good.”

They separated from Rory, who ascended the main stairs to inform and retrieve Anne. Jack and Cate continued across the foyer to the sitting room. Lillian sat perched on the edge of the sofa as though afraid to touch it.

“Lord MacKenzie is retrieving Lady MacKenzie. He’s sure she’ll want to see you before you go to your room,” Cate informed her. She sat next to Lillian on the sofa.

Moments later the doors to the room burst open and Anne rushed in, followed by Rory. “Murray!” she cried, rushing to the girl’s side. “It’s so good to have you back!”

Lillian stood as Anne reached her, grasping Lillian’s hands in hers.

“Are you well?”

“I am, m’lady, yes,” Lillian assured her.

“Oh, thank you for arranging this, Jack,” Anne gushed, grabbing Jack’s hand and squeezing it.

“You’re welcome.”

“Will this trouble Murray further?” she questioned.

“I’m afraid the case isn’t closed yet but we’re working to find more information so Lillian can put this behind her. Unfortunately, she’s still the top suspect.”

“Oh, how dreadful,” Anne lamented.

“She won’t be for long if we have anything to say about it,” Cate asserted.

“Thank you both for your help on this. We are most grateful,” Rory added.

“Yes, quite,” Anne followed up. “Now,” she continued to Lillian, “I suppose you should go straight to bed.”

“I’m all right, m’lady,” Lillian assured her again. “I can attend to you before dinner if you aren’t put off by my situation.”

“Nonsense,” Anne answered. “However, formal dinner is not being held this evening because of the uproar in the house. You can begin tomorrow if you feel up to it.”

“I shall. I am most eager to work again, m’lady,” Lillian stated.

“Then I shall see you tomorrow morning to dress for the day. Have you informed Benson of your return?”

“Not yet, m’lady. Mr. and Mrs. MacKenzie instructed me to wait here and speak with you first.”

“Quite right of them. We shall inform him now and see that he is aware of the rest you require after your ordeal.” Anne approached the call bell cord on the wall and rang for Benson.

He appeared moments later and, after a brief conversation, led Lillian to the servants’ quarters to speak with the head housekeeper before returning to her room.

“Again,” Anne said once they were alone, “thank you both so much for arranging her release. I do hope she is troubled no more with this.”

“You’re welcome, Anne,” Jack answered. “Well, we will leave you to enjoy the rest of your evening. We have dinner plans in a neighboring town.”

Rory smiled at them and nodded. “I hope you enjoy them.”

They took their leave, heading upstairs to their bedroom.

“Ready to head back?”

Jack flicked his eyebrows up. “Yes. More than ready.”

“I’ll bet! You need a break after all your legal maneuvering.”

“Oh, yes. I’ve exhausted my legal muscles with all that flexing.” Jack struck his strong man pose again, eliciting a giggle from Cate.

“Okay, come on, then, let’s get you home so you can rest.”

They activated the timepiece’s mechanism, drawing them back to the present time.

Jack gave his now customary sigh of relief after returning. “Boy, I hope Forsythe gives us some good information tomorrow. I’d like to wash my hands of this mystery and my legal career.”

“Me too. Should we go with the same plan? Head back following lunch?”

“That’ll work. That seems to be an opportune hour to speak with Forsythe.”

“Okay. I’ll keep working on finding information until then.”

* * *

Cate spent the next several hours in a fruitless search for information on their two prime suspects. After dinner, she continued but gave up after an hour when she hit her thousandth dead end. She opted to stream a few episodes of a comedy show to ease her mind before bed. She found it did little to stop her brain from parsing through questions and concocting more theories.

An hour before she turned in, her phone chimed to signal a text message. She found a message from Jack: *I hope you don't have any nightmares tonight, Lady Cate*

Cate smiled at the message, agreeing with the sentiment. She responded: *Me too... hit a dead end on my research here... hope Forsythe has some news tomorrow!*

Jack typed back: *Me too... I'm doing my homework over here.*

Cate wrinkled her brow in confusion, responding: *Homework?*

Jack returned a photo message showing his laptop streaming a police procedural show. Then responded: *Get some sleep, Lady Cate, see you tomorrow :)*

Cate chuckled at the picture, then toggled off her phone display after wishing Jack pleasant dreams and finished two more episodes attempting to lull her mind into a restful state. She retired for the evening, sleeping without interruption after her extended day and restless prior night.

* * *

A bundle of nerves, Cate spent the morning distracting herself with her manuscript. She drummed her fingers against the table rather than adding meaningful content. But despite her distracted mind, she added two thousand words to her document before lunch.

Cate sped through her meal and changed for their trip back. She sat waiting for Jack in her sitting room, her leg bouncing up and down as she waited. After a few moments, she bounced from her seat and paced the floor as her mind spun out of control, wondering what information Forsythe would provide them.

“What do you think, boys? Will we solve this mystery today?” Cate inquired of the two dogs.

Riley eyed her, his head cocked to the side in a quizzical display.

“Yeah, I doubt it, too, Riley, but perhaps Forsythe will give us some clue that will allow us to catch a break!”

Riley gave her a small yip after her last comment.

“I’ll take that as a ‘yes,’” Cate answered as a knock sounded at her door. “Come in!”

“Hello, Lady Cate and her loyal subjects,” Jack announced as he entered the room. “Ready?”

“Beyond ready. Let’s go so I can stop pacing the floor and fretting about what we might discover.”

“Okay, let’s head back then.”

They entered the bedroom and slipped back to the bygone era.

Jack raised his eyebrows as they landed in 1925. “Here we are, let’s go straight to Forsythe. I’m dying to hear what he has to say.”

“You and me both!” Cate exclaimed as they hurried from the room to the servants’ area. When they arrived, Jack peeked into Benson’s office, finding both Benson and Forsythe inside.

“Ah, Mr. MacKenzie,” Benson greeted him. “Thank goodness you’re here.”

“Oh?” Jack replied, confused by the greeting.

“Yes,” Benson continued, skirting his desk and approaching them. “Lord MacKenzie asked that I bring you to him at once should I run into you. There has been a problem with the police and given your law background, he’d like your expert opinion on the matter.”

Jack rubbed the back of his neck. “A problem?”

“Yes, please follow me. A dreadful business, this,” Benson added at the end.

“Oh, but...” Jack began.

“Go,” Cate said, squeezing his hand. “And good luck.”

“Ah... okay,” Jack replied with a shrug, following Benson down the hall. He glanced back at Cate with another shrug, flashing his crossed fingers to her.

Cate pushed the door closed behind them, turning to Forsythe. “Is this an opportune moment to speak?”

“Yes, though, with the uproar, I only have a few moments to impart my news.”

“News? So, you found something?” Cate questioned, her voice raising to match the excitement coursing through her.

“Possibly,” Forsythe answered. “I questioned the staff very casually about both men. Mr. Calhoun seems to have garnered a stellar reputation with the staff. Most consider him to be above reproach, and I found nothing untoward in his background or character.” Cate nodded, and he continued. “But... Mr. Gould has a bit of a different reputation.”

“Oh?” Cate inquired, her eyebrows raised.

“Yes. Seems he enjoys alcohol more than he should. And he also enjoys cards. Last week during a regular card game that occurs in the stables, he imbibed quite a few drinks and told everyone he’d soon have enough money to open a restaurant. He confessed it to be a lifelong dream of his. No one could determine how he’d come up with the money for the venture, especially after he mentioned the location of the business he’d like to start.”

“Where?” Cate asked, playing innocent.

“London!” Forsythe exclaimed, raising an eyebrow. “I’m certain you are aware of how expensive a venture of that nature would be!”

“I see,” Cate murmured, deep in thought. “Yes, I understand your meaning. Thank you for the information. It’s most helpful.”

“Of course, Mrs. MacKenzie. If I learn anything else, I shall pass it along to you. I imagine this may have some bearing though, given the claims he made about coming into money.”

The door to the office burst open. “Mr. Forsythe, you’d better come quickly,” a maid said.

“Thank you, Forsythe,” Cate said to end the conversation. She preceded him through the door and ascended the stairs to the main floor as he continued in the opposite direction to the servants’ hall.

Shouts came from the sitting room. She hurried toward the room, slipping inside and into a firestorm.

CHAPTER 28



Jack and Rory stood with Officer MacCullough and two other uniformed officers. Jack shouted at them, "... ludicrous! Nothing more than a scare tactic! You're upsetting the household for no good reason."

Officer MacCullough sighed. "As I've explained multiple times, I have a warrant to search the girl's room again. Your opinion on the matter, while noted, is meaningless."

Jack snatched the paper from the officer's hands, scanning it. "Fine," he retorted, tossing it back at the man, "but don't linger longer than needed and keep yourselves to only her space. I shall observe the search."

"Fine," the man answered with a grunt. "Boys..." He shoved a finger toward the upstairs, signaling for them to proceed with their search.

Cate joined Jack as they followed the police. She offered a questioning glance his way, eyebrows raised.

"They want to search Lillian's room... again," Jack whispered.

Cate nodded in understanding as they climbed to the top floor housing the servants' quarters. The police charged down the hall to Lillian's room. The housekeeper waited outside. Lillian stood inside the door, wringing her hands. Cate approached her, putting her arm around Lillian's shoulders.

"Search it all," MacCullough grumbled to the other two officers, scanning the sparse furniture in the room. The other two officers each headed to separate corners, beginning their search. They tore drawers from the wardrobe, dumping their contents on the floor. Clothes were torn from

hangers and tossed in a heap after they were poked and prodded to search for hiding spots. A small tin keepsake box clattered to the floor, startling Lillian and Cate after its contents were littered across the floor.

“Officer MacCullough, instruct your men to be more delicate, they are frightening the ladies,” Jack warned.

The man grunted at them. “Perhaps the ladies should wait outside.”

“I will not be told where I can wait,” Cate groused at him.

“Try to be a little quieter, boys,” the man acquiesced, sounding anything but genuine in his request.

They continued their search, peering behind the furniture. They ended by stripping the beds and tossing the mattresses onto the floor. Nothing was found.

“Satisfied?” Jack questioned.

“Hardly,” Officer MacCullough responded. He approached Lillian, who shook from witnessing the entire experience. “Where are you hiding them, girl? Sold them already?”

“I have done nothing!” she cried.

“That’s enough!” Jack barked, stepping between the officer and Lillian. “You conducted your search, that is all your warrant allowed. Now leave.”

“I have every right to question the suspect!” MacCullough maintained. “And if you interfere again, I’ll take her back into custody.”

“You’ll do nothing of the sort. You’ve turned up no evidence to warrant her arrest. Just because you suspect her does not mean you can do as you please. You’ve had her in custody for over forty-eight hours. In that time, you’ve turned up no evidence to support your theory. At this juncture, any action on your part to remand her into your custody is harassment. Any judge will agree.”

“You’re preventing me from doing my job, Mr. MacKenzie. Any judge will see that!”

“I’m not. If you were doing your job, you’d be considering other suspects instead of railroading my innocent client. You’ve no proof Miss Murray did anything. In fact, at each turn, you are presented evidence of her innocence that you discard! And while you continue to pursue this dead end, the real thief is getting away with a crime! No, Officer MacCullough, what the judge will see is an incompetent policeman who is failing to do his job.”

MacCullough huffed at Jack but backed down. "This isn't the end of this, Mr. MacKenzie," he answered after a breath, wagging his finger at Jack.

"I should hope not. It would be best if you actually caught the thief," Jack called as Officer MacCullough led the other officers from the room.

"Wow! Great job, Jack!" Cate whispered after they cleared the room.

Lillian glanced around the room. "Yes, thank you, Mr. MacKenzie..." she paused. "I had better clean up." She reached to pick up the tin memento box. A whimper escaped her lips as she began placing her keepsakes back in the box.

"Let me help," Cate offered, kneeling down and gathering items of clothing from the floor.

"Oh, no, Mrs. MacKenzie, please. I've got it, it's mine to take care of. You've done enough for me."

"This will take a while, Lillian. You need help! It's no problem."

"Cate's correct," Jack chimed in, heaving one mattress back onto its frame. "This is too large a job for one person."

"You are both too kind," Lillian murmured as they continued the cleanup. They had the room restored in ninety minutes. "Thank you ever so much, both of you."

"You're welcome, Lillian," Cate responded, squeezing her hand.

A gong sounded. "That'd be the dressing gong. We finished just in time," Lillian replied.

Cate nodded, taking it as their cue to leave.

"Is there anything else you want to do before we go home?" Jack inquired as they traversed the halls to the bedroom.

Cate shook her head. "No. We can discuss the information Forsythe gave me once we get back."

As they rounded the corner to the hallway continuing to their suite, they spotted Anne coming toward them. "Oh, there you are!" she exclaimed as she caught sight of them.

"Hello, Anne," Cate greeted her.

"I was just looking for you. Rory said the police had left, and I assumed you returned to your suite."

"No," Cate informed her, "the police left quite a mess behind. We helped Murray clean it up. It would have been impossible for her to restore that room herself."

“How kind. The reason I was seeking you out was to invite you to dinner. With the household restored, we’re returning to serving formal dinner. Won’t you please join us?”

“Oh, well, we were...” Jack began.

“Oh, please. I’ve been such a terrible hostess thus far. I’d like to rectify that. I’d prefer not to take no for an answer.”

Cate glanced at Jack. “Well, I suppose it would be nice to dine with the family again.”

“Wonderful! I shall see you in the sitting room for cocktails soon, then!”

Anne stepped past them, rounding the corner, and disappearing down another hallway on her way to dress for dinner.

Jack held his arms out with a shrug. “Sorry,” he confessed. “I didn’t see a way around it.”

“Me either,” Cate admitted. “It’s fine. And it’s a nice chance to spend time with my family. Sort of.”

“They are your family,” Jack insisted. “Guess I’m back in the monkey suit for the night though.”

Cate giggled as she perused her suitcase. “Yep. But like I said, I like the monkey suit.”

She selected a dress, heading for the bathroom to ready herself for dinner. She pulled on the evening dress, again heavily beaded with gold beads and sea-foam-colored frills making up the bottom. She switched places with Jack, pulling on her shoes as she waited for him to change. As she waited, she added a headband, crossing it across her forehead as was the style in the era.

“Wow, you really look the part, Lady Cate,” Jack said, emerging from the bathroom in his so-called monkey suit. “You look great!”

Cate struck a pose. “Thank you!”

“Don’t say it.”

“Don’t say what?” Cate questioned.

“I’m dashing, I already know.”

Cate shook her head at him.

“Shall we?” He extended his arm to her.

She accepted it and they made their way to the sitting room.

Anne, Rory, Amelia and Lucas were already gathered there. “I hope we haven’t kept you waiting too long,” Cate apologized as they entered the room.

“Not at all, we’ve only just gotten here ourselves,” Rory informed her.

“I’m so glad you could join us,” Anne added. She seemed in much better spirits than Cate had seen her before.

“Indeed, now we may all congratulate you on the fine work, Jack,” Lucas chimed in.

“Oh, it was nothing.”

“No, no, it was quite something,” Anne argued. “Lillian is so indebted to you, as are we all!”

“Yes, fine work,” Rory added.

“I wasn’t aware you practiced law, Jack. I thought land was your business,” Lucas mentioned.

“It is now. I haven’t practiced in years, but when the situation called for it, I used my old career to our advantage.”

“Lucky for us you did, particularly for Miss Murray,” Rory commented.

Benson announced dinner, and they filed into the dining room for the meal. Conversation continued about Jack’s legal maneuverings before turning to other subjects. Cate enjoyed the evening, becoming more relaxed with the family than she had been before.

She and Jack “retired” shortly after dinner, returning to their own time after changing from their evening clothes. When they arrived home, Jack noted they had enough time to discuss the events of the day prior to their next dinner.

“Yes, we should have time before second dinner,” Cate commented with a giggle.

“Okay, meet you in the library in a few,” Jack said.

They parted ways, meeting again after changing into their regular clothes. They sank into their usual seats as the dogs settled nearby, both weary from living through the hours that had passed in 1925 despite it only being forty minutes in the present.

“The double life is catching up to me,” Jack admitted with a groan.

“Haha, yes. Estate manager by day and land acquisitions and lawyer... also by day,” she answered with a chuckle. “You’re doing great though! That was some tough talking with Officer MacCullough today. Watching those legal dramas is really paying off!”

Jack burst into laughter. “Yes, I’ve learned quite a bit. Everyone’s always yelling and threatening. It seems to work.”

Cate rubbed her forehead with her palm. "What a mess this is. Poor Lillian. I'm convinced she's innocent, yet that Officer MacCullough will not leave her alone!"

"The man's convinced he can close the case against her."

"Why?"

Jack shrugged. "I'm not sure. Though it may be a case of pure laziness. He doesn't want to bother investigating if he expects he can wheedle a confession out of the lassie. It makes his job easier."

"That's awful. Doesn't he have any sense of justice or fair play? Or even any pride in his work?"

"Doesn't seem like it. Anyway, was there anything interesting from Forsythe?"

"Yes," Cate responded with a clear affirmative. "He asked around about both men. In Robert Calhoun's case, he found nothing untoward. Everyone seemed to agree he was a nice guy and there wasn't anything questionable about his past or present or any shady dealings."

"That doesn't seem like much help, but I suppose it knocks him down a few pegs on the suspect list if we have no motive and no reason to believe he could or would do something of this nature."

"Right. But the more interesting bit was about Thomas Gould," Cate continued. "He likes both alcohol and gambling more than he should. And he's been bragging to his gambling buddies that he's going to be out of service soon and owning his own restaurant in London."

Jack puckered his lips as he pondered it. "Hmm. That's interesting. Is it just idle chatter, do you imagine? Or is there something to this?"

"I'm not sure. Forsythe seemed to believe there may be something to it. Possibly because he let it slip while he was inebriated. Forsythe all but came out and said he stole the jewelry to finance his new career."

"So, Forsythe thinks he's guilty."

Cate flicked a gaze to Jack. "He didn't say as much, but he certainly implied it, yes."

"What do you think?"

Cate remained silent for a moment, parsing through her thoughts. "I think it's enough to consider him a suspect and move him up to the top of our list. It's not an open and shut case, but the circumstantial evidence against him is building. First, he has no alibi. And he never mentioned the absence of his roommate. So, either he lied to protect Mr. Calhoun, or he

had no idea Calhoun left the room because he wasn't there. Second, he's been bragging about coming into some money, enough to start a restaurant in an expensive city."

"Yes, the evidence does point toward his guilt. We just need some proof. We can't mention this to MacCullough yet. He'll never go for it, even with the mounting circumstantial evidence, without direct proof."

"I wonder if he'd go for it if the man were standing with the jewelry clutched in his hand," Cate quipped with a roll of her eyes.

"No doubt he'd still try to blame Lillian Murray somehow."

"Funny but not," Cate responded with a chuckle. "So, we've got ourselves down to two primary suspects."

"Still keeping Calhoun on the list?" Jack inquired.

Cate shook her head. "No. Still keeping Lucas on the list."

Jack screwed up his face. "Lucas? With what evidence?"

"Anne's letter."

Jack let his head sink back into the chair behind him at her comment.

"Jack, we can't ignore that letter! What else could Anne's letter have been referring to? What other type of theft would have gotten her so upset she wrote something like that?"

"Okay, okay," Jack answered, holding his hands up in surrender, "Lucas and Thomas Gould."

"The only way I can figure to solve this is by proving one of them is innocent."

"Or both of them are innocent."

Cate grimaced, wrinkling her nose. "Which sends us right back to square one."

"No. We'd have ruled out at least two people. Progress, see."

"Yeah, progress, right," Cate commented, sarcasm thick in her voice.

Jack checked his watch. "Almost time for second dinner. You joining us servants in the servants' hall tonight?"

"I am, yes." She stood, glancing around the room in search of her furry friends. Her eyes rested on the bookshelf across from her. She narrowed her eyes, continuing to stare at it. Something nagged at her.

"Don't start with that bookshelf again, Lady Cate," Jack warned, noting the direction of her gaze. "You'll start your nightmares up."

Cate shook her head.

"Don't shake your head at me, lassie, you will so."

“No, I didn’t mean that. But something is nagging at me. Something’s off.”

Jack glanced between Cate and the bookshelf. “You mean besides the horrible nightmares that thing’s causing you?”

“Yes.”

She held up a finger as she strode to the door, opened it and glanced into the hallway. She stepped into the doorway. Her gaze flitted between the two spaces. “Does this space look right?”

“Huh?” Jack questioned, screwing up his face. He glanced around it. “Looks fine to me? Has the cleaning company done something strange? Misplaced something?”

“No. Not that, the dimensions. Shouldn’t it be... bigger?”

“Bigger?” Jack queried.

“Come stand here and take a peek.”

Jack joined her in the hallway. “Now, we’re aware of how deep the bookcases are. But consider their placement compared to where the wall is in the hall. Doesn’t it look like they should be a few feet further back toward the hall?”

Jack glanced between the hallway and the bookcases a few times. “Eh, maybe?”

“Well,” Cate added, standing against the wall for emphasis, “consider the wall being here and the bookcases coming out into the room this far.” She stepped forward to illustrate. “Now look in the library. Those bookcases would be a few extra feet deep given where they are.”

“Okay. I see what you mean,” Jack conceded. “What are you implying?”

“That the room’s dimensions are incorrect. There is something behind those bookcases! Like a secret passage.”

“Or pipes,” Jack commented. “There’s no passage listed on the original plans or any other. But when indoor plumbing was installed, perhaps that was the space they were put into. This wall,” Jack said, placing his hand against the hallway’s wall, “may have been moved out to accommodate plumbing.”

Cate considered the idea. “Hmm. Then why wasn’t it marked on the plans.”

“Mistake? Last minute change? Careless error? Someone forgot. Could be any number of reasons.”

“You may be right,” she conceded, “although that’s not very fun.”

“I find indoor plumbing quite fun, Lady Cate.”

“Funny, funny. Oh well, so much for my big discovery. Ready for dinner?”

“Yep.”

“Come on, you two rascals,” Cate called to the dogs. “Let’s go get our dinner!”

* * *

Cate strolled around the castle the next morning, following Riley and Bailey on their morning walk.

“Good morning, Lady Cate,” Jack greeted Cate as she rounded the corner toward the back garden.

“Good morning. I see your fan club found you,” Cate noted, eyeing the two small dogs grouped around Jack’s feet as he petted them.

“Aye, they did.”

“Kind of cold to be working out here, isn’t it?”

“It’s not too bad. I won’t be out long. I’m just noting a few things to plan for spring.”

“Spring,” Cate repeated with a smile, rubbing her arms. “That word sounds wonderful!”

“Aye. You’ve not experienced a spring in Dunhaven yet. You came almost at summertime.”

“Yes. I’m looking forward to spring here.”

“And then we celebrate your one-year anniversary with us.”

Cate glanced back to the castle. “I know. I can’t believe it. Almost a year already! Where has the time gone?”

“To 1856 and 1925, that’s where.”

“Uh-uh,” Cate argued. “You can’t count that! We get extra time to do that.”

“Oh, right. Yes, you’d think your year would have taken longer, what with our thirty-six-hour days and all.”

Cate chuckled and licked her lips. “Speaking of our thirty-six-hour days...”

“Same plan as yesterday? Head back after lunch?” Jack replied before she could finish her statement.

“Yeah, that sounds good.”

“What’s the plan? Speak with Gould? Or perhaps Benson or Forsythe again?”

Cate bit her lower lip. “My plan is a bit bolder than that.”

Jack ceased his work, narrowing his eyes at her. “Bolder? Oh, Lady Cate, I don’t like when you say things like that.”

“Yes, I know. But we’ve got to do something! We can’t just keep asking people what they think might be true. We need proof!”

“How can we get proof? Or do I want to know?”

Cate shook her head. “You don’t want to know.”

“Now I *have* to know.”

Cate sighed, holding her hands up . “Okay. But don’t say I didn’t warn you. I want to sneak upstairs and take a peek in Gould’s room.”

She flicked her gaze to him, eyebrows raised as she awaited his response.

CHAPTER 29



Jack's eyes widened as Cate told him her daring plan to search Thomas Gould's room.

He blinked a few times before responding. "*What?* Cate, are you mad?"

"No. But it may give us a clue. Perhaps he wrote a note mentioning he has the jewels, or someone replied to a request to sell them. Or perhaps the jewelry itself is hidden up there."

"And perhaps we'll get in big trouble if we're caught."

Cate waved a hand at the concern. "Oh, that's simple."

"It is?"

"Yeah, don't get caught. You be my lookout. I'll do the searching."

"Ugh," Jack lamented, his shoulders slumping.

"Jack, we're getting nowhere and soon Officer MacCullough is going to come back with some other request. As good of a fake attorney as you are, there may come a point where you can't help Lillian with your fancy but fake legal mumbo-jumbo!"

Jack sighed, his hands on his hips. "You're right. I hate it, but you're right. If we don't come up with proof soon, there may be no stopping MacCullough from pinning this on Lillian."

"Okay, so we're agreed?"

"Agreed. See you after lunch for the daring plan."

Cate nodded with a smile. "Okay, see you then!"

She spent the rest of her morning working on her book's manuscript. With the belief that only pipes were behind the library's bookshelves, Cate decided to brave it and work there. She answered a few personal emails during lunch before returning to her suite to dress for the trip back.

Around one, Jack arrived, and they slipped back to 1925.

"I am not looking forward to this at all," Jack complained after they arrived. "Do we know which room is theirs?"

"No," Cate answered. "But I have a plan to ascertain that information. I'm going to ask Forsythe in the name of following up on our clues."

"Okay. Well, it's your show," Jack said, motioning for her to precede him.

They navigated below stairs, seeking Charles Forsythe. They found him in Benson's office selecting a wine for the evening dinner.

"Excuse me, Forsythe," Cate said, knocking at the door.

"Mrs. MacKenzie! May I help you?"

"Do you have a moment? I had a few questions about our discussion yesterday I'd like to follow up on."

"Yes, please come in," Forsythe responded. "Oh, hello, Mr. MacKenzie."

Jack nodded to him in greeting as Cate closed the door. "I've informed Mr. MacKenzie of the information you passed along to me yesterday. This coupled with the fact that for several hours Mr. Gould is without an alibi has brought up a few other questions."

"I'll help in any way I can," Forsythe assured them.

"Could you tell us the location of Mr. Gould's room in the hallway?"

"The location?" Forsythe questioned, his brows scrunching.

"We're trying to determine who, if anyone, may have been able to hear someone coming and going from the room. If anyone did," Jack explained.

Forsythe nodded in understanding. "They are on the right, second door. Only my room, on the opposite side of the hall, and Mr. Benson's are between theirs and the stairway. I heard nothing that night and to my knowledge, neither did Mr. Benson. Though, the hallway is not long. Few steps are needed to reach the stairs."

"Okay, that's helpful, thank you," Cate answered.

"You're welcome. Do you expect you may have the crime solved?"

Cate paused a moment. "No. Just sorting through information and trying to determine what is best to follow up on."

Forsythe rubbed his chin. "I see. Well, I shall continue to keep my ear to the ground for any further information. I must admit, the information I found on Mr. Gould that I imparted to you yesterday, Mrs. MacKenzie, seems to have direct bearing on the case."

"It is interesting. We don't want to accuse any innocent parties, though, so we need more than conjecture."

"It seems that is all the police have in the case against Miss Murray," Forsythe insisted.

"It is. However, without direct proof, the police won't take anything we say seriously," Jack explained.

Forsythe sighed. "I wish we could ferret out some information to assist. I am uncomfortable having a thief on my staff. Perhaps a search of his things?"

Cate nodded at him, hoping to end the conversation. "I understand, though we don't know there is one. Let's hold off on doing anything rash until we can consider the information further. And if you discover any other news, please let us know. Again, thank you, Forsythe."

"You're welcome, Mrs. MacKenzie."

Jack and Cate left the room, climbing upstairs to the main floor before continuing on to the servants' quarters. At this hour, the servants would be attending to their duties, so they hoped to slip in and out unseen. Using the information from Forsythe, they located the bedroom. Like Lillian's, it was sparsely furnished.

"This shouldn't take long," Cate whispered. "Keep an eye on the door."

Jack nodded, taking a post at the door, and peering through the crack they'd left open. Cate scanned the room before diving in. A wave of guilt passed over her as she slid open the first drawer in the dresser, but she shoved it aside, pawing through the contents. She checked each drawer with a cursory scan but found nothing. She glanced behind the dresser and under each drawer. But her search was fruitless. The wardrobe search also came up empty.

Cate glanced under the bed and felt under the mattress. Under one, she found a few notes. A quick scan of them gave her no more information. She stood and approached Jack. She signaled to him with a shake of her head and motioned to ask if they could retreat downstairs without being caught. He nodded, and they hurried from the quarters down to the floor containing the family's bedrooms.

They returned to their suite. Cate slogged through the door, filled with frustration. She slapped her hands against her thighs as Jack closed the door. "Well, that didn't help!"

"You didn't expect to find the jewelry there, did you?"

"No, but at least some clue! Though, you're right, he'd keep nothing incriminating in his room. Perhaps the stables," Cate muttered, thinking aloud. "Do you think he could have unloaded them already?"

"I'm not sure. I'm not sure how we're going to solve anything. We're reaching dead-ends at every turn."

Cate made a face and nodded. She paced the floor for a few more moments, deep in reflection. After a while, she crinkled her brow, then glanced to Jack.

"What?" he inquired.

"Did you find the conversation with Forsythe strange? He seemed bound and determined to pin this on Gould."

"I suppose he's just antsy to settle this and not have a thief on his staff, as he mentioned."

"Perhaps. Although it seems he's as inflexible as Officer MacCullough."

"Why didn't you take him up on the search?"

Cate shook her head. "It seemed like a bad idea. I wanted to do it alone, without him there. I'm not sure why, but it just seemed a bad decision to involve him."

"It may not have been the best idea, you're right. If he's innocent, it could cause problems within the staff."

"So, now what?"

"Up to you," Jack responded. "What's the next trick up your sleeve?"

"I haven't got one," Cate replied, showing him her empty sleeves. "If it's all the same to you, I'd like to skip dinner with the family tonight and go home."

"Sure. We'll leave a note for Rory telling him to pass along our regrets and tell the others we've gone out to dine."

"Okay."

Jack scribbled a note to Rory, explaining they wouldn't attend dinner. He left it with Benson before returning to the suite. Cate sat on the chaise, her chin resting in her hands.

“Second thoughts, Lady Cate?” Jack asked after witnessing her glum expression.

“No. But I have no idea what to try next.”

“Don’t let it get you down, Cate,” Jack said, squeezing her shoulder. “Just let your mind relax. Something will come to you. I’ve never known you to go more than twenty-four hours without a brilliant idea.”

“Brilliant, huh?”

“I have no doubt that by tomorrow, you’ll have a new idea to pursue to solve this case.”

“Whew, pressure’s on now!”

“Oh, no, now you’ll be in overdrive,” Jack retorted. “That wasn’t a challenge, Cate. It was a vote of confidence.”

“I’ll remember that before I accuse you of being the reason I didn’t sleep all night and was up brainstorming!” Cate exclaimed with a chuckle.

“Aye, you do that. Shall we head back so you can begin your night of fretting?”

“Yes,” Cate agreed with a nod.

Jack pulled her to standing. They entered the bedroom and returned to the present.

“At least we won’t have two dinners today,” Cate said with a sigh.

“Hey, that’s my favorite part of time traveling! The double meals!”

“Wow, you have a favorite part? And here I assumed you hated everything about it.”

“I told you it was growing on me,” Jack answered, winking. “Well, I’ll leave you to begin your handwringing, pacing and worrying. M’lady.” He gave an extravagant bow before departing from the room.

Cate chuckled as he left, though her mind immediately turned to the puzzle they’d just left behind. Jack was correct, she’d likely pore over it again and again for the rest of the day. She hoped he was also correct in saying that by tomorrow she’d have a new avenue to pursue. So far all they had were unsubstantiated suspicions, dead-ends, and no leads to get them any closer to the culprit.

She spent some of her time on a long, chilly walk with Riley and Bailey, hoping the cold winter air and mindless task of playing ball with the dogs would relax her mind into stumbling onto her next great idea. She returned to the castle with no new conclusions or objectives to pursue.

After dinner, Cate spread all her materials out on the floor of her sitting room. She added any missing information to her notes, then studied each item. She considered the case they'd built against Thomas Gould and Lucas MacKenzie forward and backward. She played devil's advocate, finding loopholes, inconsistencies in assumptions and leaps of logic.

They were missing something. But what? Proof, her mind filled in. So far, any case they'd built had been circumstantial only. They could have built a similar case against any random stranger. Cate sighed.

Unless they got a break, and soon, they'd likely never solve the case. She worried Lillian Murray would be railroaded into a prison sentence for nothing. At the very least, perhaps they could help the girl avoid that, even if they couldn't finger the guilty party and recover the jewelry.

Cate's phone chimed an incoming text alert. She opened her messaging app, reading the text from Jack: *Have you worn through the floorboards with your pacing yet?*

A chuckle escaped her as she answered: *No... no pacing, just studying.* She included a picture of her messy work area with notes and papers spread all over the floor.

Jack replied: *Ah... have you solved it yet?*

Cate responded: *No! We're missing something... and if we don't find it soon, we may never solve this!*

Within a few minutes, Jack returned the text: *No and our thief will get off scot free... pun intended ;)*

Cate shook her head at the terrible joke and wrote back: *Your jokes leave me speechless*

The response to her text was: *But you laughed, didn't you?*

She responded with an affirmative, admitting it elicited a chuckle from her, and Jack argued the joke couldn't possibly have been terrible if it worked.

She toggled off her phone after promising to get some rest. "A few more minutes won't hurt though," she murmured to herself as she stared at the papers again.

She took two clean sheets of paper. One she titled *Case Against Lucas MacKenzie* and the other she titled *Case Against Thomas Gould*. She noted every piece of evidence and every doubt for each suspect. Nothing caught her eye. Short of a miracle or additional information from Charles Forsythe

tomorrow, they were stuck. With a sigh, Cate shoved the papers back into the folder, calling it a night.

When morning rolled around, Cate found herself no closer to solving anything. There were no big ideas, no new leads to try. Short of searching any area Thomas Gould frequented or finding a witness who spotted him meeting with a shady character, there seemed to be nothing else to do. Disappointed, Cate snuggled under a blanket on her chaise as the sun crested the horizon. Fog clung to the moors in heavy patches, obscuring the view. The fog also seemed to settle in Cate's mind, removing her ability to seek a solution with any clarity.

After breakfast, Cate studied the new case sheets she'd made against each suspect. She read them aloud to Riley and Bailey. "What are we missing, Riley? Do you know, Bailey? How can we figure out who committed the crime?"

Neither dog offered an answer. With a frustrated sigh, she tucked the notes away and made her way to the library. As she settled at her desk, she received a text from Jack: *So, what's the big idea for today?*

Cate responded with a sigh: *Sorry to be a disappointment but I've got nothing... short of searching the entire estate or Forsythe having new information I'm fresh out!*

Jack answered within moments: *Perhaps we should up our trip? Go this morning.*

Cate considered it. Molly, ever adventurous, was using her day off to sightsee in her new country, leaving Cate alone in the castle. With no one to question Jack's appearance on his day off, she went with the plan. She responded: *Okay... unless you're busy... I hate making you work on your day off!*

Jack answered: *Not busy... not work... see you in a few*

Cate stood in the foyer waiting for Jack to arrive. The gravel driveway crunched under the weight of his car, and she flung the door open to greet him.

"Wow, are you psychic, Lady Cate?" Jack inquired, stepping from his car.

"No, just impatient."

"You are definitely that."

"Let's change and go right away. I don't want to miss Forsythe."

“Or Gould,” Jack added. “Meet you in thirty? Is that enough time for you?”

“I’ll make it enough time. I don’t want to delay this.”

“Okay, see you then.”

Cate hurried to her room, tossing on her dress, and fixing her hair at lightning speed. Jack knocked at the door as she fastened the buckle on her shoe.

“Come in! I’m almost ready,” she shouted.

“That’s a pretty dress,” Jack noted as he caught Riley mid-leap.

“Thank you,” Cate answered, glancing up at him. “Let’s hope it’s lucky in addition to pretty and we get the break we need.”

“I’ll admit, this one is tough. I swear, solving that murder was easier!”

Cate nodded as she rose to standing, smoothing her dress. “Seemed like a breeze compared to this. Even with Randolph dead set on ruining the investigation! “Ready?”

“I am, but you aren’t.”

Cate furrowed her brow, confused. “I’m not?”

“Nope,” Jack said, approaching her and sliding something off the side table.

“You’re still just Cate Kensie,” he said, holding up the plain gold wedding band. “And you’ve got to become Mrs. Jack MacKenzie.”

“Oh! Yikes! I almost forgot my fake wedding ring! Sorry, I was in such a hurry, I meant to put it on as soon as I sat down, but I went straight to the shoes.”

“Forgot? How could you possibly forget your wedding ring? Don’t forget it or we may have some explaining to do.” He took her hand, sliding the wedding ring onto her finger. “There, that’s better.”

Cate smiled at him as she stepped toward the bedroom. “Now, I am ready!”

“Darn right,” Jack responded, following her. “Come on, Mrs. MacKenzie, let’s go solve a mystery.”

Cate held out the timepiece, rolling her eyes at him. “Okay, Mr. MacKenzie.” They activated the timepiece, slipping back to the Roaring Twenties.

“All right, Mrs. MacKenzie, let’s see if we can track down any clues.”

They descended to the main floor, finding Rory in the library.

“Jack, Cate!” he greeted them. “We missed you at dinner last evening.”

“Sorry,” Jack apologized. “We weren’t able to make it. We were hoping to speak with Forsythe again today. We’ve been following up on a few leads.”

“You aren’t still considering him as a suspect, are you?”

“No,” Cate corrected, “he’s been helping us sort through the staff member accounts and alibis. We’re checking everyone’s stories again to see if we’ve missed anything.”

“Oh, I am pleased he’s helpful to you. He seems to be working out well in the household.” Rory consulted his timepiece; the same one Cate wore under her dress. “Hmm, at this time of the morning, he should be below stairs.”

“Thanks,” Jack answered as they turned to leave.

“Have you made any progress? You mentioned following leads?” Rory questioned before they could exit the room.

“We’re looking into a few things,” Jack hedged.

“What do you know about your groom, Thomas Gould?” Cate questioned.

“Thomas? Not much. He seems a good chap, and he’s good with the horses.”

“It seems he’s good with liquor and cards, too,” Cate confessed. “And during one of his games, he mentioned coming into some money soon. An odd admission given the theft.”

Rory offered a surprised expression. “Oh! How... odd, yes. Though I can’t imagine him doing something like this! For what reason?”

“His friends say he plans to open a restaurant in London. Perhaps he viewed the theft as a shortcut to funding his venture.”

Rory considered it, his expression changing from shock to dismay. “How disappointing if it’s true. As I mentioned, he’s wonderful with the horses.”

“Let’s hope it’s not true,” Cate responded.

“Yes,” Rory said, nodding his head. “Let us hope for that. Please keep me apprised, will you? And I hope you’ll be able to join us for dinner. Lucas and Amelia will be departing at the end of the week, and I’m sure they’d like to spend more time with you both.”

“We’ll be there,” Cate answered.

“Wonderful. Well, I shall let you get on with your investigation.”

Cate and Jack closed the doors behind them as they exited the room.

Cate shook her head as they ambled down the hall. "I swear we could catch the thief red-handed and Rory would still not believe they did it."

"Yeah, he really has an optimistic view, doesn't he? He trusts everyone to do the right and honorable thing. It's endearing in a way."

"It is. His trust is almost childlike. But it's also costly."

"No kidding. His trust has invited a thief into the household."

They descended the stairs leading to the servants' hall. They found Forsythe in the kitchen emptying a tray.

"Mr. and Mrs. MacKenzie, is there something I can assist with?"

"Yes," Cate answered. "I'm sorry to interrupt, could we speak privately?"

"Of course," he said with a bow. They left the kitchen, walking down the hall to Benson's office.

Forsythe closed the door behind them. "Quick thinking requesting to speak in private."

"I expect it's best to keep our conversations private. Particularly at this juncture," Cate replied.

"Yes, especially with what I've found."

"Found?" Cate asked, excitement and hope filling her voice. "What is it?"

Forsythe removed a note from his breast pocket. "This!" He handed the note to Cate. "I must confess you would probably disapprove of my methods, but I believe the ends justified the means."

"What methods?" Jack inquired.

"I asked Mr. Calhoun to search Mr. Gould's things. Not very honorable, I'll admit. But, in these cases, when dealing with someone as dishonest as a thief, we must use extreme methods."

Jack raised his eyebrows at the comment as Cate unfolded the note. Her pulse quickened as she read the scrawled words.

CHAPTER 30



Cate stared down at the scrawled note, her heart thudding as she read it.

Thomas,

Have you got the jewelry? I have a buyer ready, just say the word. We'll have that restaurant soon!

- P

Jack peered over her shoulder.

Cate glanced up from the paper. "And Mr. Calhoun found this amongst Thomas' things?"

"Yes, in one of his drawers."

Cate folded the note, waving it in the air. "Can we keep this?"

"Yes. Though at this point, I judge it's wise to go to the police!"

Cate nodded and glanced at Jack. "Mr. MacKenzie is an attorney, so I leave it to his judgement on how best to approach the police with this evidence. We want everything above board. We don't want any issues with the case because of the methods used to obtain the evidence."

Forsythe nodded. "Ah, yes, I understand. At the very least, this clears Miss Murray."

"It does, thank you," Jack replied. He took the note from Cate, stuffing it into his jacket pocket. "And we'll use it to clear her name. But as Mrs. MacKenzie mentioned, we must do it in the proper way so it may be used to

create a case against the guilty party in addition to proving Miss Murray's innocence."

"This has been so helpful, Forsythe. Thank you. And we will let Miss Murray know you and Mr. Calhoun helped to clear her name," Cate assured him.

"I didn't do it for the gratitude. It may be wise not to mention anyone's name. It may cause strife within the staff," Forsythe asserted. A knock sounded at the door. "Yes?"

"Mr. Forsythe, sorry to interrupt," a young freckle-faced maid whispered, peeking in the door. "Mr. Benson is asking for you at once."

"Thank you, Ethel," Forsythe answered. "Good day, Mr. and Mrs. MacKenzie." He nodded his head to them and turned on his heel, exiting the room.

Jack glanced to Cate, bewilderment on his face.

"Oh, Forsythe!" Cate called, reaching to the floor and grasping a few folded notes. The man disappeared without answering.

Cate stared down at the papers in her hand. "He must have dropped this when he pulled that note out."

"Yes," Jack answered. "You can leave them on Benson's desk to return to him."

Cate didn't respond, instead her brow wrinkled as she stared at the note.

"Lorne Peterson?" Cate asked, confusion filling her voice. "Who is Lorne Peterson?"

Jack shrugged. "A pen pal of Forsythe's?"

Cate shook her head. "No, this letter has already been posted and delivered. It's not an outgoing post. Why would Forsythe have Lorne Peterson's mail? Who is he?"

Cate puckered her lips at the envelopes before shoving them in her dress pocket. "Let's go."

"You're taking it?"

"Yes. Call it instinct but something is odd about this."

"You can explain it to me while we wait hours for dinner."

"Come on," Cate said as they stepped into the hall. "We'll walk to the loch or town to pass the time."

"How about to town? Maybe hit the pub for lunch... my stomach is growling."

"Wow, is the pub there already?"

“Yes, that pub’s been in business for most of the town’s history.”

Cate glanced to Jack, a serious expression on her face.

Concern crossed Jack’s face. “What is it, Cate? What’s wrong?”

“Do you think they have the fish and chips?”

Jack burst into laughter. “Oh, Lady Cate, I’ll bet they do, don’t you worry. Should we request a car?”

“Okay, whew, good. No, we don’t need to. We can walk.”

“You sure?”

“Yeah,” Cate assured him. “I’m good. For the fish and chips, I can walk.”

They climbed to the main level and headed for the foyer. As they approached the front door, Lucas and Amelia met them.

“Well, hello, Cate and Jack!” Amelia said in greeting. She pulled Cate into an embrace, kissing her cheek. “We missed you at dinner last evening.”

“We’ll be there this evening,” Jack assured them.

“Wonderful. We’re departing the castle at the end of the week, but we’d love to spend more time with you both,” Lucas added.

“Are you heading out?” Amelia asked.

“Yes. We’re heading to town for the afternoon,” Cate answered.

“And for lunch,” Jack added. “We’re dying to try the pub.”

“We’re also heading into town for lunch! Would you care to join us? We can share a car,” Amelia said.

“Oh!” Cate exclaimed, glancing at Jack. “That would be lovely unless you were hoping for a private day.”

“Not at all, Cate,” Lucas chimed in. “It promises to be a lovely afternoon with you joining us.”

“I’ll run up for the coats,” Jack said, beginning his ascent of the stairs.

“Don’t forget my hat!” Cate called after him.

“No, I won’t forget your hat,” he assured her.

Jack returned within a few minutes. The crunch of gravel announced the car’s arrival.

“That sounds like the car now,” Lucas added. “Shall we?”

The foursome stepped into the chilly air, climbing into the car with Jack taking the front seat and the ladies and Lucas in the rear. The trip to town was quick, and they arranged for the chauffeur to pick them up in the late afternoon near the town’s center. They filed into the pub and were seated in a booth near a roaring fire.

“Ah, this is lovely,” Amelia said, settling into the booth next to Lucas. She perused the menu. “What looks promising?”

Cate browsed the menu finding the fish and chips were listed. She smiled to herself.

“I can take one guess at what my wife will order,” Jack mentioned after a glance at the menu.

“Oh?” Amelia questioned.

“Fish and chips,” Jack and Cate replied together.

“Cate loves fish and chips at any pub we stop at,” Jack added.

“Ah, a fish and chips connoisseur, Cate?” Amelia joked.

“Something like that,” Cate admitted.

They placed their order with the waitress and settled into a conversation while waiting for their meals.

“So, Jack,” Lucas began. “Where did you attend law school?”

Without skipping a beat, Jack rattled off, “Oxford.”

Cate’s eyes widened at Jack’s lie.

“Ah, an Oxford man! Very good!”

“Why did you leave the work?” Amelia queried.

“I wanted something more challenging, more interesting. Land management allows me to use my legal skills but also travel.”

“How interesting, what a unique blending of skills,” Lucas commented.

“What about you, Lucas?” Jack inquired.

“I’m also in land, though not acquisition. I hold several different types of properties for various purposes: farms, housing, businesses. I may have to seek your expertise whenever I plan to expand my holdings.”

“Are they concentrated in one area or spread out in several locations?”

“Spread out across both Scotland and England, but the majority of my holdings are in this area. The extended holiday stay here allows me to look in on things.”

“A little cold to be touring properties.”

“Cold, indeed,” Lucas admitted, “however, not too cold to meet with tenants and discuss issues.”

“Oh, you meet with them in person?”

“I do, I try to keep up with it. I believe face-to-face dealings done with a smile and a handshake make all the difference. Many of my fellow land investors have done away with all that. They only see numbers in their books. I see people. Each person has a story, triumphs, and trials. It’s

important to be cognizant of them. Several colleagues solely review their books, toss a tenant out if they aren't meeting their due. That's quite unfair if you ask me, perhaps something happened, perhaps this is only temporary. I prefer to speak with them, determine what can be worked out. Losing a tenant is an inconvenience, but for the tenant, losing their home or livelihood can be a great deal worse."

"That's a very honorable take on land management. And a more than respectable practice," Jack noted.

"We're all here to help one another. I've been rather fortunate in my life. I'd like to share that good fortune with others."

"What a kind sentiment, Lucas," Cate commented.

Amelia smiled at her. "If you gentlemen are quite finished discussing business, perhaps a change of subject is in order. Poor Cate and I are sitting here like bumps on a log!"

"Prettiest bumps on logs I've ever seen, wouldn't you agree, Jack?" Lucas asked with a grin.

"Quite," Jack answered.

"Well, what have you in mind, Amelia? We can't very well talk dresses with you ladies. We're out of our depths there," Lucas replied.

"I don't agree. One can still appreciate beauty whether or not one understands how it is achieved. Cate, you seem to have quite a sense of fashion. I've enjoyed many of your ensembles, both day and evening."

"Thank you. I suppose I inherited it."

"Was your mother very into fashion, then?" Amelia queried.

"All those preceding me have been. They've paved the way for my choices, you could say."

Cate was spared any further clothing discussion as their food arrived. Amelia spent a few more minutes discussing recent changes in clothing styles, from hemlines to dress cuts. Conversation then turned to the delicious meals and plans for the afternoon.

"And how are the fish and chips in our little town, Cate?" Lucas inquired. "Are they quite up to your standard?"

"They are," Cate assured him. "It was an excellent choice if I do say so myself."

Her comment earned a chuckle from Jack, who realized the extent of her enjoyment of the pub's fish and chips. Since Cate's arrival in Dunhaven months earlier, she'd ordered nothing but that particular dish at the pub.

The group finished their meal before emerging from the pub into the chilly winter air. Despite the nip in the air, the sun shined bright in the cloudless blue sky.

“What a delightful winter day,” Lucas commented. “Do you plan to do much shopping in town?” he inquired of Cate and Jack.

“No,” Cate responded. “Just window shopping.”

“Oh!” Amelia exclaimed. “They’re skating on the pond. Shall we try?”

“I’m afraid I’ve never skated before,” Cate admitted.

“Then today is the perfect day to change that!” Amelia replied, grabbing Cate’s hand and pulling her toward the pond. Cate allowed Amelia to drag her toward the pond, issuing a helpless glance back at Jack.

“Amelia quite likes your quiet nature,” Lucas commented as they approached the skate rental trolley. “If you’re not careful, she’ll have you racing cars next or the like.”

“That’s quite a leap from ice skating,” Amelia chided jokingly.

Lucas insisted on treating everyone to the skate rentals and they sat down to strap the blades to their feet on a nearby bench. “Are you an experienced skater, Jack?”

“Yes,” Jack responded. “Though I haven’t skated in a while.”

Amelia stood up, stepping onto the frozen lake. “Come on, Cate, put your feet right onto the ice and get a feel for your skates.”

Cate stood on wobbly legs holding tight to Amelia’s hands.

“Now, we’ll begin by just pulling you around a bit. Don’t worry, we won’t let you go, will we, Jack?”

With a grin, Amelia began pulling Cate across the expanse of the icy pond with Jack’s help.

Lucas skated toward them. “You’re doing quite well, Cate. You’ve got excellent balance.”

“Are you ready to try a bit of skating on your own? We won’t let you go. Just push a bit with your feet,” Amelia instructed.

Cate pushed a bit too much, toppling them in a heap. Cate apologized, wide-eyed and concerned about Amelia.

Amelia laughed the incident off. “I didn’t expect you to skate without taking at least one spill. I’m no worse for wear, now, come on, let’s try again.”

Jack, who had recovered from his fall already, pulled both ladies to their feet.

“Just a tiny push,” Amelia said.

Cate gave a gentle push, tempering her movement this time.

“There you go, Cate!” Jack exclaimed. “Now, you’ve got it.”

Cate offered a nervous grin. “I haven’t toppled you a second time. Yet! But I’m far from having it down,” she admitted, still clinging to both their hands.

“So, I can let go, right?” Jack joked.

“NO!” Cate shouted, tightening her grip.

Jack chuckled, looping his arm around her waist. “Don’t worry, Cate. I won’t let you go.”

Amelia grinned at them. “You’re progressing nicely, I agree.”

Cate smiled at her, gaining confidence as they looped around the pond. After two loops, Cate gained enough courage to tell Amelia she could skate with Lucas.

“Are you sure? I won’t leave you if you’re still unsure.”

Cate nodded. “I’m sure. Go have fun.”

“I won’t leave her,” Jack chimed in.

They made their way around the pond several more times. While concentrating on her skating, Cate snuck a few glances at Amelia and Lucas skating around the pond together. “They seem to be enjoying themselves.”

“Yes,” Jack responded. “Are you?”

Cate nodded with a smile. “I am, yes. I’d prefer not to fall again but I’m enjoying myself.”

“Okay, just checking. If you get tired, let me know, I’ll drag you to the bench.”

“Okay. What about you? Tired of dragging me around yet?”

“No, Lady Cate, I am not.”

They made several more passes around the pond before Amelia and Lucas joined them. Cate let go of Jack’s hand after a few rounds, skating on her own. Jack remained watchful of her, keeping her upright when she wobbled.

“You’ve made a vast improvement!” Lucas noted, approaching Cate.

“Look, no hands!” Cate quipped, waving her hands in the air as she glided along on her own.

“Getting confident!” Amelia noted, applauding.

“A tad,” Cate admitted. The foursome made another four passes, testing Cate’s new skating skills. After the last one, they collapsed on the bench

together in a heap, all smiles.

“What did you think, Cate? Did you find it fun?” Amelia asked as they removed their blades.

“I did. And thank you for teaching me,” she responded.

“You’re quite a good student,” Lucas noted. Amelia nodded in agreement.

Lucas checked his pocket watch. “We should go back to change for dinner.”

“Goodness!” Amelia exclaimed, grabbing hold of the watch, “I didn’t realize how long we’d lingered. Oh, I hope this doesn’t present a problem for dinner dressing.” She glanced to Cate and Jack.

“I’m sure we’ll make it and anyway, it was good fun!” Cate responded.

“Come along,” Lucas coaxed. “Williams is meeting us at the town’s center.”

They trudged up the hill to the town, navigating down the main street. The foursome piled into the car which whisked them to the castle. As they entered, a maid passed by the foyer.

“Oh, has the dressing gong rung yet?” Amelia asked the girl.

“Aye, ma’am. About thirty minutes ago.”

“We’d better go straight away then,” Amelia answered, glancing to the rest of them. “See you soon.” She squeezed Cate’s hand. They raced up the stairs, each going to their suites.

Cate blazed a trail straight to her suitcase, digging through it and pulling out two dresses. She held one up in each hand, studying them.

Jack collapsed on the bed with his suit. After a few breaths, he sat up. “If you’re going to stand there pondering your choice all day, I’m going to call first dibs on the bathroom!”

Cate smirked at him. “I now have a reputation to maintain!”

Jack laughed. “That you do. Nice side-stepping on the conversation. ‘It runs in my family.’”

“Ha! Thank you! Although I can’t touch your seamless fabrications, Oxford man.”

“Hey, if you’re going to fib, you may as well do it right. Besides, it’s only half a fib.”

“Half a fib?”

“Yes,” Jack answered as he backed his way toward the bathroom. “I did go to Oxford. Two semesters.”

Cate raised her eyebrows. "Really? You're full of surprises!"

"Aye," Jack agreed. "I hated it and dropped out. I may have stayed if the professors were as pretty as you." He winked at her, disappearing into the bathroom.

Cate giggled, turning her attention back to the dresses. She selected the royal blue, silver beaded dress, tossing the burgundy back into the suitcase as Jack emerged from the bathroom.

"Have you made your choice? I moved as slow as I could."

"Yes, I made my choice. And I expect Amelia will be pleased!" Cate disappeared into the bathroom. She pulled off her day clothes, hanging the dress on a towel bar. She shimmied into the evening dress and took a few moments to fix her hair. Her skating excursion, while fun, left her hair a disheveled mess. She tamed it back into a low chignon. She adjusted her dress, smoothing it and adding a necklace. Satisfied, she emerged from the bathroom and sat on the bed to pull her shoes on.

"Whew, we're just going to make it!" Jack announced.

"We'll be late. This buckle can be tricky," Cate retorted, fiddling with the t-strap shoe.

"Here, let me," Jack offered, kneeling on the floor in front of her. He set her shoe on his knee, buckling the strap after his second try. "There."

"Saved the day," Cate said as he pulled her to standing. "Thank you."

"I don't want to be late. I'm hungry."

Cate pulled on her gloves as they exited the room and navigated to the sitting room. Amelia and Lucas had also just arrived. They were offering their apologies for their lateness along with those of Jack and Cate. Amelia insisted it was their fault.

"No harm done," Rory stated. "Though we should forego cocktails."

"Of course," Amelia agreed. "Shall we go straight in?"

"Yes, that might be wise," Anne agreed. They filed into the dining room, taking their seats.

"What caused you to run late, Amelia?" Anne inquired over the first course.

"We went into town earlier for lunch. Then went skating on the pond," Amelia responded.

"What fun!" Rory exclaimed. "Did you enjoy it?"

"Very much so," Amelia answered. "Cate hadn't skated before. I insisted she try. So, you see, it is rather my fault we were late."

Anne's eyebrows raised as she turned her gaze to Cate. "Did you enjoy it, Cate?"

"I did," Cate admitted. "I was unsure but found it to be enjoyable."

"Well, you are more adventurous than I, Cate," Anne admitted. "I've never tried, though Amelia attempts to talk me into it every season."

"Oh, she's exceptionally adventurous, this lassie," Jack chimed in.

"Perhaps it's the American in you," Lucas suggested.

"One day, we'll make a skater of you, too," Amelia teased Anne.

The conversation continued on to winter sports, weather, travel and Amelia and Lucas' upcoming departure. Dinner sped by, with Cate enjoying the company and relaxing with her family.

Cate and Jack stayed for one post-dinner drink before retiring for the evening. Cate cited her sore muscles for her early night. She and Jack returned to their suite, changing back to their day clothes before using the timepiece to return to their time.

"Whew! What a day!" Jack announced as they returned.

"Yeah and it's only... nine forty-eight... in the morning!" Cate announced, citing the mere forty-eight minutes that had passed in the present during the twelve hours they spent in the past.

"I'm ready for bed. And it's still morning!"

Cate nodded. "Well, perhaps you should take a nice long nap when you get home."

"Aye, though I'd like to go over the information we received today. The note Gould received... this could be the break we've been hoping for."

CHAPTER 31



“It may be a little too good of a break,” Cate said as she recalled the note Forsythe passed to them. “We can head down to the library.

We should have plenty of time to discuss it before your Sunday dinner with your grandfather.”

“Why don’t you join us for dinner. Pap sure won’t mind. And he’ll most likely be interested in our little investigation.”

“Oh,” Cate hedged, her brows wrinkling in thought. “I wouldn’t want to impose. It’s your time with your grandfather. Plus, I’ve got the dogs. I hate to leave them.”

“It’s no imposition. Pap loves you. Pap also loves your dogs. And he’s got a nice yard for them to frolic in. Besides, I won’t take no for an answer.”

Cate grinned at him, arching an eyebrow. “Oh, is that right? I suppose I’d better just agree then!”

“You suppose right, Lady Cate! Now, we’ll change and meet downstairs. We’ll head down early and help him cook.”

“Okay,” Cate agreed.

Jack left her to change.

She selected an outfit, carrying it into the bathroom. She hung her dress on the towel bar, leaving it for later to put away. She fixed her hair into a suitable style for the present time before touching up her makeup.

After exiting, she made her way to the sitting room and pulled on her boots. “How about a field trip, boys? Want to go to Jack’s grandfather’s?”

Riley agreed at the mention of Jack's name. Bailey, beginning to become excited when Riley did, leapt to his feet as well.

Cate ushered both dogs from the room. They raced ahead of her down the hall, barreling down the stairs to a waiting Jack. Cate pulled on her coat, slipping harnesses and leashes on both dogs. "I think I remember where your grandfather lives, but I'll follow you just in case."

"Nonsense," Jack said, swatting the air with his hand. "I'll drive."

"Then you'll have to bring me back, that's silly! I'm capable of driving. I even stay on the correct side of the road most times!"

"Hmm," Jack considered it, his hand on his chin. "Yes, I'd have to drive you back. That would take hours..."

Cate rolled her eyes at him, chuckling.

Jack continued, "May even have to stay overnight before I drive back..."

"Oh, stop," Cate said, batting at him. "Fine, fine, I'll let you drive."

They escorted the pups outside and into Jack's car. Within a matter of minutes, they were pulling up to the little cottage on the outskirts of town. Riley and Bailey reveled in the new scents as they explored every inch of the front yard before trotting to the front door.

"Well, Lady Cate!" Stanley Reid called from the doorway. "Hello!"

"Hello, Mr. Reid. I hope you don't mind my joining you for dinner!"

"Not at all, come in, come in! Add a little beauty to the meal. Better than staring at this big lug all day," Mr. Reid teased, jerking his thumb toward Jack. "Besides, can't have you eating cereal for dinner."

"Thank you for having me," Cate replied, stepping through the door. "And despite what Jack tells you, I don't always eat cereal for dinner."

"Eighty percent of the time then," Jack mentioned with a wink. "The kind with the marshmallows and the cartoon leprechaun on the box."

"And you brought the little pups. Hello, boys! When Jackie texted me you were coming, I set aside two bones for you pups."

"Aw, thank you, Mr. Reid, that's very kind of you," Cate said. "What a treat for you boys!"

Riley pranced into the living room, settling down next to the wall heater in the room.

"Little laddie has made himself right at home. Come on, Mr. Bailey, come over here by your buddy." Jack led him over, settling him near Riley.

“Been time traveling, eh?” Mr. Reid questioned as they headed to the kitchen. “When to?”

“Yes,” Cate responded. “1925.”

“Ah, the jewelry theft,” Mr. Reid commented, mixing a few spices together.

“That’s correct. Anything I can help with?”

“Just sit yourself down, lassie,” Jack answered, joining them. “We’ll handle it.”

“I can help, I’m not that much of a disaster in the kitchen.”

“You’ll help by sitting down and telling me what your investigation has shown so far,” Mr. Reid insisted.

Cate sank into a chair at the kitchen table. “All right, all right!”

“Who have you identified as suspects?” Stanley asked as he sprinkled his mixed spices over cubed potatoes.

“A groom named Thomas Gould is our primary suspect,” Jack replied, tenderizing meat.

“Or Lucas MacKenzie.”

“Lucas? Rory’s brother?” Stanley inquired.

“Yes, my great-grandfather.”

“Though neither of us believe he did it,” Jack insisted.

“Nay, I wouldn’t imagine he did,” Stanley agreed.

“Why do you say that, Mr. Reid?” Cate queried.

“Didn’t seem the type. I met Lucas a few times. Good, decent fellow, he seemed.”

“We arrived at the same conclusion after spending some time with him. Speaking of great-grandparents, I met Lachlan.”

Stanley Reid stopped in his tracks, staring at Jack. “You don’t say. And how was dear dad, Jackie?”

“Very friendly. We had a great conversation. Rory put all the pieces of the puzzle together pretty fast and realized we were time travelers,” Jack mentioned with a roll of his eyes. “By extension, Lachlan is also aware.”

Stanley shook his head, amazed by the experience Jack related. “Truly a gift we’ve been blessed with.”

“That’s what I said!” Cate exclaimed.

“Time traveling is growing on me,” Jack admitted.

Mr. Reid spread the potatoes on a baking sheet, popping it into the refrigerator. “Why do you suspect Lucas?”

“We found a note. Anne MacKenzie wrote it. Oh, I should have brought it!” Cate planted her palm against her forehead. “In short, it spoke to an unnamed family member about how shocked Anne was that the family member could have stolen so much from her family. She mentions a theft, and she details how angry she is about it.”

“Who is it addressed to?”

“No name,” Cate responded. “The note mentions she cannot bear to write their name she loathes them so much.”

“Odd,” Stanley replied, cutting celery for a salad.

“You know, I can chop celery. I feel useless over here,” Cate mentioned.

“I won’t have it, lassie,” Stanley repeated.

Jack issued her a wry glance.

“And Jackie, get the lady something to drink before her throat runs dry.”

“Really, I’m fine. I can get myself a glass of water.”

“Nay, Lady Cate, you’re a guest! We can do better than a mere glass of water.” He set about making her a warm cuppa.

“Okay,” Mr. Reid said, returning to the previous discussion as he settled down at the table with Cate after placing the roast in the oven. “Based on Anne’s note, you fingered Lucas as a suspect. But neither of you really expects he did it.”

“I hope he didn’t for personal reasons. But beyond that, after we investigated, I cannot imagine him or Amelia doing it. They both seem like wonderful, honest people!”

“Aye, I’d agree with that sentiment,” the elder Mr. Reid commented as Jack placed a piping hot cup of tea in front of him too.

“You said you met Lucas?” Cate inquired.

“Aye,” the man confirmed. “Much later than 1925, mind you, but I met him on a few occasions. He seemed a good, honest man, as you noted.”

“At the castle?” Cate questioned.

“Aye, lassie. Around Christmas. They traveled here every holiday.”

Cate’s brow furrowed. “So... Lucas and Amelia continued to travel here many years later.”

Jack sat down with his cuppa. “Which all but confirms their innocence despite Anne’s note.”

Cate remained silent for a moment, considering it. “Yeah, I must agree. Given that they traveled here for years after points to their innocence. With

the rhetoric in Anne's letter, I doubt they'd have been invited back if they were guilty."

"No, they'd have become estranged," Jack added.

"So that leaves your other suspect, Thomas Gould," Stanley Reid concluded.

"Aye, Pap, it does," Jack agreed. "And the evidence against him is compelling."

"Let's hear your case against him."

"He has no alibi. And we have a rather incriminating note that's been given to us suggesting he has the jewelry and intends to sell it. Those two items along with some brash statements he's made about coming into enough money to start a restaurant in London round out our full case against him."

"How did you come about this information?"

"The police accused Anne's ladies' maid of the crime. Remind Jack to fill you in on his new burgeoning legal career, by the way! When we visited her while she was in custody, she told us Rory's valet, Mr. Calhoun, was ill the night of the theft. We then questioned the staff. During that process, we found that Mr. Calhoun, who is Thomas Gould's roommate, was out of the room for part of the night. Leaving both Mr. Calhoun and Thomas without an alibi for a portion of the night."

"A fact that Mr. Gould failed to mention to Cate when she spoke with him. So, either he didn't realize his roommate was gone because he was asleep or because he wasn't in the room," Jack chimed in.

Cate nodded as she sipped her tea. "Right. After that, we focused our time and energy on Gould and Calhoun. We asked the under-butler, Forsythe, to provide any information he could. After a few inquiries, he found that most considered it a stretch that Robert Calhoun could have stolen the jewelry given his honest nature. However, Mr. Gould enjoyed gambling and drinking."

"While it's a character flaw, it's not a reason to accuse him," Mr. Reid interjected.

"No," Jack answered, "but he tends to run his mouth when he drinks and plays. And he told his gambling buddies he'd soon be coming into money to open a restaurant in London."

Cate nodded again. "Which he opens mere months after leaving Dunhaven!"

“And he leaves Dunhaven only months after the theft,” Jack added.

Cate’s voice rose with excitement and her speech became rushed. “*And...* Forsythe had Calhoun search his room and he found a note asking if he was ready to sell the jewelry.”

Mr. Reid considered the information. “The evidence does point to him.”

Cate nodded, and they fell silent for several breaths.

Mr. Reid narrowed his eyes at them. “Yet something is bothering you about it.”

Cate nodded again to confirm Stanley’s suspicions. “Two things, really. First, it seems too convenient. Second, Anne’s note doesn’t fit with Gould as a culprit.”

“Too convenient?” Jack queried. “We’ve almost got him dead to rights.”

Cate shook her head. “No. Forsythe said Calhoun found the note in his room. But he found it after we searched the room!”

Jack’s eyebrows raised, and he glanced to Cate. “And the note wasn’t there when you searched his things?”

Cate shook her head again. “Nope. And besides, would you keep such an incriminating piece of evidence in your room? The police have searched the house several times.”

“Perhaps he felt untouchable. The police are focused on Lillian Murray only.”

Cate shook her head, crossing her arms over her chest as she leaned back in the chair. “I didn’t overlook that note. It’s fake.”

“By whom?”

Cate considered it. “It couldn’t have been anyone but Forsythe or Calhoun. Only they were involved.”

“That we know of,” Jack responded.

“That’s where this falls apart. Why would either of them fake the note? Or ask someone else to fake it?”

“Because one of them is the guilty party,” Stanley Reid deduced.

Cate scrunched her brow, considering his conclusion. “Calhoun or Forsythe? Hmm.”

“Forsythe was on the original suspect list, Cate,” Jack reminded her.

“Yes,” Cate agreed. “And he was adamant about pinning this on Gould. When we didn’t jump on the first tale about the restaurant, he gave us the note. Perhaps he wrote the note, in an effort to make the case stronger.”

“It’s possible,” Jack agreed.

“Looks like you two have more investigating to do,” Stanley suggested after checking his roast.

“Aye, looks like it, Pap,” Jack agreed.

The older man plopped into his chair. “What’s this about your blossoming law career, Jackie?”

Jack let out a loud laugh and shook his head. “Aye, I’m quite the legal genius. I’ve already gotten a man off on a murder case, and now I’m working on keeping Lillian Murray out of jail for a crime she didn’t commit.”

Mr. Reid wrinkled his brow, glancing between Cate and Jack. After a moment, he raised his brows. “You really are blooming as an attorney!”

“I’d expect no less from a man who graduated top of his class at Oxford,” Cate said with a wink.

Mr. Reid roared with laughter. “You do it big when you do it, don’t you, Jackie?”

“Aye,” Jack agreed, joining into the laughter. “I told Lady Cate, if we’re going to lie, might as well make it a damn good one.”

“All joking aside,” Cate added, after her laughter subsided, “he may have missed his calling.”

“What was that you said, Jackie? Legal genius?” Mr. Reid replied, still chuckling. “Ah, perhaps, but he didn’t miss his calling. His place is right here with us and you, Lady Cate.”

Cate smiled at the older man. “I couldn’t agree more.”

They continued their conversation as Jack and Mr. Reid prepared a few more items for the dinner then settled down for an early afternoon meal. Riley and Bailey gathered around the table, gnawing on the bones provided by Stanley Reid.

Cate was not only impressed by Stanley’s roast, but also by his dessert-making skills. After the meal, Mr. Reid served a delicious Cranachan, a traditional Scottish dessert. Despite it being “out of season” for the dessert, Mr. Reid insisted he make it once he learned Cate would join them for dinner.

“With cooking like this, Mr. Reid, I may come here every Sunday,” Cate said as she polished off her dessert.

“Better than your cereal?” Jack asked.

“Mmm, yes, even the marshmallow kind.”

The trio continued their conversation while cleaning up after their meal, a task Cate insisted on participating in. They settled in the living room afterward, enjoying each other's company. In the late afternoon, Jack returned Cate to the castle for the evening.

"Well, I suppose we'll try our other avenue tomorrow afternoon. Follow up on Pap's idea that either Forsythe or Calhoun are the culprit," Jack promised as they drove up the drive.

"Yes. This is quite the conundrum. Other than money, what reasoning is there? And how does it tie in with Anne's note?"

Jack shrugged as he eased the car to a stop in front of the castle. "I hope we can find out."

"Me too! Well, I'll see you tomorrow. Enjoy the rest of your day off."

"Thanks, Lady Cate. Enjoy your evening. And you too, Riley and Bailey." Jack gave each a pat on the head before they jumped from the car, racing to the front door. Cate ushered them into the castle, waving to Jack as he pulled away.

She climbed the stairs, the two pups racing in front of her toward their suite. Quietness filled the castle. Molly must not have returned yet. Cate entered the room, crossing to her bedroom and bathroom. Despite the early hour, she planned on changing for bed and relaxing for the rest of the evening. The extra twelve hours added to her day exhausted her. She turned in early, hoping for a restful night.

Cate slept straight through to the alarm. It buzzed at her, startling her awake. Groggy, she slapped the snooze button, rolling over for ten more minutes. The alarm screamed again, waking a dozing Cate. She groaned but dragged herself from her bed.

She stifled a yawn as she slogged into the kitchen. "Good morning."

"Good morning, Lady Cate," Mrs. Fraser answered. "Are you alright?"

"Yeah," Molly added, "you look pale."

"Aye, Molly. I noticed the same. You may be coming down with something, Lady Cate!"

"Oh, no," Cate responded, waving their concern away with her hand. "I didn't sleep well. Still waking up."

"Trouble sleeping?" Mrs. Fraser questioned. "Everything all right?"

"A little. Must be getting too much rest and not enough exercise," Cate fibbed.

“With all that walking you do with Riley and Bailey?” Molly inquired. “You get plenty of exercise!”

“I’ll sleep like the dead tonight, I bet!” Cate responded. Jack and Mr. Fraser entered the kitchen as Mrs. Fraser set out the last of the breakfast.

“Well, I’d recommend you join us for a cuppa after breakfast. It’ll help with your muddled mind from the lack of sleep.”

“I will take you up on that,” Cate agreed.

After finishing breakfast, Mrs. Fraser and Molly bustled about the kitchen cleaning up before making tea. Cate rose to help clear the table, but Mrs. Fraser put her firmly back in her seat, insisting she appeared too weak for physical labor.

Cate waited for her tea, stacking dishes, and shoving them to the edge of the table to make it easier for the women to retrieve.

“You’re bound and determined to do work, aren’t you, Lady Cate?” Mrs. Fraser asked.

“I’m not ill! I’m capable of doing a little.”

“We’ll have it cleaned up in no time,” Mrs. Fraser insisted.

It wasn’t long before Cate had a piping hot cup of tea in front of her, along with one of Mrs. Fraser’s famous shortbreads.

“Mmm,” Molly murmured, munching on one. “When are you going to teach me to bake these?”

“Soon enough. When you’re ready.”

“I’m more than ready,” Molly assured her. “I need to learn how to make these in case I eat them all before you bake more.”

Cate giggled at Molly’s statement. “How was your day trip yesterday, Molly?”

“Wonderful! I don’t expect I’ll ever get tired of this country!”

Molly discussed all aspects of her sightseeing with Cate and Mrs. Fraser. She’d done quite a bit in one day. Not put off by the cold, she scouted several nearby sights and noted several she wanted to explore further in warmer weather. Molly babbled on over tea, encouraging Cate to come with her on one of her expeditions and see the countryside. Cate promised to do that once the weather improved, ceding that the dogs would love the trip.

After tea, Cate retreated to her room, using her time to work. She stared at her computer screen with glazed eyes. Only adrenaline and anticipation

for her upcoming trip kept her awake. After a while, she slammed the laptop shut, opting for a walk with the dogs to fill her time before lunch.

After lunch, Cate began her preparations to return to the past. She swept her hair into a 1920s-appropriate style. Her dress from the previous day remained hanging on her towel bar.

Cate pulled it down, and it slipped from her fingers, splaying onto the bathroom floor.

“Of course,” Cate mumbled, bending to retrieve it. She grasped it by the hem, pulling it upward. As she attempted to untangle it and turn it right-side up, something slid from the pocket, clattering to the floor. She glanced at the object, confusion crossing her face.

She set the dress aside in a heap, reaching for the envelope laying on the floor. She turned it over in her hands, recalling shoving it in her pocket the day before.

The name on the envelope read Mr. Lorne Peterson. Cate sank onto the edge of the tub. Who was Lorne Peterson, she wondered? Why did Forsythe have a letter addressed to him? He wasn’t sending the letter to Lorne Peterson, the letter had already been delivered.

With a deep inhale, Cate opened the missive and unfolded it. Her brow furrowed as she read:

My darling Lorne,

How I cannot wait to see you! Do you have them? Are they as beautiful as I’m imagining? Oh! To have such luxuries! But one day, my darling, one day we shall!

Love, please let me try them on before you rid us of them! Could we keep just one of them? Surely selling only one piece would give us enough money to live the good life! I could wear one when you take me out on the town. How lovely I would look. Like a grand lady!

Oh, but I know we can’t keep them. Sadly, we must sell them. At least once they’re gone, you’ll have something from your family beyond just a dull name. They owe you, love. You’ve been robbed of your due.

When can I see you? Please say before you sell those little beauties! I want to try it on just once, please, my love? Write when you can.

Ever yours,

Trixie

XOXOXO

Cate stared at the letter, confusion on her face. She raced into her sitting room, pulling open her folder listing all the servants in the household during 1925. She scanned the list, running her finger down the page. No listings existed for Lorne Peterson.

She wrinkled her brow and tightened her lips together. Something wasn't adding up. Why did Forsythe have this note? What did it mean? What luxuries was the mysterious Trixie referring to?

CHAPTER 32



A knock at the door interrupted Cate's musings. She rushed to the door, greeting a prepared Jack.

"Not ready?" he surmised, eyeing Cate still in her normal clothes.

She shook her head. "No, but come in."

"Change in plans?" he asked, stepping into the room and bending to pet the two dogs.

"Not really. But something interesting came up. As I was about to change, this note slipped out of my pocket. I'd forgotten about it after I pocketed it yesterday!"

"Ohhhh, the note Forsythe dropped? I'd forgotten about it, too."

"Yes. Well, anyway, it dropped out of my pocket, and I again wondered why Forsythe had it. Who is Lorne Peterson? Long story short, I read it."

"What did it say?"

Cate took a deep breath before shoving it toward him. "Here you read it. I want your take without my thoughts mixed in. I don't want to influence your opinion"

Cate paced the floor as Jack read the note. "Well?" she queried the moment he glanced up from the missive.

"I'm confused. Who are these people? And what are they talking about? And why does Forsythe have this note?"

"Same questions I had. The first thing I figured was one or both of them were servants at the house in 1925 and Forsythe, for whatever reason,

confiscated the note from them. But..." Cate paused, grabbing the staff list from her folder, "there are no Lornes or Trixies on the staff in 1925."

"Perhaps Lorne is a friend of Forsythe?"

"Why give him the letter?" Cate inquired.

"Show off to his friend? Brag about his girlfriend?"

Cate shot him a glance. "That seems a bit of a stretch. I couldn't answer the who question. So, I moved on to the next obvious question: what are they talking about? What are the luxuries?"

"Could be anything," Jack replied with a shrug.

Cate paced around, biting her lower lip in thought. "Or..." she said, her mind churning in thought as her eyes grew wide, "or do they refer to something we know?"

"Like what?"

"Like the missing jewelry."

Jack stared at the note, scanning it again. "I mean it could..."

Cate sidled next to him, peering over his shoulder. "Could? It's pretty possible. Consider how she refers to these objects: beautiful, luxuries, let's sell one piece, I'll wear the other out on the town and look like a grand lady. What does a woman wear that she refers to as a beautiful luxury, that she'd wear out on the town to look like a grand lady?"

Jack shook his head as though he had no clue. "Oh, come on, think, Jack."

"Luxurious clothing? A fur coat? Yeah, jewelry. It could be jewelry, sure."

"Okay, so this note could refer to the stolen jewelry. She asks Lorne if he has it. Which means Lorne, whoever he is, is the guilty party. And it fits with Anne's note. Look here!" Cate exclaimed, pointing to a specific statement. "You'll have something from your family beyond that dull name! This implies Lorne is related to the MacKenzies somehow."

Jack remained silent, deep in thought. Cate cocked her head, biting her lower lip again. She glanced up to Jack, wide-eyed again.

"What?"

"This implies Lorne is related to the MacKenzies," she repeated. "Lorne... related to the MacKenzies... Lorne... MacKenzie. Lorne MacKenzie!"

Jack glanced around the room. "Randolph's brother?"

Cate nodded.

“Cate, he’d be ancient if he’s still alive!”

“No, he can’t be Lorne himself. That’s obvious,” Cate answered, pacing. “Lorne’s son? No... no! Lorne’s grandson! Yes, that must be it! Lorne’s grandson!”

Jack knit his brows. “You’re jumping to some big conclusions here, Cate.”

Cate shrugged. “The note references taking something from his family, so he gets more than the stupid name. His name is Lorne. It can’t be a coincidence that there is a Lorne MacKenzie in the family tree.”

“Perhaps it’s the Peterson family Trixie is referring to?” Jack questioned.

Cate shook her head, disagreeing. “It can’t be a coincidence. There are far too many of those. The note refers to something luxurious... the jewelry. It refers to taking something owed to him from the family... Lorne’s family. Lorne’s children probably received nothing in the will. We know he had a reputation as a womanizer. Victoria confirmed that to me. It’s likely they were bastard children, anyway.”

“I still think it’s a stretch, Cate. And even if you’re correct, who is Lorne? Thomas Gould? Robert Calhoun? How can we find out?”

Cate considered it for a moment. A grin crossed her face and her pulse quickened. “No. Charles Forsythe!” She grabbed her laptop, plopping onto the chaise.

“How do you figure?”

“He’s the only one I couldn’t find anything out about when I researched them online! I found no information at all. Because he’s using a fake name!” Cate’s fingers flew over the keyboard. “Just as I suspected!”

“What?” Jack moved to peer over her shoulder.

“When I search Lorne Peterson, I find results. Death date, birth date. But when I try Charles Forsythe, nothing. I mean, I get results, but there’s nothing that fits with our Charles Forsythe.”

“Hmm,” Jack mused aloud.

“He *must* be Lorne Peterson. He’s hiding his identity because he’s related to the family.”

“Still,” Jack replied, “it’s a stretch. So, you have the name Lorne. Do you really think he and his grandfather were the only ones with that name?”

“No, but perhaps it was still too close for comfort. Or perhaps the Peterson name is known by the family. They may have kept tabs on Lorne’s

progeny.”

Jack remained unconvinced, a fact obvious from his expression.

“Okay, Mr. Skeptical, what else makes sense? Who is Lorne? What does this note refer to?”

Jack sighed, pondering her queries for a moment. “I suppose you’re right. This is the most likely scenario given the information we have.”

Cate smiled at him.

“*But*,” he continued, “we have limited information. This is hardly a smoking gun and we’re making a lot of assumptions about who Lorne Peterson is and how he’s related to the family.”

“You’re right,” Cate answered, closing the laptop, and jumping to her feet. She paced the floor. “We need more proof. And we’re going to get it!”

Jack rubbed a hand across his face. “I hate the sound of this.”

“We’ve got to return to 1925 and pursue this.”

“How?”

“First, we prove the incriminating note is a fake. Then we need to get proof against Forsythe, a. k. a. Lorne. Perhaps search his things?”

“Ugh. Yep, I hate this plan.”

“We must get proof. We can’t go to the police or even Rory without it. Rory will never believe us, especially if we come with the story about this being a cousin of his.”

Jack sighed. “Well, I suppose you better get changed and we better get this horrendous plan underway.”

Cate nodded her head, a smile on her face. “Be right back!”

She raced to the bathroom, pulling on her dress. She slid her ring and shoes on, hurrying to buckle them before dashing to the bedroom and calling for Jack. “Let’s go!”

“You are way too excited.”

“We’re on to something, Jack. This is the break we’ve been hoping for!” She held out the timepiece, and they activated it, traveling back to 1925. “Okay, let’s get going!”

“How do you plan to prove this note is fake?”

“Try to get a handwriting sample from Forsythe. Once we do that, we can compare them. If it matches, we’ll move on to part two of the plan.”

“Searching Forsythe’s room? Ugh. I hate taking this risk, but okay, let’s go!”

Cate grinned at him, hurrying from the bedroom, across the sitting room, and into the hallway. She charged down the hall, making her way straight down to the servant's area. She sought Forsythe, finding him in Benson's office, decanting the wine to be used for dinner.

"Mr. and Mrs. MacKenzie!" he greeted them. "Have you been able to discuss the new evidence with the police?"

"Ah," Cate hesitated, glancing at Jack. "We are about to present our case to them, but we want all our ducks in a row. The police will, without doubt, want to verify any name mentioned in the note you provided us. Would you provide us with a list of all male staff members?"

Forsythe paused a moment, before nodding his head. "Yes, of course, Mrs. MacKenzie."

"I hate to be a bother," Cate pressed, "but we'd like to gather the information now and speak with the police as soon as possible. I'm sure you understand."

"Oh, yes, of course."

"Just a handwritten note will do, thank you," Cate instructed.

Forsythe offered a brief smile, pulling a piece of paper from Benson's desk drawer and scrawling a list. "This is all of them. I hope you find it helpful and that this soon is behind us." He held the note out toward them.

Cate smiled at him, accepting the note. She glanced at it. "Yes, this will be most helpful. Thank you. With any luck, we'll have this wrapped up soon!"

Cate and Jack left the man to his wine, climbing the stairs and entering the sitting room. They found the room empty. Cate pulled the note Forsythe provided yesterday and held it next to the staff list written today.

Jack peered over her shoulder. "What's it look like?"

Cate squinted her eyes, peering back and forth between both notes. After a moment, she responded, "I'm no expert, but I'd say the same person wrote both notes. What do you think?"

Jack stared a moment longer. "I'd say it's a match. And that's my expert Oxford opinion talking."

"I agree with your expert Oxford opinion. See the 'o' here and here. And 't's' are the same, crossed at an angle."

"Yeah," Jack agreed. "And the 'P' is a near identical match to the note."

"So, this note," Cate said, holding the so-called evidence up higher, "is a fake."

“A fake written by Charles Forsythe to lay the blame on someone else.”

“Which puts Charles Forsythe at the top of our list.”

“Yes, I’d agree.”

Cate tapped her chin. “Now we need more evidence of his involvement, or at least his motive.”

“This is the part I dread.”

“Well...” Cate began when the door opened across the room, interrupting her. Amelia and Lucas entered the room. Cate folded the notes, shoving them into her pocket and pasting a smile onto her face.

“Cate!” Amelia exclaimed, rushing toward her. She pulled Cate into her arms in a tight hug. “Just the person I’ve been searching for.”

“Oh?” Cate inquired, pulling back from her great-grandmother.

“Yes. I wanted to show you the dress I mentioned last night at cocktails. Do you have a minute now?”

“W-Well...” Cate stuttered. She glanced at Jack.

“Oh, it won’t take but a moment and I do want you to see it.”

“And, Jack,” Lucas added. “I had a few land questions I hoped to gather your input on. This will give us the perfect opportunity. I suspect Amelia’s ‘moment’ may last quite a bit longer than that. Women and fashion and all that!” He laughed at his joke.

Jack joined in. “Yes, I dare say we’ll have enough time.”

He winked at Cate. “Go on, dear, enjoy your fashion while we talk business.”

Cate wrinkled her nose at him but faked a laugh and told Amelia to lead the way. They left the men pouring brandies in the sitting room and sitting down to business.

“Did I interrupt something?” Amelia questioned as they climbed the stairs.

“No,” Cate fibbed. “We were going over our wish list for sightseeing!”

“Ah! Have you ticked all your boxes yet?”

“Not quite. There is one additional item left to be ticked.”

“Well, I hope you have time to visit it. If not, we’ll have to ask Rory and Anne to have you back next year for the holidays. They’ve both enjoyed your visit, as have Lucas and I.”

“We’ve enjoyed it, too,” Cate admitted, saddened that the next holiday would be near the close of the year, preventing them from visiting after the new year.

They arrived at Amelia's suite, entering her sitting room. "Isn't this room lovely?" Amelia commented, motioning for Cate to take a seat on the sofa near the fireplace. "We stay in this room every visit. I simply adore it. This side of the castle sees some amazing sunsets!"

"It is lovely," Cate agreed.

"How is your room? I hope you are enjoying it!" Amelia shouted from the bedroom.

"We are!" Cate called in. "Contrary to your room, we have amazing sunrises."

Amelia emerged from the bedroom, carrying a dress. "Sunrises? How vivacious of you to be awake to see them!"

Cate joined her across the room. "I'm not very good at sleeping."

"Poor dear. Is it something medical?"

"No, just a racing mind, I'm afraid."

"Hmm," Amelia murmured, considering Cate's statement. "You are quite clever, Cate. I'm not surprised. If I have a daughter one day, I hope she will be as clever as you, though better at sleeping!"

The women chuckled over the joke, though the comment struck Cate square in the heart. Pride surged through her. Being the woman's great-granddaughter, she felt as though Amelia had somewhat achieved her goal.

Amelia held up the dress. "Here's the dress I was telling you about. See the lovely detailing on the hem?"

Cate and Amelia spent the next thirty minutes discussing the dress, shoes, accessories, and fashion in general. Cate enjoyed the conversation, staying much longer than she expected. It relieved her mind from the turmoil of solving the mystery.

When she and Amelia parted ways, her mind returned to the pressing business of finding evidence against Forsythe. She navigated to the foyer, approaching the sitting room. Voices carried from inside, announcing with no doubt that Jack and Lucas's conversation had not yet ended.

Cate hovered for a moment outside the doorway, determining her next steps. She checked the timepiece. If the conversation lasted much longer, they may not be able to search Lorne's room before the dressing gong rang. After a moment of debate, Cate spun on her heel and hurried up the main staircase. She wound through the halls, finding one of the back staircases leading to the servants' quarters.

Cate puffed a long breath out, steeling her nerves to climb the staircase and search Forsythe's room.

"It has to be done," she assured herself with a whisper. She stared up the steep staircase for another breath. She placed one foot on the first stair, forcing her weight on it. Then she climbed to the second step. One foot after another, she forced herself up the staircase, her knees weak from tension.

She reached the top. The hallway appeared deserted. Cate stood for a moment, straining to listen for sounds. Nothing reached her ears. She tiptoed to Forsythe's door, giving it a light knock. No response greeted her. She tried again, louder this time. Again, there was no response.

Cate took a deep breath and turned the knob, pushing the door open. An empty room met her gaze. She was about to step inside when a voice halted her.

"Mrs. MacKenzie?" Forsythe called from the stairway.

Cate's stomach turned, and she jumped, startled by his presence. She spun to face the man she assumed to be the thief, swallowing hard.

CHAPTER 33



Cate stared at the man down the hall, trying to keep her breathing at a normal rate. She licked her lips and swallowed hard again.

“Oh,” she replied, her voice unsteady. “Forsythe, there you are.”

Forsythe’s brow furrowed as he stepped toward her. “Is there something you need? It must be very urgent for you to seek me out here.”

Cate swallowed hard. “I forgot earlier. You dropped this note yesterday. I meant to return it and it slipped my mind with all the turmoil earlier about sorting the evidence.” Cate held out the note marked Lorne Peterson toward him.

Forsythe glanced down at it before accepting it. “Oh, did I? How clumsy of me. Thank you.”

“You are welcome. I hated for you to have lost your personal correspondence.”

“How kind of you. However, it is not mine. It was delivered in error. I’m still sorting it out, but I’m sure whoever it belongs to will be most appreciative.”

Cate offered a nervous, awkward smile with a nod. “Well, I’ll be on my way. Good luck finding the note’s owner.”

“Good day, Mrs. MacKenzie.”

Cate’s leaden legs carried her to the stairway. She glanced back over her shoulder, finding Forsythe staring at her.

She swallowed hard as she forced herself to descend the stairs at a slow, normal pace. Every inch of her body screamed for her to run, but she

slowed her pace until she reached the bottom quarter of the stairs. There she picked up her pace, stumbling down the last few steps and spilling into the hallway below. She hastened down the hall, glancing behind her, half-expecting Forsythe to be following her. His quiet, unflappable manner disconcerted her. It should have calmed her, made her less suspicious of him, but it achieved the exact opposite.

With her thoughts distracting her, Cate almost ran into Jack as she rounded the corner.

“Oof,” Cate grunted as Jack grabbed hold of her to steady her. “Oh, Jack! Sorry!”

“Cate! Where have you been?” Jack stared at her, noting something was amiss. “Are you okay?”

Cate nodded, collecting her thoughts. “Yes,” she said after a breath. “I... I went to Forsythe’s room.”

“You what?” Jack exclaimed. “Oh, Cate...” he trailed off, shaking his head.

“Bad idea, I realize that. Let’s take a walk. I need some air.”

“All right,” Jack agreed, grasping Cate’s elbow and leading her toward the stairs. Without a word, they traveled outside into the chilly air. Cate hugged her arms around her, squeezing her eyes shut. She gulped deep breaths of the cold air to steady her nerves.

Jack removed his jacket, placing it around Cate’s shoulders. She opened her eyes, pulling the jacket around her tighter. “Thanks,” she replied just above a whisper.

“Cate, what happened?” Jack inquired, staring intently at her.

She glanced to him before refocusing her gaze on the horizon. She shook her head before plowing into her story. “After Amelia and I spoke, I came to find you. You were still talking to Lucas. It didn’t sound like you’d be finished anytime soon. I debated a moment but decided to try a quick search of Forsythe’s room.”

Jack exhaled in a huff.

“I know, I know. It was stupid. But I was afraid we’d run out of time before the dressing gong.”

A moment of silence lasted for a breath between them before Cate continued. “I climbed up to the servants’ quarters, despite my better judgment. I knocked at Forsythe’s door and when no one answered, I opened it. Just before I entered, Forsythe appeared and asked if I needed

anything. I didn't know what else to do, so I gave him back the note he dropped."

"What did he say?"

"He claimed it wasn't his. Said he was trying to sort it out and get it to the correct person." Cate paused for a moment. "Something about him seemed disingenuous. He was almost too cool about it."

"Cate..." Jack began.

Cate held up a hand, stopping him. "Please, no lectures."

"I'm not going to lecture you, Cate," Jack responded. "I was going to say Forsythe seems to be an excellent liar. I don't trust him."

Cate smiled at him.

"And that I'm happy you're okay. And stop running off to investigate by yourself."

Cate chuckled at Jack's stern warning.

"Don't laugh at me," Jack scolded, giving in to a laugh too. "I'm serious."

"Yes, I know," Cate admitted.

"Come on, Lady Cate, let's get out of this cold and dress for dinner."

Cate nodded to him, allowing him to lead her back inside. They changed for dinner, discussing the prospect of sharing their suspicion with Rory about Forsythe. They decided to return the following morning to share their theory, agreeing this evening's dinner was not the appropriate time.

They returned to the present following their dinner to wait out the rest of the day. Cate paced the floor for a good part of it, nervous about her upcoming conversation with Rory. Too many unanswered questions remained. Her mind refused to cease twirling them around her head like an amusement park carousel at full speed.

Following dinner, Cate spent an hour watching a movie before retiring. Despite her longer than typical day, Cate still experienced a fitful night. Visions of being caught by Forsythe and concoctions of the upcoming conversation with Rory danced across her mind in an endless array.

Dawn finally brought a new day to Dunhaven Castle. A groggy Cate rose from her bed, lumbering straight past the rose gold rays painting the moors and into the shower. The steamy water helped awaken her. The pending conversation with Rory also added enough adrenaline to her system to keep her awake.

Cate ate her breakfast in the dining room, her mind whirling and her leg bouncing up and down with impatience. After breakfast, Cate took Riley and Bailey for a brief walk outside before returning to her room to change.

Jack met Cate at their prearranged time, and they traveled back to 1925, arriving in Cate's own bedroom nearly a century earlier.

Jack glanced at Cate. "You ready?"

Cate blew out a long breath. "I guess," she said, uncertainty creeping into her voice.

"That sounds less than ready," Jack assessed.

"There are still so many loose ends," Cate replied. "My mind hasn't stopped since we returned yesterday. So many unanswered questions are still lingering."

"Perhaps Rory can help us tie up some loose ends."

Cate nodded at Jack. "Yes, let's hope he can."

"Come on," Jack responded, grabbing Cate's hand and tugging her toward the door. "Let's get this done!"

"I never imagined I'd see the day where you were more enthusiastic than I was during one of these trips!" Cate said with a giggle.

"Me either. Now, come on, you're ruining this for me. I'm supposed to be the sour one!"

Cate chuckled as they navigated to Rory's office, finding him there going over the estate ledgers.

Jack rapped his knuckles against the door jamb. "Got a minute?"

Rory glanced up from his paperwork. "Of course! Please come in! How are you?"

Cate and Jack entered the room.

Cate pushed the door shut behind her. "We were hoping to discuss our investigation into the jewelry theft."

"Oh," Rory muttered, as though he preferred not to. "Have you found anything? Anne is most anxious to solve the matter."

"I'm sure she is," Cate replied. "We have a suspect in mind after a thorough investigation."

Rory raised his eyebrows. "Yes, I gathered as much. My groom, I believe?"

Cate furrowed her brow and shook her head. "No, not Thomas Gould."

Rory matched her expression. "Not Thomas? I understood from Forsythe the evidence against him was extremely damning."

Jack raised his eyebrows. "Forsythe told you about the evidence?"

"Yes," Rory admitted. "We discussed the matter at some length yesterday. He inquired about the result of your discussion with the police. Have you presented the evidence to them yet?"

Cate glanced at Jack. "Uh, no."

Rory answered before she spoke again. "According to Forsythe, there was no doubt. He has motive and an incriminating note stating he had the jewelry! May I ask the reason you've not shared your information with the police yet?"

"The evidence was fabricated."

Rory's jaw dropped open. "What? Faked? Who? How? Oh, my apologies for the string of questions, but I'm flabbergasted!"

"I understand," Cate answered. "But Thomas Gould was framed. He isn't the thief. Yes, he has made claims that he wants to buy a restaurant and stated he'd soon have the money, but the note that provides the most incriminating evidence was forged."

"How do you know?" Rory inquired.

"We suspected the forgery and compared it to the handwriting of the person who wrote the note. It was a match," Jack explained.

"Why would anyone do that?"

"To throw us off the scent. To pin the crime on someone else and take the heat off themselves," Cate related.

Rory shook his head, confusion crossing his face. "This is all so very confusing. How appalling that someone stole our property and then lied to place the blame on an innocent man. And you say you've identified who it is by the forged note?"

Cate's heart raced as she faced the prospect of naming their suspect. "Yes."

"Who is it?" Rory queried.

"Forsythe," Jack and Cate said in unison.

Rory gasped, his features pinching. "What?"

Cate nodded a second time. "Yes, Forsythe. He is the one who gave us all the incriminating information. He provided us with the note that he allegedly found in Thomas Gould's possessions. A comparison of that note with this handwriting shows that they match. Forsythe wrote the note to cast suspicion onto Thomas."

Rory stood from the desk, stalking to the window and staring out. "This can't be."

"I'm afraid it's true," Jack added.

"What made you check the handwriting?"

"We searched Thomas Gould's room for clues," Cate admitted. "The note Forsythe claimed Mr. Calhoun found was not there. Forsythe had the room searched after we searched it. Since we did not find it, we suspected it was a fake. We tested our theory by requesting a list of the male staff from Forsythe yesterday. The handwriting matches."

Rory gave a slight shake of his head. "Coincidence, perhaps."

"I don't believe so," Cate answered.

"But it must be!" Rory exclaimed, turning his head toward them before returning his gaze out the window.

Cate glanced at Jack, confused by Rory's reaction. "There's more."

Rory failed to respond, so Cate continued. "When Forsythe gave us the evidence against Thomas, another note slipped from his pocket. I picked it up, intending to give it back to him, but he disappeared before I could. It was addressed to Lorne Peterson. I read the note. It hinted that he had stolen the jewelry and even suggested a familial connection. The evidence from that note fits with certain facts we've stumbled upon."

"Who is Lorne Peterson? What is his involvement with this?" Rory questioned, spinning to face them.

"We believe Lorne Peterson is the real name of Charles Forsythe," Cate answered. "We also have inferred that Lorne Peterson is a distant cousin of yours, a grandson of Lorne MacKenzie, your great-uncle."

"What proof have you?" Rory demanded. "I'd like to read this note." He held his hand in front of him.

"I don't have it," Cate admitted.

"You don't have it?"

"No. I returned it to Forsythe yesterday."

"So, you don't have the note. You have no proof other than your conjecture. Is that correct?" The heat entering Rory's usually lighthearted voice surprised Cate.

"Well, it's a little more than just conjecture."

Rory slammed his hand on his desk. "It's not. What concrete proof is there? You can't even produce the note that hints at the theft!"

Cate's jaw dropped but she could not find the words to respond, thrown by Rory's sudden aggressive behavior.

"Rory, we..." Jack began but was also cut off by Rory.

"No!" Rory exclaimed. "None of this proves anything. And I find the entire story difficult to fathom. I am well acquainted with Forsythe. This doesn't fit his character, not at all."

"But..." Cate tried again.

"Jack, Cate, please. I have heard enough. You are barking up the wrong tree. Please, I assure you, Forsythe is not the culprit."

Cate and Jack stood in stunned silence.

"Look, I'd like to solve this travesty as much as you, but I cannot support your current theory. I beg you to dismiss it from your minds."

Cate glanced to Jack, giving a slight shrug at him. "All right," she agreed with a tiny nod. "All right, Rory. We'll keep searching."

"Wonderful," Rory replied, offering a slight smile. "I very much appreciate what you are doing. Oh, please don't be put off, but I am certain your theory is incorrect. I'm only trying to spare you any embarrassment."

"We understand. And thank you. Well, I hope to have more news for you soon," Cate answered. "We'll leave you to your work."

"Will I see you at dinner?" Rory questioned.

"No," Cate responded before Jack could. "We won't be able to stay for dinner."

Rory nodded, taking a seat at his desk. "We'll miss you, but hopefully tomorrow."

"Yes, tomorrow," Cate agreed with a smile.

She spun on her heel, leaving the office with Jack following her. They pulled the door shut behind them. Jack thrust his arms out, shrugging, shooting Cate a "now what?" expression. Cate pointed down the hall, signaling that they take a walk outside. Jack nodded in agreement and the two proceeded to the front door in silence.

Cate led Jack toward the loch, only speaking once they were a safe distance away from the castle. "Sorry. I didn't want to say anything in there since we don't seem to have a friend among us!" Cate waved her arms in the air with frustration.

Jack smirked at the statement. "I don't blame you."

They walked on in silence, reaching the loch. The pair stared out over the water before speaking.

“His reaction was odd, right?” Cate began.

“Yes, I agree. The moment we mentioned Forsythe in relation to the crime, his entire mood changed. He became defensive and argumentative.”

“Yes, he became combative! I found it very odd,” Cate exclaimed in agreement.

“He does paint a rosy picture of the world.”

“This was more than that. His reaction just before we mentioned Forsythe’s name was that of someone who views the world through a rosy lens. But his reaction after we mentioned Forsythe’s name seemed to be more than that.”

“Perhaps he feels a friendship with him. They must work closely together, and Forsythe fills the role of valet when needed.”

Cate considered Jack’s explanation for a moment. “Still...”

“Still, it seems an over-the-top reaction,” Jack finished for her.

“Yes. Although...” Cate continued, pausing as her brain processed the idea.

“Yeah?” Jack asked when the silence persisted a beat too long.

“It’s not that outrageous a reaction if someone is accusing your family member of being a thief!” Cate exclaimed, wide-eyed.

“What?”

“Charles Forsythe,” Cate explained, “otherwise known as Lorne Peterson, Rory’s cousin.”

Jack wrinkled his brow, his expression showing complete confusion. “Rory...” he paused, piecing together the puzzle on his end, “is aware of who Charles Forsythe is? Assuming he *is* Lorne Peterson, grandson of Lorne MacKenzie, which is still a big if, Cate.”

“It makes sense, right? Rory realizes who he is, which is why he gives him the job here. It’s why he’s protective of him when we accused him of theft. It’s why Anne wrote the note! Well aware that he is family, she pens an angry missive after he leaves, and they both realize what has happened.”

Jack shook his head, his hands on his hips. “Those are some huge leaps, Lady Cate. If Rory and Anne are aware of who Forsythe is, why hire him? Why not help him some other way?”

“What way? It may not be uncommon to offer a struggling family member a position. There must be lots of families with poorer relations. Fast forward to our time and consider me. I was unaware of my family and the estate, and I lived a normal life as a working gal!”

“All right, so Rory hires him, thinking he’s doing his family a favor. I can buy that. But if Anne’s note refers to the theft, and they realized Forsythe was the culprit, why not turn him in?”

“Scandal. Familial obligation.”

Jack frowned, waving his hands in the air. “Bah, Cate, I don’t buy that one, no way. A servant robs you and you don’t turn him in because it might cause scandal that he’s a distant relative?”

“The MacKenzies locked a girl in their tower room because she was a bastard child, so yes, I’d believe it!”

“In the 1800s, Cate! Not 1925! Surely we’re beyond the point of hiding family secrets.”

Cate shook her head. “No. I’m not even sure we’ve reached that point in the twenty-first century! Certainly not in 1925. Plus, with this type of mentality running in the family, it’s plausible.”

Jack mulled over Cate’s explanation, rubbing his hand on his chin. “Okay, it’s a credible theory. Now what?”

“We stay the course. Charles Forsythe, who we assume is Lorne Peterson, is still our primary suspect. We have to find more proof. But perhaps we’re at a point where we can mention this to MacCullough.”

“I’m not sure he’ll listen. And we may anger Rory, although...” Jack’s voice broke off as a loud sound cracked through the air.

Instinctively, they both ducked, searching around for the source of the noise.

“CATE, GET DOWN!” Jack shouted at her, tackling her to the ground.

Another crack rang out, followed by a sickening smack as a speeding object struck a nearby tree.

CHAPTER 34



Jack glanced around, his head swinging behind them, eyes darting all over. Cate followed his gaze, spotting nothing. He huffed out a breath after a moment, returning his gaze to Cate. “Are you alright? Are you hurt?”

Cate remained silent for a breath, still collecting herself. She nodded. “Yes, yes, I’m all right.”

Fear still coursed through her as her mind caught up with the events of the past few moments. Realization dawned, and she fought to steady her nerves and trembling limbs.

Jack rolled off her.

Cate remained motionless for another moment.

“Are you sure you’re all right, Cate?”

“Yes,” Cate answered, forcing herself to sitting. “Just a little shocked. I’ve never been shot at before.”

“Neither have I,” Jack admitted. He crawled toward the tree, pulling himself to standing. His fingers dug at the bark.

Cate gained her feet, her knees wobbly but able to support her weight. She joined him, peering at the object of his attention. A bullet was lodged in the tree.

Cate’s heart skipped a beat as she stared at the object. It provided physical evidence that they had not imagined the experience. She swallowed hard, taking a step back, a hand on her head.

“Cate?” Jack questioned.

“I’m fine,” she replied. “Just thanking my lucky stars.”

“Yes, we were lucky.”

Cate shook her head, trying to shake the memory loose. “My God, we could have been killed!”

“I know. But we weren’t. Let’s focus on that.” He put his arm around her shoulders, pulling her closer to him. “Okay?”

Cate took a deep breath, nodding. “Okay,” she answered when she found her voice again.

A moment of silence passed between them before Jack spoke again. “I’m revising my previous statement. I think we need to talk to MacCullough. Even though we’re fine, someone tried to kill us or at least scare the hell out of us. To hell with Rory’s feelings.”

“Not someone,” Cate reminded him. “Lorne Peterson.”

Jack nodded. “Perhaps we should take a car to town and talk to MacCullough.”

Cate raised her eyebrows. “Perhaps we should walk. I have no interest in requesting a car from the man who just tried to kill us.”

“Good point, we’ll walk it. Let’s grab our coats and go.”

After retrieving their coats and outerwear, Cate and Jack made their way into town. Despite the cold, Cate found the fresh air calming. She drank in deep breaths. Each step further from the castle also calmed her frayed nerves.

They reached the police station, climbing the handful of steps to enter. Jack requested to speak with Officer MacCullough and they were asked to wait a moment. Cate tapped her toes on the floor as they waited. Jack placed his hand on her arm, giving it a squeeze.

After a moment, they were escorted to Officer MacCullough’s desk. “Now what?” the gruff man grunted as they approached. “I’ve done nothing to that girl, there’s no reason to come hollering at me.”

“We have information to help you,” Jack answered. “And an incident to report.”

“Incident? Something else missing?”

“No,” Cate replied. “Someone tried to kill us.”

Officer MacCullough let out a long belly-laugh.

Cate crossed her arms, glaring at him.

“Someone tried to kill you, Mrs. MacKenzie? Oh, I can’t imagine why.”

“This is no joking matter, sir,” Jack admonished the laughing man.

The man stood, wiping his eyes with a handkerchief as he stifled his laughter. “No, of course not, Mr. MacKenzie. Though I daresay your wife’s imagination has run wild. I’m sure it’s all a simple misunderstanding. Ladies can be stirred up so easily. As an officer-of-the-law, I’ve seen it time and time again.”

Frustration showed on Jack’s face. “This is no figment of my wife’s imagination, Officer MacCullough. I was with her when someone shot at us. Twice! One bullet is lodged in a nearby tree as proof!”

Officer MacCullough’s expression changed in an instant, sobering as he realized his mistake. “Shot at you?” he repeated, confusion entering his voice.

“Yes! Shot at us! Someone shot at us not an hour ago!” Jack exclaimed.

“Why would someone shoot at you?” the rather dense detective questioned.

“Because we’re getting too close to the truth,” Cate responded.

Officer MacCullough’s thick eyebrows rumped. He stared at the floor, deep in thought. “We have uncovered several key pieces of information.”

“Let’s hear them. Have a seat,” Officer MacCullough responded, motioning to two chairs he dragged from another desk.

“First,” Jack said after Cate signaled him to relay the information. “We were given an incriminating note suggesting Thomas Gould was the thief.”

“Ah, so Gould’s our man, then!” MacCullough exclaimed. “I suspected him, of course.”

Jack shook his head. “No, no, no. Gould’s innocent.”

“But...”

“The note was a fake,” Jack interrupted.

“Fake? By whose estimation?”

“Mine and my wife’s,” Jack responded. “We compared the handwriting in it with the handwriting from another note. They were a match. The note was forged to point the finger at Thomas Gould and shift any suspicion from the real criminal.”

“Who is?”

“Charles Forsythe,” Cate answered. “Who may be better known as Lorne Peterson.”

“Forsythe? The under-butler? So, he is in cahoots with Lorne Peterson!”

“No!” Jack answered with an adamant shake of his head. “Charles Forsythe *is* Lorne Peterson!”

The officer rubbed his chin as he disseminated the information. "All right, Mr. MacKenzie, we'll take it from here. Thank you." The man stood, pulling his jacket closed over his bulging stomach.

"But you haven't heard half of the information we discovered!" Jack argued.

Officer MacCullough plopped into his seat with a huff. "Oh, all right. Continue," he said, waving his hand in the air, motioning for Jack to proceed. He placed his folded hands on top of his stomach, leaning back in his chair.

Jack gave Cate a disgusted glance before he continued. "When we received the forged note, which came from Charles Forsythe, he dropped another letter. Addressed to Lorne Peterson. After doing some research, we are convinced Charles Forsythe is an alias."

"And, uh, why would Mr. Forsythe need an alias?"

"No," Cate interjected. "Lorne Peterson needs the alias. We're not sure why," Cate fibbed, not wanting the truth shared just yet. "But plenty of criminals use aliases."

"Anything else?" MacCullough asked, ignoring Cate's statements.

"Mrs. MacKenzie returned the dropped note yesterday to Mr. Forsythe. And today, someone took two shots at us."

"Where were you when the shots were fired? Outside? You mentioned a tree?"

"Outside," Cate answered. "Near the loch."

"Uh-huh," the officer mumbled. "Well, I appreciate the information and we'll make a full report. There's no need for either of you to stay beyond this. I'm sure you're both tired."

Officer MacCullough's nonchalance stunned Cate. She stared at Jack, her jaw hanging open in shock.

"Appreciate the information? We were almost killed!" Jack exclaimed.

"Well, Mr. MacKenzie, that remains to be determined," the officer answered. "Dinnae misunderstand. I'm not accusing you of lying. I've no doubt shots were fired. But this is rural Scotland, laddie. They could have been shooting at an animal, a bird. Hunting is great sport here."

Jack sighed and shook his head. "This wasn't..."

Officer MacCullough waved his hand in the air to stop him. "I've already promised we'll look into it, but I wouldn't lose sleep. I'm sure no harm was intended."

Jack opened his mouth to respond, but Cate stood, stopping him. “Thank you, Officer MacCullough. We won’t take up any more of your time.”

Officer MacCullough stood, smiling at Cate. “No problem, Mrs. MacKenzie. And as I said, I thank you for the information you provided. We will follow up on it.”

Jack stood next to her, a dubious expression on his face. He extended a hand toward the officer. “Yes, thank you.”

“Good day, Mr. and Mrs. MacKenzie,” Officer MacCullough said, dismissing them.

Cate and Jack left the police station, beginning their walk back to the castle.

“Well, that was a bust,” Cate sighed as they trudged toward the castle.

“Is he dense or just an ass?” Jack complained in frustration.

“Both,” Cate responded. “He has no intention of continuing the investigation or following up on any information we provided him. He’s also very, very dim-witted. That’s half the reason he won’t follow up.”

Jack huffed. “Now what?”

“We’re on our own. We need more information.”

Jack stopped dead. “More information? Cate, are you sure we should pursue this? I mean, absolutely certain? This is becoming a dangerous game and we have no support from the police... or Rory for that matter!”

“Which is reason we must keep going! Unless we plan to return to our time and leave this alone and never return, which I do *not* want to do, we’re stuck.”

“Going back to our time and forgetting about it may be our best bet, Cate.”

Cate remained silent for a moment, her lower lip in a frustrated pout. She thrust her arms out before speaking. “Then what was the point! We’ve solved nothing! If we do that, we’ve just wasted our time.”

“Well, you did learn to skate, and you met your great-grandparents. It wasn’t a total waste. And there’s no shame in giving up, given the latest developments. Even Rory would understand.”

“I’m not giving up!” Cate exclaimed. They stood in silence for a few more moments.

“Even Rory would understand,” Cate murmured after a moment, snapping her fingers. “That’s it!”

“That’s what?” Jack inquired.

“With the latest developments, surely Rory will do something now that someone’s tried to kill us!”

“He doesn’t believe us about Forsythe, what makes you think he will now that we’re accusing him of trying to kill us?”

“This makes things more serious. Covering for the theft of your own property by a family member is one thing. Covering for them when they try to kill someone is quite another.”

“Eh, covering for murder runs in the family, Cate. Grandpappy Randolph did it.”

“For an orphaned child. Not an opportunist who’s stolen valuable property.”

“Still, I’m not sure he’ll believe it’s Forsythe.”

Cate frowned, crossing her arms. “You’re right. He’ll insist we’re incorrect and Forsythe couldn’t have done it. He’ll want to believe the best of his family.”

“Assuming he realizes Forsythe is his family. So we’re on our own. Are you sure I can’t convince you we’ve done enough?”

Cate flung her arms in the air. “We have done nothing but make an enemy! The jewelry is still missing, and we’ve brought no one to justice!”

“But how can we convince Rory or Officer MacCullough?”

“We’re going to need solid evidence. Like finding the jewelry in Forsythe’s possession.”

“I was afraid you’d say that.”

Cate checked her timepiece with a frown. “Well, there’s no sense trying today. It’s too risky to try now. Too much likelihood of being caught. Shoot!”

“Fine by me. Tomorrow’s a new day. Perhaps we can figure out a better plan. We’ve done enough for today. I need to decompress.”

“You and me both,” Cate agreed. “As much as I’d love to solve this today, I’d really love to go home. Somewhere safe.”

Jack nodded at her with a tight-lipped smile. “Let’s go, Lady Cate.”

They returned to the castle, avoiding contact with anyone and returning to the bedroom. Within moments, they had returned to the safety of their own time.

Jack breathed a long and loud sigh of relief. “Still some time before lunch. I can’t believe we’ve accused someone of theft, been shot at, spoken

with the police and it's still before lunch."

"Yep," Cate agreed. "Such is the life of a time traveler."

"Call me crazy, but I liked my life before I was a time traveler."

"I could have done without the being shot at," Cate admitted. "But perhaps he was just trying to scare us off and not hurt us."

"I'm not sure what his intentions were. It was still too close a call for me. I'll be spending the rest of the day trying to forget about it."

"I'll spend the rest of the day trying to come up with a plan to solve this... and soon!"

"Happy scheming," Jack answered. "I'm going to change and breathe the fresh air while I assess a few repairs outside."

"Anything major?" Cate asked.

"No, nothing major. Just a few minor jobs to bid out before spring."

"Okay. Got to have the place in tiptop shape for the next party Mrs. Campbell springs on us. She's got her heart set on 'bigger and better' for the next event."

"Ugh," Jack groaned. "What does that mean?"

Cate shrugged. "With her it could mean anything from a larger event to a fancier event. She keeps rambling on about having the 'upper crust of society' here like the 'old days.'"

"Old days? I prefer not to recall any old days in this castle."

Cate chuckled at his subtle joke. "Tell that to Mrs. Campbell."

"I just might, Lady Cate! I just might. Now, I leave you to your day. M'lady!" Jack gave an extravagant bow before leaving the room.

Despite the earlier scare, Jack's over-the-top mannerisms elicited a giggle from her. After he disappeared through her sitting room doors, Cate changed and took the dogs for a walk. She hoped to keep her mind from dwelling on the incident earlier. Jack's assessment was correct. This was becoming dangerous. They had little choice in becoming more aggressive in their investigation before it cost them their lives.

As her eyes gazed over the loch's still waters, she shivered, reminded of the two close calls with death, both at this location. Odd that her favorite spot on the estate in her time was the source of such terrifying experiences in the past.

Cate's mind turned to the matter of the missing jewelry and Charles Forsythe, a.k.a. Lorne Peterson. They had to gain more proof against him. They needed solid evidence for both Rory and Officer MacCullough. There

was no choice but to perform a search of Lorne's room with the hope of finding anything incriminating.

Cate shivered again at the thought, though she convinced herself it was only the cold causing her to shudder. She returned to the castle, spending the afternoon searching for any information she could find on Lorne Peterson. The little she found offered no help for their predicament.

She turned her attention to a mystery novel but found it unable to hold her attention. She paced the floorboards of her sitting room for a solid hour before dinner. Afterward, Cate invited Molly to watch a movie, hoping the distraction would pass the time faster and relax her.

Despite her distracted thoughts, Molly's gregarious nature diverted Cate's troubled mind to lighter topics. Cate hated for the night to end, worried that she'd toss and turn.

As Cate lay in bed, she wondered if she was becoming psychic. Even the extra hours added to her day from time traveling failed to tire her enough to sleep. She laid awake until the clock read after midnight. Finally, as she stared at the moonlit moors, Cate drifted off to sleep.

Cate awoke with a start. Both dogs barked at the foot of her bed.

"Riley? Bailey? What is it?" she questioned, following their gaze.

They stared at the ajar bedroom door. Cate climbed from the bed, her bare feet touching the cold floorboards beyond the area rug as she tiptoed to the door. As if on cue, both dogs ceased their protestations and raced, tails between their legs, to hide under the bed. She followed them with her eyes before turning her attention to the sitting room.

"Guess I'm on my own," she murmured as she peered into the darkness in the next room.

Cate spotted nothing. She returned for her robe, wrapped it around her, slipped into her slippers and padded to the sitting room door. She cracked it open, squinting into the darkened hall beyond. Movement at the end of the hall caught her attention.

"Molly?" she called, receiving no response.

Cate stepped into the hallway, following the motion.

"Molly? Is everything okay?"

She again received no response.

Cate proceeded down the hall, closing the gap between herself and the unknown figure. Before she reached the form, it fled. Without considering

her actions, she followed, racing down the halls behind the running individual.

She caught up with the unidentified figure as it entered the library. She flipped the light switch, but no lights lit. She pulled the flashlight from the desk drawer, pointing it at the figure hovering on the opposite side of the room.

“Who...” her voice trailed off as she recognized the person. Her brows knit in confusion as she tried to make sense of it. In front of her, illuminated by the piercing flashlight’s beam, stood Charles Forsythe. “Forsythe?”

She swallowed hard as she recognized the object clutched in his hands. A stubby-nosed gun pointed at her. The muzzle flashed, evidencing a shot fired. Cate dropped the flashlight, shrieked and ducked, hoping to dodge the bullet.

She held her breath for a moment, eyes squeezed shut. After a breath, she opened her eyes to slits, peeking at the room. The figure across the room had vanished, and she lay alone on the library floor.

She glanced around the room, searching for Forsythe, but he was nowhere to be found. She pushed up to kneeling, checking her body. No blood, no bullet holes, no pain. What happened, she wondered? Had she imagined the whole thing? Was this the product of her overtired mind?

She sighed, grasping the corner of the desk to pull herself to standing. A rogue wind rustled her hair as she stood. She searched the room for the source. After retrieving the flashlight from where it clattered to the floor moments ago, she trained the beam in the direction of the breeze. She gasped, stifling a yelp as she noticed the bookcase missing, replaced again by a gaping hole.

She blinked her eyes several times. Convinced her eyes weren’t playing tricks on her, she took a step toward the black hole. She quickly decided against proceeding any further, retreating a few steps back and toggling off the flashlight. She spun and hurried to the door. Before she could exit the room, an unearthly groan commanded her attention. She whirled around to face the void, straining to hear any sounds.

“Catherine!” a voice called.

Cate swallowed hard. She attempted to back from the room, but the doors slammed behind her before she could exit. She turned, pulling on them as she spun the doorknob desperately in an attempt to flee. The doors

did not budge. She pounded against them, calling for help. No one came. The doors remained shut fast.

“CATHERINE!” the voice boomed again.

Cate spun to face the sound again. Tears streamed down her cheeks as terror rose from the pit of her stomach. “What do you want?”

Thunder boomed overhead, lightening lit the room. The brief flash revealed a figure standing in the open space that once held the bookcase. She covered her mouth with her hand, stifling a scream.

“Who are you?” she demanded, pulling herself up to standing.

As thunder clapped again, its sound reverberating through the castle’s stone walls, the figure approached her. As he strode closer and closer, she inched toward the closed doors, pressing against them. Her eyes darted around the room, searching for an escape. She found none. She tried pounding against the doors again, but no one came to help.

The figure loomed over her; the unidentifiable features shadowed by the dim moonlight. An icy hand grasped her shoulder. She turned to face the figure. Lightning tore through the sky, lighting the room for a brief second. As the man’s features became more apparent, the room faded away to black. Cate experienced the sensation of falling.

CHAPTER 35



Cate shot up to sitting, drenched in sweat. She'd snapped her eyes open in terror, then realized she was in her bedroom. She caught her breath, glancing around the room. The two dogs slept in their beds, Riley snoring softly.

Cate blinked a few times, checking the clock. It read quarter after two in the morning. She'd managed a few hours' sleep before the nightmare woke her. Cate collapsed back onto the pillows behind her. They had to solve this crime before she went crazy.

* * *

Cate dragged herself from bed the following morning. She'd slept little, tossing and turning both before and after her nightmare. Her muddled mind found no additional solutions during that time. She slogged through her morning routine, breakfast, and a walk with the dogs.

Afterward, she met Jack as she began ascending the steps. "Lady Cate, good morning. Have a minute for some estate business?"

"Sure," Cate replied, recognizing the ruse Jack used to request her presence to discuss time traveling. "Let's step into the sitting room."

"No library?" Jack groused. "I like those armchairs."

"Sorry," Cate answered, stifling a yawn. "I'd rather avoid the library."

They ushered Riley and Bailey into the sitting room before them and Cate pulled the doors closed.

“Avoiding the library again?” Jack asked, approaching the loveseat and plopping onto it.

Cate nodded as she sank onto the loveseat across from Jack.

“Another nightmare?”

“Yes, another,” Cate admitted, slouching in her seat.

“Same thing?”

“Sort of. This one started with spotting a figure at the end of the hall outside my bedroom. When I followed it, it went to the library. It turned into Forsythe holding a gun and he shot at me. When I ducked, he disappeared. I stood up to leave, and the bookshelf was missing again. A shadowy man stood in there. He came at me, and I tried to run, but the doors were stuck shut. I couldn’t get out. He grabbed me and I almost saw his face in the lightning, but I woke up. I’m assuming it was Forsythe again.”

“We need a plan. This is having a terrible effect on you.”

“I agree. A plan that solves this mystery. I’d like to sleep again soon!”

“So, what plans did you concoct while you weren’t sleeping last night?” Jack questioned.

Cate shrugged and huffed. “None. We need proof to end this. Proof that I expect we’ll find only in Forsythe’s room. Unless you have another idea?”

“Nope,” Jack answered with a sigh. “I’m afraid you’re correct. I hate it, but I don’t see a way around it.”

“So, that’s our plan. Shall we dress and head back there? Try to settle this?”

“Sure!” Jack agreed.

Cate pushed up to standing and crossed the room to the doors.

“You going to make it through? I’ve never seen you with such little energy.”

Cate offered him a half-smile. “I’m going to make it. Don’t worry, my adrenaline will kick in as soon as I’m close to solving the mystery!”

“There’s the spirit, Lady Cate. Meet you in thirty in your sitting room?”

“Deal,” Cate agreed, calling the dogs to follow her to her bedroom.

With the promise of time travel on the horizon, Cate dug deep to muster the energy to tackle her hair and clothes, making each appropriate for 1925.

She finished with a few minutes to spare and paced the floor of her sitting room as she waited for Jack.

Within a few moments, a knock sounded at the door. Jack entered after Cate pulled the door open.

"I was thinking..." she blurted as he entered the room.

"Of course you were," Jack interrupted. "There's the Cate Kensie I know!"

Cate chuckled, smiling at him. "Anyway, even if we can get that note back that I had to give to Forsythe, that's a win. We can show it to Rory. If we can win him to our side, we might stand a chance!"

Jack nodded. "I hope he didn't destroy it after you returned it to him."

"Me too," Cate said with a shake of her head. "Only one way to find out."

She strode to her bedroom with Jack in tow. They activated the watch, slipping backward in time to 1925. After a quick change of clothes into new outfits, Cate and Jack left the suite, intent on determining the whereabouts of Forsythe.

They made it a few steps down the hall when Amelia rounded the corner. "Oh, Cate! How fortunate. I was just coming to find you. I feared missing you, that you'd left for the day!"

"No, we were about to..." Cate began.

"I hope they are plans that can be broken!" Amelia exclaimed. "You don't mind, do you, Jack? Cate and I have ladies' business!"

"Oh, well..." Jack started.

"Besides, Rory has been searching for you all day. It seems urgent. You will probably find him in his office."

"Oh," Jack said, his brow furrowing, "I suppose I should seek him out." Jack shot a questioning glance at Cate.

"And that leaves you," Amelia said, wrapping her arm around Cate's, "on your own and in need of entertainment. Search no further, Cate! I shall provide it!"

Amelia dragged a helpless Cate away as Jack headed off to find Rory. When they were alone, Amelia said, "I hope you aren't too sore at me for breaking your plans. But we are leaving Friday morning and I missed you at dinner last night! I hoped to make the most of what remains of our visit."

"Not at all," Cate assured her. Despite her desire to dive right into finding evidence against Forsythe, she, too, longed to spend more time with

Amelia, her great-grandmother. The familial connection alone soothed her beyond words. "We will be leaving soon, too. It saddens me to think of it."

"But then we shall begin counting the days until we meet again here next holiday, if not sooner! We must have you and Jack out at the country estate. You'd enjoy it so!"

"It sounds very charming," Cate agreed wistfully, realizing she would never see the estate.

"I do hope Jack can carve time from his schedule. Though you are most welcome to visit on your own if Jack finds himself too busy and you find yourself alone! Women are traveling alone more and more these days!"

"Thank you. We'll certainly need to plan for it," Cate fibbed. "Now, what is this pressing ladies' business?"

"Why clothing, of course!" Amelia declared, pushing through the door to her suite. "Anne, I found her!" she announced to the woman in the room.

"Wonderful. Hello, Cate," Anne greeted her. She rose and strode to the bell pull against the wall, pulling it. "I'll ring for tea now. Amelia hoped to find you before we requested tea. She has grand plans to discuss all things fashion. And she insists she has an evening dress that makes her look gauche but would be lovely on you."

"Oh, I do, let me fetch it," Amelia stated, rushing from the room and returning in moments with a rose-colored dress in her hands. "Here it is!" She waved it in the air.

"Oh, it's beautiful!" Cate exclaimed, admiring the color and the detailed beading on the bodice.

Amelia held it out, staring at it. "It's simply ghastly on me, Cate." She held it against her. "Look, how sallow it makes me. You have handsome porcelain skin and sweet, rosy cheeks. It will look marvelous on you, I'd bet." Anne joined them as Amelia held it up to Cate. "Do you agree, Anne?"

"Hmm, yes, quite. It fits her complexion well," Anne agreed.

"Try it on? Oh, please!" Amelia requested, shoving the dress toward Cate and closing Cate's hands around it.

"Well..." Cate answered, unsure.

"There's plenty of time before tea arrives!" Amelia responded, pushing Cate toward the bedroom. "Use my room!"

Cate disappeared into the bedroom. The sounds of light conversation carried from the other room as Cate tossed the dress onto the bed and

removed her clothes. She pulled the dress on, struggling to fasten it.

“How’s it coming, Cate?” Amelia called in. “Do you need help?”

“I’m just fastening it!” Cate called in response. “Or trying to!”

Amelia appeared in the doorway. “Here, let me,” she said, spinning Cate around and finishing the fastening in the back. “Oh, it’s gorgeous on you. Very becoming! The dress requires few alterations, if any. It’s nearly a perfect fit! Anne, come and see Cate in the dress!” Amelia positioned Cate in front of the mirror. “What do you think?”

Cate admired the dress in the mirror, agreeing it fit her well and was a becoming color. Anne agreed with Amelia’s assessment.

“Say you’ll take it!” Amelia exclaimed.

“Oh, I couldn’t!” Cate answered.

“Oh, please. It’s such a waste for me to keep it. I’ll never wear it! Take it, Cate!”

Cate grinned at her through the mirror’s reflection. “I will,” she answered, turning to pull Amelia into an embrace.

“Wonderful!” Amelia exclaimed. “Now, let me unfasten you so you can change. Tea has arrived! We will discuss how you shall accessorize your new dress!”

Cate nodded in agreement, and, left alone, changed back to her day dress and returned to the sitting room to join the others for tea. They spent over an hour discussing Cate’s new dress, upcoming fashions, Paris fashions, and other topics of the sort. Cate’s nerves relaxed as she talked and laughed over shorter hemlines, sporty clothes, shopping at Selfridge’s, and the advancement of the modern woman. The sense of kinship played a large role in her comfort.

After tea, Anne excused herself to finish correspondence. Amelia invited Cate to take a walk. Since she planned to search Forsythe’s room before lunch, Cate declined, also using the excuse of correspondence. With a hug, Amelia left her in the hallway.

Cate snuck downstairs when she figured the coast was clear of Amelia and crept toward Rory’s office. She listened at the door as voices carried from behind it. She considered knocking and requesting Jack’s presence, but decided against it.

A noise down the hall sent her scurrying into the library. She hid behind the door, leaving it open a crack to peer out. Forsythe passed with two footmen trailing behind him.

“... items must be moved before lunch. It will take all three of us. I hope we finish the task in time...” His voice trailed off as they disappeared down the hall.

Cate raised her eyebrows. Forsythe would be engaged for the rest of the morning. It was a perfect time to check his room. Should she disturb Rory and Jack’s meeting? Cate debated for a few moments. Yes, she decided. It was a terrible idea to go alone. Although Forsythe should be busy, so it should be safe. And how would she explain her need for Jack’s presence to Rory? She couldn’t explain their plan. Rory’s reaction yesterday suggested he’d be less than hospitable if she explained.

“You’re wasting time!” she whispered to herself.

After a moment, she harrumphed, pushing through the doors and hurrying down the hall and upstairs alone. She climbed to the servants’ floor, sprinting down the empty hall to Forsythe’s room. She turned the knob, pushing the door open and hurrying inside. She closed the door behind her, leaning against it with closed eyes, and let out of a sigh of relief.

Part one of her plan was complete. She’d made it to Forsythe’s room. Now on to part two: searching it. She opened her eyes, scanning the room. While racing toward the wardrobe, she winced as she crossed a creaky floorboard, fearing she’d be given away.

Cate flung open the doors, scanning the contents of the cupboard. She pawed through the few articles of clothing inside, squeezing each article to determine if anything was concealed in the pockets or lining. She came up empty.

She stood on her tiptoes, sweeping her hand across the top shelf. The few items on top provided no additional information. A drawer at the bottom of the wardrobe provided her last search area in the cabinet. She yanked it open but found nothing but clothing items. She sighed, pushing the drawer shut and easing the wardrobe doors closed. She peered behind it, finding nothing. The wardrobe stood too close to the wall to have hidden anything.

She spun and crossed to the bed. On her hands and knees, she peered underneath. Nothing but dust bunnies greeted her. She frowned, sitting back on her heels and shoving her hands under the mattress. She swept them around, reaching as far as she could, but found nothing.

A chest of drawers stood against the far wall. It was the final place to search. Cate climbed to her feet, crossing the room. She cursed her careless

footfalls, crossing the creaky floorboard again. She began with the bottom drawers, coming up empty. The middle drawers provided no information either. She pulled open the top drawers, shoving items from side to side in a desperate search for anything. Near the back of the drawer, Cate found several letters tied together. She read the address line, finding the top missive made out to Lorne Peterson. A slight smile crossed Cate's face. Proof, she reflected, flipping to the next letter in the stack. It, too, was addressed to Lorne Peterson.

She returned her gaze to the drawer, hoping to find more when the door popped open. Startled, she whipped her head to stare wide-eyed at the doorway. She swallowed hard, shock causing her jaw to hang open as she identified the figure as Charles Forsythe. Her eyes grew wider as she recognized the object clutched in his hands. A stout-nosed gun pointed at her.

CHAPTER 36



“Something I can help with, Mrs. MacKenzie?” Forsythe growled at her as he trained his gun at her.

Cate swallowed hard, realizing she was trapped. “I...” she began, attempting to talk her way out of the situation. Nothing came to her, her mind remained blank.

“You what? You happen to be holding my personal property. Though I don’t believe you care. You clearly can’t take a hint. I attempted to scare you and your husband off yesterday. I see that did not work.”

“Scare us?” Cate exclaimed, finding her voice. “You mean kill us!”

“I wouldn’t have shed too many tears had the bullet struck you,” Forsythe admitted.

“Well, it didn’t, Mr. Forsythe! Or should I say Mr. Peterson?”

“Yes,” the man answered. “You’ve figured it out. I assumed you would when I dropped the note. I am Lorne Peterson.”

“Lorne Peterson, grandson of Lorne MacKenzie. Am I correct?”

“What difference does it make?” Lorne snapped, raising the gun.

“I... I’d like to know. If you plan to murder me, I’d like to know why. Why you did this.”

He scowled at her. “All right, Mrs. MacKenzie. You are correct. I am Lorne MacKenzie’s grandson. My mother insisted on naming me after him. For all the good it does me. I’ve no claim to the riches of the MacKenzie clan. I pay for the sins of the mother, or rather grandmother.”

“Do you mean because one of your parents was an illegitimate child of Lorne’s?”

“Oh, yes, my mother was the illegitimate daughter of Lorne MacKenzie. Still, the woman worshipped her father, always insisting he’d rescue us at some point. Give us the life we’d only dreamt of. To her dying day, she professed her infatuation for him. A foolish woman. Where my mother preferred to wait and hope, I preferred to take action.”

“Action? As in theft?”

“As in taking what is owed to me. What I deserve!” he shouted. Lorne raised his eyes to the ceiling, balling his free hand into a fist. “You rich people. All alike! You live a charmed life with no consideration of anyone outside yourselves, never considering how others long for only half of what you have. You can’t...” His voice ceased mid-sentence and Cate heard a thump. For a split second, she assumed he’d fired the gun. She braced her body for the impact. She jumped back a step when Lorne Peterson slumped to the floor, unconscious, his limbs sprawling and the gun sliding toward her.

For a moment, she remained shocked before her instincts kicked in and she grabbed for the gun. She glanced up to find Jack and Rory standing in the doorway. Jack clutched a pistol in his hand, the source of the assault on Lorne.

“Jack!” Cate exclaimed.

“Cate! Thank God.” He rushed into the room and pulled her into a hug. Rory stepped over the sprawled form of Lorne, relieving Cate of the weapon she held.

“Thank heavens you’re all right, Cate,” Rory stated, after Jack pulled back. “I’m so very sorry I didn’t listen yesterday.”

“It’s all right,” Cate answered.

“No, no, it isn’t,” Rory insisted, pacing the room. “I forced you into this position by not wanting to believe what you told me.”

“I found the letters addressed to Lorne Peterson,” Cate said, holding them out. “Charles Forsythe is an alias.”

“Yes, I know,” Rory admitted, not even glancing at the notes. “I’ve known all along what his real name is. He’s a distant cousin. The grandson of...”

“Of Lorne MacKenzie, your great-uncle,” Cate finished.

Rory halted, staring at Cate. “Yes, you are correct! My, you are clever to figure that out, aren’t you?”

Cate shrugged. “Once I found the letter with that name, it clicked. I never met Lorne, but we spent a great deal of time with your grandfather Randolph, and we discussed his reputation. It wasn’t a leap to consider there may be children and grandchildren from some of Lorne’s liaisons.”

“Yes,” Rory responded. “When I met Lorne, he was down on his luck. I considered it a favor to employ him. And being family, I did not want to believe he would steal from us. I assumed he was grateful for the opportunity!”

Cate gave Rory a soft smile. “I’m sorry. But I don’t think Lorne is the gentleman you assume him to be.”

“I’d damn well say he’s not,” Jack chimed in. “He nearly killed Cate. He would have if you hadn’t kept him talking! Good thinking, Lady Cate.”

“Lady Cate?” Rory questioned. “So, you are the MacKenzie, not Jack! How interesting!” He paused a breath. “Though now I feel worse. My refusal to face facts nearly cost my progeny her life.”

Cate laid her hand on his arm. “I’m fine. But there’s still the matter of the missing jewelry. I’m sorry to say I haven’t found it anywhere.”

As Cate finished her statement, Lorne, still on the floor, moaned in pain. He stretched his limbs before his eyes fluttered open. He groaned again, grabbing at the back of his head.

“Easy there, friend,” Jack warned him, hauling him up to sit on the bed. “No sudden movements.”

Lorne continued to ruffle his hair, rubbing his head. “You could have killed me, *friend*,” he answered.

“And you nearly killed both me and my wife!” Jack exclaimed. “Now the jig is up. We know who you are and what you’ve done. Where is the jewelry?”

“I have no idea what you’re referring to.”

“Please, Lorne,” Rory begged, “I won’t press charges, but the jewelry means more than money to me. They are heirlooms from my grandmother.”

Lorne did not respond. Cate paced the floor, a nagging notion plaguing her mind. As she stalked across the floorboards, the familiar creak sounded throughout the room. Cate stopped in her tracks. She glanced down at the creaky board, rubbing over it with her toes. Her forehead wrinkled, and she bent to inspect the board closer.

“What is it, Cate?” Jack inquired, noticing Cate’s intense gaze.

As he questioned her, Lorne attempted to race from the room. Jack grabbed him and, with Rory’s help, wrestled him back to the bed.

“Where do you think you’re going?” Jack asked.

Cate continued her examination of the creaky floorboard. Using a fingernail, she traced the edge of the board. She detected subtle movement as she outlined the board. Cate tried to push on the board, but it didn’t budge. She attempted to grasp it and pull it upwards but could not.

“Do you have a pocketknife, either of you?” Cate queried.

“I do,” Jack answered, removing it from his jacket pocket. He slid it to Cate, still holding tight to Lorne. She caught it as it rattled across the floor, pulling it open and using the blade’s edge to pry up the floorboard.

“Aha!” she exclaimed as it moved upward. “This creaky floorboard is hiding a compartment.”

She pulled the board out, setting it aside and glanced into the dark hole, gasping.

“What is it, Cate?” Jack questioned.

Cate reached inside, withdrawing an object. She pulled it up, letting it dangle from her fingers. Both Rory and Jack gasped at the sight.

A ruby necklace hung from Cate’s fingers, its fine jewels catching the light at every angle. It remained as dazzling now as it had when Victoria MacKenzie wore it first at her Halloween ball.

“The ruby necklace!” Rory exclaimed, rushing to Cate and removing it from her hand.

“And the sapphire necklace,” Cate added, retrieving the deep blue necklace from the hole.

“Oh!” Rory cried out. “Both of them! Still here. Thank heavens. I’d have felt sick if we weren’t able to retrieve them. My grandmother loved these pieces.”

Rory clutched the two necklaces to his chest. “Anne will be so pleased.”

“I’m glad we found them,” Cate replied, standing and dusting her knees off.

“How?” Rory questioned, his brow furrowing as he considered the discovery. “How did you know where to look?”

“I’ve hit that squeaky floorboard every time I’ve walked around in this room. Something about it bothered me. Just a hunch,” Cate added with a shrug.

“Thank heavens for your hunch, Cate.”

“And now, Mr. Peterson,” Jack growled, pulling the man to his feet. “Time for you to head to your new home: a prison cell.”

“No, please,” Rory said, blocking Jack from moving Lorne further.

“What? We’ve found the jewelry in his possession. You can’t still believe he’s innocent.”

“No, I don’t,” Rory assured them. “But I meant what I said. I will not press charges. He is family. I’d prefer this matter to be kept quiet. As long as you’ll leave as soon as possible, Lorne. I expect no further trouble from you. I shall pay you a severance.”

“You must be joking!” Jack exclaimed, shock entering his voice. “The man’s a thief and a potential murderer!”

“I realize that. I do...” Rory hesitated, glancing to Cate. “But... I’d prefer to avoid the scandal.”

Cate offered Rory a tight-lipped smile, placing her hand on his shoulder. “We understand.” Jack opened his mouth to offer a retort to the contrary, but Cate gave him a small shake of the head to discourage him. “We must create a story that explains this to Officer MacCullough.”

Rory pondered a moment. “Couldn’t we just let it go unsolved?”

“My fear is that he’ll attempt to railroad poor Lillian if it remains unsolved,” Cate responded.

“Ah, you may be correct. What can we do? Perhaps request the case be closed?”

“He’s a stubborn man. I’m not sure that will do it,” Jack answered.

“Jack’s right,” Cate noted, pacing the floor as she pondered the options. “We need another solution. A way to close the case but not blame anyone.”

Jack knit his brows. “How are we going to do that? How can we explain missing jewelry that no longer needs to be found?”

“We have to admit we found it.”

“How do we say we found it without incriminating Mr. Congeniality over here?” Jack queried.

“We obviously can’t say we found it here,” Cate admitted.

“Perhaps we should call Officer MacCullough and be vague about the details. Let it all come out in the wash, as they say,” Rory suggested.

Cate snapped her fingers and flicked her gaze to Rory. “That’s it!”

“Do you really expect being vague will do the trick?” Jack questioned.

“No,” Cate corrected. “No, not the part about being vague. The part about the wash. We’ll say they must have been picked up with some other random garment and sent to the laundry. They were misplaced by mistake, and no one realized until the garment was repaired or washed.”

“Ohhhhh,” Jack answered, realization dawning on him. “In the confusion after the party, someone grabbed clothing to launder, not realizing they also grabbed the jewelry with it and the jewelry turned up later when that clothing was being dealt with.”

Cate nodded. “Yes, that’s right. It’s a sellable story, especially to the less-than-quick Officer MacCullough. He’ll likely be glad to close the case and find it a sufficient explanation.”

“All right. I agree. The secret remains between the four of us and Anne. I insist we tell Anne. I cannot keep this from her.”

“Agreed,” Cate answered, pointing a finger at Lorne. “And he will quietly leave and never speak a word of this to anyone.”

All eyes turned to Lorne. He wrestled himself from Jack’s grasp without a word.

“Well?” Jack asked, squeezing his shoulder. “We can make a lot of trouble for you if you don’t agree. It’s a more than fair deal.”

The man grimaced but acquiesced. “Fine. I shall leave, but I will need time to prepare.”

“I shall pay you for two months work, but you shall leave posthaste. I care not what excuse you give to the other servants.”

“Fine,” Lorne grouched.

Jack unhanded the man, and they left him to commence packing his things. Cate returned the letters to the top of the bureau before exiting, Jack’s wary eye making sure there was no more trouble as she did so. Rory placed the jewelry in his pocket, so it remained unseen by anyone until the ordeal was over.

He led them to Anne’s suite of rooms, entering after knocking to find Anne at her desk.

“Yes, darling?” she inquired before glancing up from her letters. “Oh! Cate and Jack, hello!” She stood from the desk.

“Wonderful news, Anne,” Rory began. “Clever Cate has found the jewelry!”

A shocked expression painted over Anne’s face. Rory revealed the two necklaces. “However, did you find them? Where were they?”

“I’m afraid that’s a rather sordid tale, dear. Please, sit down.”

Anne stared at him for a moment before taking a seat on her chaise. Rory explained the affair to Anne. Anne’s face was aghast as he explained the familial connection of their under-butler. She whitened further when he admitted Lorne was the responsible party and the circumstances of Lorne’s relationship to him. He finished by detailing the deal made between them and the story they would supply to Officer MacCullough to close the case.

When he finished, Anne leapt from her seat, her hands balled into fists. “Rory! How could you be so foolish? The man is a thief! He should be punished!”

“Please, Anne, try to understand. I don’t want the scandal it would bring. His connection would be revealed! We couldn’t hide it.”

“Hogwash!” Anne exclaimed. Her reaction surprised Cate, who had never seen this level of emotion displayed by Anne.

“Anne, please!” Rory begged, preferring to be finished with the matter. “I prefer not to discuss it further! The decision has been made. I expect you to abide by it. Now, if you will excuse me, I have many details to take care of, including informing Officer MacCullough. But first I will return these beauties to the safe.”

Rory departed, leaving Jack, Cate, and a fuming Anne. Anne paced the length of the room. “How could he decide this? That man should be in jail!”

“If it’s any consolation,” Cate noted, “he’ll be leaving the estate soon.”

Anne collapsed onto the chaise. “It should be, but it isn’t. How could he do this? To his own family?”

“It’s because Lorne’s family that Rory is doing it,” Cate explained.

“No,” Anne disagreed. “Not Rory, Lorne! He lived among us, performed a job given to him by Rory to help and then stabs his own family in the back.”

“I’m sorry,” Cate said, easing onto the chaise next to Anne and taking her hands.

“Oh, how unbecoming this all is,” Anne answered, glancing between Cate and Jack. “But I am so angry!”

“It will pass once the shock is worn off,” Cate assured her.

Anne shook her head. “I want to believe that, however, I’m not sure. I’m shaking with anger at this moment. How can I look anyone in the eye and lie to them about this incident!”

An idea formed in Cate’s head.

CHAPTER 37



Cate stared up at Anna, a slight smile on her lips. “Perhaps it would be helpful to get your thoughts out. In a letter. You don’t have to send it, but perhaps you should write your anger and disappointment down as though you’re speaking to Lorne. It may help ease your emotions.”

Anne sat in silence, clutching Cate’s hands for a few breaths. “Perhaps it is a wise idea, Cate. I shall consider it. Well, I prefer not to dwell on it further right now. Oh! We are late for lunch. Will you give me a moment to compose myself?” She rushed into her bedroom.

“Clever, Lady Cate, clever.”

Cate winked at Jack. “She needs to write a letter so I can find it in our time and investigate!”

Anne reappeared, and they navigated to the dining room for lunch. They spent the afternoon discussing the case with Officer MacCullough. Cate found the man’s grunts impossible to read but, at last, he agreed to close the case without assigning blame to any party.

Cate’s story of finding the jewelry amidst a laundry pile made for most of the dinner conversation. Though the group shared many laughs over the investigation and its outcome, sadness crept over Cate as she realized this was the last evening she would spend with her great-grandparents.

Over cocktails before dinner, Cate and Jack announced they would depart the next morning. Dinner was a bittersweet affair for Cate, who prepared herself to say goodbye to people she’d likely never see again.

There would be plans made to keep in touch, invitations extended, and she would make promises she couldn't keep.

But she could put those conversations off until tomorrow morning. She was determined to enjoy her last dinner with her family. She even wore the dress Amelia gifted her. She planned to keep the dress, putting it in her collection in case she ever returned to this time.

Cate and Jack turned in soon after dinner, feigning the excuse of packing prior to leaving. This wasn't a complete lie, they did pack, readying their suitcases to return with them tomorrow morning.

They returned to their time. A feeling of satisfaction settled over Cate, coupled with melancholy.

"You going to be okay, Lady Cate?" Jack asked before leaving her to change.

She nodded without speaking at first. "Yeah. I'm glad it's over in a way."

"But you'll miss everyone."

"I will. Especially Amelia. But she's leaving on Friday anyway, so she wouldn't be there to visit."

"Perhaps you'll get a nice Christmas present, and we'll visit again before the year is out."

Cate smiled at Jack. "Wow! *You* suggesting time travel? Are you sick?"

Jack chuckled. "I just may be, but you can hold me to this promise. I know how much your family means to you, Lady Cate."

"Careful. I have a good memory. I won't forget this!"

"I don't expect you will!" Jack said, backing out of the room. "M'lady!" He bowed with his usual gusto.

* * *

Cate rose from bed with a heavy heart. Despite solving the mystery, today she would say goodbye to the family she'd spent the past few weeks getting to know. She hated this part. It had been hard when she'd said goodbye to Randolph and Victoria. This farewell would be no easier. She'd grown fond of all the 1925 MacKenzies. She felt especially drawn to Amelia, her great-grandmother. Perhaps she imagined it because of the connection between them, but Cate experienced it all the same. Today would be hard.

Jack met Cate after breakfast in her sitting room for one last trip to 1925. After arriving, Cate and Jack made their way to the sitting room where Anne and Amelia sipped tea.

“Good morning!” Cate said, trying to sound upbeat as they entered the room.

“Jack! Cate! All packed?” Amelia inquired.

“We are,” Jack responded.

“Too bad you couldn’t stay one more evening,” Amelia lamented.

“Duty calls,” Jack fibbed. “But we’ve had a lovely time.”

“And we can’t thank you enough for the gracious welcome,” Cate added as Rory and Lucas entered the room.

“Saying our goodbyes?” Rory questioned.

“We are,” Jack replied. “And thanking everyone for their hospitality.”

“No thanks needed. We should thank you! Your sharp detective skills proved invaluable to us,” Rory said.

“Not necessary! I was happy to help!” Cate answered.

“All the same, thanks are extended,” Anne agreed. “Also, thank you for your suggestion yesterday. I took you up on it and it helped ever so much.”

Cate nodded, not responding to the comment but understanding.

Silence filled the air for a few breaths. Amelia spoke first, “Well, I suppose you two are eager to be on your way.”

“I wouldn’t say eager,” Cate lamented. “We will miss all of you and this beautiful castle! But we need to get a start on our journey.”

“Yes,” Jack added. “We have a lot of ground to cover today.”

“Well, let’s not treat it with such finality. It will not be long before we are together again,” Amelia responded.

“Yes,” Anne agreed. “The holidays will be upon us before we realize it. And Amelia tells me she plans to invite you to the country home this summer. That will be lovely. Rory and I also plan to travel there.”

Cate pasted a smile on her face, choking back her sadness as she realized this invitation would never pan out. She nodded. “That would be wonderful if we can fit it into our schedule.”

“Oh, please, Jack,” Amelia requested, placing her hand on Jack’s arm for emphasis, “if you can’t make it, let Cate come along herself. She’ll need the break!”

“As long as I don’t miss her too much!” Jack hedged.

Another moment of silence passed before Rory spoke. "Well," he said, sticking his hand out to Jack, "it has been a pleasure. We will never forget the help you've given us on your first visit. All the best to you."

Jack accepted it, giving Rory's hand a solid shake. "Thank you. It's been a wonderful visit."

Cate embraced Anne and then Amelia, lingering a tad longer with Amelia. Cate held back the tears forming in her eyes as she pulled back.

"Oh," Anne said after final goodbyes were said, "the car isn't 'round yet. Did you call for it, Rory?"

"No need. Cate and I would like to enjoy one last walk and have arranged for a car to meet us in town."

"How adventurous of you. Are you sure?" Anne inquired.

"Yes," Cate assured her.

"We've had our luggage sent into town earlier, so it will be an easy journey," Jack noted.

"Well, I suppose we'll retrieve our coats and be on our way. Thank you again," Cate said.

The group disbanded with Jack and Cate climbing the stairs and returning to the bedroom suite. Without a word, they returned with their luggage to their time from 1925 one last time.

"You okay?" Jack questioned when they returned.

Cate nodded with a tight-lipped smile. "Yeah," she said after a moment. "Yeah, I'll be okay."

"How about a post-mystery meeting? I have a few items to discuss with you for spring planning."

"Estate business... the perfect thing to get my mind off of leaving my great-grandmother in 1925!" Cate quipped.

"Roof repairs are enough to take away any of your 'missing-my-family blues," Jack retorted. Cate giggled. "See you in the library in twenty minutes, give or take?"

"How about the sitting room?"

"No, thanks, I don't think so. Library," Jack insisted. "I need those comfy armchairs."

Cate rolled her eyes at him. "Okay, okay, library it is." They parted ways and Cate changed into normal clothes, setting aside her dress. She chose not to put it away just yet, deciding she'd deal with it later.

Cate ushered Riley and Bailey to the library, finding Jack already lounging in one of the generous armchairs near the fireplace. They spent almost two hours going over the projects needed once the weather broke in the spring. After the discussion, Cate slouched back in her chair, too.

"These chairs are comfy," she admitted. "I need to overcome my fear of this room."

"Perhaps with this latest mystery solved your nightmares will subside," Jack suggested.

"I hope so!"

"By the way, you owe me twenty pounds!"

"So I do!" Cate exclaimed. "Perhaps we can go double or nothing on our next adventure."

"Okay. Just don't go finding any more adventures soon, Lady Cate," Jack quipped.

Cate grinned at him as Riley let out an earsplitting yip. She groaned, assuming they'd experience another bout of hysteria over the leaky bookshelf. Instead, she spotted Riley staring at the fireplace. She furrowed her brow, then relief coursed through her. Riley's toy moose lay on the stone in front of the hearth.

Cate chuckled as she climbed to her feet. "Oh no! Did Moose run too close to the fire?" She made her way over to rescue the stuffed toy. Riley, too nervous to approach the heat of the roaring fire, stared at his beloved toy from a distance.

She leaned forward to retrieve the moose, steadying herself on one of the large stones framing the large fireplace. As she bent over, she stumbled, catching herself before she toppled.

"Cate!" Jack shouted, rushing toward her.

"Whoa!" Cate exclaimed. "This stone seems to be loose. When I put my weight on it, it shifted."

"Perhaps that's the source of the leak," Jack surmised, staring at it.

Cate's brow crinkled, eyeing at the stone. She placed her hand on the stone again. She pushed, leaning her weight against it. A loud crack sounded, reverberating throughout the room. Her eyes widened, and she backed up a step, almost bumping into Jack.

The stone stuck in the pushed-in position. A creaking noise followed, and a gust of air rushed past them. The scent of must filled their nostrils.

Riley and Bailey barked, backing several steps away. Cate's jaw fell open, and she glanced to Jack. He swallowed hard.

When pressed, the stone on the fireplace's right side triggered a mechanism. The leaky bookcase, the source of Cate's nightmares and the dogs' trepidation, had swung open. A black hole stared back at them.

A shiver passed through Cate, though she couldn't say whether it was from the cool air emanating from the open bookshelf or the mild dread she experienced from the situation that matched her nightmares.

She swallowed hard, approaching the hole, determined to face her fears.

Jack followed, peering into the blackness. "This explains the leak. Looks like a passage. I'll grab some flashlights."

"I told you!" Cate whispered, breathless.

"That you did, Lady Cate, that you did," Jack answered with a shake of his head.

Jack retrieved two flashlights from a cabinet on the opposite side of the room while Cate quieted the dogs. He handed her one of the flashlights and they both powered them on. Cate shined her light into the blackness. The light provided a dim outline of the cavity's features.

She stepped inside, shining the light around the space. Cobwebs decorated it, and the stale air wafted to her nostrils.

"It continues this way," Cate informed Jack, shining her light to the right where the passage continued down a set of stairs.

"Careful, Cate. We've no idea the condition of those stairs. Let me go first." Jack pushed ahead of her, creeping down the steps, testing each one as he went.

Cate nodded, keeping a firm grip on the dusty handrail. She tiptoed behind him, careful with her weight on the aged stairs.

They reached a landing, and the stairs turned at a right angle. They inched down the remaining steps, spilling onto the stone floor at the bottom.

Cate and Jack shined their lights around the cavernous space. Cool, damp air surrounded them, and Cate shrugged her sweater tighter around her. Jack approached the nearby wall, focusing his beam on an object there.

Cate followed his gaze. "What is it?"

"Looks like a lamp. Kerosene by the smell of it," Jack answered. "Might help to light this and any others we find. Our flashlights aren't doing very much in a space this size."

"Good idea," Cate agreed.

“I’ll run up for some matches. Will you be okay here by yourself?”

Cate nodded. “Sure,” she muttered as she swung her flashlight beam around, anything but sure.

Jack squeezed her shoulder, hurrying up the stairs. Within a few moments, he returned and lit the lamp. He searched around the walls, finding a few others and lighting them. The warm light illuminated the space, revealing additional details.

Cate gaped at the enormous space. “What is this place?”

A large desk sat in the center of the space, piled with books and papers. Storage shelves placed along the walls held various items, some housed in crates. Trunks littered the floor and several large tables stood at various spots around the room, also covered with assorted materials. A thick layer of dust covered everything.

“I have no idea,” Jack admitted. “And why isn’t it shown on any plans? Not even Douglas’s private plans.”

“Perhaps it was added after Douglas’s era?” Cate conjectured.

“Maybe,” Jack replied.

Cate wandered toward the desk. She blew away some of the dust covering the materials. With two fingers, she lifted a few items as Jack perused the shelves.

She picked up one of the books on the desk, a thick leather-bound volume filled with script writing. She thumbed through it, dust exploding into the air as she shuffled the pages. She flipped open the cover, staring at the text written on the first page.

“I doubt this was added after Douglas’s era,” she commented, still staring at the page.

“Why do you say that?” Jack asked, joining her and peering over her shoulder at the page.

“This book,” Cate replied. “It says *Journal of Douglas MacKenzie*.”

Cate glanced around the cavernous space, awestruck.

Jack rifled through the materials on the desk. “There are several journals here. Looks like they all belong to Douglas,” Jack noted after opening a few.

Cate wandered to one of the tables, studying the things scattered across it. She spun to face Jack. “I think we’re standing in the private research laboratory of Douglas MacKenzie.”

“I think you may be right,” Jack answered.

“Oh, Jack, do you realize what this means?”

Jack stared at her.

A smile spread across Cate’s face, and she raised an eyebrow at him. “It looks like our next adventure just found us.”

* * *

THE END

DANGER AT DUNHAVEN CASTLE



A CATE KENSIE MYSTERY

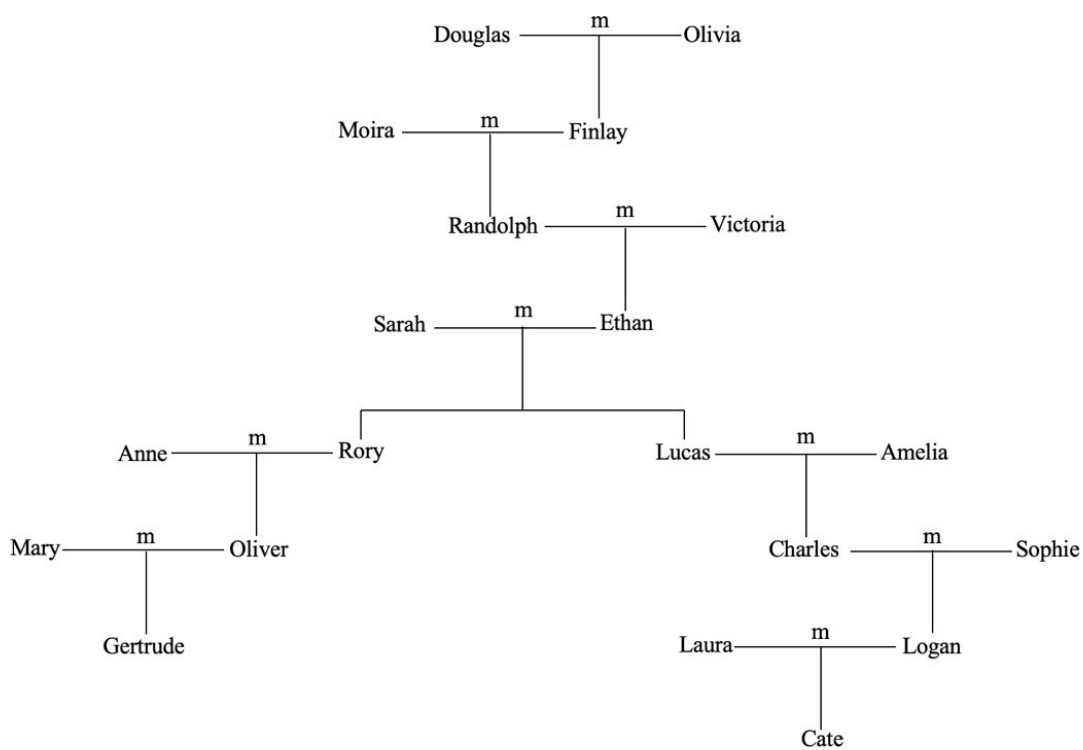
*For my goddaughter, Arabella
Keep reading!*

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

A HUGE thank you to everyone who helped get this book published!
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Finally, a HUGE thank you to you, the reader!

MacKenzie Family Tree



CHAPTER 1



Cate's heart pounded hard in her chest. She puffed with exertion. Her throat parched as she raced down the hall. She risked a glance behind her. The hallway appeared empty. Where was he, she wondered?

She hurried through the doorway into the library. She tugged the train of her gown inside before closing and locking the doors.

Cate backed a few steps away. A loud pounding shook the doors. She jumped with each jolt.

"Catherine," a voice growled on the other side. Cate's breath caught in her throat at the sound of his voice. She swallowed hard as she glanced around the library. No escape routes existed. Could she climb from a window, she pondered?

Cate hastened to one window and yanked on the handle. It stuck fast. She struggled with it as the pounding ceased. She spun to face the now silent door. Her eyes widened as the doorknob turned. Would the lock hold? Not for long, Cate surmised.

Her eyes searched the space and she spotted a new feature. A gaping black hole stared back at her. Cate lifted her skirts and sprinted into the blackness.

Cate knew the space well. Additional light was not needed. She pressed against the stone wall as she crept down the stairs leading to Douglas MacKenzie's secret office. At the bottom, Cate groped the wall in the dim light. Her fingers found the trigger to close the secret passage off to the

library. She pulled it. A scraping sound filled her ears as the bookshelf swung closed.

The closing bookcase shut out all light from the room. With the space plunged into blackness, Cate held her breath as she strained her ears for sounds of the library doors being breached. Silence pervaded the space.

After a moment, faint footsteps sounded on the floor above her. Cate's pulse quickened as she glanced to the ceiling. She retreated further into Douglas's office. In the darkness, Cate bumped into his desk. It made a sickening scrape across the floor.

The footsteps halted above. When they resumed, they hurried toward her location. A tear escaped Cate's eye as she rushed to hide.

Light illuminated the space she searched. He had opened the bookcase. "Catherine? Where are you hiding?" he called to her.

Cate held in a sob as she squeezed into a darkened corner. She pressed against the damp stone wall as she sank to the floor. Footfalls sounded on the wooden steps leading down to her hiding place. Cate sucked in air as she struggled to maintain her composure.

The man appeared at the bottom of the stairs, backlit by the light from above. Even featureless, his form was imposing. Cate pressed a hand over her mouth as she strove to remain silent.

The walls around her pushed against her back and side. Were they moving closer to her or was she pressing herself closer to them, she wondered? The man stalked across the room. Had he spotted her? Cate shrank further back. The walls closed in around her. She squeezed her eyes shut as the figure approached.

The damp, cold rock brushed against Cate's skin. When she opened her eyes, the stone wall filled her vision. What happened, she pondered? She felt around, finding stone surrounded her. She pushed against the cold, rough rock, searching for an exit. She found none.

Cate pounded her fists against the wall in front of her. Tears streamed down her face as she fought to escape her prison. "HELP!" she screamed. "HELP!"

* * *

Cate vaulted to sitting. She gulped in air as her heart thudded in her chest. A glance around the space confirmed her location. She sat in her bedroom. Moonlight streamed through the window overlooking the back garden.

Riley, her little black and white dog, popped his head up and stared at her. His dark almond eyes studied Cate with a quizzical expression. Next to him, his dog pal, Bailey, glanced sideways at Cate. "I'm okay, guys," she said as her breathing slowed and her heart returned to normal speed. She reached over and tousled the fur on each of their heads. "Just another nightmare. I'd better write it down."

Satisfied with her explanation, Riley let his head drop onto the bed. With a sigh, his eyes drooped shut, and he returned to sleep. Bailey's eyes closed as he drifted back to dreamland, too. Cate flicked on the bedside lamp and grabbed a notebook and pen from her night table. She flipped it open to the first blank page and began to detail her dream.

After Cate filled in the information, she closed the book, set it on her night table, and switched off the light. As darkness surrounded her, she relaxed back into her pillows. Yet another nightmare, she reflected.

The nightmares had plagued her since early December. Now, almost four months later, they were a growing cause for concern. When they started, Cate assumed they were warning her about something in the library. After she and Jack found a hidden passage leading to the secret workspace of Douglas MacKenzie, the castle's first proprietor, Cate assumed the nightmares would cease. She had been wrong.

The haunting dreams continued for months after they'd located Douglas's office. Shortly after the discovery, Jack suggested the nightmares would taper off. Instead, they had done the opposite, becoming more frequent and more terrifying in nature as time passed.

Cate now spent almost every night chased by a mysterious man whose identity she could not ascertain. After numerous discussions with Jack, he suggested she detail them in a dream journal. Perhaps keeping track of them would allow them to identify the source.

So Cate diligently wrote all the details she could recall upon awakening. In this version, the man chased her through the castle. As usual, they wound up in the library. The gaping hole represented the secret entrance to Douglas's workshop. As Cate sought safety there, the space had somehow morphed into a stone tomb, trapping her inside.

Cate spent another hour contemplating the nightmares before falling asleep. Why had they not stopped after she found Douglas's office? Were they a warning? If so, of what?

Cate pondered the meaning of the many dreams. In the two months she'd been keeping track, she'd filled half of the thick notebook's pages. Detail after detail from various versions flooded back into her mind. She recalled her heart pounding as she fled through the castle halls, the terror she experienced as the man hissed her name while chasing her, the icy air that gusted from the gaping hole in the library. The damp, cold stone that closed in around her as she hid.

Cate recalled other specifics from prior dreams. In each case, she wore old-fashioned clothing. From the notes Cate described in her dream journal, the clothing appeared to be from the late 1700s.

To the casual observer, this detail may seem nonsensical, typical of a dream. But for Cate, well-acquainted with the well-guarded secret within the castle walls, the clothing seemed indicative of something more. She stared at the timepiece she wore around her neck. At almost a year after her arrival, memories of her first few months in the castle flooded her mind.

A smile crossed her face as she remembered her first glances at her new abode and her overwhelming sense of home. A chuckle escaped her as she recalled the events that occurred over the last summer. From phantom maids to ghostly gardeners, Cate assumed ghosts haunted the halls of her new home. Little did she know she wore around her neck the key to a secret larger than shadowy specters. Imprinted with the warning *ALWAYS KEEP AN EYE ON YOUR TIME*, the golden timepiece interacted with various areas within the castle walls allowing the wearer to travel through time.

Amazed and excited at the discovery, Cate and Jack, who was sworn to protect the secret along with Cate as part of his duty as a Reid, had traveled to the 1850s and the 1920s to help Cate's ancestors solve various mysteries.

The smile returned to Cate's face as she reminisced about meeting her ancestors. After a few fond memories, her mind circled back to her current conundrum. She'd never traveled to the 1700s. She wasn't even aware of a spot in the castle that led to this time period.

Still, the clothing in her dream suggested the terror she lived out nearly every night pointed to this era. Did something or someone call her to that time? Was the man chasing her Douglas MacKenzie? Was he calling for

help? The presence always seemed sinister to her. But she couldn't understand why she'd get that vibe from Douglas.

Cate sighed as she stroked the silky fur on Riley's back. She hadn't solved anything thus far, and she wouldn't tonight either. She closed her eyes and drifted off to what she hoped would be a dreamless state.

Red streaked the morning sky as Cate awoke. The sun peeked over the misty moors as she stretched and climbed from her bed. She teetered on the edge, her eyelids still drooping with sleepiness. Her gaze fell to the notebook on the night table. Elements of her dream poured back into her mind.

She frowned at the notebook and turned her focus to Riley. With a large yawn, the little pup stretched and climbed to his feet. His tail offered a lazy wag in her direction as he sidled next to her.

"Good morning, sleepyhead," Cate said as he licked her cheek.

Cate kissed the top of his head as he sank back down amidst the covers for a second snooze while she showered. Bailey stretched as he eyed her from his spot. His eyes closed to slits as she plodded to the bathroom.

Her mind dwelled on her dream as she adjusted the water's temperature before stepping into her shower. The warm water caressed her skin as she parsed through more details. She came to no new conclusions as she dressed for her day.

Riley shook off any sleepiness the moment the cool Scottish air hit his nostrils. He raced around the portion of the yard closest to the castle. His floppy ears bounced up and down as he bounded around in a circle with his mouth open in a giddy grin. Cate couldn't help but smile at the little pup's exuberance for life. No matter the situation, Riley could always bring a grin to her face.

A bit more reserved than Riley, Bailey trotted around the property, sniffing bushes and following the flight of morning birds venturing from their nests.

Cate collected them after their romp and entered the castle's kitchen for breakfast. Inside, she met her full staff who were preparing for breakfast. Mrs. Fraser, her current housekeeper, bustled about the kitchen as she prepared the morning meal. Close on Mrs. Fraser's heels was her housekeeper trainee, Molly Williams. Cate's former department secretary, Molly, had moved to Scotland a few months ago. When Mrs. Fraser retires,

Molly would take over as the housekeeper. That wouldn't be for several years, according to Mrs. Fraser.

Molly bent over the oven, testing cookies with a spatula.

"How do they look, Miss Molly?" Mrs. Fraser called over her shoulder as she shook raisins into a bowl.

"Eh," Molly answered, "flat."

Mrs. Fraser finished her task and peered into the oven over Molly's shoulder. "Aye, too much opening of that door and fiddling, that's why. Close it up, girl, and let them bake!"

Molly nodded and pushed the oven door closed. She switched on the oven light and continued to stare at them. "They'll cook in their own time, Molly. Leave them for a few minutes. They'll puff up again."

Cate chuckled at the scene. For months, Molly had begged Mrs. Fraser to teach her to bake the cookies she often supplied everyone with. Mrs. Fraser had finally allowed Molly to try a simple shortbread recipe.

Molly fretted over the recipe for days, afraid her attempt wouldn't measure up. She shot Cate an apologetic glance as she pulled her gaze from the oven. With a shrug, Molly mouthed to Cate, "Hope they're okay!"

"They'll be fine," Mrs. Fraser said without skipping a beat. Cate suppressed a laugh at Mrs. Fraser's almost extrasensory ability.

At the kitchen table, Cate spotted Mr. Fraser and Jack. Mr. Fraser, her head groundskeeper, sipped a cup of coffee as he read a list of tasks for the week. Jack, Cate's estate manager and time-traveling buddy, set his coffee mug on the table as both dogs swarmed him.

"Well, hello, little laddies!" Jack said as Riley leapt into his lap and Bailey stood with his paws planted on Jack's thigh. "Did we have a wonderful sleep last night?"

Riley answered in the form of a lick to Jack's cheek. "Oh, is that right, big fellow?" Jack replied to him.

"Good morning, Lady Cate," Mrs. Fraser said as Cate sat down at the table.

"Good morning," Cate answered. "Putting Molly to work this morning, I see."

"Aye, the lassie has earned her first attempt at the shortbread."

"Earned?" Cate inquired.

"Aye," Jack answered. "She passed her shortbread exam yesterday." He winked at Cate.

Cate chuckled at his statement. “Don’t laugh, Lady Cate,” Molly said as she placed a glass of water in front of Cate. “He’s telling the truth.”

Cate knit her brows. “There was a test?”

“Aye, there was,” Mrs. Fraser responded. “Had to memorize that recipe. I cannae have the lassie glancing at the recipe card every few seconds. The dough is very persnickety. One moment it’s perfect and the next it’s ruined. That’s what makes my shortbreads the best!

“They are the best,” Jack agreed. “When do we get to taste test Molly’s?”

Molly peeked through the oven’s window, a frown crossing her face. “You may not want to taste mine,” she fretted.

“I’ll be the judge of that,” Jack responded. “You’ve got to let us try them to know for sure.”

Mrs. Fraser peered into the oven again. “A few more minutes,” she advised. “See how they are puffy now that you’ve left them alone?”

A smile crossed Molly’s face as she gazed at the baking tray. “Yes, they do look a bit better!”

Mrs. Fraser and Molly finished all the breakfast preparations as Riley and Bailey curled up near Cate’s feet. Cate grabbed a bowl as Molly, at Mrs. Fraser’s direction, pulled the cookies from the oven. “Set them out and leave them,” Mrs. Fraser advised.

Molly nodded and placed the baking tray on the stovetop before retrieving her breakfast. The group sat down for the meal, sharing a discussion about Cate’s upcoming one-year anniversary as a countess.

Mrs. Campbell, the town’s librarian and president of the historical society, had convinced Cate a celebration was in order. With less than three months to go, the massive celebration she planned still required a fair amount of work. Though this time, everyone at Dunhaven Castle fully supported the party since it celebrated their Lady Cate. Scheduled for the sixth of June, Mrs. Campbell planned an extravaganza that would remain unrivaled for years to come.

“Will we be baking for the anniversary party?” Molly questioned.

“No,” Cate responded. “You are *guests* at my party! Not caterers!”

“Aye, true,” Mrs. Fraser responded. “But we will still be baking!”

Cate tilted her head to offer a confused glance at Mrs. Fraser. “But...” she began, when Mrs. Fraser interrupted her.

“Not for the party. I agree, let the caterers handle the scores of people in attendance.”

Cate’s face blanched. “I hope there aren’t scores.”

Mrs. Fraser continued, “But we shall have our own private celebration for you, Lady Cate! With a large meal and plenty of cookies. And I’d like to make another Scottish Berry Brûlée. The same dessert I made when you arrived.”

Cate smiled. “Now *this* is a party I can get on board with! I’ll even help with the baking!”

“No, you won’t, Lady Cate,” Mrs. Fraser chided. “It is a celebration *for* you, so you can’t prepare anything for it. And given your tales of woe in the kitchen, I’d rather you didn’t, anyway.” Mrs. Fraser chuckled.

Cate giggled, too. As she approached her one-year anniversary, she marveled at the change in less than one year. Not only in herself, she reflected, but in everyone around her. When she arrived, Mrs. Fraser detested the idea of a “crass American” running Dunhaven. Now, the woman planned not one but two celebrations in her honor.

She glanced around the table. Molly grinned at Mrs. Fraser as they discussed her choice of desserts for the special occasion. Mr. Fraser, always quiet, wore a small grin as he interjected comments about sprucing up the grounds and transforming them for the party.

Cate’s eyes rested on Jack, her estate manager and, more than that, her friend. In less than a year, their lives had radically changed when they discovered time travel. Jack, ever the cautious one, always warned against anything too extreme. Even so, he typically gave in to her whims and allowed her to visit and help her family from generations past. He glanced at her from across the table, a wide smile on his face.

Cate returned his expression. She, too, had changed. While she remained introverted, she was no longer a wallflower. She’d transformed from quiet college professor to gracious Countess.

As the meal wound down, she considered her next task. With an upcoming meeting with Mrs. Campbell on Wednesday, she had many details to review. Orders were due soon on several items, and Mrs. Campbell hoped to have all decisions made within the next two weeks.

Still, with the meeting in two days, Cate could put those decisions off until tomorrow. Instead, she planned to continue her research into Douglas MacKenzie, the castle’s builder. Two months ago, they had found his secret

workspace. Filled to the brim with journals, sketches, technical drawings, plans and odd devices, she had spent the first few months of the new year cataloging and sorting through much of it.

She hoped to learn more about the strange anomaly of time travel encompassed in the castle walls through Douglas's many journals. Unfortunately for Cate, she'd learned nothing thus far. Nonetheless, she was determined to continue exploring options until she made some headway.

After breakfast, she enjoyed a cuppa with Molly and Mrs. Fraser before her usual mind-centering walk around the property with the dogs. With the air still chillier than she'd like, Cate kept her walk shorter than she did in the summer months.

She returned to the castle and navigated the halls to the library. A fire roared in the large central fireplace. Tall bookcases surrounded it, stretching from floor to ceiling. They extended around three of the four walls. The only bare wall contained massive windows adorned with heavy tartan draperies overlooking one of the estate's gardens.

Soon, spring flowers would bloom just outside the window where a massive wooden desk sat. She would use them as a distraction from her work whenever a blinking cursor stared at her on her laptop screen. Her book on the castle's history stalled as her research on Douglas dead-ended beyond the standard basics recorded in the history books.

Perhaps Mrs. Campbell could tell her more. They had not discussed Douglas yet. As the town's historical society president, Mrs. Campbell may have information. As the town's biggest gossip, Cate felt certain she would have some tidbit about Douglas to share. She made a mental note to ask during their next meeting.

Riley and Bailey wandered into the library behind Cate. After their walk, a customary nap was in order. Riley wandered toward the fireplace, with Bailey meandering behind him. Bailey curled into a tight ball close enough to feel the warmth of the fire. Riley sprawled next to him, stretching his little body as far as he could before letting his head rest on the thick area rug under him.

Cate smiled at the scene before turning her attention to her target. Her eyes focused on one particular bookshelf across the room. She stalked to the fireplace and pressed the top stone. The square stone retracted, and the customary creak of the hinged bookcase filled the room.

CHAPTER 2



She opened the bookcase on so many occasions before, Riley and Bailey no longer reacted to the bookcase's groaning, nor the smell of must that followed. She stepped toward a large cord on the floor and pushed the plug into the wall socket.

Light bloomed from deep within the cavity. The temporary lighting Jack rigged for her in the secret lab brightened the dim space. Light filtered all the way to the top of the squeaky wooden staircase leading into its depths. With a deep inhale and exhale, she crossed to the opening and peered into the brightened space. What would she find there today?

"Ready to head into your dungeon, m'lady?" Jack queried from behind Cate.

At the sound of his voice, Riley bounded to his feet and dashed across the room. He leapt from the edge of the area rug, flying through the air into Jack's waiting arms. "Did I wake you, little fellow?" Jack asked as he rubbed his head. Bailey meandered over, stretching before glancing up to Jack for an ear scratch.

Cate smiled at the scene. "They were just about to nap," she informed Jack.

"That is a great idea, boys. Probably better than spending your time in the dusty dungeon!"

"It's not a dungeon," Cate corrected. "It would have been easier to assess had it been!"

"Still no progress?" Jack inquired.

She threw her arms out with a shrug. “Nope,” she admitted. “I’m still sorting through. There’s tons of stuff down there, but so far nothing beyond sorting is getting done.”

“Perhaps today will be your lucky day, Lady Cate,” Jack suggested.

Cate raised her eyebrows as she considered it. “Every day is my lucky day. I inherited a castle. Though beyond that, I expect today I’ll only find frustration in my dungeon and no answers.”

“Why do you do it?” Jack inquired.

Cate inhaled a deep breath as she formulated her answer. “It’s Douglas’s lab. The man who discovered the time travel anomaly. *And* the man who figured out how to control it. The information down there is invaluable. It could teach us so much about the phenomenon. It’s worth it even if we glean a tiny bit of information from it.

“If, Lady Cate, if. So far, you haven’t deduced anything.”

Cate shook her head with a sideways frown. “Nope. So far every book I’ve found has contained gibberish.”

“Perhaps they contain the rantings of a madman. Nonsensical ramblings he scribbled after losing his mind,” Jack suggested.

“I don’t know,” Cate answered with a sigh. “Once I get everything sorted, I’ll take more than a glance at the hand-written journals and determine if I can make any headway.”

“Well, good luck, Lady Cate,” Jack said with a grin.

“Thanks!” Cate answered, matching his expression. “You know, I’m surprised you’re so keen on me making any progress! You hate time travel!”

“The longer you spend deciphering those journals, the less we time travel,” Jack answered with a grin. Cate shook her head at him. “And I don’t hate it. I just don’t like it.”

“Same difference,” Cate contended.

“Not really, but anyway, I don’t want to keep you from your gibberish and dust. I just stopped by because I needed your signature on a few items before sending it to Mr. Smythe for payment.”

“Oh, sure!” Cate answered. She approached Jack, who passed her a folder. Cate grabbed a pen from the desk. Jack explained the basics of each as Cate signed off.

After collecting the paperwork, he said, “And now, I leave you to your research. M’lady!” He gave an extravagant bow before retreating from the

room.

Cate shook her head at the comical display. With Jack gone, the dogs returned to their preferred morning nap spots, while she returned to the open passage. She stepped inside and hovered at the top of the stairs. The moment they had first discovered the secret area popped into her mind as she descended each step. They groaned under her weight. Just complaints from aging wood, Jack had told her, after a thorough inspection. Before she continued to traverse them on a regular basis, he insisted on ensuring their safety. With every creak, she thanked him.

As she reached the bottom, she glanced around the disheveled room. She contemplated whether she'd made any progress. Piles of a variety of items sat in various locations around the room. She had sorted them to the best of her ability. She filled the many bookshelves with the odd items which appeared to be inventions or attempts at inventions. In her cataloging, she found a prototype of the timepiece she carried around her neck, a rudimentary attempt at a lightbulb, an odd contraption shaped like a helmet and attached to a magnet, and various other peculiarities she could not identify.

In a corner of the room, a wooden staircase led to nowhere. In the opposite corner stood a metal box large enough for a human to stand in, with tubes leading at all angles from it. Next to it sat a large glass ball, stained by watermarks. Across the room, a twisted mass of tubes, beakers and pipettes formed a complicated chemistry setup.

Cate stared at the other piles. She'd used another bookshelf for reference books. In the middle of the floor stood the room's true bounty. A collection of journals written by Douglas MacKenzie. Next to that stood a jumble of technical drawings with his signature.

When Cate and Jack found the space, the journals scattered throughout the room had provided the promise of answers regarding the castle's secret. She recalled her heart skipping a beat as she'd read the words "The Journal of Douglas MacKenzie" on the leather-bound book discarded on the desk.

Only after sorting through them had her hopes been dashed. Journal after journal contained nothing more than gibberish. At first, she had searched every page for a readable entry. After the seventh journal, she gave up on the exhaustive examination of each journal's pages. Instead, a cursory glance at the first page, followed by a quick leaf through was all she

completed before tossing the journal into the ever-growing pile with the others.

Even the sketches of his inventions were adorned with annotations in gibberish. Cate took her frustrations out by promising to find answers after she'd organized the space. It allowed her to make progress without requiring a search for solutions regarding the gobbledygook in the twelve journals she'd discovered.

Cate's organization goal would soon be met. With one bookshelf left to sort through, she estimated she'd finish in the next day or so. She stepped onto the stone floor and made her way to the large structure. She'd cleared the top shelf already, saving herself multiple trips up and down the stepstool today. She focused her energy on the second shelf at her eye level.

Cate pulled the first item from the shelf. A rusty spring the size of her arm, with two cup-shaped objects on either end. Cate rotated the object in her hands. She peered into the cups and placed one to her ear. With both hands, she pulled on both ends, stretching the coil before allowing it to snap back. Dust clouded the air as the ancient spring sprung back to shape. She coughed and waved at the air in front of her. She shuttled it to an empty spot on her "inventions" shelf.

She continued working her way through all the materials, polishing off two shelves before lunch. Her progress was made slower by her fiddling with each object. Some of them she recalled spotting in technical drawings. She often spent time digging through the pile to compare the sketches to the physical objects. Without any readable text, she learned little about any of the items.

"Lady Cate!"

Cate glanced toward the staircase leading to the library. Mrs. Fraser's voice floated down from above. "Lady Cate!" she shouted again.

"Coming!" Cate shouted as she climbed to her feet. She clapped her hands together to remove as much dust as possible before brushing off her shirt and pants.

"Still working in that dusty dungeon?" Mrs. Fraser inquired as Cate appeared at the top of the stairs.

"Afraid so," Cate said. "It's not a dungeon, though. There's some really interesting stuff down there, to be honest!"

Mrs. Fraser lifted an eyebrow at Cate, her eyes sliding up and down her form. "Young Jack says it's a dungeon," she said with a nod. "It's a

dungeon. And look at the state you've got yourself in! I dare say we'll not get the dust out of those."

Cate glanced down at her black leggings, now a shade of gray from the powder covering them. Her burgundy tunic hadn't fared much better. A large gray streak of dust adorned her abdomen. She pulled her bottom lip into a frown. "Oh, I've really taken a beating already today."

"Aye. You'll clog the drain with the dust in your hair, too, Lady Cate," Mrs. Fraser said with a chuckle.

Cate batted at her hair, attempting to knock some of the dust from it. "You may be right," she answered.

"Well, dusty or not, it's time for your lunch," Mrs. Fraser said as she motioned to the tray on the desk.

"Mmm," Cate responded as she sniffed the air. "Smells wonderful! Is this your famous chicken soup?"

"That it is, Lady Cate," Mrs. Fraser confirmed. "Now, you'd better go wash your hands before you eat."

Cate smiled and nodded as she darted from the room to clean up before eating her lunch. "Thank you!" she shouted behind her.

"You're welcome. Don't dally! It's best-served piping hot!" Mrs. Fraser called after her.

The promise of Mrs. Fraser's famous chicken soup on a chilly day caused Cate to speed through her handwashing and hurry straight back to the library. She leaned over the steaming bowl, inhaling a deep whiff of the fragrant soup. She dug in after blowing on a full spoonful of the broth. Behind her, Riley and Bailey gnawed on soup bones, a treat from Mrs. Fraser. Today, lunch satisfied everyone.

Cate curled in the leather armchair near the fireplace for a few moments after lunch, allowing the dogs to continue their feast. Her muscles protested her return to Douglas's secret office. So did her work ethic. Though nearly complete, the lack of progress annoyed her. Perhaps the last two shelves held a breakthrough, she mused.

The promise of a discovery motivated her to return to the space after a brief walk with the dogs. Cate descended the stairs and approached the bookshelf. She knelt on the cold stone floor to assess the final two shelves of unsorted materials. Cate blew on the shelf, sending a dust cloud into the air. She waved it away and began on one end. She removed several unidentifiable items and shuttled them to another shelf.

Underneath two large glass beakers, Cate found another journal. She grasped the thick leather spine and pulled it from the shelf. As she flipped open the front cover, the sound of cracking leather filled her ears. She glanced at the first page. A random assortment of letters adorned it. With a sigh and a shake of her head, Cate flipped through the remaining pages, stopping at random to peruse the contents. None of it made sense.

Another sigh escaped her as she snapped the book shut. A cold, wet nose pressed against her cheek and a warm tongue gave her a lick. Her eyes slid sideways, and a half-smile crossed her face.

“Hey, buddy,” Cate said as Riley offered her another kiss on the cheek. “Getting bored?”

Riley stared at her with his dark brown eyes before sniffing the book she held in her hand. “Any thoughts on it, Riley? Can you read this? Maybe it’s in dog language.”

Cate flipped a page open for Riley to peruse. The pup offered no answers. Instead, he glanced to the page, then to Cate before sliding to the floor and curling near her. Cate scratched his ears for a moment. “Did you leave your brother napping upstairs?” she questioned.

She glanced around the room, spotting a small form peering at her a few steps from the bottom of the staircase. “Did you venture down, too, Bailey? Come on.” Cate held her hand out to encourage him. He bounded down the remaining stairs and trotted across the stone floor to Cate. Cate took a moment to cuddle with them both before returning to work.

“What do you say we finish this sorting, boys?” Riley gave her another kiss on the cheek for encouragement.

Cate climbed to her feet and tossed the journal on the top of the pile. She finished moving the additional materials on the shelf. The bottom shelf consisted mainly of laboratory equipment and a few sketches of lab setups. She finished by late afternoon.

With aching muscles, she herded the two dogs up the stairs in search of a much-needed shower. Before leaving the library, Cate pulled the plug on the lab’s lighting and closed the secret passage, sealing off the area for another day.

As she crossed the hall and headed toward the main staircase, she ran into Jack. Riley bounded toward him as Bailey trotted behind.

“Any luck today?” he questioned.

She shook her head. “No. But I got everything sorted!”

“Hey! Progress, Lady Cate!”

“Yes, some. Now on to deciphering the information.”

“Surely, you can take a few days off to celebrate your sorting feat.”

“I’d really like to unravel the information I’ve found. Not just the journals, but some of those inventions are interesting. I’d love to understand what’s written about them, their intended purpose or why he made them.”

“I find them creepy.”

“They’re not creepy,” Cate said with a laugh.

“They are! The giant fishbowl? The weird Iron Maiden with the tubes? I don’t want to know their purpose, Lady Cate. I’m afraid to find out.” Jack shivered in an overly dramatic display of fear.

Cate shook her head at him, a half-grin on her face. “You have no sense of adventure.”

“No, I don’t, Lady Cate. And I like me just fine that way. If I never find out what secrets the mad scientist’s lab holds, I will still live a full and happy life.”

“Well, I would like to discover those secrets. Though first,” Cate said as she glanced at her clothes, “I would like to discover the shower.”

“Aye, you look like you’ve crawled through a dusty tomb. I shall leave you to your shower. M’lady!” Jack bowed to her as she collected her furry friends and climbed the stairs in search of steamy hot water and clean hair and skin.

* * *

Cate peered from her bedroom window early the next morning. Dense fog covered most of the landscape. Early spring storms rolled through the highlands for most of the night. For the moment, the heavy clouds held the rain at bay. The overnight thunderclaps were enough to send both pups hiding under the covers and pressed against Cate. She laid awake, watching lightning tear through the sky as they huddled against her. The dreamless dozing between storms kept her nightmares at bay.

Cate stretched and climbed from her bed. As she walked the dogs before breakfast, Cate pondered the puzzle awaiting her in Douglas’s lab. Could she decipher the enigma? What discoveries lay inside the journals and

sketches? Would she learn more about the castle's unique property? Would it provide a better mastery of time travel?

Cate stared into the mists shrouding the moors, her mind searching for answers. A yip several yards away called her attention back to her current situation. Cate glanced around her, finding herself alone.

"Riley! Bailey!" Cate called, not spotting the dogs. "Riley! Bailey!"

Cate heard a grumble from behind a bush in the side garden. As she navigated through the garden, she rounded a row of rose bushes and found both dogs. "There you are! What are you two doing over here?" Cate questioned.

Both dogs studied the ground. Bailey's head tilted sideways as he gave the area a curious look. Riley glanced to Cate before returning his gaze to a grassy patch. Cate stooped to peer closer at the area. Blades of green grass poked from the dirt. She spotted nothing else.

"What is it?" she inquired again.

Bailey scratched the area with his paw twice. Cate shrugged. "I don't see anything, bud."

Riley issued a whine as Bailey raked the patch again with his paw. "You guys are silly. There's nothing there. Come on, let's get our breakfast."

Cate stalked a few steps away. She spun when neither pup followed her. "Riley! Bailey! Come on! Dish!" Both dogs bounded toward her at the mention of their breakfast. Cate shook her head at them, pondering what they imagined they spotted in that grassy patch. Likely a bug, she concluded as they approached the castle.

"Good morning!" Cate called to Molly and Mrs. Fraser as she entered the kitchen.

"Good morning, Lady Cate," Mrs. Fraser answered, followed by Molly.

"Jack and Mr. Fraser already hard at work before breakfast?" Cate inquired.

"Aye, gathering tools for the day and tending to the fires."

"The rain seems to have stopped for the moment. Will they attempt to work outside?" Cate asked.

Mrs. Fraser shook her head. "Storms are expected to continue all day off and on. They're stuck inside. Young Jack will spend most of his day pestering me for biscuits."

"A good day to stay in and learn more baking!" Molly exclaimed as she prepared the oatmeal.

Cate agreed with a nod. "How did your shortbreads turn out?"

"Eh..." Molly murmured.

"For a first attempt, they were quite good!" Mrs. Fraser answered for her. Molly smiled at the compliment. "With a few tweaks, they'll match mine!"

"Looks like we picked the right woman for the job!" Cate answered.

"Aye, I concur, Lady Cate," Mrs. Fraser said with a firm nod.

"Well, I'll be upstairs," Cate said before leaving.

"Dining room?" Molly questioned.

"Yes," Cate confirmed.

"Not in your dungeon?" Mrs. Fraser quipped.

"Not today!" Cate exclaimed. "I finished all the sorting! Now I'm going to move on to Douglas's journals. I hope to find some great information for my book."

"I dare say you will. Interesting man, Douglas MacKenzie. He's a bit of a local legend," Mrs. Fraser answered.

"Local legend?" Molly prompted in a questioning voice.

"Aye," Mrs. Fraser confirmed. "The builder of this old place has quite the reputation."

Cate pursed her lips and narrowed her eyes. "Do you mind if I stay for breakfast and ask you more about him?"

Mrs. Fraser raised her eyebrows at Cate. "All right," she agreed.

Cate smiled at her as she removed the place setting from the tray on the island and placed it on the table. A second breakfast at the servants' table, she reflected. Mrs. Fraser was getting soft.

"And don't you go thinking I'm turning soft, Lady Cate. This is for the sake of your research only!"

"I wouldn't dream of it, Mrs. Fraser," Cate said as she held in a chuckle.

"And today, we will bring your bowl to you. Since this isn't your day off!" Mrs. Fraser declared.

Cate settled herself at the table, not willing to argue. Jack and Mr. Fraser pushed through the door into the kitchen. Riley and Bailey, who had curled near the door, greeted them with tail wags.

"Well, good morning, Sir Riley and Mr. Bailey!" Jack exclaimed. "What are we doing here this fine morning? Still rustling breakfast from Mrs. Fraser and Miss Molly?"

“Lady Cate is joining us again this morning,” Molly explained before Cate could.

Jack raised his eyebrows as he scratched Riley’s belly. “Again? Why, Mrs. Fraser, have you gone soft?”

Mrs. Fraser harrumphed. “Certainly not, young Jack!” she protested.

“No,” Cate defended her. “Mrs. Fraser has allowed me to stay so I can hear the tales of Douglas MacKenzie!”

“Aye, a strange duck, that one,” Mr. Fraser added with a nod.

Mrs. Fraser placed a full bowl of oatmeal in front of Cate, along with several toppings. “As I’m sure you discovered in that dusty dungeon,” Mrs. Fraser agreed.

Jack filled his bowl and took a seat across from Cate. “The lab of the mad scientist,” Jack stated with another dramatic shiver. “It’s frightening down there!”

“It’s not!” Cate countered. “It’s very interesting!”

“He has somewhat of a reputation as a Dr. Frankenstein, yes,” Mrs. Fraser admitted as she joined them at the table.

Molly gulped at Mrs. Fraser’s description. “Dr. Frankenstein?” she questioned. “What kind of experiments was he doing in that dungeon?”

Mrs. Fraser chuckled a bit. “He didn’t build a monster sewn together with dead people’s body parts. At least not to my knowledge,” Mrs. Fraser answered.

“Perhaps not, but the creepy stuff down there suggests he did some sort of strange experiments,” Jack contended.

Molly eyed them each around the table. “What kind of stuff?” she asked with a wrinkled nose.

“Mostly lab equipment and a few odd inventions,” Cate explained.

Jack shook his head as he swallowed a spoonful of oatmeal topped with brown sugar. “No. Nope. Strange contraptions, odd apparatus, disturbing devices. It’s a dungeon. A torture chamber.”

Molly’s eyes grew wide.

“It’s not!” Cate repeated. “He appears to have been an avid inventor. I’m not sure what everything is, but it seems he tried to invent some form of electrical lighting and perhaps a crude attempt at an early communication device similar to a phone.” Cate shrugged.

“Aye, an inventor,” Mr. Fraser agreed. “Many describe him that way.”

“And I’d bet many more contend he’s an evil scientist,” Jack suggested.

“Some do, some don’t,” Mrs. Fraser confirmed. “Some say he toyed with things he shouldn’t. Others claim he was an eccentric experimenter with fantastical ideas.”

“Hmm,” Cate murmured as she pondered the information. “What things shouldn’t he have toyed with?”

“They claim Douglas’s interests ran toward the occult. Some say he was a devil worshipper. Others claim he investigated the line between life and death, including attempting to restore life,” Mrs. Fraser explained.

Molly pulled her lips into a grimace. “Devil worship in the basement of this castle?” She glanced around the room as though searching for signs of the supernatural in every corner.

“And the other side?” Cate inquired.

“They maintain Douglas was nothing more than eccentric. An avid reader and researcher, he fiddled with all sorts of things to pass his time, no more.”

“Sounds like typical gossip,” Cate replied.

“There is one odd tale that persists through the centuries,” Mr. Fraser chimed in.

“Oh?” Cate inquired.

“Aye,” Mrs. Fraser agreed. “One persistent rumor has followed that man through the centuries.”

“What’s the rumor?” Molly choked out, her voice just above a whisper.

Mrs. Fraser leaned forward, her eyes alight with mischief. “That he was a warlock!”

CHAPTER 3



As Mrs. Fraser uttered the word “warlock”, lightning flashed and thunder boomed overhead. Both dogs jumped at the loud sound.

Molly jumped with them, shrinking down at the loud roar.

“A warlock?” Cate inquired, a hint of incredulousness in her voice.

“Aye, a warlock,” Mrs. Fraser said with a nod.

Molly gulped again. “Wh-Why did they believe that?” she stammered.

“Oh, they presented a whole host of evidence,” Mrs. Fraser explained.

“Claimed he could appear and disappear at will, summon spirits and he concocted strange potions.”

Molly’s forehead wrinkled, and she bit her lower lip. “S-Summon spirits?”

Cate cocked her head at Molly’s concerned expression. “Oh, Molly, you don’t honestly believe this, do you?” she asked.

Molly shrugged. Her eyes darted around the kitchen, glancing from wall to wall and then to the ceiling. “There’s usually some truth in rumors!”

“The castle isn’t haunted. There are no spirits here,” Cate assured her. “And there are no such things as warlocks.”

“How do you explain the peculiar equipment in the lab, then?” Jack queried.

Molly glanced between Jack and Cate before focusing on Cate for an answer. “He was a curious guy,” Cate answered with a shrug. “In his day and age, people mistook curiosity for witchcraft. Even into the late 1700s,

the rumors of witchcraft persisted, particularly in small communities like this one.”

Cate glanced at Molly. “It’s fine,” Cate assured her. “These types of tales exist in every country. They’re used to explain away strange behavior people couldn’t or didn’t want to explain or were jealous of. There’s likely a reasonable explanation for all of it!”

“Appearing and disappearing?” Molly questioned.

Cate shrugged again. “It’s a large castle. Perhaps they lost track of him or perhaps he used a secret passage, making him appear magical when he was not.”

“Smart, Lady Cate,” Mrs. Fraser said with a wag of her finger. “Douglas was also known to have a jovial spirit and a good sense of humor in addition to his curious nature.”

Cate nodded. “He probably liked to play tricks on people. In a castle this size, it wouldn’t be hard to do. Same with the spirits. And his supposed potions were likely his chemistry experiments.”

Molly knit her brow further as she considered Cate’s explanation. “Trust me,” Cate continued. “I’m a historian. These stories persist in every culture across the board. They are nothing more than scary fireside tales! There are no such things as warlocks.”

“She’s correct, Molly,” Mrs. Fraser added. “While you’ll still hear that rumor around town, there’re no such things as warlocks. It’s nonsense! Good for an entertaining tale on a stormy night. That’s likely how the rumor took root! Some servants chatting as lightning lit their faces and thunder boomed overhead. Likely embellished for dramatic effect and an interesting yarn. There are no ghosts here. I’ve lived my entire life on this estate, I know!”

Molly slouched a bit, easing the crinkle in her forehead. She nodded without speaking.

“Oh, Miss Molly,” Mrs. Fraser said with a chuckle as she patted Molly’s hand. “I was only telling you in jest. It’s just a silly rumor! There’s no truth to it.”

Molly straightened her shoulders and nodded again. “You’re right. I’m letting my imagination run away with me.”

“Now, we’d better get breakfast cleaned up and start our baking. There are no ghosts around here to do it for us!”

Molly cracked a smile for the first time during the conversation. "I'm glad. I'd rather bake myself. I hear ghosts use too much leavening!"

Mrs. Fraser chuckled at Molly's joke as they began to clear the table. "Well, that's my cue," Cate said. "Good luck with your baking and thank you for the entertaining stories about Douglas!"

"You're welcome, Lady Cate. Good luck with your dungeon."

Cate climbed the stairs to the main level, with Riley and Bailey in tow. Mrs. Fraser's words rung in her mind as she pulled the doors open to the library. Riley trotted toward the fireplace and collapsed in a heap near it. Cate eyed the roaring fire. The flames danced in the fireplace, keeping the damp chill of the Scottish morning air at bay. Bailey meandered toward Riley and curled in a ball next to him.

"I won't be long downstairs today, boys," Cate assured them as she opened the secret passage. "I'm just going to bring the journals upstairs and work here."

Cate plugged in the lighting and peered down the stairs. As she descended them, her eyes scanned the room. A chill passed over her. She tried to reassure herself it was merely the damp air seeping through the stone walls rather than the haunting words Mrs. Fraser had imparted over breakfast.

She chuckled. "There are no such things as warlocks," she reminded herself aloud. Her eyes found the stack of journals in the floor's center. She'd focus on those today near the warmth of the fireplace.

She gathered several of the leather journals into her arms. She'd need to make several trips to move them all. After three trips, she'd lugged all thirteen of the journals upstairs and made a pile near her favorite armchair.

Cate sank into it after retrieving a few cleaning materials. She pulled a blanket over her, even though the warmth of the fire reached her seat.

She began by dusting the books before using saddle soap to clean the leather and remove centuries of dirt and dust. She stared at the stack of newly cleaned journals. Had she spent the time cleaning to postpone the inevitable?

With a deep sigh, Cate decided she could no longer delay the task of examining the interiors of each journal. She pulled one from the top of the stack. Her first task would be to attempt to order the journals. She studied the exterior, searching for a mark or brand indicating the journal's number.

The smooth brown leather displayed no such marks. Cate flipped open the front cover. The front cover's interior contained a table of twenty-five numbers. The values, ranging from one to twenty-five, seemed to be in random order. She wondered if they may be some indication of dates, perhaps giving the time period in which the journal was written.

But why five rows of numbers, she pondered? And why five numbers in each row? Dates consisted of three pieces of information in most cases: month, day and year. Or in the case of European dates: day, month, year. Perhaps the last number in the row contained the year and the first four contained a range.

Cate glanced down the final column. No, her mind corrected. The years ranged too far apart and made no sense. She focused on the first number on the page. Seven. She'd found thirteen journals. Perhaps this was the seventh of the thirteen.

What the other numbers meant escaped Cate. However, this theory was her best so far. She glanced to the first page after the cover. *Journal of Douglas MacKenzie* was scrawled across it.

Cate flipped to the next page. An array of random letters filled it. Her forehead creased as she studied the writing. She searched for words within the gibberish but found none. Written with careful precision, she could not identify anything distinguishable. There were barely any breaks indicating words or other grammatical structures. What was this, she pondered?

She recalled her task of ordering the journals. Instead of searching further in this journal, Cate selected the next book from the stack and opened it to the first page. A similar inscription graced the first page, confirming this book was another of Douglas MacKenzie's journals.

She glanced to the interior of the front cover. A grid of twenty-five numbers was scribbled there. She noted the first number on the page was three. Perhaps this was the third journal, she mused. She set it on top of the previous journal and reached for the next in the stack.

She peered at the cover's interior. The number twelve sat in the first position of the grid. She set it underneath the journal marked with a seven. So far, so good, she mused. Perhaps her assumption would prove correct.

Cate pulled a fourth journal onto her lap and studied the inside of the front cover. Her heart sank as she read the first of the twenty-five numbers on the page. Twenty-one. There were only thirteen journals. At least that

Cate had found. Perhaps there were more journals and she hadn't found them all. Or perhaps she was wrong about her theory.

She opened all the journals and placed them in order by the first number. If her theory proved correct, she was missing twelve journals. She considered returning to the secret office to search for them but discarded the idea. She'd been over every inch of the space. No other journals existed there.

She stared in the air as her mind processed the conundrum. Perhaps the journals were housed somewhere else. She glanced at the bookshelves in front of her. What better place to store journals than in the library, she thought? She pushed up to standing. All the journals shared the same characteristic brown leather with a burned leaf pattern ringing the edges. If other journals were stored here, she could identify them by this characteristic.

She approached the first bookshelf and examined each shelf. None of the volumes matched the journals' style. She spent the next hour searching every shelf and book for more journals. None existed.

With a long exhale, she sank back into the leather armchair. She stared at the stack of journals. She was missing something.

Cate grabbed the first journal from the stack. She studied the grid of numbers again. Nothing new jumped out at her. Cate moved to the title page. Other than the pronouncement of the journal's owner, no other marks were on the page.

She checked the backside of the page, finding nothing. This journal, too, contained a nonsensical framework of letters. She tried to read them left to right, right to left, up to down and down to up. No combination spelled anything recognizable as English.

She flipped to the next page and found a similar set of markings. She spent another ninety minutes flipping through the more than two hundred written pages. She uncovered nothing.

She turned to the final page of the journal. No words were recorded on this last page. Before closing the journal, she inspected the back cover's interior. Scrawled in the bottom right corner was a mark. She squinted at it and brought the book closer to her face. She identified the symbol as a two.

Did this indicate the order of the journals? She grabbed the next journal, pulling open the back cover and checking the bottom right corner. Her pulse

quicken as she found a tiny number scrawled there. She squinted at it, making out the number seven.

She pulled another journal from the stack and opened it to the same location. The number four appeared in the corner. She worked her way through the remaining journals, finding numbers from one to thirteen.

She stared at the new stack of journals next to her, pleased with her work. If her theory proved correct, she had managed to order the journals. Perhaps this achievement would assist her in unraveling the information inside.

Cate glanced at the number grid inside the front cover. The book, marked with the number one on the back cover, contained the number seven in the first spot. What did the numbers refer to, she pondered? She stared at the lattice of numbers, but they provided no answers.

She turned the page and narrowed her eyes at the letters inscribed on the thick paper. Carefully penned in all capital letters, words made little sense. The writing appeared almost to form a grid on the page. She counted the letters across the page, finding they numbered twenty-five. What did they mean? Were the letters connected to the numbers on the interior cover? How?

A voice interrupted her thoughts. "That spot looks far more comfortable than your dungeon, Lady Cate," Molly said.

Cate twisted to face her, closing the journal and setting it on the stack. "I'll admit it is much more comfortable," Cate said. "AND warmer!"

"I've got your lunch," Molly said, raising the tray in the air before setting it on the coffee table in front of Cate. Both dogs climbed to their feet to sniff at it.

"Thanks, Molly," Cate answered. "I hadn't even realized the time!"

"Just like you, Lady Cate. Once you started working, you'd lose track of everything. What have you got there?" Molly waved her hand to signal the stack of journals.

Cate picked up the first one and opened to the first page. "These are Douglas MacKenzie's journals," she said, showing the inscription on the first page. "I found them in his lab."

Molly shifted her eyes sideways, giving the open bookcase an uneasy glance. "You mean... the dungeon?" she questioned.

"It's not a dungeon," Cate said with a chuckle. "It's just a workspace. It's really interesting! You should take a look!"

Molly peered at the open bookshelf again. She shifted her weight from side to side. “Umm,” Molly murmured, her voice an octave above its normal volume, “maybe another time.”

Cate stood. “I’ll show you,” Cate offered. “Come on!”

“No!” Molly answered. “No, no!” She held her hands out to stop Cate’s progress. “You’ve got your lunch and I should be getting downstairs to mine. Maybe another time.”

Cate held in a chuckle. “Okay, another time,” she agreed as she sank into the armchair again.

“Have a good lunch, Lady Cate. Oh! By the way,” Molly exclaimed as she backed to the door, “those shortbread cookies or biscuits if you prefer that term, are my second attempt. See what you think!”

“I can’t wait to try them!” Cate called to her. “Thanks, Molly!”

Cate spent her lunch pondering the gibberish contained in the books. Her mind tried to connect the numbers and letters, though she came to no definite conclusions. After lunch, she dodged raindrops on an afternoon walk with the dogs.

As she returned to the library following their walk, Cate ran into Jack. He juggled a few boxes of lightbulbs.

“Lady Cate!” he exclaimed. “Sir Riley and Mr. Bailey, how are you? I’d give you a proper pet, but I’ve got my hands full.”

“I see that! Need help?” Cate inquired as two boxes teetered dangerously on the top of his stack.

“Aye, I believe I do,” Jack admitted.

Cate collected several boxes from the top of the pile. “Where are these headed?”

“Ballroom,” he answered.

“ALL of them?” Cate questioned.

“Aye, Lady Cate. Those chandeliers have a good number of lightbulbs on each. I’ve got to climb that massive ladder to change them.”

“Ah,” Cate exclaimed as realization set in, “so may as well change them all at once.”

“You’re a smart lady, Lady Cate,” Jack said with a wink.

“I don’t blame you,” she said as they approached the ballroom. “I’ll help. You head up the ladder, I’ll unbox and hand these up.”

“I won’t say no, though I hope you don’t dock my pay for lack of effort.”

Cate chuckled as she shook her head. "Since you are climbing the ladder, I won't."

"Mighty nice of you, Lady Cate," Jack said as he ascended the ladder. Cate stayed below and began to pull lightbulbs from the boxes and hand them up.

"How is your dungeon project coming?" Jack inquired as they worked.

Cate sighed as she pulled another bulb from its box.

"That good, huh?" Jack said as he reached down for it.

Cate nodded. "Yeah, that about sums it up."

"What's the dead-end? Or are you just realizing how creepy that dungeon really is?"

"It's not creepy!" she insisted. "I finished all my sorting. I figured the best place to move to is reading those journals we found the first night."

"But?" Jack prompted when Cate didn't continue.

Cate shrugged. "But I can't read them," she responded. "They're gibberish."

"Old English or Scottish?" Jack inquired.

"No," Cate said with a shake of her head as she handed up another lightbulb. "No, I'd recognize that. This isn't English at all."

"Foreign language, maybe?" Jack suggested.

"Could be," Cate answered. "Though I've never seen any language like this before. And another strange thing is it's written in all capitals in almost a grid-like pattern."

Jack climbed down to the floor and dragged the ladder to another chandelier. "Perhaps he was practicing his penmanship." He grinned at Cate.

"I'm really surprised your comedy career never took off, Jack," Cate jested.

Jack climbed the ladder again. "So, it's some form of encryption, then?"

"That's what I'd imagine it is. What specific type of encryption, I'm not sure. I'll need to work on it and dig up some information to decode it. I may even need to ask a few experts."

Jack stopped his work and fixed his gaze on Cate. "Cate, those journals could..."

Cate held up her hand, stopping his speech. "I know, I know," she said. "Information for our eyes only. I can't give the text to anyone, but I may

need to consult with a few people from my old university to see if they can suggest any decryption programs to help me.”

Jack nodded. “Okay, just watch how much you share with them. We don’t need any information getting out that shouldn’t.”

“I’ll be careful,” Cate promised.

“Lady Cate promising to be careful, what a leap forward for mankind.”

“Very funny, Jack.”

“Why not start with something other than the journals?” Jack inquired.

“What else would I start with? I have no idea what some of his inventions are and his sketches seem to be encoded in a similar way.”

“So, crack the code on the journals and you’ll crack the code on everything, most likely.”

“Right,” Cate said with a nod. “And since the journals contain the most text, they should provide the most information for decryption.”

Jack descended the ladder and collected the empty boxes scattered around Cate. “I wish you luck, Lady Cate. I must admit, I’m rather interested in the contents of those journals.”

Cate raised her eyebrows at him. “What’s this? Jack Reid interested in something beyond estate affairs?”

“Aye, I’m hoping it contains information that will make us stop time traveling,” he said with a wink.

“I’ll keep you informed, but,” Cate said, clapping her hand on his shoulder, “don’t get your hopes up.”

Cate’s afternoon kept her busy reviewing details for her upcoming meeting with Mrs. Campbell. The work provided a welcome break from her frustrating inability to make progress with Douglas’s journals.

Despite that, she found her gaze drawn to the stack of books every few minutes. She fought to concentrate on the task at hand. The work took twice as long with her wandering mind. She finished as her dinner tray arrived.

She ended her evening curled by the fire with a book. Written in standard English, Cate was pleased she didn’t need to decode it.

* * *

Cate stared at the encoded text in the journal as she sat at the library’s desk. The black ink against the cream page stared back at her. The block letters in

a neat grid gave her no clue about how to proceed. She glanced outside at the darkened sky. Rain pelted the windows as gray clouds shielded the stars from shining.

She yawned as she watched the raindrops slide down the window. She'd given up on sleep hours ago, choosing to rise from her bed and wander to the library to consider her latest conundrum.

She glanced back to the page. She swallowed hard. The letters danced across the paper. She blinked her eyes a few times. She must be too tired, she surmised, as she closed her eyes to rest them for a moment.

When she opened them, she was shocked at what she saw. The letters ceased their rhythmic motion and melted from the page. She pushed the book away as she leapt from her seat and backed away from the desk.

Lightning tore through the night sky and thunder clapped. She glanced outside. As the sky darkened again, she spotted her reflection in the glass. Her brows knit as she noticed the secret passage open behind her.

She hadn't opened it. But yet it clearly stood ajar in the reflection. As she considered it, the mirror image changed. She gasped, pressing her hand over her mouth as a figure formed at the opening.

She spun to face it. She inched back step by step.

"Hello, Catherine," the voice growled at her.

"Wh-who are you?" she asked, her voice quivering with fear. She squinted toward the opening. The man's features, shrouded in shadow, made him impossible to identify.

The man snickered at the question. His laughter grew louder and louder, roaring through the room.

The desk stopped any further backward progress she could make. She stumbled as she bumped into it. She clapped her hands over her ears as she sank to the ground. His shrieking laughter threatened to make her ears bleed as the sound howled through the room.

A tear fell to her cheek as she struggled to maintain her composure. The man's chortling died down. She glanced at the opening. Red eyes glowed back at her.

Cate swallowed hard and rose to stand. She squared her shoulders and wiped the tear from her cheek. "Who are you?"

"Oh, Catherine," the man's voice chided. He stepped toward her, still shrouded in the blackness of the gaping hole to the secret lab.

The lights flickered before extinguishing. She reeled around, pawing through the desk in search of a flashlight. Her trembling hands clawed through the drawers until her fingertips touched the cylindrical object.

She curled her fingers around the base and pushed the toggle button. No light shone from the lens. She shook the flashlight and smacked it against her hand. She pushed the button again in a desperate attempt to coerce it to light.

Lightning tore through the sky again, and the room glowed for an instant. As thunder boomed overhead, cold hands grasped her arms. She froze, her muscles tensing, her shoulders rising toward her ears.

Hot breath swept past her neck and a voice whispered in her ear. "I am your worst nightmare."

CHAPTER 4



Cate gasped for air as she shot up to sitting. Sweat beaded on her forehead. Tears stained her cheeks. Her chest heaved as she sucked in deep breaths of air.

She glanced around, finding her surroundings familiar. Soft white moonlight glowed through her bedroom window. She clutched at the bedsheets, drawing them closer to her as her breathing stabilized and her heart ceased to race.

Another nightmare, she reflected. She sniffled and wiped at her cheeks before retrieving her journal from the night table. She propped pillows behind her before switching on the bedside lamp.

She squinted as her eyes adjusted to the bright light. She paged through the journal to the first blank page and noted the date and details of her newest nightmare. Her hairs stood on end and her flesh turned to goosebumps as she recalled the final haunting words the man uttered to her.

After jotting them in her notebook, she snapped it shut, as though this would close the subject. She clutched the journal for a few more moments as she forced her nerves to settle. Cate closed her eyes and breathed in a deep, long breath.

Her eyes snapped open as a cold, wet nose nudged her hand. The corners of her mouth turned upward as her eyes met Riley's sparkling, dark brown eyes. Behind him, Bailey stared curiously at her, his head cocked to the side as he studied her.

“I’m okay, boys, just a bad dream,” Cate assured them. She set the notebook and pen on the night table and patted the bed on either side of her. Riley curled in a ball on her right, his head resting on her thigh. Bailey hopped over her legs and nestled into a spot on her left.

She flicked off the light, plunging the room into darkness. She rubbed the dogs’ heads as she settled back into her pillows. Riley offered her hand a lick before settling his head on her leg.

The calming effect of both boys with her settled her back into a dreamless sleep.

* * *

“Thanks, Mrs. Campbell!” Cate called as Isla Campbell, the town’s librarian, historical society president and party planner extraordinaire, climbed behind the wheel of her car.

After a three-hour meeting to plan details of her anniversary party, her morning was spent. Her mind swam with party nuances, from linen patterns to champagne flutes to hors d’oeuvres. Certain she could not keep track of every minor detail required, she appreciated Mrs. Campbell’s ability to oversee them all.

“Is the party czar gone?” Jack voiced behind her.

Cate jumped, startled by his sudden appearance. Details of her dream in which the man, who described himself as her worst nightmare, crept into her mind.

“Oops, sorry, I didn’t mean to startle you, Lady Cate,” Jack apologized.

She twisted to face Jack. “No problem and yes, she is.”

“Mrs. Fraser sent me up to see if the ninny was gone yet or if she needed to delay lunch.”

“No, I just need to gather my things from the sitting room and drop them off in the library and we can head down!”

Jack followed her into the sitting room off the foyer. Fabric samples, guest lists, layouts and menus lay scattered across the coffee table. She scraped them together, forcing the items into as neat a pile as she could, then stuffed them into a large file folder.

Jack grimaced at the sight. “And what outlandish requests does the party czar have this time? Perhaps she’d like us to move the castle stone by

stone to the Caribbean for an island party. Or maybe she'd like us to erect seven stages across the property and invite the world's biggest musical acts."

Cate chuckled at Jack's assessment as she stuffed a few wayward papers into the folder. "Nothing that extravagant, though she's definitely scaling this up to be the 'event of the year.'"

Jack slumped his shoulders and closed his eyes for a moment. "Why is every event the 'event of the year' with her?"

She shrugged as she pulled the folder to her chest.

"Sorry, Lady Cate," Jack continued. "Ever since she asked us to bring in snow machines to ensure snow for the holiday party, I expect her requests to be over the top."

"Oh, this is going to be over the top, all right," Cate replied. "She insisted. Nothing but class, top of the line all the way around. A guest list to rival all other guest lists."

"I didn't expect anything less from Isla Campbell," Jack responded as they navigated to the library.

"You should have seen her face when I suggested an old-fashioned American picnic."

"I'm surprised the woman is still alive, Lady Cate. You could have killed her with that suggestion!"

"I may have come close," she admitted, recalling the shocked expression on Mrs. Campbell's face. Perhaps the one time she'd rendered the woman speechless. "Her expression was priceless."

"Damn," Jack muttered. "I wish I'd have been there. I would have loved to have witnessed that!"

Cate pushed the doors open to the library and crossed to the desk. She dumped the party planning materials on it. A chill passed over her as she stood facing the same window she had in her dream. She swallowed hard and glanced at the now-closed bookshelf passage.

"Someone walk over your grave, Lady Cate?" Jack inquired.

"No," Cate said, stifling a yawn. "Recalling the details of yet another nightmare involving this room."

"Another?" Jack questioned.

"Another," Cate said with a sigh. "This time I was working here in the library, trying to translate Douglas's journals. The letters started to run off the page, and I suddenly felt frightened. As I backed away from the desk, I

caught a reflection of the room in the window. The bookcase was open, and the figure of a man stood in the shadows.”

“Could you identify him? Did he speak to you?”

Cate shook her head. “I couldn’t make out his features, but he did speak. He said ‘Hello, Catherine.’”

“Same as before,” Jack noted.

“Yep, same as before. He always calls me by my full name. In this dream, I asked who he was, and he laughed. Not a normal laugh. It filled the room. It was frightening, almost demonic. Then the lights went out. I raced to retrieve the flashlight, and before I could get it working, he was behind me. He grabbed me and said ‘I am your worst nightmare.’ Then I woke up.”

Jack frowned as he processed the information. “Your worst nightmare? Well, that rules me out.”

Cate screwed up her face at him. “What?”

“While I may be the man of your dreams, Lady Cate, I’m not your worst nightmare,” Jack joked with a grin.

“That’s very funny, Jack,” Cate groaned. “It’s not you, he doesn’t sound like you.”

“Douglas?” Jack proposed.

“Perhaps. It would fit. He’s tied to the bookcase and the secret room. But why would Douglas be my worst nightmare?”

Jack shrugged. “Who else could it be? Who else would be tied to all this?”

“I’m not sure. Douglas is also my guess, but it makes no sense. Unless it’s all just some strange reaction to stress or something and none of it has any meaning.”

“These have gone on far too long for them to be meaningless.”

“Perhaps when I decrypt the journals, I’ll find another clue.”

Jack knit his brows, placing his finger on his lips in thought. “It’s always been in the library, somehow related to the secret passage. To Douglas’s secret office. Now his journals show up. It must be Douglas, right?” He snapped his fingers and pointed to Cate.

“What?” she questioned.

“His accent! You wouldn’t recognize his voice. You’ve never met him...”

“Yet,” Cate added.

Jack offered Cate a flat glance. She shrugged in return. “Does he sound Scottish? Like Randolph?”

Cate glanced to the floor and pursed her lips as she recalled the voice. She gave a slow shake of her head. “No,” she admitted. She returned her gaze to Jack. “No, his accent isn’t Scottish! It’s British!”

“You’re certain?”

Cate nodded her head as she chewed her lower lip. “One hundred percent certain. That voice... it haunts me even when I’m awake. His ‘Hello, Catherine’ is so creepy. It rings in my head for hours after those nightmares. It’s unforgettable. He’s British. Upper-class, well-bred I’d say from his speech pattern.”

“Likely not Douglas, then. I’d bet my bottom dollar he had a Scottish brogue, like Randolph. Perhaps not as thick as mine given his station, but nonetheless, Scottish.”

Cate nodded in agreement. “That’s a likely bet, yes. It doesn’t prove it’s not Douglas, but it does cast doubt on him.”

“That coupled with the question as to why he’d be your worst nightmare, I’d say someone else is haunting your dreams, Lady Cate.”

She focused her gaze on Jack. “But...” She paused as her forehead wrinkled. “Who is?”

* * *

The afternoon hours waned as Cate settled in the library. She opened the first of Douglas’s journals and stared at the undecipherable text. The conversation with Jack earlier stuck in her mind. Were they correct in assuming Douglas was not the man haunting her? Who else would it be? And why?

Thoughts danced through her brain as she stared blankly at the page in front of her. Perhaps deciphering these journals would lead her to some conclusion. She couldn’t see how, but it couldn’t hurt.

She opened a browser on her laptop and navigated to Google Translate. Upon closer inspection, she identified small spaces between the letters that seemed to indicate word breaks.

She typed in the first line of the journal. On the off-chance Jack’s foreign language idea was correct, perhaps Google Translate could identify

it. The translator came up with nothing. Its closest identified language produced no translation at all.

Cate spent fifteen minutes shifting letters around in case the spaces between words were not where she assumed they were. The translator was not able to offer any additional information.

With a shake of her head, she crossed “foreign language” off the top of her list of theories. She stared again at the first line:

J IDUP ZTHBESL VGPR XDVPMSD YI

Twenty-five indecipherable characters seemed to be broken into six words. Perhaps it made up a simple cryptogram, Cate pondered. She stared at the next line to determine if she could make any headway with this theory.

RIIPXGXVZ SFL DENRHQRF GQ OITLKOCXZDP

The sentence continued to the next line:

BI H QMZYIQ TCP CVJFFEB.

Cate typed on her keyboard and searched for a cryptogram solver. She entered the first sentence into the solver and clicked the Auto-solve button. The solver worked as she drummed her fingers on the desk. After a few moments, the results appeared. She scrolled through the output. The top-scoring result provided another nonsensical array of letters.

She continued down the list. A few solutions contained English words but none of them provided an entire sentence of them. With a sigh, she crossed “Substitution Cipher” off her list.

Cate glanced around the room as she considered her other options to break Douglas’s code. Riley approached, stretching as he placed his front paws on her leg.

“Hiya, buddy,” Cate said as she scooped him into her arms. She ruffled the fur on his head, tracing the white streak from his nose to between his ears. “Got any ideas on this code?”

Riley leaned back and stretched, offering only a large yawn.

“How about you, Bailey?” Cate inquired of the other small dog. He lifted his head from the rug beneath him. “Any ideas on how to break this code?”

The gray and white dog set his head back down on the rug and stared at Cate. He wagged his curly pigtail a few times but offered no other response.

“Well, you two aren’t any help! You also aren’t far behind me with ideas.”

Cate glanced at the page of letters in front of her. “This is *not* my area of expertise!”

Riley glanced at her as she spoke. “Yeah, I know, buddy. When in doubt, research. Which I definitely *can* do.” She kissed the pup on his head and set him on the floor.

“Can that research wait until tomorrow?” Molly inquired from behind her.

“Already?” Cate questioned, glancing at her timepiece.

“Yep!” Molly announced as she brandished a tray of dinner. “Over there or by the fireplace?”

“By the fireplace,” Cate requested. “Thanks. I’m done with this for the day.”

“Making progress?” Molly asked as she slid the tray onto the coffee table.

Cate flicked the journal shut and closed her laptop. “No, hence the need for research. I’m stuck!”

“Well, that shouldn’t last long,” Molly said. “I’ve never known Dr. Catherine Kensie to be stuck for long.”

“We’ll see,” Cate said. “Decrypting codes is not up my alley. I’m a historian, not a code breaker!”

“What code are you trying to break?” Molly questioned.

“Oh, those journals I found downstairs in Douglas’s lab. They are all encrypted in some way. It looks like the pages were written in gibberish.”

“Hmm, that’s weird. Why would he write his journals in code?”

Cate shrugged. Though she had a guess, it wasn’t one she could share with Molly. “He seemed eccentric. I guess just another one of his eccentricities.”

“Hmm,” Molly mumbled. “Have you asked Ken Matthews from Aberdeen Math? His expertise is cryptology.”

“Oh, right! I didn’t know him well. I didn’t remember that was his specialty.”

“He’s a really nice guy,” Molly informed her. “I’m sure he’d be happy to help. He’d probably be excited to see a real live cipher in action!”

“If I can’t make any headway, I may send him an email and see if he has any ideas.”

“Well, it can wait until tomorrow. It’s dinner time now!”

“You’re starting to sound like Mrs. Fraser,” Cate teased.

“She’ll be very pleased with that assessment,” Molly said with a grin.

“She’s already very pleased with you,” Cate said. “We’re both really happy you’re here.”

“So am I,” Molly answered. “Except now I’m afraid this castle is haunted after all that warlock talk.”

“It’s not haunted,” Cate assured her.

“Yeah, remind me of that when you decipher that journal, and it’s full of ghost stories,” Molly said with a wink. “Enjoy your dinner, Lady Cate.”

Cate thanked Molly again as she eased into her favorite armchair near the fireplace. Molly’s words rung in her mind. She was certain Douglas’s journals would be filled with such tales. It would be interesting to read his experiences. How had he discovered the anomaly within the castle walls? What incidents had he documented before he realized the circumstances? She wouldn’t find out tonight, she reflected with a sigh.

CHAPTER 5



Cate yawned as she stepped into the foggy morning air with Riley and Bailey. After another nightmare disturbed her sleep, she had spent the night tossing and turning. Between the mysterious journals and the nightmares, her mind could not rest.

As she lay awake, staring at her ceiling, she'd also experienced another odd event. In the quiet stillness, she heard the characteristic loud ticking of her timepiece. The noise accompanied the timepiece interacting with a time rip. It indicated the moment when the wearer slipped through the time rip and returned to another era.

She grasped the watch and bolted upright. The second hand crept by for a second before returning to normal speed. She blinked her eyes several times as she stared at the watch face. She glanced around the room. Both dogs slept on the bed. All her things remained in the room. She hadn't passed through time into 1925, where the rip in her bedroom led.

As she shivered against the chilly morning air, she wondered if she had imagined it? Perhaps she had drifted off and dreamt it. She hadn't been rubbing the timepiece, so the trigger could not have activated.

In the cold light of morning, she assumed she imagined it. A trick of her mind as she drifted in and out of sleep, she reflected. She stared at the fog in the distance as it shrouded the moors surrounding the estate.

She pulled herself from her pensive mood. "Boys! Boys?" She glanced around her, finding herself alone.

"Riley! Bailey!" Cate called as she searched the area.

A yip came from the side garden. She followed the noise. She found both dogs in the same spot they had been in two days ago. Riley pawed at the ground. Bailey stared at the spot, his front legs flat on the ground with his back end high in the air.

“What are you two doing there again?” Cate inquired of them. Riley glanced to her, then back to the spot. He dragged his paw over it again.

Cate closed the distance between them and peered at the ground. She spotted nothing. “There’s nothing there, boys.”

Bailey leapt to all fours and let out another yip. Riley continued his mission to paw at the mysterious spot.

“You guys are silly,” Cate said. “There’s nothing there. Come on, let’s go get our breakfast.” She stalked a few steps away. Neither dog followed her. “Riley, Bailey, come on!” Both stared intently at the ground.

She returned and shooed them away. “Come on, boys. Time for breakfast. Stop that before you’re both covered in mud from digging at that spot.”

She corralled the two small dogs through the castle’s kitchen door. After everyone said their good mornings and she fed her furry friends, she headed upstairs with the dogs in tow for her breakfast.

After finishing her breakfast, she settled at the library’s desk with Douglas’s journals. She hoped to make more progress today. She began her research with an internet search of popular cryptography methods in the late 1700s.

Cate scanned the list of search results before she selected a few sites and jotted down several notes. As she dug into the fourth site on her search list, a tinkling filled the air. Cate’s phone vibrated across the desk’s top.

Cate’s stomach flip-flopped as she noted the caller: Isla Campbell. “Uh-oh,” Cate mumbled as she swiped to answer the call.

“Hello, Mrs. Campbell,” she said as the call connected.

“Lady Cate!” Mrs. Campbell’s voice greeted her on the other end. “Thank *goodness* you answered.”

“What can I help you with?” Cate inquired.

“The samples I told you about yesterday *just* came across my desk. If you’ve got a moment this morning, I can run them right up to the castle for you to peek at before you approve.”

“Oh, ah,” Cate murmured as she searched for a reason to avoid the meeting.

“I just need to toss them into my car. I can be there in fifteen minutes!”

“You know, Mrs. Campbell, I really trust your judgment on this. And if you feel they are the best choice, I’m comfortable approving them sight unseen!”

“Absolutely not!” Mrs. Campbell argued. “This is the single most important party of your year, Lady Cate. We must achieve perfection. And I simply will not feel comfortable approving these choices without you viewing them first.”

Cate sighed. She couldn’t avoid it, she figured. But perhaps she could kill two birds with one stone. “Okay. I’m available all morning, though I really do trust you.”

“A fact that I am aware of and most grateful for. Nonetheless, I shall see you in fifteen minutes!”

Cate ended the call after saying goodbye and stared at her laptop screen. While cryptography was not her expertise and not her cup of tea, she’d rather spend her time with a discussion of mathematics than linen selection.

Still, Cate mused, perhaps she could retrieve some information from the town’s historian about her latest research project, the castle’s original proprietor.

Cate shut her laptop and stowed her research materials. “You boys stay here. You know how Mrs. Campbell feels about pets.”

Mrs. Campbell estimated fifteen minutes before her arrival. That gave Cate ten minutes at best before the woman arrived. After she settled the dogs by the fire in the library, she made a quick trip downstairs to inform Mrs. Fraser and Molly about the latest development.

Mrs. Fraser’s eyes went wide as Cate imparted her change of plans for the morning. She placed her hand on her hip as she spoke. “You mean that ninny has invited herself here again? Will that woman’s demands never cease?”

“She’s particularly excited about these linens, yet she won’t order them until I’ve seen and approved of them.”

Mrs. Fraser shook her head. “She’ll have you worn out before your party with her antics.”

“It’s okay,” Cate replied. “I plan to use her to gain some information about Douglas for my research.” Cate winked at them.

“Well, I suppose that’s one thing,” Mrs. Fraser admitted. “And she’ll make the perfect test subject for your cookies, Molly.”

Molly removed a tray from the oven. "Mm-hm," Molly agreed.

"Though dinnae be surprised if she makes a rude comment. That woman wouldn't know how to compliment someone if you gave her a script."

"I'd better head up," Cate said. "She told me fifteen minutes."

"That means she'll be here in seven," Mrs. Fraser said.

Cate nodded as she backed from the kitchen.

"I'll send up the tray of tea and cookies as soon as I've got it ready, Lady Cate," Mrs. Fraser called as Cate traversed the hallway toward the stairway leading to the main floor.

"Thank you!" Cate shouted.

True to form, Mrs. Campbell's car wound down the driveway just as Cate got to the front door.

"Lady Cate!" she greeted her as she climbed from her car. "How fortunate you were available today. Though I can't imagine what else you may be doing."

Cate smiled at her as she considered the statement. "I have the samples. They are simply *gorgeous*," she said as she pulled several items from her car. "Wait until you see them!"

The woman bustled around the car and pushed past Cate into the foyer. "Sitting room, I assume?"

"You guessed it!" Cate answered. "I've got tea on the way up."

"Oh, how lovely. You didn't have to given that the meeting was impromptu. I'd hate to put Emily out. I know how she hates last-minute changes," Mrs. Campbell murmured.

"No trouble at all."

"Wonderful," Mrs. Campbell replied as she plopped onto the loveseat. "I do enjoy a good cuppa."

"And some cookies fresh from the oven from our newest addition, Molly! Mrs. Fraser is teaching her how to bake some of her favorites."

"Oh," Mrs. Campbell answered with a raise of her eyebrows. "There are so many good bakers in the area, I'll bet Molly could pick up lots of new tricks here."

"As long as she picks up all of Mrs. Fraser's, I'll be more than satisfied. She bakes one mean shortbread, and her chicken soup is really the best."

"Yes, well, anyway, we really should get down to business, I suppose," Mrs. Campbell said, changing the subject.

“Sure,” Cate agreed. “Oh, and if you have a few moments after we discuss these linens, I hoped to speak with you on another matter.”

Mrs. Campbell glanced up at Cate, her eyes narrowed as her mind attempted to guess the other matter. “Of course, Lady Cate, I always have time for you,” she replied. “And if it isn’t too much, I also had a second item to add to our impromptu agenda.”

The opening of the door saved Cate from responding. Molly carried a tray of tea and cookies. “Hello, hello!” Molly set the tray on the coffee table between Cate and Mrs. Campbell. “Tea and fresh shortbreads!”

“Thank you, Molly,” Cate answered. “Mrs. Campbell is excited to try your cookies.”

“I believe these are better than the last batch. They may be closing in on Mrs. Fraser’s perfection.” Molly held up her hand, flashing crossed fingers.

“Yes, well, thank you, Molly,” Mrs. Campbell answered, dismissing her.

“Good luck with your linens,” Molly said as she exited. She paused behind Mrs. Campbell and offered Cate a dramatic eye roll before disappearing through the door, her hand covering her mouth as she suppressed a giggle.

Cate poured tea for each of them and offered Mrs. Campbell the plate of cookies. She pulled one from the plate with the tips of her thumb and forefinger. The grimace on her face suggested she preferred not to try one.

“Okay, let’s see the infamous linens!” Cate prodded as Mrs. Campbell stared at the cookie with disdain.

“Oh, yes,” she answered. She set the cookie down untouched and pulled the linens from her messenger bag. “Here we are. Aren’t they simply perfection? The classic look, the classy elegance. It screams Countess of Dunhavenshire.”

Cate eyed the linens. Gold with a simple navy-blue pinstripe, Cate wasn’t sure they “screamed” anything, but she did agree they provided a classic and elegant look. Mrs. Campbell’s ability to nail down details like these was beyond reproach.

Cate sipped her tea and nodded. “Yes, you are quite right,” she agreed. “They are perfect.”

Mrs. Campbell held them up and stared at them. She narrowed her eyes at the sample clutched in her hand. “Would a cranberry pinstripe be better? I wonder...”

“Oh, no, I really believe the blue is the better choice.”

“Well, navy,” Mrs. Campbell corrected.

“Yes. Navy. Navy and gold is a classic combination.”

“But is it boring? Classic and classy are not always the same!” Mrs. Campbell warned.

“In this case, they are.”

Mrs. Campbell squinted at the fabric sample again. She waved it around, studying it in different lights. Cate took another sip of her tea. “Yes. Yes, you are right. Cranberry simply would not do in this case.”

“They really couldn’t be more perfect,” Cate said.

“Oh, I’m so glad you agree! Well, that was easier than I expected!”

“I’m not too difficult to please!” Cate answered.

“No, though your ideas sometimes differ from mine, Lady Cate.” She chuckled a shrill cackling laugh. “Oh, my apologies, I’m recalling your suggestion of... a barbecue.” Mrs. Campbell snorted with laughter.

“They are quite popular where I’m from. It seemed like a relaxed idea and the entire town could have participated.”

“Definitely a very quaint idea, yes, but really, we need something more elegant and a bit more posh for a countess!”

“I’ll be the first to admit you are far better at planning these than I am,” Cate answered.

“While I appreciate the vote of confidence, I still prefer that we’re both on the same page with all choices.”

Cate smiled over her teacup. “Well, now that we are, you mentioned a second agenda item?”

Mrs. Campbell waved her hand in the air. “I believe you mentioned one as well. Please, by all means, ask yours first.”

“Mine may take a bit longer. I’d like to lean on your knowledge as town historian again regarding a former occupant. So, please, go ahead with yours before we move on to that discussion.”

“Ah,” Mrs. Campbell said, giving Cate a knowing glance. “Moving our interests from Randolph to another proprietor? There’s certainly no shortage of tales about any of them!”

Cate was certain there wasn’t from the town’s gossip. “That tends to be the case in places like this,” Cate noted. “Anyway, what was your other item?”

Mrs. Campbell explained. “As president of the historical society, I am a member of an exclusive group of historical society presidents across

Scotland. Each year we host a large charitable event, centered around an auction. It occurs in late summer.” She glanced to Cate, her eyes narrowing as she considered Cate’s response.

“And you’d like a donation?” Cate queried as Mrs. Campbell paused.

“Well,” Mrs. Campbell hedged. “In a way, yes.”

Cate knit her brows as Mrs. Campbell responded. The woman continued. “Each year, one of the presidents organizes the event, The Presidents’ Ball. It really is the event of the year for us, and it is quite an honor to be chosen as the event coordinator. I have tried for it a few times before, but I was always overlooked.”

“What a shame,” Cate commented. “Your planning skills are excellent. They’d be foolish not to select you.”

“I appreciate the vote of confidence and in that way, there is something you can do to help me secure the spot.”

“Oh?”

“The president must have a host selected. The host is really a large part of the selection committee’s consideration. In fact, the host can make or break the committee’s choice.”

A sinking feeling filled the pit of Cate’s stomach. She’d hoped to give a donation, monetary or otherwise. Instead, she surmised she’d be offered the role of host. She felt her personality did not fit well into the circumstances. But...

Mrs. Campbell continued, “And I thought who would be more perfect to host this year’s event than our newest Countess? Lady Cate, the American college professor turned Scottish countess! I’m certain with you as our host, the country’s latest noblewoman, we’d be a shoo-in for the selection!

“And the boost it would give to the county and town,” she babbled. “Not to mention showing off the beautiful castle and the grounds!”

“I...” Cate hedged, searching for an answer. Questions flew through her mind faster than she could process them.

“The historical society would handle everything, with me in the lead. What a thrill it would be for them to work on something like this. It would be the talk of the town for years to come...”

“I’d be happy to,” Cate burst. Cate shoved all the questions from her mind. It didn’t matter. The event was important to the region, the town and Mrs. Campbell. She’d deal with whatever she had to in order to make it

work. With Mrs. Campbell at the helm, she had no doubt the event would be expertly planned and run.

“Oh!” Mrs. Campbell exclaimed. Her voice betrayed her surprise at Cate’s acceptance. “Well, I will send our application in today! The moment I leave this meeting, I will prepare it and get it right to them! Thank you, Lady Cate!”

“You’re welcome. My fingers will be crossed that we hear good news soon.”

“Applications are due at the end of the month, but it never hurts to be early. We’ll hear back by April third. Oh, so many ideas are running through my head. I’ll begin documenting them all, so we’re prepared in the event we’re selected.”

“I have no doubt the event you plan will be outstanding.”

“Well, I have my afternoon cut out for me preparing our application! Now, you had a question for me?”

“Yes, I won’t take up too much of your time so you can work on the application, but I wanted to gather any stories you had about the castle’s original proprietor, Douglas.”

Mrs. Campbell’s expression changed to coy. A smirk crossed her lips, and she raised an eyebrow. She had a story all right, Cate mused.

“Ahhhh, Douglas,” Mrs. Campbell murmured with a nod. “The man who started it all.”

“Yes. I began my research for my book with Randolph after our conversation when I arrived. But now I’ve turned my attention toward Douglas.”

“Oh, there certainly are tales,” Mrs. Campbell assured her. “Douglas was quite the character.”

“So I’ve heard.”

“Of course, the first question on everyone’s mind is how Douglas came into his money. Obviously, the MacKenzies before him did not have the wealth to build a castle then suddenly Douglas did!”

“Wise investments?” Cate suggested.

Mrs. Campbell chuckled. “Well, of course, that’s what Douglas maintained, but that explanation simply did not add up.”

“Were the MacKenzies before Douglas well-off?”

Mrs. Campbell shook her head vehemently. “No. The only thing royal about Douglas’s parents was his father’s name. Kendrick MacKenzie was a

simple town doctor. Douglas left the area early in his twenties and returned home a wealthy earl.”

“How?” Cate inquired, encouraging Mrs. Campbell to finish with her yarn.

“No one really knows,” Mrs. Campbell whispered.

“Rumors?” Cate questioned.

“There is no shortage of those! Wise investments, as you mentioned, an unexpected inheritance from a befriended nobleman, spying for the crown, alchemy.”

“Spying for the crown? Really?”

“Oh, yes, that suggestion was floated! Of course, other suggestions are far less innocuous!” Mrs. Campbell raised her eyebrow at Cate.

“Which are?”

“The most commonly agreed upon theory is Douglas involved himself in the black arts!”

“The black arts?” Cate repeated as a question.

“Yes. The rumors spring from the strange goings-on during and after the castle’s construction. His unexplained wealth suddenly became explainable.”

Cate raised her eyebrows, encouraging Mrs. Campbell to expound.

Mrs. Campbell leaned closer to Cate, her eyes darting around the room.

“Human sacrifices, ritual killings, strange disappearances, devil worship.”

CHAPTER 6



“*W*hat?!” Cate exclaimed as Mrs. Campbell’s comments about her ancestor and devil worship.

Mrs. Campbell nodded her head slowly. “Someone died in an ‘accident’ during the castle’s building. Of course, no one believes that story. Most believe he was sacrificed by Douglas and his coven to appease dark powers.”

“That’s a bit far-fetched, isn’t it?” Cate said.

Mrs. Campbell shrugged. “Is it? Considering the events that occurred here during those days? I’m not certain it is!”

“The accidental death?”

“The accidental death, strange noises, haunting sounds, Douglas disappearing mysteriously then reappearing, others doing the same. Odd shifts in the weather, unexplained winds, storm clouds appearing over the castle with no warning. Screams heard in the wee hours of the morning carrying all the way to town! Orders for odd materials by Douglas with peculiar explanations citing weird experiments. The evidence is endless.”

“That’s hardly evidence,” Cate countered. “More likely conjecture based on things townsfolk couldn’t explain.”

“Well, people then didn’t think scientifically like we do now but... there usually is a bit of truth to rumors. And there is the one story that persists throughout the ages.”

“Oh? Regarding Douglas’s ties to the dark side?”

“There’s no specific mention of devil worship or murder, but the tale is bizarre, to say the least!”

“Do tell!” Cate prodded.

“The story begins shortly after the castle’s completion. Douglas entertained several guests in the castle. Townsfolk reported the castle lit from the inside well into the night as he treated his guests to lavish dinner parties. Around this time, townsfolk reported strange happenings in the town. Mysterious attacks of madness, sick animals, dying crops.

“Then the tales take an even stranger turn. On one moonlit night, a few men walked home from the pub. As they did, a storm came out of nowhere. It centered over the castle. Black clouds blotted the moon from the sky. Booming thunder resounded, louder than anyone had heard before. Lightning brightened the night sky.”

“Sounds frightening, though the storms here can be quite powerful,” Cate noted, recalling the previous night’s storms.

“Ah, but that’s where the story gets interesting. The men swear the lightning shot from the ground up to the sky.”

Cate scrunched up her face at the twist. Mrs. Campbell nodded at her. “Yes, lightning bolts shot from ground to sky in a dazzling display. A fireball burst from near the castle and flew around the estate. A tree suddenly burst into flames with no warning. Winds formed a tornado-like funnel that twisted and twirled toward the castle. Then, without warning, everything stopped. The clouds cleared, the fire extinguished, the lightning and thunder ceased, and the winds died. The moon returned, and the night quieted as though nothing had happened.”

Cate raised her eyebrows. “That’s quite a tale. Though two gentlemen returning from the pub after a night of drinking may not be the best source of information.”

“That’s where it gets even more intriguing,” Mrs. Campbell explained. “Though those two gentlemen insisted they witnessed something incredible, their story would have likely been written off as fable.”

“But?” Cate prompted.

“But around the time the men departed from the pub, the reverend’s wife suffered a horrific nightmare in which she witnessed the destruction of Dunhaven Castle. She awoke from the nightmare and raced from her bed to the window to ensure the castle still stood. She, too, witnessed the fantastic

events on the castle grounds. She woke her husband, and he also witnessed them.

“When the men retold their strange tale, the MacAlistairs admitted they witnessed the same events. Bolstered by their account, others came forward. In total, over one hundred people in Dunhaven beheld those bizarre events and their stories never wavered. Each of them told the exact same tale with the exact same details. It is those unwavering details that have persisted through centuries and part of the reason Dunhaven Castle’s reputation lingers as haunted... or worse, even to this day.”

“That’s quite a story!”

“And every word true!” Mrs. Campbell insisted.

Cate smiled at her. “Even if it isn’t, it makes for a fantastic opening chapter for my book!”

Mrs. Campbell grinned at her. “Yes, it does!”

Cate pondered it a moment. “Did Douglas entertain many guests on the estate? Related to his... black magic?”

“Oh, in those first days of the castle, Douglas entertained often! In fact, I’m certain he had quite the list of visitors from wealthy Americans to high-ranking noblemen!”

“Hmm, how interesting. Anyone in particular?”

“Bankers, shipping magnates, statesman, noblemen. Some even say your Thomas Jefferson stayed here!”

“What a colorful history the castle has! I can’t wait to continue my research into that era. Well, I shouldn’t take up too much more of your time, Mrs. Campbell. With the application due, I’m sure you’re itching to get at it and get your ideas recorded.”

“That I am, though I’m never too busy to share tales for your book!”

“And, as always, you are a wealth of information!”

Mrs. Campbell beamed at Cate as she gathered her materials. “I will forward you a copy of the application as soon as I’ve prepared it. We should begin planning even before the announcement so we can hit the ground running should we be selected.”

“Sounds like a plan!” Cate said as she stood from the loveseat.

Mrs. Campbell gathered all her materials and Cate walked her to the door. The horn sounded as she pulled down the drive.

Cate spun on her heel and collected Riley and Bailey from the library before retrieving the tea tray to deliver to the kitchen.

“Is the ninny gone?” Mrs. Fraser inquired as Cate set the tea tray near the sink.

“What did she think of the cookies? Did she say?” Molly asked with hope in her voice.

Cate set a teacup in the sink and lifted the saucer in her hands. She spun to face them. “Untouched,” she said as she eyed the uneaten cookie. “Sorry, Molly.”

Molly’s shoulders slumped. “You’re better off!” Mrs. Fraser informed her.

“Better off how? Did I just spot Mrs. Campbell’s car leaving?” Jack inquired as he entered the kitchen.

“Yes, you did,” Cate informed him.

“Aye,” Mrs. Fraser confirmed. “Another linen crisis.”

“And she didn’t even try my cookies!” Molly moaned.

“Her loss is my gain!” Jack joked as he grabbed the cookie from the saucer and stuffed it into his mouth.

“But you’re no help!” Molly protested. “You’ve already tried them! I needed an outside opinion.”

“You’re better off without hers,” Jack said.

“Told you,” Mrs. Fraser said with a nod. “Well, did you get your linens sorted, Lady Cate?”

“We did. I went with her suggestion after she second-guessed it then confirmed it was a perfect choice. And she had another request.”

“No,” Jack whined. “Another? What now? Palm trees? Bring a beach grain by grain for a luau?”

“No,” Cate answered with a chuckle. “Not related to my anniversary party. She’s vying for...”

Mrs. Fraser gasped. “The Presidents’ Ball!” she exclaimed.

“Yes!” Cate responded, impressed by Mrs. Fraser’s guess.

“What’s The Presidents’ Ball?” Molly inquired.

“Association of Historical Society Presidents annual charity event,” Mrs. Fraser answered as Mr. Fraser joined them in the kitchen. “Isla has been vying for that role for as long as I’ve known her.”

“Is it a big deal?”

“To her, it is,” Mrs. Fraser confirmed. “I imagine she figures she’ll be a front-runner with you as her host. And I suppose it is quite a big deal, in

general. It's a large-scale event. Whatever town it's held in gets a big tourism boost."

"Ugh," Jack groaned. "Dunhaven will be crawling with tourists. Our sleepy little hamlet invaded by foreigners."

"Hey, I'm a foreigner!" Cate exclaimed.

"But we like you, Lady Cate," Jack replied with a wink.

"It would be a big boost to the town," Mr. Fraser chimed in.

"Aye," Mrs. Fraser agreed. "It would be. I suppose I hope she gets it."

"I'm surprised you offered to host, Lady Cate," Molly said.

"A snap decision I'm certain I'll regret at some point, but it seemed important to her and the town so I accepted. And I hope you'll all be my guests at the event!"

"Oh, I won't turn you down, though Isla will be livid when she sees us 'servants' there!" Mrs. Fraser said with a chuckle.

Jack sighed and stared at Mr. Fraser. "Another party to prepare the grounds for," he lamented.

"At the rate she's going, we'll just have to maintain. Mrs. Campbell's got a party a month here, so we're always in tip-top shape anymore!" Mr. Fraser commented. "Though for an event of this nature, I suppose we'll want the banners again."

"Dinnae count your chickens before they're hatched," Mrs. Fraser said. "She's not got the job yet!"

"With Lady Cate as host, we're bound to be a favorite."

"I don't understand why," Cate admitted.

All eyes turned to her. Jack scoffed at the question. "American history professor turned Scottish countess," Jack answered. "Who wouldn't want a colorful character like you hosting?"

"Colorful character?! Hardly!" Cate exclaimed.

"Aye, he's right, Lady Cate," Mrs. Fraser confirmed. "You'll be the talk of the ball. New blood. You'll be the most interesting host in the last thirty years!"

Cate frowned at the statement as she considered it. "Following in the line of the MacKenzies, I suppose."

"At least you haven't summoned any spirits to gain that reputation," Molly said.

"According to Mrs. Campbell, Douglas had a more sinister reputation than that!" Cate claimed.

Molly spun to face her. "More sinister than devil worship?"

Cate nodded her head. "Ritual killings, human sacrifices."

Molly gulped at Cate's admission. Mrs. Fraser scoffed. "That woman and her gossip," she said with a shake of her head. "Dinnae give it a second thought, Miss Molly. That woman tells fantastical tales just to hear herself talk."

"She told me another one, too," Cate announced.

"Oh?" Mrs. Fraser inquired.

"Yes. About a strange occurrence on the castle grounds shortly after its construction. A storm from nowhere, lightning from the ground to the sky. Fireballs flying around the estate. A tree bursting into flames and a tornado. She said hundreds of people witnessed this happen including the reverend and his wife."

Molly's eyes grew wide, and her mouth fell agape.

"Aye, that story's true," Mrs. Fraser confirmed.

"You didn't tell me about that!" Cate protested.

"There's a reason I omitted it."

"Because you didn't want to frighten Molly?" Jack teased.

"Nay, because that story is nonsense."

"But you said it was true," Cate countered.

"Yeah," Molly chimed in. "Fireballs and tornados Cate said, and you said it was true!"

"The account is true. Over one hundred people reported witnessing those strange events on the estate. But she's left out the reason."

"Because this joint is haunted?" Molly questioned.

"Nay, Miss Molly. The town had just finished a spring fair celebration. They later found out the pork pie turned before they ate it. Everyone who ate it experienced the strange phenomenon. It was the result of bad food, nothing more."

"Mass hallucination from bad pork? I'm not sure I believe that," Molly said with a wrinkled nose.

Mrs. Fraser gave her a hearty laugh. "Think of the alternative. Fireballs flying about, a fire that extinguishes itself, lightning bolts from the ground to the sky. Pshaw! Rubbish! Foolishness!"

Molly pressed her lips together and knit her brows. "I guess you're right."

“Of course, I’m right,” Mrs. Fraser said with a nod. “The very idea of such nonsense occurring is for children’s books.”

Cate held in a chuckle. If Mrs. Fraser ever realized the capabilities housed under this castle’s roof, she’d faint dead away.

“Well with that settled, and everyone aware of Mrs. Campbell’s latest venture, I will grab my lunch and excuse myself!” Cate said.

“Ah, the announcement was just a sneaky way to retrieve your own lunch tray, was it?” Mrs. Fraser asked of Cate.

“You caught me,” Cate said as she held her hands up. “Guilty.”

“Good thing we like you, Lady Cate,” Mrs. Fraser said with a wink as she handed the tray off.

“Have a good lunch, everyone!” Cate called as she disappeared down the hall with her tray and two dogs in tow.

* * *

Cate stared at the gibberish in the notebook again. She toggled between the written words and the information on her laptop. After searching several websites, she concluded this may be over her head. Breaking a cipher, even a centuries-old one, may not be achievable on her own.

Cate clicked off the current website and typed the web address for Aberdeen College. She searched the faculty roster for Dr. Ken Matthews. After finding his email address, she opened a new email and typed a message.

Hi Ken - I’m not sure if you remember me. We met on a few occasions while I was at Aberdeen College. I used to work in the History Department. I’ve since moved to Scotland (long story) and am working on a book about the history of Dunhaven Castle, my new home.

I’ve come across some journals from the castle’s builder, but they seem to be encrypted. Code-breaking is NOT my strong suit but Molly Williams reminded me it is yours! Would you be able to provide any help to get me started on trying to decipher these materials?

Thanks! Cate Kensie

Cate blew out a long breath as the email left her outbox. She slouched in her chair, stretching her arms overhead as she considered what to fill her afternoon with as she awaited a response.

Cate stared out the window, pondering how to identify the man who haunted her dreams. As she considered how to research guests on the estate in the 1700s, her laptop chimed. Cate glanced at the screen, surprised to see a return email from Ken Matthews.

Hi Cate! Or should I say, Lady Cate? You're somewhat of a local legend on campus now. The story of your inheritance spread fairly quickly after your departure.

How interesting to find encrypted journals from a past era! I am happy to help if I can. Would it be possible for you to send a scan of a page or two so I can see what we're working with?

My mind is already listing the most likely possibilities. I may be able to rule a few out by seeing the text.

I hope you are enjoying Scotland.

Ken

Cate scanned the email, and a smile formed on her face. Maybe now she could make some progress. The only problem was sharing the information with Ken. What if the information shared gave something away about the castle's secret?

Cate pondered it for a moment. Would Douglas's first journal mention the secret on the first page or two? Cate weighed the odds. She'd never decrypt this without help.

Cate snatched her cell phone from the desk and toggled open her camera app. She snapped a picture of the first page. She shuffled through a few pages and snapped a picture of another random page from the journal. Two non-consecutive pages should make any information indecipherable for Ken.

Cate clicked the reply button on Ken's email and typed back to him.

Hi Ken - Thanks for your help! I've attached two pictures to this message with samples from the first journal. If you could point me in the right direction (or to an online solver!), I can decrypt these myself. I'm just not sure where to start!

Thanks again. I'll owe you one!

Cate

Cate drummed her fingers on the laptop after sending the email. Perhaps Ken would respond as quickly as he did the first time. Within seconds, her laptop chimed, and a new email popped into her inbox.

On it! I've already got a list of ideas to run through. With any luck, I'll hit on something in my initial list and have more information for you soon!

Ken

Cate appreciated the man's fervor. Like so many of her colleagues, he was like a kid in a candy store when faced with a puzzle in their field. She hoped to have answers soon.

With Ken on the case, Cate shut her laptop. She'd need a new project to fill her time as she waited for answers from him.

Cate stood and stretched as she pondered her options. Perhaps she'd poke around in Douglas's office for any other information she could scrounge.

She opened the secret passage and turned on the lighting. Cate wandered down the wooden steps and into the cool laboratory space. She glanced around the room as she considered where to begin.

The stack of drawings near the desk caught her attention. She meandered to them and grabbed the first few sheets from the top. Cate stared down at the drawings. Outside of the sketch, she could make no sense out of any words scrawled on the paper. She shuffled to the next page. Similarly, each written word was no more than a random selection of letters in Cate's eyes. She sighed and flipped to the next page.

After thirty minutes, Cate found herself on the floor with papers sprawled around her in every direction. Outside of the nonsensical labels, the papers shared one additional characteristic in common. Each was numbered on the backside in the bottom right corner. The location matched the numbers in the journal. Using them, Cate pieced together the order in which the drawings were created.

While it didn't help her decipher anything, Cate felt she'd made some progress. As she collected the papers into an ordered pile, she studied a drawing. She decided her next task would be to match the drawings with any of the inventions she'd placed on the shelves. Then, if she could decipher the code, perhaps she could make some sense of each of them.

The drawing, labeled number one, contained an illustration of the large wooden desk in the room's center. Cate examined it. Why draw the desk in the room? Had Douglas designed it? If so, why encrypt its design? Did it hold some secret?

Obscure labels pointed to various areas on the piece. Cate scurried across the floor to the desk and studied the marked areas. They appeared

decorative in nature. Several arrows pointed to drawers on the desk. Cate glanced inside a few of them but found nothing unusual.

Stumped, she returned to inspecting the drawing. "Oh, if only I could read these!" Cate bemoaned.

"Talking to yourself, Lady Cate?" Jack inquired from the stairs.

Startled, Cate jumped. "I guess you caught me," she said with a chuckle as she recovered from her surprise. "I didn't even hear you coming down the stairs."

"Lost in thought?"

"Yes," Cate admitted.

"Any luck deciphering those journals?"

"No, that's why I'm down here on the floor. I sent a message to a former colleague and I'm waiting for an answer. I figured I'd move to a new project to pass my time."

"What project? Cleaning the floor with your pants?"

Cate shook her head at him. "No. I found all these sketches with the journals. They are encrypted, too, but I figured I would try to sort through them and match them with the objects they belong with. Then if I decipher the journals, perhaps I can decipher these and find out what each of these inventions of his are!"

Jack stared at the large glass bowl across the room. "I'm not sure I want to find out," he murmured.

"Anyway, the first sketch is of this desk."

"Really?" Jack inquired. "Douglas designed his own desk?"

"It appears that way. I can't read anything on here, but he must have designed it for a reason. All these pieces are marked. I can't read their labels, but I was trying to determine what they mean."

Jack joined her near the desk. Cate climbed to her feet and shared the drawing with him. Jack glanced from the sketch to the desk.

"Perhaps it marks specific decorative items he wanted?"

"But why mark the drawers?"

Jack studied one of the marked drawers. He pulled it open and peered inside. He ran his hand around the drawer's interior.

"Anything?" Cate questioned.

Jack shook his head with a frown. "Not that I noticed."

"No false panels or anything?"

"Nope."

Cate scrunched up her face as she studied the drawing again. “I really wish I could read this,” she murmured.

Jack grabbed the paper from Cate and took a closer glance at it. He flitted his eyes between the sketch and the marked components. Cate peered over his shoulder at the drawing. She bent down, her brow furrowing as she studied a decorative element marked on the drawing. Carved wooden leaves adorned a corner piece. She pressed her fingers against the brown leaves. They did not budge.

Cate poked at the carving. She narrowed her eyes at it before changing strategies. Her fingers wrapped around the piece and pulled. The wooden rectangle pulled away from the desk. Cate stood and stared at the piece.

CHAPTER 7



Cate stared at the piece protruding from the centuries-old desk.
“You broke it, Lady Cate,” Jack teased.

She glanced at the picture before she reached to the freed piece again. She grasped hold of it and turned. A grinding noise filled the room, followed by a loud clank.

“Well, that did something,” Cate said.

“Aye, lassie, but what?”

Cate pulled the drawing from Jack’s hands and set it on the desktop. She pointed out the mechanism she’d just engaged. “Okay, this one has been activated. At least I expect so. These other marked pieces must engage some sort of mechanism within this desk.”

“What mechanism?”

“I’m not certain,” Cate admitted. “But I’d love to find out.”

Jack raised his eyebrows. “Oh, please don’t tell me you object,” Cate groaned.

“For once, I don’t. I can’t imagine this could be that dangerous.”

“Good,” Cate said with a smile.

“Until we trigger whatever mechanism is inside the desk and the castle is swallowed by a sinkhole,” Jack joked.

“Funny,” Cate said.

She identified another leafy panel marked on the sketch on the desk’s corner. Cate grasped it between her fingers and pulled. It came away from

the desk easily. Cate turned it in a similar manner as she had the first. Nothing happened.

Cate frowned at it. She tried to turn it the opposite way, but it didn't budge.

"Hmm," she murmured. "Nothing happened."

Jack narrowed his eyes at the object before he glanced back to the drawing. "Wait!" he exclaimed. "Look at the label."

"What about it?" Cate inquired.

"The first one you turned has three letters. The second one you tried has five letters."

"So?" Cate asked, knitting her brows in concentration.

"This one," Jack said, pointing to another labeled decoration, "has three letters. And this one has four."

"I'm still not understanding how the number of letters factors in," Cate admitted.

Jack pushed the decorative panel back into place. "Let's try this one," he suggested. He grabbed the panel labeled with three letters. He pulled it and twisted it to the side. A scraping noise resounded, ending with a clank. Jack grinned at Cate. "And there's the second piece."

"Great job!" Cate said with a smile. "How did you know that one would work?"

"I'm a genius," Jack responded.

"Funny, come on, how did you know?"

"It disturbs me that you don't believe I'm a genius, Lady Cate," Jack said with an exaggerated frown.

Cate shot him a glance. "I realize you are very intelligent. You have saved a man from the death penalty without ever setting foot in law school. What I mean is *how* did you figure it out?"

Jack pointed to the labels. "Each of these has three random letters. This has five, this has four. I surmised these are numbered elements, indicating the order to engage each. You used this one: three letters labeling it as 'one.' You got lucky picking the first one. The only other one with three letters is this one which I figure is labeled 'two.' Now I suggest we try this one. Five random letters which I believe suggests the label 'three' which also has five letters."

"Way to go, Jack!" Cate grinned at him. She reached for the marked panel, released it from its spot against the desk, and turned. The familiar

whirring and clanking filled the air.

“Last one!” Jack exclaimed as he repeated the process with the fourth. This produced a grinding noise followed by a clank, then a hiss.

“Now what?” Cate questioned.

They both leaned over the drawing. “The drawers?” Jack suggested.

“But what about them?” Cate mused aloud.

“One label has three letters, one has four, and two have five.”

“Five, six, seven and eight?” Cate proposed.

“That’s a safe bet, I’d say,” Jack answered. He pulled open the drawer labeled “five.” The drawer slid further than it had before. “Whoa!”

“That’s further than it slid before.”

“Aye, it is. And what are these marks?” Jack questioned.

Cate squinted down at the tiny markings. “Numbers!” she exclaimed.

“Numbers?” Jack questioned.

“We must have to open each drawer to a certain number to activate whatever mechanism is built into this.”

“What numbers? Five, six, seven and eight?”

“We can try it, though I’d bet that’s not it.”

Jack positioned the other drawers to match their labels. Nothing happened. “You were correct, Lady Cate. That’s not it.”

“That’s far too easy,” Cate admitted.

“Of course, it is,” Jack moaned. “Any other ideas?”

Cate pondered the question for a moment. “Birth year, the year the desk was created, the year it was designed, the year the castle was built, the year Douglas married,” she rattled off.

“Okay, let’s start trying them. What’s the date on the drawing?”

Cate glanced at the unreadable title and the date scrawled under it. “1792,” she said.

Jack lined up the drawers to that year. “Nothing,” he said.

“Try 1791,” Cate suggested. “Castle completion year.”

“Okay,” Jack replied as he pushed the final drawer in to ‘one’ rather than ‘two.’ “Nope.”

“Uh,” Cate mumbled as she processed dates. “Try... 1788.” Jack glanced at her with a confused expression. “When Douglas married Olivia.”

Jack moved the drawers to reflect the date. Nothing happened.

“1767, Douglas’s birth year.” Nothing.

Cate squinted into the distance. “1770.”

Jack repositioned the drawers. A popping noise sounded. “Haha!” Jack exclaimed. “You got it! How did you come up with that date?”

“I’m a genius,” Cate joked.

Jack gave her a wry glance. She shrugged. “Olivia’s birth year.”

“Good going, Lady Cate. Now, what made that noise?”

“I’m not sure,” Cate answered. They glanced around the perimeter of the desk. Cate sank to her knees and glanced underneath. “Here!”

Jack joined her on the floor, sticking his head between the two columns supporting the desk’s thick wooden top. He removed his cell phone from his pocket and toggled on his flashlight. Cate pulled open the piece of wood protruding from the back panel.

As the wooden door creaked open on rusty hinges, Jack shined the light into the new opening. Dull metal reflected the light. “It’s a safe!” Cate exclaimed.

“This guy loved security,” Jack breathed as he reached to pull the metal box from the desk’s hidden chamber.

“What in the world did he hide in here?” Cate murmured.

Jack grunted as he struggled to pull the heavy safe from its hiding spot. “What is this made out of?” he squeaked as he clenched his teeth.

“Let me help,” Cate offered. She reached in to assist in lifting the metal box. “Oof!” She breathed as they pulled it free from its location and dumped it on the stone floor.

Jack wiped his forehead before they slid the safe out from under the desk. He frowned at the metal box. Round metal buttons covered the surface of the rectangular metal box. “How do you open it?”

“This is a strongbox,” Cate explained. She knelt up and pulled open one of the desk’s drawers. She pulled a metal ring with two keys, one large and one small with a pointed tip. “One or more of these buttons should have a small divot. We use this pointy key to trigger a mechanism that will open a panel where we use this large key.”

“That’s quite a knowledge of ancient safes you’ve got there, Lady Cate. Were you a former safecracker?”

Cate checked several buttons before she inserted the pointy key. “Just a humble historian,” Cate promised. A panel snapped open, revealing a keyhole. Cate fitted the key into the keyhole and turned it. She tugged at the key to remove it.

“There must be another,” she mumbled. Cate searched the other buttons. Jack followed her progress as she found another trigger. A second panel popped open, revealing a second keyhole. Cate used the key to unlock this bolt. She pulled at the door. “Still stuck.”

Cate searched and found a third divot near the bottom of the strongbox. After unlocking the latch, she pulled the door open.

Jack toggled on his flashlight again. “I hope it’s something expensive after all this!”

Jack and Cate peered into the box’s interior. Cate’s mouth hung agape as she held her breath and identified the objects inside. Within seconds, she closed her mouth, a frown forming. Jack made a face. “That’s it?” he griped.

Cate reached inside and withdrew the two items. “A piece of paper with a list of numbers and a bunch of metal rings hanging around a bar mounted on a horizontal stand,” Jack assessed as Cate set the objects between them.

The items left Cate speechless. She stared at them. She reached out and touched one of the disks on the stand. It spun around on its pin.

“It’s not what I expected,” Cate admitted after a while.

“Not what you expected? It’s junk!” Jack cried. “What is it?”

Cate shrugged. “Ancient calendar?” she joked.

“Well, that had a lackluster result after all that work. Why did he go through all this trouble to hide this?”

“No idea, but it has to be something important,” Cate insisted. “I have no idea what, though. Well, at least we solved it.”

“Way to look on the bright side, lassie,” Jack said as he climbed to his feet. He extended his hand to pull Cate to her feet. She scooped the items from the floor. “Taking your bounty with you?”

“Yep! We worked hard for this. I’m going to take a closer look at it. See if I can find anything interesting.”

“You do that, Lady Cate. I am going to clean up before dinner. At least we’ve killed the time between meals!”

“I’m glad I could assist with that,” Cate said. “And at least I found a new toy to play with while I wait to hear anything back on the journal encryption!”

* * *

The heaviness of her dress's fabric weighed on Cate as she bolted down the hall on wobbly legs. As she rounded the corner, she searched for an escape. Her mind clouded as she spun in every direction, finding herself trapped. A tear rolled down her cheek, and she bit her lower lip.

Footsteps approached. A moan escaped Cate's lips as she continued her frantic search. She spotted a wall sconce. Cate lunged toward it, pulling on it with all her weight. It slid down the wall and triggered a mechanism.

A panel slid open. Cate ducked inside. She shoved it shut, collapsing against it and exhaling a deep breath.

Her posture stiffened as the footsteps closed in on her location. "Catherine," a voice sang. "Where are you?"

Cate glanced around as her eyes adjusted. She swallowed hard as she searched the darkened space for a hiding spot or an exit. She backed away from the hidden panel; her hand tracing the stone wall next to her.

A thud sounded behind her and Cate froze. Her assailant pounded against the wall. "Are you there, Catherine?" he called.

Cate's breath caught in her throat, and she backed further away from the hidden panel. The passageway sloped sharply downward. She followed it into the blackness below.

The air turned chilly and damp. Water dripped in the distance. Cate wrapped her arms around her waist as she shivered against the cold.

A scraping sound echoed throughout the chamber. Cate twirled to face the secret panel. Light streamed in from the open entryway. The figure of a man stood limned against the bright glow. Cate backed another step away.

"Catherine!" his voice called into the chamber.

Cate shrunk against the wall as she continued to inch away from the opening. Her back struck another wall. She pressed into the corner as the man stepped inside the passage.

Without warning, the man spun on his heel and faced the opening. He cursed and raced from the passage, disappearing into the hall beyond.

Cate breathed a sigh of relief, though she did not budge. Her bottom lip quivered as she strained to listen for sounds in the hall. Was this a trap? Was the man lying in wait for her just beyond the exit?

Cate held her breath as she listened. Her brows knit, and she squeezed her eyes shut in concentration. Within seconds, Cate snapped them open. Her eyes darted around the space. She frowned and tilted her head as she strained to listen again.

In the silence of the room, one sound stood out. Breathing. Cate listened as the rhythmic noise filled her ears. She wasn't alone in the chamber. Cate's heart skipped a beat, and she strained her eyes to search the darkness for the hidden individual.

Cate found no one. "Hello?" she called, her voice breathy and strained. "Is someone there?"

The breathing ceased for a moment. A rustling noise filled the air. Cate recoiled, squeezing closer to the wall. "Who is it?" she demanded again.

A burst of bright blue-white light exploded in front of her. Cate squinted against it as it pierced her eyelids. "STAY AWAY!" she screamed.

"Stay away, stay away," Cate murmured as she thrashed in the sheets.

She shot up to sitting and gasped for breath. She swallowed hard as her heart began to slow.

Another nightmare. Cate grabbed her journal and jotted down all the details she recalled. Who was the man she fled from almost every night? And what was the meaning of the latest development? Who was the other person hiding in the secret passage?

CHAPTER 8



Cate settled at the library's desk and opened her laptop. Her odd nightmare flitted across her mind and she shivered, shaking her head to clear it from her mind. She scanned her work area, strewn with Douglas's journals as the laptop booted. With a sigh, she wondered if she'd ever decipher them. Perhaps Ken would provide some help.

As the laptop's screen lit, Cate swiped at her trackpad. She navigated to her email. Her pulse quickened as she discovered a new email from Ken Matthews. Cate clicked to open it. Time seemed to slow as she waited to read his response.

Hi Cate! I hope you're doing well. I wanted to update you on my progress. (This is fascinating, by the way!) I ran your text through a few text analyzers. What I can tell you so far is that it's not a simple substitution cipher (you may know this as a cryptogram).

My text analysis has not shown that this follows the standard patterns expected in the English language. To explain a bit further, in the English language, we'd expect to see one letter making up 11-13% (this would be an "e"), 6.3%-8.7% as another ("t") and so on. So, if this was a substitution cipher, the one letter that substitutes for "e" should show up 11-13% of the time.

Now, I did adjust for the fact that this was 1700s English based on the information you provided, but even with the Old English taken into account, the text still doesn't come up with the correct percentages expected for letters.

This also rules out a Caesar cipher. This is basically a substitution cipher but instead of random substitutions (e.g. q for e, u for t), this one shifts the alphabet. For example, we may shift 4 letters to the left, meaning A would be coded as E, B as F, C as G and so on. Again, we'd notice the basic percentages of letters that show up in the English language (albeit shifted).

That's probably far too much information about the math behind it for your taste, sorry. Force of habit. Anyway, those are two of the popular ciphers from the 1700s. Which leaves only a few other options, all of which are harder to break. The fortunate thing is without technology, ciphers were quite limited, though some of them still prove difficult (or impossible) to break!

The one that's next to check on my list is the Vigenère cipher. It's a series of twenty-six Caesar ciphers, and encryption is based on a keyword. This cipher is designed to hide the letter frequencies, so that would fit with the text analysis I performed. Vigenère ciphers CAN be broken especially if we can identify the key's length. I've got some tricks up my sleeve I can use to establish this, but I figured I would check in to see if there's any identifiable keyword in your journals. If there are, this will be easy!

If not, I'll proceed with the two attack plans for breaking the Vigenère!

Ken

Cate parsed through the email. Ken's enthusiasm for the subject leapt off her screen. Unfortunately, Cate lacked his enthusiasm for the intricacies of code-breaking. With little idea what a Vigenère cipher was, Cate wondered if she may have overlooked the keyword Ken's email mentioned.

She grabbed the first journal from the desk and paged through it. She searched for any prominent words that suggested keyword status. She found none. She searched the other twelve journals, finding no traces of the keyword.

Cate swiped her laptop's trackpad to revive her laptop. She tapped the "Reply" button and began her email to Ken.

Hi Ken - I'm doing well. Thank you so much for all your work on this so far. I'm sorry it hasn't panned out yet.

I searched all through the journals and didn't see anything that may be the keyword you asked about. Each journal begins with "The Journal of Douglas MacKenzie" before it descends into indecipherable gibberish.

I don't suppose that's the key? Is the key in plain English? I searched through for an English word but maybe I overlooked something if the key is encrypted too.

Sorry for all the questions. This is not my area of expertise (as you can tell). I'm just not sure what I should be looking for.

Thanks again, Cate

Cate sent the email and checked her watch. At quarter after ten in the morning in Scotland, it would be only just after 4 a.m. across the pond in Aberdeen. She'd have a while to wait for a response.

Cate spent another thirty minutes searching through the journals. After finding nothing, she performed an internet search on Vigenère ciphers, hoping that learning about them would assist her in finding the keyword.

She poked around a few sites, learning a little more about how the cipher worked. None of the sites pointed to how to identify the keyword. Cate pinched her lips together. Another dead-end for the moment.

She glanced around the room as she blew out a puff of air. An alert sounded on her computer, drawing her attention back to it. Cate glanced at the screen. A new email stared at her from Ken Matthews.

Wow, Cate mused, Ken was an early riser.

Hi Cate - No problem, I'm having a blast! Great puzzle to solve! I'd doubt the journal title is the key, but I'll run it (and any variants) through my decryption software to see if it produces text.

The key wouldn't be encrypted. It should be a normal word that we will use to determine which shifts to use to encrypt each letter.

Let me try these words and phrases and see what I come up with. I'll get back to you soon (give me about an hour)!

Ken

An hour, Cate ruminated. Perhaps in an hour, she would have an answer. A nagging feeling suggested the answer would be no, but Cate held out hope one of those words would produce something.

Cate rose from her chair and faced the fireplace. "How about a walk, boys?" she suggested to the two dogs lounging near the fireplace.

They leapt to their feet and followed her from the room. Cate spent an hour and a half enjoying the early signs of spring in Scotland. A day with mild temperatures and sunshine provided ample reason to stay outdoors as Cate ticked the minutes down to the next response from Ken.

As they returned to the castle, they passed the side garden. Both dogs raced toward their new favorite location. “I can’t believe you two are so obsessed with this spot,” Cate said with a laugh.

“Talking to yourself again, Lady Cate?” Jack inquired as he rounded the corner.

“No, talking to the outdoor experts,” she qualified, motioning toward the two dogs.

“Oh? And what have our intrepid expert explorers discovered today?”

“Nothing,” Cate said with a shrug. “They’ve been interested in this spot near this bush for days now. I don’t see a thing there.”

Jack stooped and examined the spot. Riley glanced to him, then back to the mysterious dirt patch. “What do you see there, Sir Riley?” he questioned.

Riley pawed at the ground. Jack knelt next to him and peered closer. “Ohhhh, yes,” he muttered.

“What is it? Do you see something?” Cate inquired as she peered over his shoulder.

“Aye,” Jack admitted.

“What?”

“A giant... SPIDER,” Jack exclaimed, tossing a leaf Cate’s way.

Cate shrieked and stumbled backward a few steps. She brushed at her clothes to rid herself of any unwanted visitors on her sweater.

Jack held in a laugh.

“Is it on me? Where is it?” Cate cried.

Jack shook his head, still holding in his chuckling. “No, no, Lady Cate,” he answered as he swiped a green leaf off the ground. “You’ve dodged it.”

Cate narrowed her eyes at him. “THAT was NOT a funny joke!” Cate groaned.

Jack snickered before sobering. “Okay, okay, it wasn’t. Sorry.”

“It’s okay. I’ll forgive you.”

“Next time I’ll say it was a snake. THAT will be funnier.”

Cate shook her head at him. “Come on, you three jokesters,” Cate said to the two pups and Jack. “Let’s head back in. I’ve got to check my email.”

“Check your email? Waiting on an important email from the party czar?”

“No. I emailed a former colleague about the encrypted journals. He’s not hit on any solutions yet. And don’t worry, I was careful about what I

sent. I only sent the first page and a few random early pages. I'm figuring he wouldn't disclose the secret within the first pages."

"Let's hope not. Anyway, with no solutions in sight, we're still safe."

Cate nodded. "I'm afraid without Ken's help, I'd never break that code. Even with his help, a lot of this is over my head."

"I'll admit I am interested to learn what's in those journals myself."

Cate grinned at him. "It could answer so many questions."

"I agree. It could lend us great insight!"

"Heading in for lunch?" Cate inquired as they neared the kitchen door.

"You bet! I'm starving!"

Jack held the door open for Cate and the dogs to enter. She collected her lunch tray and carried it upstairs. With any luck, an email awaited her. An email containing a solution to her cipher.

Cate ushered the dogs into the library and carried her tray to the desk. She shoved the tray onto the desk's top, nudging the journals toward the edge. Cate sniffed at the aromatic tomato basil soup as she opened her laptop.

She tapped the keyboard, signing into her email account. No new messages awaited her. She frowned at the page before refreshing it twice, to be sure. No new emails popped into her inbox. Perhaps this was good news. Perhaps Ken hit on something. Time would tell. For now, Cate would have to wait.

Dejected, she carried her lunch tray to the cozy armchair near the fireplace. Perhaps when she finished her lunch, she'd have an answer, she mused.

Halfway through her meal, her laptop made the characteristic chime, indicating a new email. Cate raced to the desk to check. A bolded email topped her email list. Cate smiled at the sender's name: Ken Matthews.

She toggled it open on her screen.

Hi Cate - Sorry for the delay, I wanted to try a few other things. As you may have surmised, nothing has worked out so far. I tried all the combinations of "The Journal of Douglas MacKenzie" as the keyword and came up with nothing.

I ran through a few different techniques to elicit the key's length (which would help us to break the code) but, again, I came up with nothing.

This doesn't mean it's not a Vigenère but what it does mean is we can't solve it without the keyword. I wanted to check back with you on the off

chance you've identified anything else that could be the key. I'm not giving up yet. But is there anything else that may point to a clue to deciphering the text? Even if you don't expect it's related, send it over. A fresh set of trained eyes may be able to come up with something workable.

Thanks, and sorry I've not found anything thus far! Ken

Cate pouted at the screen. Though grateful for Ken's help, her frustration mounted with each negative result. Cate opened the first journal again, determined to scour it for a keyword. She had to find something!

Cate flipped through the first journal again. If the keyword was anywhere, it would be in the first journal, she surmised. Cate scoured every inch of the pages for the thousandth time but found nothing. She let the book fall to her lap. The pages fanned shut as she propped her head up with her hand. Cate stared down at the journal with its front cover open. *The Journal of Douglas MacKenzie*, she read as she stared at it.

Her eyes flitted to the inside cover. She focused on the numbers scrawled on the cover. Cate knit her brows and squinted at them. Could they help?

Cate sat straighter and clicked the Reply button on Ken's email.

Hi Ken - Thanks for your help so far. I have been over every inch of the journal and haven't found any keywords BUT I did find something curious. In each journal I have found, there are twenty-five numbers scrawled on the inside cover. Could they be the keyword? Or related to it? I realize it's not a word, but it's the only thing I can come up with.

I've attached a picture of the inside cover from two of the journals for your reference. Does this help at all?

Cate

Cate pressed send, then drummed her fingers against the desk. In five minutes, she gave up on staring at her inbox while willing the email to appear. She yawned, a sudden burst of tiredness overcoming her.

Her mind turned to another journal. Her own. She'd experienced another nightmare last night. Why was she suffering from them? What did they mean? Perhaps if she couldn't solve the mystery of Douglas's journals, she could make progress on her own.

Cate pushed back from the desk and navigated upstairs to her bedroom. She retrieved the notebook from her night table. As she tucked it under her arm, she recalled the frightening details summarized inside.

They were only silly dreams. Why did they terrorize her? As she contemplated the question, a loud ticking echoed in the room.

Cate grabbed at the timepiece hanging around her neck. She opened the cover. The second hand crept around the watch face. Her jaw dropped. She hadn't triggered the mechanism. She glanced around the room. What was happening? Her bedroom contained a time rip accessing 1925. Was she in the 1920s?

CHAPTER 9



She swallowed hard as she considered her options. Was she standing in another century? Cate raised the timepiece, intending to use it to return to the present. Her eyes widened as the second hand sped up and kept normal time.

Cate stood unmoving for a moment. She tore her eyes from the watch face and glanced around the bedroom. She recognized her things. Riley and Bailey's beds lay near her bed. Her cell phone charger poked from behind the night table lamp. A discarded cardigan hung limply over her armchair.

She was in her time. Cate ran a shaky hand through her hair as her heart settled back to normal speed. Had she imagined the incident? Was her mind playing tricks on her? Was this the product of an overtired imagination?

Cate bit her lower lip as questions flooded her mind. She shoved them to the back of her brain. It was a fluke. A trick of her mind. A reaction to the memory of her nightmares.

Still, she felt a sudden urge to leave her bedroom. Cate hurried from the room and weaved through the hallways toward the library. As she stepped into the hallway from a back set of stairs, she bumped into Jack.

"Ahoy there, Lady Cate," Jack greeted her with a salute.

"Hi, Jack," she said.

"Uh-oh, that doesn't sound like Lady Cate! Say, you're not still sore at me over that spider hoax? I really do apologize, Cate."

Cate waved at him. "No, it's not that."

"Then what is it?"

“Just tired I guess,” Cate admitted. She waved her journal in the air. “Another nightmare last night. That on top of no leads on Douglas’s journals even with an expert helping me and I’m just indulging myself in a pity party.”

“Oh no,” Jack moaned. “No. Lady Cate, please. No more parties. Soon, Mrs. Campbell will be asking us to erect a stone fountain of a weeping woman in the back garden. And install a rain machine to ensure nasty weather for the event.”

Cate giggled at Jack’s ridiculous assessment of Mrs. Campbell’s party planning requests. “Okay, pity party concluded!” Cate agreed.

“Another nightmare, huh? Care to discuss it?”

Cate shrugged. “I’m not certain I do, to be honest. These are becoming tedious. As usual, I was being chased. I reached a dead-end, but I managed to open a secret passage and I hid there.”

“Did your friend find you?”

Cate rolled her eyes. “He’s NOT my friend. That much is obvious. He terrorizes me every time I come across him in my dreams. Anyway, he opened the passage and called to me. I hid in the shadows. Something else caught his attention, and he disappeared. I waited there for a few more moments to determine if I was safe. While I waited, I heard something. Breathing. Someone was hiding with me in the secret passage. I called out to them. They didn’t answer but a blinding light exploded in the space and then I woke up.”

“A blinding light?” Jack queried.

“Yeah,” Cate answered.

“Like a flashlight?”

“No,” Cate said, with a shake of her head. “No, not like that. The light was blue-white. Almost ethereal.”

“LED flashlight?” Jack suggested.

“No,” Cate insisted. “No, it was like an orb of light. It was strange.” She shrugged again. “Anyway, this marks the first time another person has shown up in my dream outside of my strange stalker.”

“And you didn’t spot the person or have any way to identify them?”

“No, none. I never saw them, only heard the breathing.” Silence passed between them for a moment. “Then there’s another strange thing.”

“Oh?” Jack inquired, shooting Cate a questioning glance.

“Two nights ago, I had one of my now infamous nightmares. Afterward, I couldn’t sleep, as usual. As I laid in bed pondering the meaning of my dream, I swore I heard the watch slow down. When I checked it, the second hand sped up and kept normal time. I assumed I imagined it.”

“Product of an overstimulated and tired mind, perhaps,” Jack agreed.

“That’s what I thought, too. But...”

“But?” Jack inquired.

“When I went to retrieve my dream journal just now, I could have sworn it happened again. I panicked because I hadn’t even been touching the timepiece. And when I checked, the second hand crept by like I had slipped into 1925. Then, without warning, it sped up and everything was normal. My sweater was draped over the chair, my phone charger was on the night table, the dogs’ beds were near my bed.”

“And you are here with me in the good-old present day!” Jack exclaimed.

“Yes, here I am. But why did the watch slow twice without me triggering it?”

Jack shrugged. “Are you certain it slowed?”

Cate considered the question for a moment. She nodded slowly. “Yes. The first time, no, but this time, I’m sure.”

“And you’re certain you weren’t rubbing it? You discovered the anomaly because you had a habit of rubbing the watch.”

Cate wrinkled her forehead in thought. “Ah,” she responded with a shrug. “I don’t think so. But perhaps I was. I don’t remember doing it. But, I suppose, I don’t remember NOT doing it either.”

“With all these nightmares, you’re overly tired. Perhaps you did it without realizing it. A nervous habit.”

“I’ll bet you’re right,” Cate said with a nod. “I did have a bad habit of rubbing the watch like a worry stone. Perhaps it’s cropped up again.”

“Keep an eye on it. If it happens again, let me know. I’ll have Pap check it out just to be sure.”

“Okay. And I’ll try to pay careful attention to my nervous tics. Pun intended!” Cate said with a wink.

Jack’s jaw dropped. “Did you just make a terrible pun joke?”

Cate grinned and nodded. “I did!”

“Lady Cate,” Jack said with a chuckle, “you’re spending too much time with me and picking up my terrible humor.”

“Maybe soon you’ll pick up my love of time travel,” Cate said with a wink.

Jack raised his eyebrow at her.

“Don’t answer,” Cate said.

“Deal. Well, I’ll let you return to your journals, whichever you choose to study.”

“Thanks! With any luck, Ken will have some answers for me when I get back to my laptop. And I can toss this journal to the side and forget about it for a while. At least until I have another nightmare.”

“Good luck!” Jack said as they reached the library doors.

“I’ll see you for dinner,” Cate said as she ducked into the library.

Cate hastened to the desk and set her journal down. She toggled her laptop on and checked her email. A new message from Ken awaited.

Hi Cate - Okay, this changes everything! That’s not a keyword for sure which means we’re at a dead-end with the Vigenère cipher. BUT I did a bit more research into ciphers of that era. Turns out, there’s another one from the time period invented by Thomas Jefferson. It wasn’t as popular as the others. In fact, it didn’t gain popularity until it was reinvented in the early 1900s!

I digress, though. My point is: when coupled with the numbers you sent me, I began to wonder if this encryption was a Jefferson disk cipher. The numbers would indicate the order the disks should be placed on the encoder/decoder. The order itself is the cipher key. It tells you how to decrypt the message.

This would also explain why nothing we’ve tried so far has worked (no keyword length clearly apparent with the Vigenère and no frequencies matching for the substitution ciphers).

Now, given the numbers (one through twenty-five) it appears this is a Jefferson cipher with 25 disks. That’s smaller than the original version invented by Jefferson (which had 36), but still with 25, this will be extremely difficult to crack without the disks themselves.

This means we’re at a standstill unless you’ve got the decoder ring. I’ve attached a picture of what one looks like. Have you found anything like this with the journals? If you have, I can explain how to decrypt/encrypt.

Let me know and I’ll keep my fingers crossed you’ve got the decryption tool right there with you!

Ken

Cate clicked the thumbnail in her email to view the picture. She gasped as she stared at it. Cate leapt from her chair and raced across the room. She retrieved the object she'd found yesterday in Douglas's hidden desk strongbox. She counted the disks, her heart pounding as she counted twenty-five.

Cate quickly clicked the reply button.

Hi Ken - Thanks for the information! Unbelievably, I just found an item that looks like that yesterday! It's got twenty-five disks and each one of them has the alphabet on it in some random order. I've attached a picture.

I'm fairly sure this is the decoder you mentioned in your previous email. I'd be ever so appreciative if you could explain how to use it to decode the journals.

THANK YOU!

Cate

Cate glanced at the stand containing the disks. Her pulse still raced from the discovery. With any luck, she'd soon be able to decipher Douglas's journals. What would they tell her, she wondered? What secrets did they hold?

Cate performed an internet search on the cipher Ken mentioned in his email. She browsed a few sites. Pictures similar to the one Ken sent appeared on them. When Cate heard a chime, she

switched browser tabs and discovered a new email from Ken.

Hi Cate - YES! That MUST be the key! We'll find out shortly once I have you try decryption on one of the journals.

I'll reference the first picture you attached for instructions.

You should be able to open the axle and remove the disks (this allows for reordering of the disks, which can provide unique cipher keys). Each disk should be numbered somewhere. You'll want to place the disks on the axle in the order noted in the cipher key. The cipher key (I think) is the list of twenty-five numbers you sent me.

In the first image you sent, the numbers are:

7 13 3 1 20 19 23 21 18 17 6 9 22 11 8 25 10 14 15 12 2 24 16 5 4

Arrange the disks on the axle so they sit in that order (4 on the right end and 7 on the left).

Now you've got the decoder set up to decode the message. This is where you'll need to do a bit of work.

Turn the disks to match the letters in the journal you're trying to decrypt. Without moving them, check the other rows on the disk. One of them should spell out a message. Often, the user selected the row above or below the cipher row to create the encrypted text, so it may be just above or below the row you created.

Sometimes, they used a larger shift in rows (maybe two or three). The good news is they would have been consistent with their choice so once you find the correct row, you'll just use that row over and over to decrypt.

I hope that makes sense. I've included a few reference sites that explain this (maybe better than I did!). If you need more help, let me know. We can also set up a video conference and I can walk you through it.

Let me know if you're able to decipher anything!

Ken

Cate read through the email twice before grabbing the decoder. She fiddled with the axle until it sprung free of the stand. Cate slipped the disks off the ring, spilling them into her lap.

She grabbed one and studied it. As Ken suggested, a number adorned one side. Cate cleared a spot on the desk. She began to line the disks in the order listed on the first journal's interior cover.

Cate spread the disks across her lap as she sorted through and searched for each number. After ordering them, she threaded them back onto the axle and snapped it shut. She turned to the first page of encrypted text in the journal.

Cate spun the disks on the axle to match the letters on the page. She worked left to right to input the nonsensical letters in a row at the top of the wheel. Once she finished, Cate took a deep breath and checked the row just above her input. Gibberish, she reflected. She pursed her lips and tried the next lineup. The line began BQ. It did not provide a solution.

Cate abandoned the lines above and tried the line below her cipher row. She scanned the row. Her heart skipped a beat.

CHAPTER 10



Cate snatched a blank piece of paper from the desk drawer and copied the letters from the journal with the word breaks. Underneath, she copied the letters matching the code.

J IDUP ZTHBESL VGPR XDVPMSD YI
I HAVE CREATED THIS JOURNAL TO

A smile spread across her face. She'd done it! Well, she reflected, Ken Matthews had done it, but with his help, she would now be able to decrypt the journals! Before she responded to inform Ken, Cate tried another twenty-five characters from the journal.

She rotated each wheel to match the letters in the journal. Cate jotted them down on her paper before she transcribed the plaintext from the row below it.

RIIPXGXVZ SFL DENRHQRF GQ OIT
CHRONICLE AND PRESERVE MY EXP

The twenty-five characters ended mid-word, though, from the other words in the phrase, Cate was certain she was decrypting the text correctly.

She set her pen aside and pulled her laptop closer to type a reply email to Ken.

Hi Ken! I read through your email a few times before I tried it. After a bit of work, I found the appropriate plaintext English! I was able to decrypt almost the entire first line. It appears Douglas began the journal to keep a record of his experiences as he began his life in the castle.

I'm sure this will prove fascinating for me (not only from a historical perspective but since Douglas is my ancestor!). Thank you so much for your help with this! I'd never have gotten this decrypted without your expertise. I really appreciate the time you took and how quickly you got back to me!

Well, back to decoding for me! With thirteen journals in twenty-five-character chunks, I've got my work cut out for me! At least it will keep me out of trouble!

Thanks again! I owe you one.

Cate

Cate sent the email and returned to her decryption task. As she finished decoding the first sentence, Cate wondered if typing may be faster. Copying each letter and its matching plaintext proved tedious. Cate pondered skipping the copy of the journal text, wondering if she could write the transcription only. She nixed the idea in case she made a mistake, which she figured would be likely given the sheer volume of text she must work through.

While eager to continue her translation, Cate opened a word document and began to type the first page of ciphertext into it. Cate frowned as the work went slower than she hoped. Transcribing gibberish did not make for easy typing, she lamented. And she itched to get to the transcription.

Cate stopped typing after the first page and decided to translate the text before continuing her copy task. She added the fifty characters she had already decoded, then continued with her decryption.

After a few moments, she had deciphered the first sentence.

I have created this journal to chronicle and preserve my experiences as I search for answers.

Pleased with her work, Cate smiled at the screen. "Well, Douglas," Cate said aloud, "what experiences do you have to share?"

As she pondered her question, a chime sounded from her laptop. Cate toggled open her email and found a new email from Ken.

Hi Cate - That's great! How exciting! I'm so glad I was able to help solve it. I wonder why he encrypted the journals? Maybe he's got a reference to a secret treasure or something and you'll be famous for discovering it! I can ride on your coattails as the man behind your big discovery.

Anyway, as you mentioned, twenty-five-character chunks of text will take you quite a while to decode! Not to mention, I'm sure it will be a

tedious exercise to work through. On that note, I've got an idea. I'm not sure it will pan out, but I've got an email out to an associate I've worked with a few times about automating this.

I'm not sure if he'll be able to help but he's a fantastic computer programmer, and he has some knowledge of modern encryption. That would really speed things up for you, so I'm hoping he can help! I'll let you know as soon as I hear from him.

Ken

Cate chuckled as she read the first few lines. In addition to Ken's obvious excitement, he referred to a secret treasure Douglas may have discussed within the pages of the journals. He had no idea how correct his assessment was, Cate mused. Unfortunately, Cate would never be able to share those details with Ken.

The rest of his email intrigued her, though. She glanced at the stack of journals on the desk. His assessment would prove correct if she had to decrypt them by hand in twenty-five-character chunks. An automated computer program could accelerate her translation exponentially.

Cate replied to Ken and thanked him for pursuing the program, telling him she would keep her fingers crossed since it would expedite her encryption.

Cate glanced to the document on her screen containing the journal's first page then to her timepiece. Dinner approached. Cate's eyes flitted to the outside. The light was already waning. As eager as she was to continue her work, she closed her laptop.

Her stomach grumbled in agreement with her decision to abandon work for dinner. She'd spend the next day engrossed in the journals, she promised herself. Besides, perhaps Ken would strike gold with his associate, and she could speed up the entire process.

After spending the evening with her staff, as was her custom, Cate found her mind relaxed enough to sleep. As she eased back into the pillows, she hoped the dinner also had the power to stave off any nightmares.

* * *

Cate stretched as she crawled from her bed the next morning. The sun had not yet risen as she stepped into a steamy shower. Her refreshed mind swam

with questions. What would she find in Douglas's journals? Would Ken be able to assist her with hastening the process? What experiences would Douglas recount? How did he discover the time travel anomaly? Would she now be able to read the text on his invention sketches? What would they reveal?

Questions crowded Cate's mind. Of course, without automated help, it may take months or longer to answer them, Cate thought as she slipped into her clothes.

Both dogs still lounged in bed when she returned to retrieve her shoes. "Look at you two sleepy heads!" Cate exclaimed. Riley repositioned his head without lifting it to stare at Cate. "Staying in bed, are we?" Bailey's tail wagged, but he refused to rise from his snug spot amidst the covers.

"All right!" Cate said as she finished pulling on her boots. "I'll go for a walk myself!"

At the mention of the "w-word," both dogs leapt to their feet and raced to Cate's side. "That's more like it!" she said as she rubbed both their heads. "Come on, boys, we may still catch the sunrise!"

Cate stepped from the castle into the cool spring air. Streaks of red painted the horizon. She strode down the path to the loch with both dogs in tow. As the red sun peeked over the distant moor, she settled on the loch's bank.

Her thoughts lingered on the castle's first proprietor again. She wondered if Douglas's experience matched hers when she had first arrived at the castle. She glanced back to the large stone-clad structure behind her. Its towers and turrets rose high above the rolling hills. Its walls held a life-changing secret. Had Douglas reacted with the same enthusiasm Cate did?

There was only one way to find out. Cate stood and brushed the dirt off her legs. The sun, now fully risen, promised to bring a warm spring day to the area. She may have to take the laptop outside to work and let the dogs frolic in the bright sunshine the day promised.

Both dogs raced ahead of her to the castle. Cate pushed through the door into the fragrant kitchen. The aroma of cinnamon filled the air.

"... told you which I preferred," Mrs. Fraser said as Cate popped through the door. Both dogs scurried to Jack's side to greet him.

"But what about..." Jack began, his voice cutting off as Cate stepped inside.

The conversation stalled, and all eyes turned to her as silence fell over the room.

“Good morning, everyone,” Cate said. “Seems I know how to make an entrance.” No one answered. “Or kill a conversation,” she added. A tangible pall hung over the room, and Cate swallowed hard. Everyone’s strange behavior disturbed her.

“No,” Molly said with a wave. “We weren’t talking about you... anything... We weren’t really discussing anything important.”

“Well, that’s... good,” Cate said. “Though I am sorry to have interrupted your conversation about nothing.”

“No problem, Lady Cate,” Molly assured her.

Cate offered a wide-eyed grin at them. She bit her lower lip and glanced around the room at each of them. “Are you all serious? You’re really not going to tell me what you were talking about?”

“Nothing!” Molly answered as Jack stated “cookies,” while Mrs. Fraser answered “dinner.”

“O-okay,” Cate stammered.

“We were discussing having no cookies for dinner. None! Nothing!” Molly filled in.

It seemed obvious they were hiding something, though Cate couldn’t fathom what or why. She decided to let it go. Whatever they were concealing may not be her business. “Well, cookies or not, I’m sure we’ll survive,” she responded.

“Got your breakfast, Lady Cate,” Molly announced. “Ready?”

“Yes!” Cate replied. “I’m hungry after that early morning walk!” She reached for the tray.

“I’ll carry it,” Jack offered, grabbing the tray from Molly. “There are a few estate items I’d like to run past you while we make the trek.”

“Okay,” Cate agreed. She called the dogs to follow her. Cate offered Jack a nervous smile as they continued down the hall toward the staircase leading to the main level. “Weird vibe in there,” she said with a chuckle.

“Huh? Really?” Jack said. “I didn’t notice anything.” Jack cleared his throat. “Anyway, about that estate business...”

“Right,” Cate said, her discomfort growing over the conversation she’d interrupted. “Estate business. What’s on the menu? Roofing? Plumbing? Or...”

They reached the staircase and began the climb to the main level. “Actually,” Jack whispered as they reached the top. “I just wanted to find out if you made any progress on your projects?”

“Ohhhhh,” Cate answered. “I have!”

Jack raised his eyebrows, prompting her to continue.

“Yeah, Ken Matthews, a former colleague of mine from Aberdeen College, helped me. He did a ton of analysis on the cipher bits I sent him. None of the standard channels produced any results. But then I sent him a picture of the numbers written on the inside of the cover. It gave him another idea about the cipher that might have been used to encrypt it. Remember the old-school calendar we found?”

“The letter wheels from the safe in the safe in the safe.”

Cate chuckled. “Yes. It’s an encoder-decoder wheel for a Jefferson disk cipher! You thread the wheels on it in the order given in the journal. Next, you input the letters from the journal, and you read the lines above or below that one. The one that makes sense in English is the plaintext.”

“Okay, I think I’ve got the idea. Did it work?”

“It did!” Cate exclaimed as they reached the library. “I tried it last night before dinner. I decrypted fifty whole characters, too!”

Cate retrieved her laptop from the desk and popped it open as she carried it to Jack. She opened her document and showed him the decrypted line.

“I have created this journal to chronicle and preserve my experiences as I search for answers,” Jack read.

Cate grinned at him. “And so it begins!”

“I must admit, I am a teensy bit interested in his experiences,” Jack admitted.

“Because you’re starting to like this time travel stuff.”

“I wouldn’t go that far, Lady Cate. But I am curious to learn how this all began,” Jack admitted.

“And we soon will! Well,” she qualified, “maybe not soon. Translating this in twenty-five-character chunks is slow-going.”

“Oh, good!” Jack exclaimed.

Cate wrinkled her nose. “Good?”

“Yeah, it’ll keep you busy in this time period for a long, long time!”

“With any luck, it won’t!”

“Got a plan to speed translate, do you?”

“Maybe,” Cate said. “Ken mentioned a friend who may be able to help automate this. I’m waiting on an email to determine if that’s an option or not. If it is, we may be able to discover Douglas’s experiences much faster!”

“Oh, Lordy,” Jack said with an eye roll. He backed to the door. “Hey, send me a copy of that translation once you have it. I really do want to read through it.”

Cate gave him a half-smile. “Will do.”

He stepped through the door but spun to face Cate again before disappearing down the hall. “Oh, Lady Cate, one more thing.”

“Roofing?” she questioned.

Jack chuckled. “No. For once, I have no real estate business. Any more nightmares?”

Cate shook her head. “Nightmare free last night! Maybe the journal decryption relieved them!”

Jack held up his hand, sporting his crossed fingers. “Have a good breakfast, Lady Cate.”

“You too!” Cate called.

Cate set her laptop next to the tray and plopped into the armchair. After a spoonful of her oatmeal, she clicked on her email program. Cate found several emails, including one from Ken Matthews. She clicked to open and read it.

Hi Cate - I got a response from my guy and he's happy to help. He considered it a fun challenge to create the program. He thought the easiest way would be to create the numbered disks within the program and the line offset to the plaintext, then all you'd need to do is input the order you want the disks in and enter the text and it'll spit out the decrypted text.

In order to do that, he'll need to get the details of the disks. We considered it easier for you two to communicate directly so he could gather the details he needs and give you any support for any bugs you may find in the program. Is it okay for me to pass your contact information along to him?

Ken

Cate clapped her hands in excitement, rousing both dogs from their lazy morning near the fire. “Sorry, fellas! It looks like Ken’s friend can help me after all. Got a little overexcited, I guess!”

She typed a return email, giving her permission to send her details along. Cate eyed the decryption ring across the room. Given the new development, this would prove much faster. Was it worth it to continue decoding by hand?

But what if the program took months to construct? Then it may be worth it to continue. Cate's mind overanalyzed the situation, as usual, creating backup plans for her backup plans.

As she finished her breakfast, she decided she'd wait to continue her decryption until she had a better handle on when the program may arrive. She had plenty of smaller pieces of text she could work on.

Cate's mind turned to the stack of technical sketches still in the office downstairs. They each contained encoded text. Maybe she could work on those.

Her lips formed a frown as she pondered how difficult it may be to decrypt them without knowing the order of the disks. As she recalled Ken's statements about the difficulty of breaking the cipher, a new thought popped into her mind.

She dropped her spoon into her bowl and set them back on the tray. She hurried across the library to the desk. Cate shoved the journals aside, searching for a specific item.

Buried under three journals, Cate struck gold. She pulled the paper out and studied it. "Ah-ha!" she exclaimed, rousting the dogs a second time. Riley cocked his head at her. "This list," she explained to them, "that we found with the decoder gives the disk order for decrypting the drawings downstairs, I'd bet. They were all numbered. I'd bet these numbers correspond to each drawing!"

Cate chewed her lower lip as she stared out the window, her mind racing. She could make good progress on those sketches while she waited for Ken's contact to reach out to her.

She considered grabbing them, but the bright sunshine persuaded her to postpone her work. "Let's go for another walk, boys!" Cate proposed.

* * *

Cate approached the gardens in the rear of the castle. She spotted Jack tending to the rose bushes there. "They should bloom in time for your party,

Lady Cate,” he shouted.

Cate sauntered to him, fingering an infant leaf springing from the plant. “If I remember correctly, they were in bloom when I arrived.”

“You remember correctly.”

“I remember because I found you tending to them after you pulled a disappearing act on me. Little did I know I was in 1856, and not the present time.”

“I’m glad we cleared that up. Speaking of the past, I’m shocked you’re out walking and not working hard on your journal decryption.”

“Cabin fever, I suppose. It’s such a beautiful day. And to be honest, I am waiting for an email from Ken’s associate. He’s agreed to create a computer program to decrypt the journals. So, I’m just being lazy and hoping he creates it before I have to tackle those journals twenty-five letters at a time.”

“Ahhhh,” Jack said with a nod, “lazy Lady Cate. You’ve gone soft! You’re losing your edge!”

Cate held her hands up in defeat. “I know,” she said with a chuckle. “And on that note, I suppose I’d better get back and at least do *some* work.”

“Good luck, Lady Cate.”

“Thanks! Come on, bo...” Cate’s voice cut off mid-word. She frowned and scratched her head. “Where did those rascals go?”

CHAPTER 11



“Uh-oh,” Jack answered. “The last time Sir Riley pulled a disappearing act outside, he found a new friend.”

Cate nodded. “If there’s another dog hiding out on the grounds, I may have to rename this place Dunhaven Rescue Castle.” She called for the dogs. “Well, I suppose before I continue my work, I’ll search for those two imps.”

“Need help?”

“I’m sure they’re around here somewhere,” Cate assured him. “If I can’t find them, I’ll be back.”

“Okay. Golly, I hope they haven’t found any other secret passages.”

Cate chuckled as she meandered away. She searched the rolling hills for the two small pups. She called to them again, peeking behind bushes and glancing over shrubs.

“Riley! Bailey!” Cate called as she rounded the corner. Two shrill barks sounded from the side garden.

Cate headed toward the noise. “Oh, you two! What have you done?!” Cate exclaimed.

Muddy smudges covered their faces and front paws. Cate stared at the culprit in front of them. A shallow crater dented the earth. Disturbed dirt sat in a pile around it.

Riley nosed the cavity and Bailey scratched more dirt from it. “Stop that!” Cate scolded. “Look at you two. You’re filthy! Come on, you both need baths!”

Cate took two steps away. Neither dog followed. “Riley, Bailey! Let’s go!” After another forlorn glance at the partially dug hole, the two dogs trotted after Cate. She collected both into her arms before pushing through the kitchen door and into the house.

“What happened here?” Mrs. Fraser asked as Cate entered with the dirty dogs.

“They decided to dig a hole in the side garden,” Cate responded.

“Uh-oh,” Mrs. Fraser scolded. “Young Jack won’t be happy with you digging holes in his landscaping.”

“Neither is Cate,” Cate replied. “These two are going straight into the laundry tub!”

* * *

With clean pups, Cate headed to the library and settled the two dogs by the fireplace. She swiped at her laptop’s trackpad to wake it. She found several emails awaiting her. Cate clicked into the first from Ken. He wrote he would pass Cate’s email along to his associate and to expect an email from Damien Sherwood who would create the program for her.

Cate scanned the other emails in her inbox. A smile crossed her face as she spotted one from Damien Sherwood. She clicked to open it.

Hi there, Lady Cate or Dr. Kensie or Lady Kensie or whichever you prefer, I’m not sure how to address someone in your position, what with both a title AND a Ph.D. At first, I thought the education trumped the title, but then I wasn’t sure. Anyway, let me know which you prefer!

My name is Damien Sherwood, Ken Matthews may have mentioned I would be emailing you. He contacted me about writing a program to help you with some decryption. I took a look at the materials he sent over and it seems fairly straightforward to achieve. I will need two pieces of information from you first! Specifically, I’ll need the order of the letters on each disk. To make this task easier, I created a spreadsheet with the disks listed (twenty-five, right?) in each row. In the first position, I put the letter A. We’ll use that as our anchor letter. Then, fill in the rest of the row with the order of the letters after A. (When I say “after,” I mean if you have the disk so “A” is in the 12:00 position, list the letters going clockwise around).

The second thing I need to know is the offset from the ciphertext to the plaintext. Let's again work clockwise. So, tell me how many letters beyond the ciphertext moving in a clockwise position gives you the plaintext.

I hope this all makes sense. Once I get this information, I'll get this guy up and running for you (I've already started putting together some of the backbones of the program!). I should have it for you in a few hours or by tomorrow at the latest!

If you have any questions, let me know!

Looking forward to hearing back from you.

Damien

Cate grinned at the email. She clicked to download the spreadsheet Damien attached and popped it open. Dozens of cells filled her screen. Damien had already typed in numbers representing the twenty-five disks. He placed an "A" in the first column, next to each number. Columns across the top listed spaces for letters two through twenty-six.

Cate appreciated his organization. She grabbed the axle containing the disks and clicked it open. The disks slid off into her lap as she spun it sideways.

Cate sorted through disks in search of the first. She spun it until she located the "A" then input each letter after it into the spreadsheet.

She spent the next hour working through the spreadsheet. She double- and triple-checked each row before saving it and opening a reply email to Damien Sherwood.

Hi Damien - Please, call me Cate. I really appreciate your help on this! Codebreaking is NOT something I'm very familiar with (though I have managed to decrypt fifty characters!). And working twenty-five characters at a time is very tedious.

I've filled in the spreadsheet as you described and attached it.

In terms of ciphertext to plaintext, the plaintext is one row below the cipher row on the disks.

If you need any additional information, please let me know. There's no rush on the project, so please take your time. In the meantime, can you let me know your fee for the program?

Thank you! Cate

She attached the spreadsheet before sending the email on its way. Cate stared at the mess on her desk. Disks and journals lay sprawled across it. She grabbed the journals and stacked them in order next to the desk. She

wouldn't tackle those until she received the program from Damien. It would speed the process tremendously.

Instead, she'd try to decode the sketches. She studied the list of drawings and the associated disk order. She threaded the disks onto the axle in the order listed for sketch one. As she slid the last one on, her laptop chimed to signify a new email. Cate glanced to the screen, finding a response from Damien.

Hi Cate - Thanks, everything looks good. I'll get started right away. One other thing that might be helpful would be to send a sample of the ciphertext and the plaintext that matches it (I think you said you had a small bit done). Then I can double-check my program before sending it over to you. Wouldn't want any crazy stories popping up because of my incorrect program, haha!

To answer your question, no charge. I'm happy to do it! It's a nice little challenge. I think it'll be fun!

D

Cate raised her eyebrows at the message. No charge? She'd definitely need to send Damien something for this. She'd put her thinking cap on if he continued to refuse any fee. She opened her text document containing her decoded message and copied the cipher and plaintext into a message back to Damien.

With the message sent, Cate needed to retrieve the drawings from the office below. She pushed back from the desk and crossed the room. She opened the bookcase and stared into the darkness below. She pondered if she could hurry down and grab the sketches without needing the lights.

Cate took two steps into the blackness before reversing her course. She plugged the lights in before continuing downstairs. The sketches sat in the middle of the floor where she'd left them, except for the desk sketch. It laid where she and Jack discarded it on the desk's top.

Cate grabbed it first, figuring she could use it for practice since they'd already cracked it. As she picked up the sketch, she heard a loud ticking. The timepiece, tucked under her sweater, couldn't have come in contact with anything to have triggered the mechanism.

Her brow furrowed as she grasped the chain and pulled the timepiece toward her. As her hand clasped it, the office plunged into darkness.

Cate's breath caught in her throat. Had one of the dogs knocked the plug loose? She glanced around as her eyes adjusted to the absence of light. Cate

toggled on her cell phone's flashlight and took one step toward the stairs when noise sounded overhead. An unfamiliar voice carried down the stairs and reached her ears.

Cate's heart skipped a beat at the sound. She swallowed hard as she processed the situation. The voice, with a light Scottish accent, did not belong to Jack or Mr. Fraser. Another Scottish accent answered. She quickly doused her flashlight's beam.

The bookcase scraped against the floor as someone pushed it shut. Footsteps sounded on the stairs, which she noted no longer creaked. A dim, bobbling light glowed in the stairway.

The urge to hide overcame her. She gnawed her lower lip and glanced around the darkened space. As the light approached, Cate scurried toward the desk. She ducked under the top and curled into the space between each pedestal. As she settled as far from view as she could, she spotted the desk sketch on the floor. In her mad scramble to hide, she had dropped it. Her heart pounded as she weighed her options. Footsteps scraped on the stone floor. She couldn't risk retrieving it now.

Cate pulled her legs close to her chest and held her breath. The footsteps approached her hiding spot. A thud sounded overhead as their owner set something on the desk. By the smell of it, it was an oil lamp.

A figure reached down to the floor and snatched the paper Cate dropped moments earlier. "What the devil is this doing out?" he questioned. He slapped the paper against the desk's top as he approached it. Cate shrank back further. He stood mere inches from her.

With a trembling hand, Cate grasped her timepiece. The second hand crawled across the face. She'd slipped back in time.

"These are the types of incidents I'm referring to," the voice continued as Cate weighed her options.

"Misplaced paperwork?" the other voice answered.

"No, no, no, of course not. This sketch was filed away. How did it get out?"

"Merely a trick of your mind, surely, Douglas."

Cate's eyes widened. Douglas? Was this Douglas MacKenzie? Had she slipped back to the 1700s?

"There are too many tricks of the mind here. There is something more."

"What do you propose?"

“I have several theories. However, I do not wish to impart them until others have reviewed the evidence and offered opinions.”

“Evidence?”

“Careful observation. Experimentation. I have kept track of all incidents, every detail.” The man shuffled and pulled open a drawer. Cate spied the item he removed: a brown leather journal. She heard it thud against the desk above her. “I am keeping a journal. I’ve filled one already.”

“May I peruse it?”

“Yes.” The man bent again and opened a door on the desk. He withdrew the cipher wheel. “You will need this. I have encrypted the entire thing.”

“Encrypted?” the other man inquired.

“Yes,” Douglas responded.

“Was that really necessary?”

“If my theories prove correct, yes. This is larger than the both of us, Jaime,” Douglas responded. “We must ensure this secret does not fall into improper hands.”

Jaime, Cate reflected. Jaime Reid? Jack’s ancestor? This must be Douglas MacKenzie and Jaime Reid, the castle’s original proprietor and his estate manager.

Cate heard the journal’s pages fan. “Perhaps you should recount the tales to me yourself,” Jaime suggested with a chuckle.

Douglas joined in with a laugh. “Not up to the game, old man? If you prefer to be regaled with the tales minus my enhanced security, join me in three days hence for my dinner party. Bring Aria, Olivia would love it.” He bent and shoved the cipher wheel into the desk’s cabinet.

“You plan to share them at the dinner table, do you?” Jaime inquired.

“Of course not, though I do plan to share them. Grayson arrives in two days. My hope is he can shed some light on the strange goings-on.”

“You plan to share these odd and unusual tales, yet you suggest extreme caution.”

“Grayson is no stranger to the odd and unusual.”

“If the incidents represent something as monumental as you suggest, perhaps we should leave well enough alone,” Jaime suggested.

Douglas groaned with a sigh. “You’ve no sense of adventure.” Silence fell between them.

“All right, Douglas. I shall plan to attend.”

“Good man,” Douglas said. His feet shuffled away from the desk. He circled it and clapped Jaime on the back. “Now about that estate business...”

“That we can discuss outside the confines of your dingy lab.”

The voices began to fade as Cate overheard their shoes clatter against the wooden stairs. The room descended into darkness as the light faded away. Douglas chuckled. “This space is far from dingy...”

The bookcase doorway scraped against the floor as it opened and closed. Silence fell over the room. Cate breathed a sigh of relief. Her head fell back against the pedestal behind her as she gulped her fear down. She stayed still for several more moments, too afraid to move lest someone spring out at her.

After several moments, she surmised the coast was clear. She’d heard nothing. Cate crawled from under the desk. Her head rose slowly, and she risked a glance. The darkened room revealed no one. She toggled on her flashlight.

Cate grasped the desk’s sketch from the blotter. She couldn’t leave it. She stuffed it into her cardigan’s front pocket.

She pulled the timepiece into her hand. She stared at its face. How had it activated? Cate rubbed its face, intent on returning to her time. Nothing happened.

CHAPTER 12



Cate's heart sank, and her stomach turned. She tried again. Nothing. Blood rushed into her ears as she swayed on unsteady legs. Somehow, she had returned to the 1790s. And now she was stuck here.

Her mind swirled with questions. They crowded into her brain all at once. What would she do? How would she return? Could she? One question settled among all the rest. She blanched as panic hit her. And brought tears to her eyes. What would she do if she couldn't get home?

Cate spun as she searched the darkened space for answers. She placed her hand against her forehead. "Think, Cate, think!" she whispered to herself.

Perhaps she needed to move to where she had been when the timepiece slowed. She hurried around the desk and tried to find the spot she'd stood in when she'd slipped to the bygone era. With shaky hands, she rubbed the watch's face again. The secondhand continued to crawl.

A sob escaped her. She chewed her lower lip as she considered the few options that sprung to mind. Could she navigate to the back hallway? The one that provided universal access to the watch wearer's time. Perhaps. Would it work? Maybe. With few other options, it was worth a try. Though escaping from this secret area may prove tricky. She had no idea who may be waiting on the other side of the bookcase at any time.

There must be a way to tell, Cate ruminated. Douglas wouldn't leave that to chance. He must have built in a peephole so he could enter and exit

his laboratory discreetly. Cate nodded to herself. She'd search for the eyehole and use it to make her escape.

Cate turned toward the stairs. Bright light blinded her. She squinted against it, raising her hand to shield her eyes.

"Lady Cate! Are you there?" Mrs. Fraser's voice called.

Cate knit her brows, her pulse quickening. Her heart leapt into her throat.

"Lady Cate?"

"I'm here!" Cate squeaked out. She cleared her throat, attempting to steady her voice. "Coming!"

Cate swallowed hard as she glanced around the room. Jack's temporary lighting glared into the space. The paperwork she'd come to retrieve sat stacked next to her. Riley wandered down the stairs and stared at her. A tear fell to her cheek as she spotted him. He meandered over, pausing to stretch mid-walk. Cate bent to collect him into her arms. He offered her a warm lick to the cheek.

Cate wiped the tear away as she sniffled. On shaky legs, she wobbled to the staircase and ascended it. With each step, Cate attempted to compose herself. She hoped her upset did not show. As she reached the top of the stairs, Cate plastered a smile on her face. She stepped into the room, finding Mrs. Fraser fussing over her tray.

"THERE you are," she said. "I thought you planned to stay in that dungeon forever!"

"Sorry," Cate breathed. "Got caught up with my work."

Mrs. Fraser frowned at her. "You'd better be careful with that work," she warned, waving a finger at Cate.

Cate gulped. How did she know? "You're going to work yourself sick! You already look awfully pale, Lady Cate."

Cate offered a nervous chuckle. She had no doubt she was white as a sheet after her experience.

"Not enough sun, I guess," Cate said with a shrug.

"And too much work. That makes Lady Cate a dull girl! Now, take a break and eat your lunch. My roast beef sandwich will give you some strength."

"Thanks, Mrs. Fraser."

Mrs. Fraser smiled at her and, with a nod, spun on her heel and strolled from the room. Cate collapsed into the armchair and sank her head into her

hand. After a moment, she blew out a long breath. "It's okay, Cate. You're okay."

"Talking to yourself again, Lady Cate?" a voice inquired behind her.

Cate leapt in her seat, flailing her arms in the air. She nearly knocked her lunch tray from the table. She shut her eyes for a moment and pressed her hand to her heart. "Oh, Jack," she murmured. "You startled me."

"My apologies, Lady Cate. Wow, Mrs. Fraser wasn't lying," he said as he approached her. "You are terribly pale." He carried a steaming cup on a saucer. "She sent hot tea up. Said you needed it. She was afraid you were coming down with something."

"Thanks," Cate said with a nod.

"You okay?"

Cate bit her lower lip and glanced at him. She shook her head. "No."

Jack sank into the armchair across from her. "Cate, what happened?"

"Ah..." she began in a shaky voice.

"Is she okay?" Molly inquired from the door.

They spun to face her. "Yeah, yeah, I'm fine, Molly. Thanks."

"I didn't mean to startle you. I came up to see if you needed anything else with the tea."

"No," Cate answered. "The tea's fine and the sandwich. I just need some food. I'm fine!"

"Okay," Molly said. She hovered in the doorway.

"Oh, I had a quick estate question I'd forgotten to ask Lady Cate," Jack fibbed.

"Well make it quick, your lunch is getting cold, and Lady Cate needs to eat."

"I will, thanks," Jack said with a grin.

Molly smiled at them as she disappeared down the hall. Jack hurried across the room and pushed the doors closed. "Cate, what's wrong?" he asked, his forehead wrinkled with concern.

Cate sipped at the hot tea, her nerves settling with each sip. "Remember I told you I thought the timepiece slowed twice without my interacting with it?"

"Yes."

"Well, it did it again." Jack raised his eyebrows at her. "And this time I got stuck in the 1700s."

“WHAT?!” Jack exclaimed. He leapt from his seat and paced the floor. “Tell me every detail.”

Cate nodded. “Well...” she began.

A knock sounded at the door and Molly stuck her head in. “Are you going to be much longer? Mrs. Fraser said your hot roast beef will soon turn to cold roast beef. I can bring your lunch up if you plan to stay awhile.”

“That might be best, Molly. Thank you,” Cate agreed. “This is going to take more discussion than we anticipated.”

“Okey-doke! I’ll run it right up,” she said with a grin.

Jack collapsed into the armchair next to Cate. He wrung his hands as he waited.

“I’ll wait until Molly brings your lunch,” Cate mentioned.

Jack nodded without speaking. Within a few moments, Molly had the second lunch tray delivered. “Here we are. I hope it’s nothing too serious!”

“No, just unexpected,” Cate fibbed. It was only half a fib, she figured.

“Enjoy and don’t work too hard!” Molly said as she left the room.

Cate waited as Molly pulled the doors closed behind her before speaking again. Jack beat her to it. “Okay, start at the beginning,” he prompted.

Cate nodded. “Okay.” She blew out a long breath before launching into her tale. “I told you earlier Ken helped me to decrypt the journals. And that he asked someone to automate the process. His contact got in touch with me and will have a program for me soon.”

Jack perched on the chair, bobbing his head up and down to acknowledge her statements. “How does this relate to being stuck in the 1700s?”

“Given that this guy, Damien, is going to provide me with a program to speed decryption of the journals, I decided I would work on decoding Douglas’s sketches while I waited since they seemed less tedious. I went downstairs to retrieve them. Oh, I never got them.” Cate’s mind began to feel less frazzled as she talked through the circumstances.

“While I was there, the timepiece started its loud ticking. I grabbed it to check, and the lights went out. I heard voices. Unfamiliar voices. So, I hid under the desk. Two men came down the stairs and spoke to each other. They called each other Douglas and Jaime.”

“Douglas and Jaime?” Jack questioned. “As in Douglas MacKenzie and Jaime Reid?”

“That’s what I’m assuming! Douglas was discussing writing the journals! He told Jaime he experienced strange things and wanted to get to the bottom of it. Jaime asked about them but seemed less than keen on decoding the journals when Douglas suggested it. Douglas told him to come to a dinner party he was hosting in three days. He planned to explain it to someone else then. What was his name?”

Jack rubbed his forehead and shook his head. “Wait, wait, wait, back up a minute. Why did you activate the timepiece?”

“I didn’t!” Cate exclaimed. “That’s what I was getting at. I went down to retrieve the papers and without warning, I was in 1790-something. I never touched the timepiece. That’s the third time it’s happened. And this time I can confirm I didn’t absentmindedly rub the watch. It was under my cardigan. My hand was nowhere near it!”

Jack’s jaw went slack. He swallowed hard. “So, it activated itself?”

Cate shrugged as she took the first bite of her sandwich. “I guess? I’m not certain. All I know is I was studying the desk schematic one second and the next the room plunged into darkness, and I was in the 1700s.”

Jack shook his head as though he could not comprehend it. “Okay, I’m sorry, one minute you’re glancing at the desk drawing the next you’re in the 1700s without ever touching the timepiece?”

“That’s right.”

Jack shook his head in disbelief. “You’re sure you weren’t touching it?”

“Positive,” Cate answered.

“Okay, okay, so then what happened again?”

“Douglas and Jaime had a brief conversation. They were discussing strange incidents, and Douglas said he was recording it all in journals. He invited Jaime to a dinner party in three days. He told him he planned to discuss the incidents with someone else. Someone familiar with strange goings-on. Who? What was his name?” Cate questioned aloud.

Jack bit into his sandwich and considered Cate’s statements as he chewed.

“Grayson!” Cate exclaimed.

“What?”

“Grayson was his name. Douglas planned to tell someone named Grayson. I need to jot that down.”

Cate scurried to the desk to retrieve a pen and make a note of her discovery.

“Okay, so, then what happened? Did you use the timepiece to return mid-conversation from your hiding spot?”

Cate shook her head as she returned to her armchair. “No, they left after a bit. I waited until I heard nothing before I climbed out. I had dropped the sketch of the desk and needed to retrieve it before I returned. This is where the story gets weird.”

“THIS is where the story gets weird?” Jack questioned in an incredulous tone.

“I climbed from under the desk and grabbed the sketch. The timepiece was still slow. I rubbed it to activate it and return here. But it didn’t work.”

Jack’s eyes went wide. “It didn’t work?”

“No,” Cate confirmed. “It didn’t work. I tried it again and still nothing.”

“How did you get back?” Jack inquired.

“I wasn’t sure what to do. I wondered if I could make it to the back hall to try the universal time rip but then, suddenly, the lights lit and I heard Mrs. Fraser calling me.”

Jack shook his head again. “So, you didn’t activate the timepiece in either instance, yet you slipped through a time rip and back? How?”

Cate shrugged; her eyebrows raised. She shook her head. “I... I don’t know.”

Jack rubbed his chin. “Cate, this isn’t good.”

“I know!” she agreed. “It’s not good. And this is the third time it’s happened. Is the timepiece broken? Malfunctioning? Is it no longer controlling the rips? Are the time rips morphing?”

Jack shook his head, his eyes wide. He paused, searching for an answer. “Perhaps Pap can help. At the very least, he should check the timepiece.”

“Good idea,” Cate agreed.

“The sooner the better,” Jack proposed.

Cate nodded. “Okay.”

“We’ll go right after lunch. I’d go now but I don’t want to raise any suspicion with the others.”

“Right,” Cate said with a nod. They ate for a few moments in silence before Cate added, “I can’t believe this happened. I’m still shocked I was somewhere in the 1790s for a few moments.”

“You’re damned lucky, Cate. You could have been trapped there!” Jack exclaimed, his tone incredulous.

“I realize that. I do, but for once, I had no control over it. I didn’t ask to go back. I didn’t even impulsively try the timepiece there to determine if a rip existed.”

“Yet now we know one does,” Jack answered. “And it goes somewhere into the 1790s.”

Cate nodded. “Early in the 1790s, I’d guess. Around when Douglas started the journals. And he was about to have visitors. A man named Grayson.” Cate stared ahead as she parsed through the information again. “Oh! My accidental trip did tell me one thing.”

“What?”

“The voice haunting me in my dreams belongs to neither Douglas nor Jaime!”

“So, we were correct in that assumption,” Jack responded.

“Yes! But we still can’t identify who it is,” Cate lamented.

“If the timepiece is malfunctioning, we may have bigger problems on our hands,” Jack replied.

Cate sighed as she finished the last bites of her roast beef sandwich. Jack’s assessment was likely correct. The mystery of the malfunctioning timepiece took precedence over her nightmares.

Jack finished his meal, and they returned their trays to the kitchen before making the excuse of errands in town. They arrived at Stanley Reid’s cottage on the outskirts of Dunhaven shortly after.

Jack let himself in through the front door, calling out to the older man. Cate followed him into the living room. “Jackie?” Stanley called.

“Yes, and Lady Cate,” Jack replied.

Jack’s grandfather ambled into the room from the kitchen. “Lady Cate! To what do I owe the pleasure?”

“Nice to see you, too, Pap,” Jack joked.

“It’s good to see you, Jackie, but it’s far better to see Lady Cate!” the older man quipped. “Can I offer you a cuppa?”

“I’d appreciate that,” Cate responded. Despite recovering from her earlier scare, her nerves remained raw from the experience.

Stanley motioned for them to follow him to the kitchen. He bustled about the small room as he set the kettle on the stove and retrieved teacups. “What brings you by? Another mystery?”

“No,” Jack countered. “Well, yes, although it’s more of a problem than a simple mystery.”

“Oh?” Stanley inquired as he set cookies on a plate.

Jack swallowed hard before he launched into the story. “Cate ended up in the 1790s earlier today. Without activating the timepiece.”

Stanley ceased laying out cookies. He twisted to face them. His brows knit together. “What?”

Cate nodded. “It’s true. I went into Douglas’s secret office and the next thing I knew I was in the 1790s. I hadn’t touched the timepiece. It slowed on its own. And that’s not the first time it’s happened.”

Cate described the other two instances to a stunned Stanley. He sank into the chair across from her as she finished the tale.

“Ever heard of anything like this happening before, Pap?” Jack inquired.

His eyebrows raised, and he shook his head in response. He blew out a long breath as he struggled to find words to respond. “Ah... I... No, I’ve never heard of anything like this,” Stanley admitted.

“Would you mind taking a look at the timepiece to determine if anything is wrong with it?” Jack asked.

“Not at all,” he answered.

The kettle screamed its alert across the kitchen. “How about that cuppa first?” Cate suggested with a smile.

Stanley returned her smile. “Whatever the lady wants, the lady gets,” he said.

“I’ll get it,” Jack offered.

“Now, explain this time travel trip again,” Stanley said to Cate as Jack poured the steaming water into their mugs. “Every detail.”

“Goodness, you two really are alike,” Cate said with a chuckle as Jack settled at the table again.

“We are, though I am more roguishly handsome,” Jack responded with a grin.

“Obviously, I’m the humbler one,” Stanley retorted. He sipped at his cup of tea. “Now, you ended up in Douglas’s time. How?”

Cate recounted the details of her experience. His brow furrowed as he considered her tale. “And the timepiece didn’t work to return either?”

“It didn’t. At least not when I attempted to use it. Perhaps it was a delayed reaction?” Cate questioned.

He rubbed his chin. “I’ve never heard of anything like this. It certainly never happened in Lady Mary’s or Lady Gertrude’s time.”

“Perhaps the timepiece is reaching the end of its life,” Cate suggested.

“Let’s take a peek and determine if anything is malfunctioning on it,” Stanley said.

Cate handed the timepiece to him. She and Jack followed the older man into his living room. He attached a magnifier to his desk and removed a jeweler’s toolset from his drawer. He carefully opened the timepiece. The mechanism inside whirred away. Jack peered into the magnifier next to Stanley.

“Anything?”

The older man cocked his head at several angles, moving the timepiece under the magnifier multiple ways.

“The mechanism controlling the general keeping of time seems to be working properly,” he murmured.

“But?” Cate inquired, reading further into his comments.

He closed the watch and handed it back to Cate. He pulled his glasses from his face. “But,” he answered, “beyond that, I couldn’t say.”

“What do you mean, Pap?” Jack questioned. “I thought you took care of this and kept it in working order for both the previous owners?”

“I did. But our maintenance never went beyond basic repair or the cleaning of it. We never had a problem with the time travel component.”

“Is the time travel component working?” Cate asked.

Stanley puckered his lips and glanced between Jack and Cate. “That I can’t help with. No one understands how that element works.”

Cate’s eyebrows squished together, and she glanced sharply to Jack. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, no one beyond perhaps Douglas and possibly Jaime understands how this timepiece controls the time rips.”

“What?” Jack questioned. “He never told anyone? Never passed on the secret in case something like this happened?”

“Not to my knowledge, no,” Stanley admitted. “No one understood how he managed to harness the power, only how to operate the timepiece.”

“Well, that’s just great!” Jack fumed, throwing his arms in the air. “So, we’ve got a malfunctioning time travel instrument interacting with time rips all over the castle.”

“It’s now vital that we decrypt Douglas’s journals,” Cate said with a sigh. “Perhaps those along with his sketches will tell us how he managed to control the time rips with the timepiece.”

Stanley raised his eyebrows. "Have you made any progress on that?" he questioned. "Jack told me about your find."

"Yes," Cate responded. "A former colleague of mine helped me identify the cipher and how to decrypt it. And, in the good news column, he put me in touch with someone who promised a computer program to make decoding it much faster. I'll make it my priority to work on those. Perhaps we'll find something there."

"I'm sorry I can't be of more help," Stanley said with a shrug. "The secret of that timepiece went to the grave with Douglas and Jaime from what I understand."

"Are there any elements inside the timepiece that aren't in a normal watch?" Jack inquired.

"No," Stanley said with the shake of his head. "That's what makes it even more enigmatic. There're no special components, no extra pieces. How this timepiece interacts and controls the rips is a mystery."

"Until we find out, perhaps you shouldn't wear that," Jack said to Cate, glancing at the timepiece hanging around her neck.

Cate considered it as Stanley responded. "It wouldn't matter."

"Because the timepiece could interact with any time rips near it wherever I leave it?" Cate suggested.

He shook his head. "No. No, it's not that. Because the watch controls the time rips. They stay closed unless you open them by activating the timepiece. But from what you've told me, the timepiece is no longer doing that. They are opening and closing at random, regardless of the timepiece's presence."

Cate's eyes widened as her jaw dropped open. Jack's eyebrows raised as he blinked in disbelief. "So, what you're saying is," Cate answered, her voice slow as she pieced together the puzzle, "the time rips can open and close at any time sucking in anyone in their vicinity and sending them to another era."

"And we now have no control over this at all," Jack finished.

Stanley stood and swallowed hard. "That's exactly what I'm saying."

CHAPTER 13



Jack ran his fingers through his hair. “You can’t be serious.” Cate sank into an armchair, speechless from the latest development. “What are we going to do?”

“I don’t know,” Jack admitted.

“Just a moment,” Stanley cautioned. “All is not lost yet.”

“Are you kidding, Pap? We’ve got a castle full of people with time rips opening and closing whenever they want and no means to control it! This is a disaster waiting to happen.”

“No,” Stanley argued, “the timepiece is still controlling them somewhat. You’re not slipping in and out of eras at every turn. And when you do, it corrects, eventually. It’s still exhibiting some control.”

“Not enough,” Jack said with a sigh and a shake of his head.

“No, I agree. But they are still held somewhat at bay. We need to determine how the timepiece does that. Perhaps then we can rectify the situation,” Stanley suggested.

“And you’re sure you have no idea?” Jack inquired. “No mention of even the slightest clue of how this thing works?”

Stanley shook his head. “No, none. As I said, this secret seems to have gone to the grave with Douglas and Jaime. No one understood how they harnessed the power with a simple timepiece.”

“I can’t believe they told no one,” Jack said, scrubbing his face with his hands.

“It’s likely,” Cate chimed in. “Randolph didn’t seem to possess an understanding of it either beyond the existence of time travel and the timepiece’s relevance to it.”

“Perhaps he recorded it in the journals,” Jack suggested.

“So, you’ll need to decode them and see if it provides any answers,” Stanley said.

“That seems a tall order,” Jack lamented.

“Maybe Damien will have the computer program for me, and we’ll find an answer in Douglas’s journal.”

“If not, we may be doomed.”

Stanley raised his eyebrows at them. “What?” Jack inquired.

He shrugged. “Well...”

“If you’ve got something to say, Pap, say it,” Jack encouraged.

“The journals aren’t the only source of information.”

Jack screwed up his face. “What are you suggesting?”

Stanley shrugged again. “You seem to have found access to Douglas himself.”

Jack’s eyes went wide and his jaw slack. “You aren’t actually suggesting we travel back in time with a malfunctioning timepiece.”

“To be fair, it seems to be malfunctioning only when it’s not in use,” Cate argued.

“We don’t know that,” Jack countered. “And I don’t want to find out mid-trip that it doesn’t work.”

“Better than finding yourself suddenly stuck in the 1790s without ever having intended to travel there,” Cate retorted.

“All right, all right, just calm down, you two,” Stanley said.

Jack rubbed his face with his hands. “Okay, you’re right,” he answered. “Let’s start with the journals and go from there. If we can’t get them translated fast enough or they don’t give us any information, we...” He paused. “I can’t believe I’m about to say this. We head back to the 1700s and search for answers there.”

“Agree,” Cate answered. “I’ll check for that program as soon as I get home. I’ll do my best to decipher everything in the next few days. If there’s no concrete information in those, we may need to consider attending that dinner party Douglas mentioned.”

Jack shut his eyes and shook his head. “I can’t believe time travel may be our *best* option.”

“Speaking of Douglas,” Cate said to Stanley, “do you know anything about a man named Grayson who visited the castle in the 1790s?”

Stanley glanced around in thought. “Name doesn’t ring any bells. Do you have a last name?”

“No,” Cate admitted. “Douglas mentioned wanting to tell Grayson about the unusual events at the castle in his upcoming visit. I was curious about his involvement in this.”

“Sorry, lassie, it doesn’t ring any bells.”

Cate shrugged. “Oh well, I suppose we should head back, and I can get a start on those journals.”

“Do you think you should stay at the castle, Cate?” Jack inquired.

“Where else would I stay?” Cate answered.

“Anywhere,” Jack answered. “Just not there!”

Cate shook her head. “I can’t do that! There’s Molly and Mr. and Mrs. Fraser to consider. How would we explain it to them?”

“Gas leak?” Jack offered with a weak smile.

She shook her head again. “That story won’t pass muster.”

“The lassie’s correct. You can’t avoid the time rips. Your best bet is to seek a solution as quickly as possible.”

Jack frowned and took a deep breath. “Then I’m afraid unless there is a clear answer in those journals, we will be attending a 1790s dinner party in three days.”

* * *

Cate and Jack returned to the castle. Silence filled most of their return ride. “I’ll start on the journals even before I receive that program from Damien,” Cate murmured as they traveled.

Jack nodded, providing no additional response.

“I should recover the sketches from Douglas’s office, too.” She paused for a moment. “Though I’m loath to go down there.”

“I’ll go with you,” Jack offered. “At least then if you get stuck, you won’t be alone.”

“Thanks,” Cate said with a nod.

Cate stared at the castle rising on the hill. Nothing appeared amiss. Inside the walls, though, danger lurked. Trouble brewed under the surface.

Her new home had become perilous. Perhaps this had been the source of her nightmares. Perhaps they were a warning.

"I'm sorry, Jack," Cate said as the turmoil bubbled to the surface of her mind.

Jack glanced sideways at her. "For what?"

"This," Cate said with a shrug. She gestured toward the castle looming on the hill in front of them. "The danger, the uncertainty. I—"

"Cate," Jack interrupted. "It's not your fault."

"Perhaps if I hadn't been so headstrong in jumping around in time since we discovered the secret this wouldn't have happened."

"And perhaps it's just an anomaly regardless of the timepiece's previous usage. Perhaps the rips are modifying in some way as you suggested. We know so little, you can't blame yourself for this."

She nodded, biting her lower lip.

"Cate," Jack continued, reaching over to grab her hand. "It's not your fault. And besides, those trips were worth it."

Her brow crinkled, and she glanced at him. "They were?"

"Certainly. We saved a man's life on one and we caught a jewel thief on the other!"

"I thought you hated time travel and thought it was best to leave well enough alone. Not mess with the past and change things."

"Sometimes I'm a stick-in-the-mud," Jack admitted.

She chuckled at his comment.

Jack continued, "Someone very wise once told me the universe has a way of correcting itself. So, perhaps we can't irreparably damage things. And besides, my duty is to protect my MacKenzie counterpart. If I don't do that now, I've really failed as a Reid."

Cate squeezed Jack's hand. "Thanks. I'm glad you've had a sudden change of heart. Because we might be visiting another time period and meeting more of my ancestors."

"And mine!" Gravel crunched under the tires as Jack swung the car onto the drive.

"By the way, speaking of visiting the past, what's with your interest in the man named Grayson?" Jack asked as he pulled the car parallel to the castle.

"Douglas mentioned him. He said he's no stranger to unusual things. I wondered if he was the man haunting my dreams."

“Ahhh,” Jack answered as they climbed from the car.

“Let’s grab those drawings and I’ll get to work.”

“Okay,” Jack agreed.

They navigated the castle halls to the library. The bookcase remained open from Cate’s previous trip downstairs. The blackness beyond yawned at them as they entered. Cate plugged the lights in, hovering at the top of the stairway.

“Ready?” Jack asked.

Cate shook her head but responded, “Yes.”

“That’s not convincing at all.”

“Let’s just do this as quickly as possible.”

“Deal!” Jack exclaimed.

Jack held out his hand. Cate grasped it, and they hurried down the wooden stairs, hand-in-hand. She raced to the pile of sketches and scooped them up in her free hand. “Okay, let’s go,” she stated.

She preceded Jack up the stairs. As they hastened into the library, both Cate and Jack blew out a sigh of relief. “Made it,” Jack said.

She nodded as she pulled the plug, dousing the lights in Douglas’s office. Jack pushed the bookcase shut. “Don’t go back down there until we have to, okay?”

“Okay,” Cate said with a nod.

“Wow! No objections from Lady Cate!”

Cate shook her head at him, a smile forming on her lips. “Don’t get used to it.”

“Good luck with the journals,” Jack offered as he approached the doors.

“Thanks, with any luck, all we’ll need to do is wind the thing backward and blow on it twice and it’ll be fixed.”

Jack stopped in his tracks. “Wind it backward and blow on it?” he asked with a chuckle.

“Don’t say anything,” Cate warned.

Jack held up his hands as a smirk formed on his face. He motioned his lips were sealed as he backed from the room.

His levity lifted her spirits a bit. The tense situation weighed on her, though she hoped a solution lay in the stack of journals at her feet. She piled the sketches next to her laptop.

Before she began, she toggled her laptop on and checked her email. Her heart sank as she found no new messages from Damien Sherwood in her

inbox. It didn't matter, she reflected. She had to make a start on the information.

She pushed her laptop away and pulled the stack of sketches over. She shuffled through them. She located the sketch showing the timepiece. She identified the number in the corner and matched it to the disk orientation written on the list she'd retrieved with the decoder disks.

Cate reordered the disks and began her translation of the marked components. Perhaps one of the marked pieces controlled the time rips. She dialed the wheels around to form the first cipher. The row underneath read: CASE SCREW.

She puckered her lips, certain this wasn't the component controlling the time rips. She tried another. It read CROWN WHEEL. She jotted it down and moved on. The next decrypted item read REGULATOR. Cate's pulse quickened. Regulator, her mind questioned? Perhaps this component regulated the time rips! She put a star next to it and tried the next. A smile crept across her face as she decoded this piece: ESCAPE WHEEL PIVOT.

She raised her eyebrows at the last two names. This *must* have something to do with the time rips! Cate grabbed her phone and tapped around until the line rang.

"Lady Cate!" Stanley answered on the other end. "Long time, huh?"

"Hi, Mr. Reid," Cate said. "Funny. You may rival Jack with your joke-telling skills."

"I think I've got that young laddie beat by a mile! What can I do for you?"

"I found a sketch of the timepiece," Cate explained. "Encrypted. I've been decrypting it and I stumbled upon a few components I wanted to run past you as potential time rip managers."

"Go ahead, Lady Cate, what have you found?"

"Okay," Cate said, shifting the phone to her left hand as she pulled her notes closer. "The first piece says 'regulator.'"

"No, that's a standard component for a timepiece like that."

"Oh," she said, a note of disappointment in her voice. "Okay. The next one I saw that might relate is 'escape wheel pivot.'"

"No, this allows the time to move forward by a fixed amount of time."

"Really?" she questioned. "Both of those are standard components?"

"Indeed, they are, Lady Cate."

"Any others?"

“I haven’t decrypted any more, I thought I’d hit upon something. Do you mind waiting while I try a few more?”

“Not at all!” Cate input a few more, checking each with Stanley.

“I’m sorry, Lady Cate, all those are standard pieces of a pocket watch.”

Cate huffed. “Shoot! That leaves us nowhere!”

“Sadly, it does. It appears Douglas did not list the components controlling the time rips on the sketch.”

“No,” Cate lamented. “Well, I won’t take up any more of your time. Thank you for your help!”

“No trouble at all, lassie. If you stumble upon anything else, don’t hesitate to call.”

She thanked him and ended the call, tossing her phone on the desk in an expression of her frustration.

Cate checked the time on her timepiece, which apparently contained no components beyond those in normal pocket watches, as Stanley mentioned. She frowned at it as she noted the later-than-expected hour.

She dug through the sketches in the hopes of making some progress today. She found a few other drawings with limited text. She spent most of the late afternoon decrypting them but found nothing to help with their current predicament.

With a huff, she shoved the paperwork to the back of the desk. She took a brief break with the dogs outside before dinner.

Upon her return to the library, she rushed to her laptop to check her email. Nothing new popped into her inbox. She frowned at the laptop as the library doors opened.

“I’m just finishing up,” she promised, assuming Molly or Mrs. Fraser delivered her tray.

“Don’t stop on my account,” Jack’s voice answered her.

Cate spun in her chair. “Are you trying out a new job?” she inquired as he waddled across the room and struggled to set the tray on the table.

“If I am, I’m sure I’m failing miserably,” he said as he nudged the tray further onto the table.

She chuckled at him. “Is anything the matter downstairs?”

“No,” Jack admitted. “I volunteered to bring the tray up since I wanted to discuss something with you.”

“I haven’t made any progress if that’s what you hoped to ask about. I decrypted the timepiece sketch, but it revealed nothing but normal watch

components. I called your grandfather and discussed each piece with him, and we found nothing beyond what a normal watch would contain.”

Jack grimaced. “That’s too bad, though that wasn’t what I wanted to discuss.”

“Oh,” Cate answered, her brows furrowing.

“I’m not comfortable with you being in this castle with these haywire time rips. I told everyone there was some problem with a potential water leak. Said we’d noticed it in Douglas’s office. I wanted to keep an eye on it until we could determine the source and repair it so I would be staying in the castle.”

“Oh!” Cate exclaimed. She gave Jack a soft smile. “I appreciate that very much.”

“I probably can’t do much, but it makes me feel better being here.”

“Somehow it’ll make me feel better, too.”

“I’ll just run home and grab a few things and be back. Molly’s preparing my usual room.”

“Great. Thanks, Jack.”

Cate dug into her dinner as Jack departed. His presence in the castle may help her sleep tonight. She considered swapping bedrooms since hers contained a time rip. However, they did not have an exhaustive list of all the time rip locations. She worried about slipping into an unidentified time rip and returning to a time with which she was unfamiliar. At least the rip in her bedroom led to a time she’d already visited.

As evening turned to night, she dawdled in the library with a mystery novel. She kept a constant eye on her email, hoping one from Damien Sherwood popped into it any second. Nothing came.

She retired to her suite. Both dogs leapt onto her bed, more than ready to go to sleep. She was less inclined. She eyed the bed with a frown as she kicked off her slippers. Would she lay awake or fall asleep and have another nightmare? Either way, the night promised misery for her.

She crawled into bed and shut off the lights. Moonlight painted the room and cast long shadows on the floor. In the darkness, she strained to listen for any sounds, especially the characteristic ticking of her timepiece.

* * *

After an hour of tossing and turning, Cate rose from her bed and shuffled to her sitting room. She collapsed on the chaise. Worry crowded her mind, along with potential scenarios and questions. Would the time rips continue to misbehave? What if they ended up in another time period? Would they find a solution before something tragic happened?

Her mind spun in an endless cycle of unanswerable questions. She pulled her laptop onto her lap. Perhaps a movie would relax her mind. Or at least pass the time. As she toggled on the display, she wondered if Jack had any luck sleeping in the castle tonight.

Her display brightened the room. Her email program still sat open on the screen. She swiped at her trackpad. As she pushed the pointer toward a new tab, the email list updated. A new email topped her inbox.

Her heart skipped a beat as she recognized the sender: Damien Sherwood. She selected the email to open it.

Hi Cate! Attached is a shiny new program for you! I tested it and it seems to work fine. If you have any issues let me know!

Once you open it, you'll first need to tell it the order of the disks. There are drop-down boxes to select the disk number. Once you have that in, click DECODE! That will open an interface with two windows. The first (on the left) is where you'll enter your ciphertext. Then click the GO! button and it will give you the plaintext in the right window.

I wanted to get this to you asap, so I didn't spend a lot of time checking efficiencies (I'll keep working on it). So, for now, maybe only do a page or two of text at a time. It should work fine with more, but it'll be really, really slow, and might take a long time to complete. It'd be faster to work in small chunks and copy the results over to a larger document to compile everything. Well, I'm sure you don't need to be told that! You're obviously very intelligent and capable.

Anyway, good luck and have fun! I hope you find some interesting things encoded in the text! Let me know if you have any questions or problems!

D

Her pulse raced as she downloaded the program file. After a brief install, a window popped up on her laptop.

DECODER EXPLODER appeared in colorful letters across her screen. She chuckled at the program's name. As it loaded, she carried the laptop down to the library, where the journals still sat in a stack next to the desk.

As promised, the first screen requested the order of the disks. She pulled open the first journal and input the disk order before clicking the DECODE button.

The next window presented itself. A blank page stared at her, awaiting a text input.

She opened her word document as she flipped to the first page of the journal. She copied the text and input it into Damien's program. She waited with bated breath after clicking the GO! button.

CHAPTER 14



Eate gnawed her lower lip as the colorful circle spun around. Her heart thudded as she waited for results from the decoder.

After a few minutes, text appeared in the right-hand window along with a pop-up window declaring success. She dismissed it and copied the plaintext into a new word document.

I have created this journal to chronicle and preserve my experiences as I search for answers. Strange encounters have met much of my brief time within Dunhaven Castle. I often ponder over the warning I received when walking the property prior to the castle's construction.

"Cursed," the old woman said. Her tattered clothing hung loosely on her frame. One crystal blue eye stared at me from a wrinkled face. The other eye clouded over in a grotesque fashion. Her wrinkled skin sagged on her face and neck. She pointed a gnarled finger at me. "Dinnae you build here. You and your kin shall be CURSED!"

I ignored her. Perhaps I should not have. Indeed, odd occurrences followed us from acquisition through building, eventually enveloping us as we settled into our new home.

Strange weather patterns were reported by townsfolk on the site we proposed for building. As the foundation was laid, a load of bricks shifted without warning, killing a poor soul crushed beneath their weight.

During construction of the west wall, one worker disappeared. Of course, foul play was suspected, but no traces of him, nor his body, could be found.

This would prove minor compared to the disturbances we would endure as residents of the finished castle.

The page ended. Cate hurried to input the next page of text. Within a few moments, she read the next piece of the entry.

It seemed to begin with minor instances. A vase out of place. A book moved. Then, occurrences became more disturbing. As the intensity increased, I vowed to determine the source of these hauntings. I have recorded and will continue to record all instances on these pages.

After living with these happenings for over one year, I have concocted several theories regarding their origins. I shall also detail these within the pages of my journal.

I shall begin at the beginning.

Good fortune smiled upon me, the son of a country doctor. Several wise investments allowed me to rise in wealth and station. Perhaps my wealth cursed me. I sought to create a grand home for my family, one worthy of the newest title I carried: Earl of Dunhavenshire.

At the center of Dunhavenshire sat the small town of Dunhaven, my home as a youth. I left Dunhaven a man of simple means; I returned an earl. Determined to erect the grandest building overlooking the town, I was immediately drawn to the hill overlooking the hamlet.

Even as a child, the hill held a reputation among the townsfolk. Tainted land, they called it. Strange manifestations occurred there. Weather shifted suddenly, without warning.

Hushed whispers suggested the undead roamed the grassy knolls. Others suggested underground rivers flowed with blood. Even more, advocated the existence of a gateway to Hell.

The rumors did little to sway me from my desires to build a structure such as Dunhaven had never seen and such that would never be rivaled by the small town for centuries to come.

"There are other properties to consider," Jaime Reid informed me as we discussed the prospect.

"There are none that hold my interest," I insisted.

"Lord Mackenzie," he countered before I interrupted him.

"If we are to work together, Mr. Reid, you must understand I am a man with specific ideas and desires. I am not easily put off by nonsense and superstition."

“Still,” the man urged, “consider the others. What holds you back on them? Why do you desire the piece of land you mentioned?”

“Simple,” I explained. “The land sits at the highest spot overlooking the town.”

“And you, as Lord of the county, desire to be a constant reminder to the town of your presence and authority?” he inquired.

“I desire to be a constant source of inspiration. I left this town a pauper. I returned a lord.”

Jaime smirked at me. He did not agree yet he did not challenge me on it.

Jaime and I had been school chums before my departure. “You threatened you would, and you have done it, Douglas.”

“And I intend to make good on my promise,” I assured him.

“We were but children, Douglas. I expect nothing.”

“I am a man of my word, Jaime. Do you recall the promise I made?”

“I do.”

Under a cloudless azure blue sky, we lay in the field. The cool grass beneath us tickled our bare feet. I had sworn there to make something of myself. “I shall be more than a simple country doctor,” I vowed.

“’Tis nothing wrong with a country doctor,” Jaime countered. “It is an honest living.”

“Indeed, it is,” I agreed, “yet it is not very grand.”

“Perhaps stability is preferential to grandeur.”

“Perhaps stability is an excuse for complacency,” I suggested. “Have you no grand aspirations?”

Jaime shrugged. “I strive to make an honest living to provide for my family.”

I rolled to my stomach and faced him. “Have you no dreams beyond that?”

He shrugged again. “I suppose not.”

“Well, I have,” I informed him. “Mark my words this day, Jaime Reid, I shall strive for more than the mundane. I shall be someone one day. Everyone shall know my name. They shall say ‘there is Douglas MacKenzie, a man among men!’”

Jaime let out a belly laugh as I continued. “I shall, Jaime. You shall see. And when I do, I shall always remember our friendship. I shall take you

under my wing and ensure your family is provided for with that honest living."

Our conversation flitted through my mind as I responded. "And now I have achieved my success and returned to Dunhaven a man among men! And my offer stands. Your family shall be provided for easily with the sum I offer you."

"To build and oversee a castle on cursed land?"

"To build and oversee a castle on PRIME land," I argued. He hesitated. "Oh, Jaime, those rumors are merely the prattling on of superstitious townsfolk. Join me. Take the first step on this adventure with me!"

A smile crossed his face, and he extended his hand to me.

"A wise choice," I said with a grin as I gave him a strong handshake.

Perhaps Jaime had been correct. Perhaps not. Perhaps this, too, is part of my destiny.

* * *

Her body trembled. She stiffened, her head darting up and her eyes snapping open. She squinted against the light in the room as she searched for the source of the disturbance.

"Cate," Jack's voice whispered. "Cate!"

"Huh?" Cate murmured as she began to awaken.

"Hey, sleepyhead," Jack said with a grin. "What are you doing down here?"

She glanced around the room, recognizing the library. Her laptop, its screen blank, sat on the desk in front of her. Douglas's first journal lay open next to it. She blinked a few times before turning her attention to Jack, who knelt at her side.

"Uh," she mumbled. "I couldn't sleep. I planned on watching a movie but when I opened my laptop, I found an email from Damien with the decryption program, so I decided to head down here and start working."

Jack smiled at her as he pushed a lock of hair out of her face. "Care to share your discoveries over one of Mrs. Fraser's shortbreads?"

She brightened at the offer. "There's not much to share, but I won't say no to a shortbread!"

She rose to her feet.

“I’ll bring them to you. Why don’t you curl up on your armchair and relax?” Jack suggested.

“I’m not going to fight you on that suggestion,” Cate answered. “I’m exhausted.”

Jack grinned at her as she slid into the chair. He disappeared and returned a few minutes later, shortbread tin in hand.

Jack sank into the armchair next to Cate. “Okay, have you fixed the timepiece yet?”

She grabbed a cookie from the tin and scoffed at the statement. “Not even close.”

Jack dropped his head onto the chair behind him in a dramatic display. “You’ve *got* to be kidding! You haven’t solved this yet?”

She giggled, despite her exhaustion. “Nope, sorry. I fell asleep way too fast. I only decoded about five pages.”

“So, this Damien guy’s program works, huh?”

“Like a charm! I decoded everything I already had typed in. But focusing on that gobbledygook made my eyes cross and apparently put me right to sleep!”

“Okay, so no solutions yet. Did you find anything else interesting though?”

“In my estimation, I did!” Cate raced to the desk and retrieved her laptop. She detailed her findings to Jack.

“Cursed. CURSED!” Jack shouted.

She chuckled at his “old woman” voice. “Not funny, they probably did assume it was cursed!”

“You laughed, didn’t you?”

“I did, yes.”

Silence fell over them. She finished her cookie and snapped the lid on the tin. She stretched and yawned. “I guess I should get back at it.”

“You should get some rest.”

“I’m okay. I had a little nap there,” Cate insisted. “And I really need to make more progress on these. I’ve got thirteen journals to get through and...”

“Cate,” Jack interrupted. “You need to get some sleep. The journals can wait.”

“No,” Cate argued. “We need to figure something out before this time rip problem gets worse.”

“We’ll handle it, Cate. We can deal with this. Get some rest. Start fresh tomorrow.”

She bit her lower lip as she glanced at the stack of journals. After a moment, she nodded. “Okay. I am tired. I’ll call it a night and start first thing tomorrow morning.”

Jack smiled at her. “Good night, Lady Cate.”

“Good night, Jack. Oh, you’d better put this tin back before Mrs. Fraser finds it missing!”

“Don’t worry, I’ll put it back before I return to bed. There’s no way I’m getting us caught!”

* * *

Morning came sooner than Cate hoped. Her alarm screamed in her ears as she groaned. “Ugh,” Cate moaned as she climbed to her feet. At least, she reflected as the hot water cascaded over her in the shower, she’d slept without a nightmare. She frowned at the current solution to her predicament. Perhaps she’d find a resolution for her nightmares within the pages of Douglas’s journals.

Following breakfast, she settled in the library for another work session. Before she began, she typed an email to Damien and informed him the program worked like a charm.

She settled in for a long session of tedious typing. After five more pages, she decided to take a break from transcribing and decrypt the new entries. She dug into the entries as the program output them.

Jaime and I toured the property the following day. I stood on the hill and overlooked the property. “Here,” I asserted.

“Here?” Jaime inquired.

“On this very spot!” I declared.

Jaime spun as he scanned the area. “It is the highest spot. View of the town below. Though, perhaps...”

“Perhaps nothing. It shall be this spot!” I tapped my cane on the ground.

“Cursed!” a gravelly voice growled from behind us.

I spun to face the sound. The old woman stared at us. Her leathery skin wrinkled across her forehead and cheeks and around her colorless lips. One

eye, crystal blue, stared at me from beneath that wrinkled forehead, the other milky and clouded. "Cursed," she repeated.

"Whatever are you on about, old woman?" I inquired of her.

"Cursed, this land is. Dinnae build here. You shall bring a terrible scourge on your family."

"Foolhardy rumors, nothing more," I assured her.

She shook her head. "Nay," she snarled at me. "Bad, this land. Cursed. You shall suffer a terrible fate if you continue with this folly."

"I do not give in to foolish gossip. Now, begone, woman, allow us to conclude our business."

"You have been warned," she muttered.

"She will not be the last person to say these things," Jaime said as she wandered away.

"I am certain she will not be. I care not. Now, where shall we place the stables?"

My mind often returns to that moment. I have spoken with the woman several times since that day. She maintains her warning. And I have grown to believe it.

We began construction on the castle three months to the day from when Jaime and I stood on that hill. I have already mentioned the unfavorable circumstances surrounding the castle's construction. I am certain one if not both of these incidents are related to the quirks we continue to experience.

After the castle's completion, we took up residence in the fantastic space. Not long after, we began to feel the effects of the castle's peculiarities.

I still recall the first night in our new home. Unable to sleep, I roamed the halls. Moonlight cascaded through the leaded windows. How wrong that old harridan had been! The only scourge brought upon us with this castle was that of a beautiful, stately home. Olivia and I had discussed at length the guests we'd invite to our new home, the parties we should throw, the generations of MacKenzies who would grace these halls.

As I sauntered through the back hall, I spotted a shadow. I squinted into the darkness. It appeared to be the figure of a person. "Hello!" I called. We were not yet fully staffed, though we had brought several staff members from our previous home to the castle. I assumed it to be one of them, perhaps unable to sleep and wandering the halls.

I received no response to my inquiry. "Hello?" I called a second time. The figure stood unmoving at the hall's end. Hidden in the shadows, I could make out no more of the person than his or her form. I took a step closer. A rhythmic noise filled the air, which I guessed to be breathing. "See here, who are you?" I demanded.

After two more steps, the figure backed from me. "Stop! Who are you?" Shadows surrounded the figure as I continued my approach. I hurried down the hall but found no one. I continued around the corner, glancing into the next hall. Empty. I rushed to each door and peered into the darkened rooms. I found no one in any of them.

I returned to the hallway and stalked to my original spot. I stared into the darkness where the figure stood. Perhaps my eyes deceived me, I reflected. The moonlight cast strange shadows. I must have mistaken the distortions as a figure. Still, the old woman's words rung in my mind. I pushed them aside. They were likely the source of my hallucination.

Cate leaned back in her chair. Douglas's first experiences within the castle walls echoed her own. Odd to share so much with a man separated from you by centuries. She stretched as she contemplated the latest round of entries.

She switched to her email before continuing her decryption. A message from Damien awaited her.

Hi Cate - That's awesome, I'm so glad it's working! I'm still playing with the efficiencies and if I get something better, I'll send a new version to allow you to decrypt more text at once.

Are you learning anything interesting from the journals? You don't have to answer that. I was just curious what was so important the author felt the need to encrypt it. Though, I suppose it could be out of some odd eccentricity. Well, anyway, I'm rambling.

Keep decrypting!

D

Cate smiled at the email as she clicked the reply button.

Hi Damien - The program is working great! I'm working my way through the journals. The longest part of the process is typing in the random letters! No rush (or even need) for a more efficient program, the current version is more than sufficient and MUCH faster than working twenty-five characters at a time by hand!

To answer your question, Douglas (my ancestor and the castle's builder) was quite an eccentric! He was an intellectual and an inventor, so he had some interesting quirks. This seems to have been one of them! So far, the stories have been entertaining at least! It makes the work to get them worth it.

Thanks again for all your help!

Cate

With a deep sigh, Cate turned to the next page in the journal and began the tedious task of typing more ciphertext into Damien's program. After deciphering several more entries, Cate continued to read Douglas's experiences.

It would not be long before I had more fodder from what I initially thought to be my overactive imagination. As I entered the library, intent on working in my hidden laboratory, I noticed a vase out of place. I would attribute a minor event such as this to Olivia or one of the servants changing its location. However, the hour was too early. I had read only the night before in this room. The vase had stood on a bookshelf near the armchair I occupied. On this morn, I found it across the room on a side table.

I approached it and studied the object. How had it moved across the room? I had been last to bed and awake before any servants came from below stairs. How had this moved? I chided myself for my silly behavior as I descended to my lab. Vases did not move on their own. There existed some reasonable explanation, I assured myself.

I descended the stairs into my study. When I returned to the library, the vase had returned to its original location. My brow furrowed as I stared at the object in its original location. Befuddlement filled me. As I considered the matter, the library doors opened.

"Oh, excuse me, m'lord," Lucy, one of our maids, muttered as she entered. "I came to tend to the lighting of the fire."

Lighting the fire, my mind pondered? Then no one had entered the room prior to this. I must be sure. "Lucy, has anyone been in the room tidying before you?"

"No, m'lord," she assured me. "'Tis only half-past six. No one has begun daily chores yet."

"Thank you," I mumbled to her as my eyes fell to the vase. How had it completed its journey 'round the room without human assistance? My mind

could find no answers.

I had almost forgotten the incident until I experienced it again. This time within the confines of my own laboratory. Weeks later, I descended the stairs to find my work in disarray.

I had left my papers stacked in a pile on the right side of my desk. When I returned the following morning, they lay scattered across my desk. I stood with my jaw agape. I had not left my work in this manner. Few people were aware of my lab's location or how to enter it. Hidden by a bookcase in the library, my lab sits deep within the heart of the castle. I had hidden the lab and its entrance from almost everyone except those involved in its construction. Outside of Jaime, no one on the estate knew the location, not even Olivia.

I narrowed my eyes at the mess as I set the lantern on the desk and collected the papers. I would speak with Jaime about it. There must be an explanation, I assured myself.

But I would find none. When I inquired later, Jaime insisted he had not entered my lab nor parsed through my papers. Who had, I queried?

"I've little idea, Douglas," he answered. "Though there is surely a reasonable explanation."

"Name it," I challenged.

"You forgot the state in which you left them. You worked late and assumed you had tidied them, but you hadn't."

"Nonsense," I argued. "I left them neatly stacked on the right side of the desk. Not the left, not the center, not sprawled."

"Douglas, papers do not move on their own," Jaime assured.

I pursed my lips at him, unable to argue, though still unsatisfied by the explanation.

Unexplainable events would continue to present themselves. More items moving about with no explanation and no human intervention. I began to wonder if I was going mad. Or someone was playing an elaborate game with me. The incidents occurred with such regularity, I became accustomed to them and paid little attention after a while.

Even with the ever-moving articles, castle life became routine. I stopped questioning the occurrences and began to settle into my new home.

Then things became more disturbing.

CHAPTER 15



Cate frowned at the “cliffhanger” in the journal.

“Of course it would stop there,” she sighed aloud as she turned the page to continue her typing. A knock sounded at the door, and the door popped open.

“Lunchtime!” Molly sang as she flitted into the room.

“Already?” Cate questioned as she checked her timepiece.

“Lost in your research again, huh?” Molly asked with a laugh.

“Yes. It’s fascinating. I’m reading through journals from Douglas.”

“Devil-worshipper Douglas?” Molly teased.

“Yes, him,” she replied.

“Has he sacrificed any animals or small children yet?”

“No,” Cate assured her. “Just detailing his early life in the castle.”

“You know I’m only teasing, right?” Molly inquired.

“I know,” she said with a smile. “And you know he wasn’t a devil worshipper, right?”

“Yeah, I know! What a fanciful tale though, huh? I bet he really hated the town gossips that spread that around.”

“I can imagine that would be frustrating, though Douglas seemed to be a good sport. An eccentric. Perhaps he even enjoyed the rumors and found them entertaining.”

“He’d be a way better sport than I would be!”

“Of course, I could be completely wrong. Perhaps he hated the rumors and was an old curmudgeon who frowned down at the town every day.”

“Perhaps you’ll find out in those journals! Enjoy your lunch!”

As she ate, she checked her email, finding a new message from Damien.

Hi Cate - Wait, there’s a castle involved? That’s cool... and creepy. Is it haunted? Sorry, I had to ask, haha!

Here’s a new version of Decoder Exploder with better efficiencies. If your eyes (and fingers) can stand it, you can now input multiple pages into the program (I’d say no more than five for best results) to decrypt at once!

Enjoy!

Damien

Damien’s first line made her giggle. If he only understood the extent of what these castle walls housed. Ghosts, however, did not haunt these halls.

She responded to thank him for the new, more efficient program and to assure him there were no ghosts. As she finished her lunch, another knock sounded at the door.

“Come in! Perfect timing, I’ve just finished.”

“Oh, good. I’d hate to interrupt your lunch,” Jack’s voice said.

“Jack!” Cate exclaimed, spinning in her seat to face him. “Are you trying out tray retrieval as a new job?”

“I’m here to check on our ‘leak,’” he responded. He slid through the opening in the door and pushed it shut behind him. “Anything from the journals about the time rips and how the timepiece controls them?”

Cate shook her head with a sideways frown. “Not yet. He’s describing his first few months in the castle and the odd occurrences he experienced. He hasn’t even mentioned the timepiece yet.”

Jack frowned.

“But,” she added, “Damien just sent a new version of the program capable of translating more text at one time, which may speed things up a tad. Though my typing is woefully slow with the random letters. But I’ll do my best to make progress this afternoon. Right after a quick walk with these guys!” She motioned toward the two dogs at her feet.

“I’ll walk you out,” Jack offered.

She stood and ushered the dogs from the room and into the hall. “How far have you made it in decrypting the journals?” Jack inquired.

“Only about fifteen pages,” Cate admitted with a sigh.

Jack didn’t respond.

“I should be able to—” Her voice cut off. “Jack!”

Cate blinked several times, her eyes growing wide. She reached out, attempting to grasp Jack's hand.

"Cate?" he questioned. "What's happening?"

"I'm not sure," Cate admitted.

She focused her attention on Jack, who faded in and out of her vision. He disappeared for seconds at a time, only to reappear next to her. Her pulse quickened, and her heart pounded. Lights flickered. Noises distorted. Dimensions stretched.

As Jack reappeared, Cate reached a trembling hand toward him. Jack's hand squeezed hers tightly, and he pulled her closer to him. After a moment, the hallway settled. She glanced around. Candlelight flickered throughout the space. They were alone. Both dogs were missing from their new surroundings.

She focused her attention on Jack. "Where are we?"

Jack swallowed hard. "I'm not sure."

She stalked a few steps away, keeping a tight hold on Jack's hand. "Candles."

"Somewhere without electricity," Jack confirmed.

She pulled the timepiece from around her neck. The second hand crept along. Jack groaned. "As I suspected," Cate said.

"So, we're stuck somewhere!" Jack exclaimed.

She nodded. "Yes, keep your voice down. We don't want to call any attention."

"Perhaps we should find somewhere to hide," Jack suggested.

"No," Cate countered. "We need to stay here. If we want to return, we need to stay near the rip we came through."

"You don't know that for sure."

"No," she admitted. "I'm not certain, but it makes sense. If we move from this spot, we may be stuck here."

"Can you try to activate the timepiece?"

"I'll try," she answered. "Put your hand around mine so if it works, we can go back together."

Jack wrapped his hand around hers, and together they rubbed the timepiece's face. Nothing happened. They tried twice more.

"It's no use," she said with a sigh. "It won't work. This is exactly what happened the last time when I got stuck in Douglas's time."

“You planned to try the back hall, the universal rip. Should we try that?” Jack inquired.

Cate pondered it for a moment. “I don’t—” she began.

Bright lights flashed for an instant before blinking out. She inched closer to Jack. He wrapped his arm around her. The lights flashed again before dying. She squeezed her eyes shut as they flared again in an almost blinding display.

Tiny paws pressed against her leg, and a cold nose nudged at her hand. Her jaw unhinged, and she slid her eyes open to slits. Her heart skipped a beat, and tears formed in her eyes. “Riley!” she cried as she spotted the tiny pup standing on his hind legs. Bailey stood next to him. “Bailey!”

Jack sucked in air and glanced around. “Are we back?”

“Yes,” Cate said, scooping both boys into her arms as a tear fell down her cheek.

Jack slumped against the wall, a sigh of relief escaping him. Silence filled the hallway. “You okay?” she inquired.

Jack ran a shaky hand through his hair. “Yeah, yeah, I think so,” he responded.

“Let’s get some air,” she suggested. She ushered the dogs down the hall after setting them down. She reached for Jack’s hand and tugged him toward the door.

They exited into the fresh, warm spring air. Jack blew out a long breath. “Feel better?” she asked.

“Yeah. Nice fresh Scottish air does the trick every time,” he said with a weak smile.

Cate squeezed his hand and smiled at him, giving him another moment to recover. “That was...” he began, his voice trailing off.

She nodded. “Yeah, I understand. All too well.”

Jack shook his head as he stared at the horizon.

She said, “I’ll keep working on the journals. I’ll try to speed up my decryptions...”

Jack shook his head again, holding up a hand to stop her. “That’s not going to work, Cate. Even if you work twenty-four seven on those things, it’ll take a while to get answers.”

“But perhaps the answers are in one of the early journals. We can hope...”

“We need to do more than hope. We need a solution, and I don’t like pinning all my hopes on the journals. What if you translate all of them and find nothing? Then we’re days behind pursuing anything else.”

“So, what are you suggesting?” she questioned, her brow furrowing as she glanced at him.

Jack turned to her and studied her face for a moment before speaking. “We need to travel to Douglas’s time and search for answers.”

Cate nodded but didn’t respond.

Jack’s brow crinkled. “I figured you’d be happy about that suggestion, Lady Cate.”

“I guess I’m still in shock,” she admitted.

Jack nodded. “I understand. That experience was enough to shock anyone.”

She glanced up at him. “No, I meant because you actually suggested time travel as the solution to a problem.” She pursed her lips in a half-grin at him.

He narrowed his eyes. “Very funny, Lady Cate. I didn’t realize you hoped to join me on the comedy circuit.”

“Anyway, you’re right. Douglas somehow harnessed these time rips. He’s the best source of information we have.”

“Do we just go back and ask him?”

Cate shook her head. “He doesn’t realize or understand the scope of what’s happening yet. Let’s get the lay of the land first and go from there.”

“Now I’m in shock. Cate Kensie suggesting caution? What did that slip in time do to us?”

“Perhaps it switched our personalities,” she joked.

“Are you looking forward to time traveling?”

Cate pondered it for a moment. “Yes, I have to admit I am. A brand-new castle and the chance to meet its builder. Yes, it’s an exciting moment!”

“And I’m dreading it, so we’re still us.”

She chuckled at the admission.

Jack continued, “And I hope we can trust that bloody watch to behave itself and return us when we want!”

She glanced down at it. “As much as I’m looking forward to the occasion, the 1790s is not where I want to stay on a permanent basis.”

“When do you want to do this?” Jack inquired.

Cate considered his question. "It would be nice to attend his dinner party. The one he discussed with Jaime. He's planning to discuss the occurrences with someone named Grayson. With others there, it might be easier to blend in. The focus won't be on only us. And we may get information if he's planning to share it with the people in attendance."

"What are the chances he shares it with two newcomers there?"

"Perhaps small, but maybe we'll learn something by overhearing it. At least we can assess Douglas and his mysterious guest who has experience with the strange and unusual."

"Do you imagine this Grayson is the character chasing you around in your sleep?"

"I'm not sure. But one or two spoken words from him may be enough to tell me. That's another reason I'd like to get to that dinner party."

"It may be a tall order. It's in, what, two days?"

"Yes," Cate admitted. "Day after tomorrow. We'd need to move fast. Visit tomorrow and hope we score an invitation."

"What's our cover?"

Cate shrugged. "The old distant cousin bit?"

"Again? We've gotten caught every time with that one!"

"Last time we got caught because Randolph told Rory the story about us. Douglas should never have heard of us before. Plus, posing as a married couple explains away my American heritage in the easiest way possible."

Jack pursed his lips and narrowed his eyes. "I imagine there's another reason you suggested it."

She glanced at the horizon, her brows furrowing. "It makes the most sense for a man and woman traveling together, particularly in that era?" she suggested.

Jack smirked at her. "Oh, come on, Cate. I'll bet you enjoy posing as my wife. I do make a fine husband if I say so myself." He raised his eyebrow at her and offered her a sly grin.

"Yes, that's it," Cate said with a chuckle. "You've caught me. I love posing as your wife. It's the entire reason I love time travel, in fact."

"That explains so much," Jack joked.

"Are you planning to go with the lawyer bit again or do you prefer to avoid that profession?"

"Eh, I may as well continue. I am quite a good attorney after all," he reminded her.

“Very true. You’re almost as perfect an attorney as you are a husband.”

“Oh, you flatter me too much.”

They turned their attention to the yard where the dogs frolicked in the luscious spring grass. “I suppose we have our plan,” Cate said after a few moments of silence. “What time tomorrow?”

“Afternoon? Following lunch, perhaps,” Jack suggested.

“All right. Tomorrow after lunch, we make our first trip to the 1790s!”

Cate collected the dogs and returned to the library. Despite their upcoming time travel trip, she preferred to make more progress on the journal decryption. Given the new, more efficient program, she spent the afternoon copying ciphertext.

It took her several hours to recreate the text from the first journal before she began decoding it. Cate read the next set of entries before her dinner.

The matter of moving vases and unkempt paperwork seemed a harmless quirk of the castle. I had grown accustomed to it and paid no mind to the odd and ongoing circumstances.

Two months passed before the next incident. This event would raise the stakes along with the hairs on the back of my neck.

On the night of the twenty-fifth of October, I roamed the halls as the midnight hour approached. I had always struggled with sleep, and tonight proved no exception. At least in a castle this size, I possessed plenty of space to amble about in an effort to relax my mind.

I strolled through the foyer and toward the library. As I strode down the hall, the sound of music reached my ears. I stopped and strained, listening for more. Lilting orchestral music floated down the hall. No orchestra played in my home at this hour! What could produce the sound?

I stepped toward it, following the sound as I navigated through the halls. I arrived outside the ballroom. Closed doors met my gaze. I narrowed my eyes at them. Did they hide the source of the noise? How could they, my mind questioned? Yet I could not deny the irrefutable sound of music emanating from behind those wooden barriers.

My heart leapt to my throat as I inched toward the doors. I know not what I expected to find beyond them that produced such a reaction, yet my body urged caution as I approached.

I stood mere fingerbreadths from the door. My hands reached for the knobs. My fingers caressed the cool handle. My close proximity now

revealed another sound coupled with the music, chatter. Voices floated through the air with the music. The din of an ongoing party lay behind those doors.

I swallowed hard as I twisted both doorknobs and flung the doors open. My brow furrowed as I stared at the scene inside. My footsteps echoed as I stepped into the darkened space. The ballroom was empty. No guests chatted; no musicians played. Weak moonlight streamed through the many windows, revealing only empty floorboards.

No. I had heard music. I had heard voices. From where? What was the source? I rushed into the hall. Perhaps I had miscalculated the location. I strained to listen, but only silence met my ears. Where had the odd music come from?

The incident haunted me for several days, though I mentioned it to no one, fearing they may accuse me of being mad. I returned to the ballroom twice after. I searched for information, for some sign of a gathering. I found none.

I decided after three days to remove the incident from my mind. I would not dwell on it. Perhaps it had been the product of an overtired mind, I assumed. At least that is what I imagined Jaime would tell me had I imparted the information to him.

The occurrence would come to the forefront of my mind a fortnight later. Though I was not involved personally, I recount it here as more evidence. Elsie, a maid in our service, fell ill. Wilson, our butler, brought the girl's condition to my attention. He had dismissed her from her duties for the day and sent her to bed. The nature of her illness, however, prompted him to discuss the matter with me.

"Sick in the head?" I queried after he informed me.

"Yes, m'lord, quite. Babbling on with nonsense."

"Is she delusional with fever?"

"She appears to suffer from no fever, m'lord."

"What nonsense was she babbling?"

Wilson licked his lips and swallowed hard as he prepared to impart the news. "Well, spit it out, man," I encouraged.

"She... She returned to the kitchen mid-morning, pale as a ghost. She collapsed into a chair at the table in the servant's hall and told a most fantastical story. She had been tidying the sitting room. When she entered the foyer, she spotted a woman in the hall on the opposite side. The woman

she claims to have seen dressed in a most obscene manner, most unbefitting of a lady. I, myself, was shocked at the description and will not repeat it. Elsie then asserts the woman... ” He paused.

“Yes?” I prompted.

“M’lord, she says the woman vanished into thin air!”

CHAPTER 16



Elate bit her lower lip as she continued reading Douglas's account of events.

I mulled over the story Wilson conveyed. "What shall I do, m'lord? Do you prefer I dismiss her entirely from her position or should she be seen by a doctor before we settle on a course? Of course, the doctor's fee may be deducted from her wages."

"I would like to speak with the girl," I responded.

Wilson's eyebrows raised at my request. He stammered for a moment before he said, "Of course, m'lord. I shall fetch her at once."

"No," I countered. "If the girl is ill, I shall go to her. Please, lead the way."

Wilson led me to the servant's quarters, collecting our housekeeper, Mrs. Carter, along the way. We descended upon the poor girl in her chambers.

"Elsie," Wilson said as we entered. "Lord MacKenzie would like to speak with you."

Elsie lay under a sheet, her face as pale as it. Her hands still trembled as she clutched at the fabric. Her eyes darted around as we approached. As she spotted me, she flung the sheet away and attempted to climb from her cot. "M'lord!" she squealed in surprise.

"No, no, madam, please, there is no need to rise on my account," I assured her. "I understand you are ill."

She nodded as she settled into a seated position on the bed.

"Though the source of your illness is not physical. Is this correct?"

Elsie bit her lower lip and lowered her eyes. "A figment of my imagination, m'lord. I am certain it's nothing more than that. I shall be able to perform my duties for the day." She glanced to Mrs. Carson, who offered her a nod. She had been coached, I deduced.

"Please, may I speak with the girl alone for a moment?" I requested.

"Of course, m'lord," Wilson agreed, ushering Mrs. Carson from the room.

"There," I said in what I hoped to be a soothing manner, "now you may speak freely."

"I have spoken freely, m'lord. I suffered from some delusion, though I am certain it shall dissipate. And it shall not affect my work."

"You do not need to worry about disguising the incident. I wish to learn the truth." She glanced at me as she again bit her lower lip. "I do not believe there to be some defect in your character. I, myself, have experienced something similar and wish to learn the circumstances of your encounter so I may compare them."

"Something similar, m'lord?" she squeaked.

"Indeed," I assured her. "As I wandered the halls late one eve, I heard music and voices. When I followed them, I found no identifiable source. Yet I am certain I heard them. I did not imagine it."

"I did not imagine the woman either, m'lord. She was there! She was real!" Elsie exclaimed.

"Please, tell me all the details you recall."

She nodded, and her forehead pinched in recollection. "I tidied the sitting room. As I departed to move to my next duty, I stepped into the foyer. In the hall beyond, I spotted movement. I glanced in that direction and saw the figure."

"A woman," I prompted.

She nodded in response. "Yes, m'lord. A woman. In a most curious choice of clothing."

"What do you mean?"

"She wore trousers, m'lord."

"Are you certain it was not a man?"

She shook her head. "No, m'lord. A woman. With her hair flowing down her back, not pulled up. And wearing trousers."

"Could it perhaps have been her underthings? Was she undressed?"

"If so, I have never in my life laid eyes upon underthings like these, m'lord." Color rose into her cheeks as we discussed the matter.

While I hoped not to embarrass her, I preferred she continue. I lifted my eyebrows to prod her, and she added, "They were dark trousers, tight to her skin. And a brightly colored woolen top."

"Did she wear shoes? Was she barefoot? Do you recall?"

"She wore riding boots," Elsie responded.

I pursed my lips as I considered the information. "Where did this oddly dressed woman go?"

Elsie swallowed hard. "Well, m'lord, as I stared at the curious scene, the woman... simply vanished!"

"Through a doorway? Into a room?"

"No, m'lord. As I followed her journey down the hall, a bright light flashed. It blinded me. When it subsided, the woman had disappeared."

I nodded. "All right, Elsie. Is there anything else you can recall?"

Elsie furrowed her brow again as she considered the question. "No, m'lord. Except for the bright light, it only flashed for a moment. She couldn't have disappeared through a door in that time."

I smiled at her. "Thank you, Elsie. You should rest given your shock. You may take the day off and return to your normal duties tomorrow."

"Thank you, m'lord. It is most gracious of you."

I offered her a curt smile and a nod before spinning to leave the room. "Oh, m'lord?" she called after me.

"Yes?" I inquired.

"Do you believe... that is, do you imagine... Was that woman a ghost?"

"No, Elsie, I do not believe so. There is some reasonable explanation. We shall find it. Your candor in explaining your encounter helps toward this goal. Do not let it trouble you further."

She nodded as she pulled the bedcovers over her. I stepped into the hallway with Wilson and Mrs. Carson. "I have given Elsie permission to remain abed. She will resume her duties tomorrow. You may leave the incident rest. I do not wish this tale to spread throughout the staff."

"Very good, m'lord. I shall see Elsie rests and the staff does not repeat the story."

"Thank you, Wilson."

I pondered the information as I walked the halls, intent on returning to my office. Instead, I found myself in the foyer. I peered into the hall opposite

the sitting room. What I expected to find, I do not know. It remained vacant at this hour. I strode down the hall and examined the floor and walls. No secret passages existed here. The woman could not have disappeared into a hidden passage. Though the music and voices I heard could not have vanished either; yet I could not find the source. Were these incidents related?

I would not wait long before another event confronted us. As November waned and gray skies filled our days, I sat reading in the library one afternoon. As I read, I overheard voices in the hallway outside. I did not recognize them. I rose from my chair and crossed the room. The voices continued on the opposite side of the door.

I threw the doors open and peered into the hall. I found it empty. I swung my head from side to side, glancing up and down the length of it. Not a soul graced the area.

Incidents like this would continue. Phantom noises, disembodied voices, footsteps with no owners. All these would haunt the castle halls on an increasingly regular basis.

Lily, one of our chambermaids, would also become the victim of these manifestations. She claimed a man roamed the halls near the west bedrooms. When she called to him, he fled into the hallway overlooking the back gardens. There, he disappeared after consulting an object clutched in his hand.

The poor girl never recovered from the sighting. She remained abed for two days before we found her meager belongings missing and her bed not slept in one morning. A simple note propped on her pillow read, "I cannot bear another moment in these cursed halls."

Rumors began to spread like wildfire through the staff and into the village. The old woman's curse rang through my mind on a regular basis. What misfortune had I brought upon my family, I wondered?

The occurrences happened so frequently, I mentioned them to Jaime. He suggested there was a reasonable explanation, though, after a lengthy discussion, we could arrive at no logical conclusion. This is when I began to document the incidents.

I have recorded all known instances of these strange manifestations and their locations. I shall continue to monitor them and record them in these journals.

Cate sighed as she reached the end of the first journal. She had learned no more about the workings of the timepiece. It appeared in Douglas's time, the time rips also opened and closed at random, as they were doing now.

How had Douglas tamed them? So far, she was no closer to a solution.

* * *

Cate sat at her desk, poring over Douglas's second journal. She finished inputting several pages and pressed the button to decrypt them. The progress wheel spun in a colorful circle. As she awaited the results, she drummed her fingers on the desk.

The program completed its run. Deciphered text appeared on the screen. Cate leaned in to read it.

Strange incidents continue to manifest. We cannot ascertain the source of these disturbances.

As Cate read, the cursor began to move backward, deleting the text as it went. There must be some bug in the new program, Cate assumed. She attempted to stop the deletion by pressing the escape key. It did nothing to halt the progress of the cursor. It continued to march backward, erasing all text in its path. She pressed a random selection of other keys before swiping at her trackpad. She clicked the button to close the program. She attempted to minimize the window. Nothing worked. The program failed to respond. As soon as it finished whatever it was doing, she would send an email to Damien and ask him about it.

When all words in the decrypted text disappeared, Cate attempted to close the program again, but it remained frozen.

The cursor blinked at her on the blank page. After a moment, words appeared. Character after character paraded across the screen.

Hello, Catherine...

With a gasp, Cate leapt from her seat and backed several steps away. The library door creaked open on its hinges. She spun to face it. Emptiness stared back. A grinding noise sounded on the opposite side of the room. Her breath caught in her throat as she twirled toward the sound.

The bookcase slid open. A figure stood in the cavity.

"Hello, Catherine," his British accent called to her.

Her pulse quickened as she recognized the voice. She raced toward the open door and into the dark hall beyond. Her footsteps pounded along the hall's runner as she fled from her assailant.

As she neared the foyer, she skidded to a halt. Her mouth gaped open, and her eyes widened as she stared in front of her. A wall blocked the normally open passage into the foyer. Candles burned in sconces, their feeble light flickering in the large hall. She glanced downward. Her tunic and leggings transformed into a light pink gown. A full, floor-length skirt with lace ruffles hung from a tight silk and lace bodice.

"Don't run from me, Catherine," the voice called behind her.

Her heart pounded in her chest as she flung herself against the wall. She pounded her fists against it in a desperate attempt to escape. She tugged on one of the sconces, and the wall swung open.

Cate pushed through it and fled across the foyer and into the sitting room. She closed and locked the double doors behind her. As she inched several steps back, she ran her hand over her clothes. She now wore a drop-waist peach dress with a sailor's bow.

Her brow crinkled. "Amelia's dress?" she questioned aloud as she recognized the dress her great-grandmother gifted her when she visited 1925. Was she now in the 1920s?

"Why do you run from me, Catherine?" the voice asked from behind her.

She whirled to face him. He strode through the shadows across the room, his features indistinguishable in the darkness.

"Who are you?" she asked as she backed toward the door. Her fingers reached behind her, searching for the key. She struck cool metal and her fingers tightened around the head as she turned it. The lock unlatched, and she spun to fling the doors open.

She fled across the foyer and up the main staircase. Her steps slowed, hindered by the sudden appearance of a domed hoop skirt. She reached a hallway of bedrooms. The man rounded the corner behind her.

"I will always find you, Catherine," he warned.

Cate ducked into one of the bedrooms, closing and locking the door behind her. The handle turned and twisted as he attempted to open the locked door. The door shook as the man pounded against it.

The noise ceased. She held her breath as she strained to listen for sounds beyond the room. An earsplitting boom resounded moments later,

knocking her down. The room plunged into darkness. The door creaked open, and the silhouette of a man stood inside.

The man stalked toward her. She crawled backward on her rear as he approached.

He reached for her. She squealed as icy hands grasped her shoulders.

“I will always find you,” he hissed as he drew her closer to him.

CHAPTER 17



Cate gasped and lashed out at her assailant. She attempted to shake loose of his grasp.

“Cate! Cate!” Jack’s voice called.

She opened her eyes and glanced around the room. “Jack?” she breathed, her voice hoarse with sleep.

“It’s okay, you’re okay,” Jack soothed, keeping a tight hold of her.

“What happened?” she inquired.

“I found you asleep at your desk again. You were whimpering and moaning. I assume you had another nightmare?”

Cate nodded as she pushed her hair behind her ears. “Yes.”

“Come sit over here,” Jack directed, motioning toward the armchair across the room. “You’re still shaking.”

“I’m okay,” she insisted as she stumbled to the armchair and slouched into it. “It just takes me a few minutes to recover from the physical effects.”

Jack sank into the chair next to hers. “What happened this time?”

“Same thing, more or less. I’m being chased by the same man. Only this time the new twist was I seemed to be jumping around in time. I started in my normal clothes then I had a dress from the 1790s, then the 1920s and then the 1850s.”

“So, basically, you’re melding the reality of these misbehaving time rips with your nightmarish friend.”

“It seems so.”

“Any more information about him? Did you see him this time? Or the other person you were hiding with?”

“No. I was alone this time. And he’s always hidden in the shadows. Just beyond my field of vision. It’s so frustrating.” Her head fell into her hand as she sighed.

They sat in silence for a few moments before Jack asked, “How are you feeling now?”

“Better,” Cate admitted.

“Can you sleep?”

“If not, I’ll do a little more work.”

“No, that’s a terrible idea.”

“I haven’t gotten anywhere yet and I’ve decrypted the entire first journal. He describes all the weird stuff happening around the castle, but not even a hint of how to control the time rips. I don’t even think he knows what’s going on yet.”

“It’s fine. You’ll keep working on that and we’ll go back to Douglas’s time later and start working that angle. We’ll figure this out, Cate. But you must rest. Starting tomorrow, we’ll have extra hours in our days. You’ll need the sleep.”

Cate nodded. “You’re right.”

“Of course, I am,” Jack teased.

“Okay, I’ll head to bed and get back on those journals in the morning. With any luck, we’ll find something to help us during our trip.”

“There’s the spirit, lassie. Now off to bed with you.”

* * *

As Cate eased into her desk chair, memories of her nightmare flooded back to her. She hoped she had better luck decrypting the journals than she’d had in her dream. An overwhelming urge to glance over her shoulder coursed through her as she opened the second journal. The decryption program loaded on her laptop as she studied the numbers on the journal’s interior cover.

With the program loaded, she updated the order of the disks for decoding. She opened a document and began to copy the encoded text. She

hoped to make it through at least one-quarter of the journal before their trip to Douglas's time.

After an hour of typing, she set the program to work. Within minutes she had text from Douglas's next entry.

I continue to keep a careful record of the strange manifestations within the castle walls. I have even begun to explore the areas in which they occur on a regular basis.

I, myself, have been party to a number of these strange incidents. On several more occasions, music has filled the air with no identifiable source. In each instance, the music emanates from the ballroom. Noises typical for a large party always accompany it. In every instance, I am unable to locate anyone. I have even attempted to spy through the keyhole.

To make sense of the events, I have also begun to record everything surrounding the occurrences. Each time I have heard the music, I have been in the foyer and hall leading to the library. My first journal confirms this to be the case for the first incident of this type.

However, not all incidents occur in this way.

As we approach spring in Dunhaven, I now have a diverse array of odd and somewhat disturbing events to study. In addition to the music I overheard, several servants insist they have encountered figures wandering the halls. They claim these people, when followed, disappear, either dissipating in a brilliant flash of light or turning a corner and vanishing.

Until December, I had never experienced anything beyond the sound of music floating through the halls. However, on one chilly winter night, something rather different presented itself.

I gazed over the frost-covered back garden. Moonlight cast a bright glow across the winter landscape. An otherworldly silence filled the air. It was this quiet solitude that drew me to this parcel of land.

It was also this quiet solitude that made the incident apparent. Hushed voices cracked the silence. Distinct whispers filled the air. Who else was awake at this hour, I wondered as the voices reached me?

I strained to listen. It sounded like a male and female conversing, perhaps arguing. Were two members of the staff engaged in a clandestine meeting? I followed the noise, creeping down the hallway as noiselessly as possible.

Their voices grew louder as I approached the corner leading to a hallway of bedrooms. I made out a few words as I hid.

“... should go before anything else happens,” the male said.

“No! We need more information!” the female answered.

“At what cost?”

“Shh!”

“What is it?”

“I heard something.”

I pivoted around the corner, intent on determining the identity of the conversants. An empty hallway met my gaze. I scanned it, searching for any signs of life. I found none.

“Hello?” I called.

I received no answer. I squinted into the darkness but found nothing. I ambled down the hall, checking in the various bedrooms, but discovered no living souls.

This incident was my first to involve more than scattered, unintelligible voices and music. In this case, I could identify two speakers and even part of their conversation. I had been in the back hall overlooking the back garden, NOT the foyer or near the library.

This marked the second incident that occurred in or near that back hallway. This is where I had also spotted the figure.

As the year came to a close, I would encounter more bizarre incidents. One week after I overheard the whispered conversation, another strange happening occurred.

I traversed the hallways in the mid-afternoon. My brothers, Alistair and Duncan, and their wives visited for the holiday season. I hoped to invite them for a winter walk around the property. As I turned the corner, I spotted a woman. Her clothing shocked me. Her dress, several inches above her ankles, hung in a boxy form around her figure. Her hair, cut short, fell only to her chin. She proceeded down the hall in front of me and into a bedroom.

I dashed after her and flung the door to the bedroom open. I scanned the room. Emptiness greeted me. Where had she gone?

This incident forced me to confide again in Jaime. He could offer no explanation. I began to wonder what sort of specters roamed the halls of my new home.

As the new year rang in, I began to search the halls for more apparitions. Convinced a reasonable explanation existed, I scoured the castle for more signs of these ghosts. More evidence of their existence

continues to pour in. Misplaced items. Phantom voices. Figures that roam the halls, then disappear. Brilliant flashes of light with no source.

I have lost count of all the events but have kept a record of all of them within the pages of one journal, which I have devoted to simply detailing each occurrence, its date, location, and other pertinent details.

In these pages, I began to parse through the information I have at hand.

I have now encountered multiple individuals wandering the halls. I have noted several patterns occurring. Attire on the individuals varies from location to location. Though WITHIN a location, clothing is consistent. Women in the bedroom hallway always wear dresses above their ankles. Men there wear trousers and coats much different from the current style.

Women in the hall off the foyer often wear trousers! Men there wear odd, loose-fitting trousers and shirts that bare their arms.

I have spotted some figures in clothing closer to our own, though dissimilar enough to be obvious to me.

These patterns suggest some ordering of the events. That they do not occur randomly.

I have read much on the subject of spectral disturbances, hauntings, and ghosts. Often, phantoms are described as appearing in the same clothing. For example, a woman appears in the same red dress to all who see her. And she appears over and over in that dress.

This is not the case in our manifestations. A variety of similarly styled clothing appears even on the same individual. This suggests the passage of time wherever these souls are, rather than the specter being stuck, glued to the earth in some form.

I postulate they are not ghosts. Ghosts imply a departed soul, someone who has lived and died on this earth and whose souls remain tethered to this world. My theory is that these sightings are of individuals who have yet to live. It may sound wild, and I dare not say it aloud to anyone as yet, but I wonder if I am in some way peering into the future.

I plan to discuss these events with a man with considerable knowledge of an otherworldly nature. For the first time since we settled here, we have welcomed guests beyond family. My dear friend, Grayson Buckley, and his wife, Celine, both have experience with unexplainable supernatural events. I hope to determine if he has any explanations for these occurrences.

I shall broach the matter at a dinner party tomorrow evening. I have also invited Aria and Jaime, a voice of cautious reason to temper the wilder

discussions. One other couple shall be in attendance. Cousins of mine have arrived in town only today.

I shall only bring the matter up to the men of the party, as the subject may prove too vexing for the ladies. In particular, I am concerned about our newest additions to the party. While I am certain my cousin, Jack, will take the matter well in true MacKenzie style, I fear shocking his wife, Catherine.

Cate's heart leapt into her throat as she read the last line. She stared wide-eyed at the screen. Douglas's journal entry discussed his upcoming dinner party, the same party she and Jack hoped to attend. It outlined the attendants and mentioned Jack and Catherine MacKenzie. This must refer to them.

As she considered the entry, detailing the past but also seeming to detail her future, a knock sounded at the door. She leapt from her chair, her nerves on edge.

"Lunch!" Molly announced. She breathed a sigh of relief. "Still hard at work, huh?"

"I've made it all the way to journal two!" Cate announced.

"Wow! Any child sacrifices yet or have we only made it to animals?" Molly inquired with a wink.

"Just discussing entertaining at the castle in the early days," Cate fibbed.

"Eh," Molly murmured, "that sounds... far less interesting but much safer."

"It is fairly interesting," Cate admitted. "It's fascinating how different life was back then. How entertaining others provided entertainment, too!"

"I suppose without any modern amenities, it would! No TV or radio or email for easy contact. Events were probably a fanfare for everyone involved."

She nodded in agreement. "I think I'll do a bit more work over lunch and learn a bit more about Douglas's life."

"Yeah, get it in before Jack steals you away for those estate headaches after lunch."

Cate chuckled. "I'd hardly call them headaches. Not when I live in a place like this!"

"Good outlook. Enjoy, Lady Cate!"

"Thanks, Molly. Have a great lunch."

Cate spent the majority of her lunch typing additional text into a document. Her progress remained slow; her mind continually returning to the last piece of decrypted text she read.

Molly collected her tray as Jack entered the library. “Ready for that estate business?” he inquired.

“You bet!” Cate exclaimed as she closed her laptop.

Molly skirted through the door, tray in hand and Jack closed the doors behind her.

“Got my clothes ready?” he asked.

“I do, but first, you need to look at this,” Cate said. She popped the laptop open again and pulled up her decrypted document.

“Did you find something on the timepiece?”

She shook her head as she handed the laptop off to Jack. “Here,” she said, pointing to the screen, “here he is postulating about what the cause of the strange apparitions and phantom music and all that is. Start there and go to the end.”

Cate bit her lower lip as she waited for Jack to finish reading the entry. She shifted her weight from leg to leg as she watched his eyes scan the text. After a few moments, he ran his fingers through his hair, and his eyes went wide. He glanced up at her. He drew in a deep breath. His lips moved but no words came out.

CHAPTER 18



Cate nodded in understanding as Jack gaped at her. “That was my reaction, too.”

Jack swallowed hard. “Is this... is this us?”

Cate shrugged one shoulder. “How could it be anyone else? Jack and Catherine MacKenzie? Jack, Douglas’s cousin. Who else could it be?”

“It must be us,” Jack admitted. “But this is... bizarre.”

“It gave me a shock when I read it, too.”

“A shock? Cate, we’re reading our futures!”

“And our pasts, technically,” Cate added.

“Well, *the* past, *our* future if we’re going to get technical. This is wild!” Jack closed the laptop and set it on the desk. He paced the floor for a few moments. “Cate, I’m not sure you should continue decrypting these journals.”

“What?” Cate exclaimed. “The solution to our problem may be in these! I have to continue!”

“I’m not certain that’s a wise idea. You’ve just read our future.”

“Yes and no. We realize we’re going to the dinner party. Is that a shocking surprise? It’s the outcome we hoped for.”

“But what if we learn something we shouldn’t. What if he continues to detail events in our lives?”

“I’ll stop then. If we continue to come up in these journals, I’ll stop reading. But this could contain the answers. We agreed to work both angles!”

“Until you started reading our futures, Madame Fate.”

Cate gave him a wry glance. “Very funny, Jack.”

“The implications of this...” Jack began.

“Let’s not dwell on it. It may prove overwhelming.”

“Perhaps we should dwell on it! Overwhelming or not!” Jack argued.

“Why? We’ll drive ourselves crazy. And end up in an endless discussion of fate and predestination. The fact is, I found mention of us in journals from Douglas. It matches what we plan to do. Let’s leave it at that and get after doing the thing we intended. Let’s secure our invitation to this dinner party.”

“Just a minute,” Jack said.

She raised her eyebrows at him.

“This other fellow mentioned. Grayson Buckley. That’s the name you overheard during Douglas’s conversation with Jaime, isn’t it?”

She nodded. “He mentioned a Grayson, yes. He didn’t give his last name but that must be him. It’s got to be the same dinner party discussed in the journal.”

“Do you imagine he’s your dream guy?”

“My dream guy? I thought you said you were the man of my dreams.”

“Well, with my roguish good looks, my charming nature and my stellar sense of humor, I assumed so. I’m hard to resist. But apparently, some other bloke’s been chasing you around in your sleep. Perhaps I should be jealous.”

“You forgot your overwhelming modesty. All joking aside, that’s what I’m hoping to find out. Which is why we must secure an invitation to that dinner party! Now, let’s go!”

Jack blew out a long breath. “All right. I’ll meet you outside your bedroom suite when you’re ready.”

Cate and Jack parted ways to dress for their immersion into 1792. Cate swept her hair up, allowed several tendrils to frame her face. She slipped into the centuries-old clothing. She adjusted the striped dress and fussed with the blouse top. The overskirt in the rear trailed behind her as she ambled to the door.

She pulled the doors open as she gathered the train over her arm for the trek to the library and Douglas’s laboratory. She found Jack pacing the halls in his cutaway overcoat topping his shirt, vest, and dark breeches.

She bit her lower lip as she held in a chuckle. “I’m ready.”

Jack spun to face her. "Are we sure we can't wear normal clothes?" Jack questioned.

She giggled. "I'm certain. You look... great!"

"In my tights. Oh, yes, I look fabulous. I must say, you look sensational as always. This outfit gives new meaning to my nickname for you! M'lady!" he said with an extravagant bow.

Cate curtsied. "Thank you, kind sir."

"Well, I guess there's no delaying it!" Jack held out his arm to Cate.

They navigated to Douglas's secret study. Cate held out the timepiece and, with a shaky breath from both, they activated it. As the temporary lighting dimmed to darkness, she glanced around.

"I guess we made it," she whispered.

"Yeah," Jack agreed. "Now we need to sneak out of here, through the library and out of the house."

"There's a spy panel at the top of the stairs. I found it after I was trapped here. We can use it to make sure the coast is clear."

"We should have brought a flashlight," Jack complained as they stumbled toward the stairs leading to the library.

"I'm not certain introducing modern conveniences into this era is wise. I can't believe a Reid suggested such a thing."

"I'm a MacKenzie right now, remember? Wild and impetuous."

"Right," Cate said with a giggle. They reached the top of the stairs.

"At least those things don't creak in this time period. They'd be a dead giveaway."

She inched the spy panel open and peered into the library. "Empty. Ready to make a run for it?"

"Yes, let's get this party started," Jack confirmed.

They unlatched the secret panel and slid the bookcase open. Cate took another glance around before they emerged into the library. Jack shut the bookcase and they raced across the room.

With the door open a crack, Jack peered into the hallway. "Clear," he whispered. He grabbed Cate's hand as he pulled the door open wider. They dashed down the hall and out the side door.

Jack breathed a deep breath as they inhaled the fresh outside air. "Made it. Now, let's hope we can get back in through the front door."

They strolled around the castle and approached the heavy wooden entry doors. Jack drew in a deep breath as he used the lion's head door knocker to

summon the butler.

A tall, wiry man pulled open the door. "Yes?" he inquired in a nasally tone.

"Mr. Jack MacKenzie and his wife to see Lord Douglas MacKenzie," Jack responded.

The man raised his eyebrows at them as he glanced between Jack and Cate. "Are you expected, sir?"

"Yes, we are. I have written ahead so my cousin may expect my arrival."

The man bowed his head at them and gestured for them to enter the foyer. He signaled to the sitting room. "You may wait inside. I shall inform his lordship at once."

"Thank you," Jack answered.

They strode into the sitting room. "Different era, same sitting room," Jack noted.

"Yep. Let's hope third time's the charm."

They waited for several tense minutes. Jack fussed with his cravat. "This is like a noose around my neck," he complained.

"Here, let me see," Cate said. She adjusted the collar, loosening it and fluffing it.

"Thanks," Jack said as he wiped a bead of sweat from his brow.

"Don't sweat this one, Jack," Cate replied with a wink. "We know how it works out."

He offered her a half-smile as the doors burst open.

A tall man stood in the open doorway. His dark unruly curls tamed back into a low queue with a ribbon. He narrowed his eyes at Jack and Cate. After a moment, he raised one eyebrow as he strode across the room.

"Jack MacKenzie, I presume?" he inquired as he eyed Jack.

"Indeed, sir," Jack said with a slight bow. "In the flesh. What a pleasure to meet you, Lord MacKenzie."

"Douglas MacKenzie," he said, extending his hand. "Very pleased to make your acquaintance. May I offer you a drink?"

"No, sir, thank you. May I introduce my wife, Catherine?"

Cate offered Douglas a smile. "Mrs. MacKenzie, how very charmed I am to welcome you to my home."

"Thank you, Lord MacKenzie. How very gracious of you to take the time to make our acquaintance."

“Please, sit! Are you certain I may not offer you a drink?”

“Very kind, sir, but no,” Jack said as he and Cate sank onto a loveseat near the fireplace.

“Wilson tells me you assumed you were expected. I am very regretful to inform you of having no knowledge of your arrival.”

Jack glanced to Cate. “I am terribly sorry, m’lord. I sent word ahead of business in the vicinity and my intentions on visiting. I am most regretful the correspondence did not arrive.”

“As am I! I should have had rooms prepared and waiting to welcome family! As it stands, you shall be forced to wait until one can be readied.”

Cate noted the release in Jack’s posture at Douglas’s invitation. In true MacKenzie style, the man proved gracious and welcoming. “Oh, how kind of you, Lord MacKenzie, however...”

Douglas waved his hand in the air. “Oh, please, call me Douglas. As proud as I am of my title, it isn’t meant for family!”

Jack offered a slight smile. “Douglas. Again, how kind of you, however, it is not our intention to impose on your household.”

“No imposition at all! Do you imagine I built this home for only myself? It is to be shared and whom better to share it with than one’s family. And you come at a most fortuitous time! We are entertaining friends. It will prove most delightful to expand the house party! Olivia shall find it most acceptable, I am certain.”

“Your invitation is very kind.”

“Then you accept it, yes? Yes, yes, you do. Now, who is our common relative? Are you Uncle Frederick’s son? No, no, he had no son Jack,” he said as he placed his finger on his lip.

“No, sir,” Jack answered. “I’m Broderick’s grandson. Our grandfathers were brothers.”

“Ah, of course, Broderick’s grandson, yes,” Douglas responded. “Good, good. Wonderful to have that side of the family in! How is your father?”

“Getting on, though still doing well enough. Same with Mother.”

“Excellent. And what brings you to Dunhaven?”

“Business,” Jack answered. “My law practice does a great deal of land management. It often involves travel on behalf of my clients.”

“An attorney! Good man! Where did you study law?”

“Oxford,” Jack fibbed.

“And you work with land management? Scouting property in Dunhaven? I warn you, I have the best property in the county!” Douglas let out a loud laugh.

“I would concur. It is a beautiful plot and a beautiful castle. The moment I realized my business would bring me to the area, I sent word ahead to visit. I am sorry you did not receive my post.”

“No matter. As long as you aren’t trying to purchase the property, there shall be no trouble at all!”

Jack held up his hands in defeat. “I wouldn’t dream of it.”

The butler entered the room, taking a post near the door in silence.

“Oh, Wilson!” Douglas said as he glanced toward him. “Have you everything prepared?”

“Indeed, m’lord. I had a bedroom prepared in the west hall for Mr. and Mrs. MacKenzie.”

“Excellent! Thank you, Wilson,” Douglas said as the man departed. “Shall we send for your things?”

“That isn’t necessary,” Jack replied. “We had them sent ahead, though there was a delay. The bags should arrive tomorrow.”

“Well, then we shall see you have what you may need for this evening! We shall not be dining formally. The Buckleys are arriving late this afternoon. We shall host a formal welcome dinner in their honor tomorrow evening. We would be most pleased if you would attend.”

“We will be looking most forward to it,” Jack answered. “Again, thank you.”

“I apologize about dinner this evening...”

Jack interrupted Douglas’s response. “We are quite tired from our travels. We shall be most happy to retire to our rooms with a light meal and rest. And on that note, we should take up no more of your time this afternoon.”

“No trouble at all,” Douglas answered. “Though I am certain Mrs. Mackenzie would like to put her feet up.”

Cate smiled at him. “Thank you. The journey has been a little taxing. I would very much like to retire.”

“I shall have Cook prepare a light meal to be sent up. And I shall have Wilson fetch anything else you may need.”

Everyone stood as Douglas rang for Wilson, instructing him on attending to the items he mentioned.

Before arranging for clothing and their meals, Wilson showed Cate and Jack to their room. She sank onto the bed as he departed. She raised her eyebrows at Jack.

“Well, we did it!”

“Indeed, we did,” Jack agreed. “It was easier than I thought. Either we’re getting better at time travel or the MacKenzies are just incredibly nice people.”

“Both?” Cate surmised in a questioning tone. “We MacKenzies are incredibly nice.”

Jack narrowed his eyes at her as he chuckled. “Very true, Lady Cate, very true.”

“I suppose we have a few hours to kill here while we make it look good.”

Jack flopped onto the bed next to Cate. “Yep. We’ll eat our meager meal before we ‘retire’ for the evening. Then we’re off the hook until tomorrow night.”

“Well, off the hook for time traveling. I plan to continue working on those journals.”

“Reading more of our future? I’m still disturbed by that, you know. It’s just odd reading about it.”

“I must admit, I found it jarring, too.”

A knock sounded at the door. “I’ll get it,” Jack offered. He bounded off the bed and pulled the door open.

A maid carried a tray with sandwiches and a decanter of wine. “May I bring you anything else?” she asked in a thick Scottish accent.

“No, thank you,” Cate answered. “This is perfect.”

Another knock sounded, announcing the arrival of a second maid. She delivered nightclothes for both Jack and Cate.

Jack bit into one of the sandwiches as the door swung shut behind both maids. “Mmm, these are good. Here, try one!”

He handed a wedge to Cate. “Eat up, gotta make it look good,” Jack said with a mouth full of sandwich.

“I’ll leave the bulk to you,” Cate said as she nibbled a corner. “We just ate lunch!”

“So? This is dinner!” Jack answered.

“First dinner,” Cate reminded him. “We’ll still have a second dinner when we get home.”

Jack raised his eyebrows at her as he poured himself a small glass of wine. "I know. I can't wait! Mrs. Fraser's making tuna salad melts!"

"You and your stomach," Cate said with a shake of her head and a chuckle.

As she nibbled on the light fare, Cate wandered to the window.

"Anything exciting?" Jack answered as he joined her.

"A carriage," Cate answered. A cloud of dust billowed down the front drive as a horse-drawn carriage trundled down the gravel path.

"The Buckleys?" Jack inquired.

"I'm not certain," Cate said with a shrug, "but if I had to guess, I'd say so."

Four chestnut horses rounded the circular fountain before the coachman urged them to a stop outside the front door. The household waited outside as their guests arrived.

"That must be Olivia," Cate said, pointing to the woman next to Douglas. Dark brown curls cascaded around one shoulder from her swept-up style. Her fair skin revealed delicate features with deep-set eyes.

"Why are they all out there?" Jack inquired, pointing to the staff. "Mr. Smythe asked us to be there when you arrived, but I assumed that was because you were the lady of the house and our new employer."

"It's a custom," Cate informed him. "It's the lady of the house's decision, but it's often to make the guests feel welcome and to give a special feel and presentation of the entire household. Kind of a way to make them feel important and give them a grand entrance."

"Hmm," Jack murmured. "These Buckleys must be special people."

"I need to research them when I return home. I didn't have the chance before we came here."

Douglas stepped forward as the coachman opened the carriage door. A tall man with dark hair stepped from the carriage. Cate studied him as he strode forward, grasping Douglas's hand in a firm handshake. A broad smile formed on his lips, and he clapped Douglas on the arm.

"Is that your guy?" Jack questioned.

Cate stared down at the man who emerged from the carriage. She studied his features for any indication that he had been the one haunting her nightmares.

After a moment, she shrugged. "I wouldn't know unless I heard him speak. It could be."

“Douglas seems to know him well,” Jack surmised.

“He referred to him as his good friend. They must be close if Douglas would mention the ongoings in the castle to him and seek his advice on it. He also said he has knowledge of the supernatural. I wonder what that means?”

“Knowledge of the supernatural?” Jack repeated. “Is he a witch-hunter or ghost-hunter or something?”

“I’m not certain. I wish he would have expounded on that in the journal. It could mean so many things.”

“Perhaps he’s one of those hysterical reverends. Like the Salem people, burning witches at the stake and the like.”

“And Douglas plans to tell him he sees ghosts in the house because he’ll perform some ceremony to drive them away?” Cate offered as a question.

“Could be. He’ll be sorely disappointed when that doesn’t work.”

“That doesn’t add up.”

“Why not?”

“Douglas figures out the secret. He creates the timepiece to control the time rips. He has to realize it’s not ghosts. He mentioned as much in his journal. No, he wants the Buckleys’ opinion for another reason. But what?”

Silence fell between them as they continued to watch the scene unfold outside the castle. The man waved his hand back toward the carriage. He reached toward the inside. A gloved hand grasped his and a woman emerged. Her light blonde hair was swept up under a sapphire blue hat. Even at this distance, her sparkling blue eyes were piercing. Her porcelain skin and rosy cheeks lit up as her full lips formed a smile.

“Wow,” Cate murmured. “She’s beautiful.”

“Yeah,” Jack answered after retrieving another sandwich. “Real looker, if you like blondes. She looks kind of young, doesn’t she?”

“She’s probably seventeen, eighteen,” Cate answered. “Not abnormal for this era.”

“He looks close to thirty!” Jack exclaimed.

“Again, not abnormal. And if he is my nightmarish friend, judging by his accent, he’s likely high ranking in the nobility.”

“Ah, married him for the money, huh?”

She shrugged. “Might not be the only reason.”

“Huh?”

“He’s a handsome guy. She really scored if he’s a high-ranking nobleman with that face.”

Jack froze and stared at Cate for a moment. “Lady Cate! I can’t believe what I’m hearing. As your husband, I’m terribly jealous over your gushing about this man.”

Cate chuckled. “I’m hardly gushing. Just making a point. She could have married him for money or looks, perhaps both. Assuming he’s my well-bred friend.”

The couple chatted for a few moments with Douglas and Olivia before Olivia motioned toward the interior of the castle. The two women stepped forward, Douglas and Grayson followed them. The female staff retreated around the corner to a servants’ entrance while the men began to unload the carriage.

“Douglas told Jaime that Grayson was no stranger to odd and unusual phenomena. Wonder what that means?”

“Perhaps we’ll find out tomorrow at dinner.”

Cate wandered back to the bed and plopped on it.

“You okay?” Jack questioned. “You’re not daydreaming about your dream guy, are you?”

She shot him a wry glance. “No, I’m not. Just anxious to get to tomorrow’s dinner.”

“You’ve got a long wait,” Jack said as he sank onto the bed next to her.

“I know,” Cate said with a sigh. “I just feel like we’ll finally make some progress on this time travel thing. Plus, I can hear Grayson Buckley speak and find out if he’s the one haunting me.”

“And you can ogle him up close and in person.”

“Oh my goodness! That’s the last time I comment on someone’s appearance with you around!”

“Not someone. Some other man’s appearance. And your dream guy no less.”

“I’m starting to think you really are jealous.”

Jack changed the conversation’s course. “What’s your gut say? Do you expect he’s your guy?”

“Why would a good friend of Douglas be chasing me? There’s no reason for it, so I can’t imagine it’s him. Then again, I can’t figure out who else it would be. Perhaps we’ll never find him and he’s just a figment of my imagination.”

“He’s quite a figment. He visits you every night. There must be some reason behind it.”

“We shall see,” Cate answered before sipping her wine.

“Until then, we may as well enjoy this!” Jack said as he filled Cate’s glass then his own.

“Wow! Are you actually enjoying time travel?”

“It’s growing on me. Maybe it’s not so bad.” He grinned at her.

They spent another two hours waiting for the household to settle before they snuck to Douglas’s secret lab to return to their time.

Jack wiped a bead of sweat from his brow as he wrapped his clammy hand around Cate’s. He flicked his gaze to her and cocked his head. “Let’s hope this works.”

Cate pressed her lips together in a thin line and nodded. They rubbed the face and held their breath as they waited to see if they would be returned to the present.

CHAPTER 19



They stared down at the timepiece, their eyes fixed on the slow-moving second hand. After a moment, it began to speed up before it returned to normal time.

Jack breathed an extra-long sigh of relief as they slipped back to the present. “Whew, I have spent the entire trip worried that thing wasn’t going to work!”

“It did! Your grandfather was right. Well, we spent about four hours in the past, so it’s been sixteen minutes here. I have plenty of time to decrypt more of Douglas’s journals.”

“And I have plenty of time to feed the shrubs in the back garden before second dinner.”

“Check in after dinner? We can discuss anything I’ve found and plan for tomorrow.”

“Sounds good, Lady Cate,” Jack agreed. “See you then!”

They parted ways after climbing the stairs into the library. After greeting the dogs and slipping into her modern clothes, Cate settled into her seat at the library’s desk to continue her work with the journals.

Before tackling the rest of journal two, she performed an Internet search on Grayson Buckley. The search turned up little. She tried a few alternate searches including Celine Buckley, Grayson and Celine Buckley and Buckley 1792. The final search produced a Wikipedia article on a town named Bucksville in the state of Maine.

Bucksville, Maine is a small seaside town on the Maine coast with a population of 564. It was founded by the Buckley family in 1754. The Buckley family is still the largest landowner in the town and its surrounding areas, owning both personal property and commercial ventures including the town's shipping fleet and cannery.

Cate scanned the second paragraph of the article and glanced at the location shown on the map. It gave no confirmation of a connection to Grayson Buckley.

Unable to dig up any information on the couple staying at the castle centuries ago, Cate turned her attention to the journal, spending the better part of the afternoon copying and decrypting the remainder of the journal's contents.

As Cate's dinner arrived, she settled into her armchair with her laptop balanced on the wide arm to read the rest of journal number two.

The arrival of Grayson and Celine brings hope that I will soon discover the answer to our strange manifestations. However, I have grown suddenly reluctant on the morn of our dinner party to bring the subject to conversation. It is not fear over the resulting discussion nor any explanation (or lack thereof) that may be offered. Perhaps I am taking advantage of my guests by thrusting this discussion upon them shortly after the eve of their arrival.

Still, I suppose the task must be done. And what better time than our welcome party when I shall have not only Grayson but Jaime in attendance. My cousin, Jack MacKenzie, will also be present. A man of the law, perhaps he will offer insight the others cannot.

I shall pen a summary of the conversation and any discoveries or theories provided from it following our dinner party.

* * *

The conversation was struck over brandy and cigars following our meal. Olivia and the ladies went through, leaving us to discuss business. After a brief discussion of our recent fortunes, I posed a question to the group.

"Gentlemen," I began, "I hoped to trouble you all with a delicate matter I have stumbled upon in the months since we have taken residence

within these walls. Jaime is already aware of some of this, but I shall begin fresh for you, Jack, and you, Grayson."

"Certainly," Grayson answered.

"I must ask before I begin that this discussion remain in confidence. Though rumors will abound despite my best efforts, what I am about to reveal I ask you do not reveal to anyone outside of your circle."

"That sounds ominous," Jack answered me.

"Indeed," Jaime said as he refilled our brandies. "It may, in fact, send you fleeing from this castle if you are faint of heart."

Jack raised his eyebrows at Jaime's admission. He turned his attention to me. "Now, I am more than curious."

"As am I. Proceed, old friend," Grayson imparted.

"Thank you, gentlemen. Since we arrived, we have been party to strange occurrences."

"Even prior to your arrival," Jaime interjected. "From the onset of the property acquisition through the building if we are to present all the facts."

"Quite right," I agreed. "As we surveyed the property, an old woman insisted the land was cursed and would bring nothing but woe to my family should I build here."

"Certainly, you did not believe her?" Grayson questioned.

"We would not be sitting in this castle if I had. Though I have often wondered if the woman may have been correct."

"What has happened to make you wonder that?" Jack asked.

"Many things." I retrieved my first journal from the buffet where I had placed it earlier and waved it in the air.

"Douglas has kept a record of the happenings," Jaime informed them.

"It began with small occurrences. A misplaced item, a missing thing. Vases moving across the room, papers appearing and disappearing from different spots."

"Vases floating across the room?" Jack inquired.

"No," I corrected. "The vase would be positioned here." I motioned with my hand at a vase on our buffet. "In the next instance, here." I motioned to a spot across the room. "In the time between which I had spotted it there, no one had entered the room, yet the same vase had moved there."

"I see," Jack said as he leaned back in his chair, his finger rubbing his chin in thought.

"What else?" Grayson prompted.

"You suspect more?" I inquired.

"You did not ask for our discretion over a transient vase," Grayson said.

"Clever," Jaime replied.

"Indeed," I answered. "And the reason I asked for his input." I swallowed another gulp of brandy before imparting more of my story. "The next incident would go beyond a transient vase, as you put it, Grayson. As I roamed the halls late one night, the sound of music reached my ears. I followed it to its source. My ballroom. As I approached, the sounds of a lively party emanated from behind the closed doors. Chatting, laughing, music.

"I inched to the doors. And all the while, the music and chattering continued. I flung them open." I paused, a bit for dramatic effect and also to read the expressions on the others' faces.

"And?" Jack questioned, his eyebrows raised high in anticipation.

"Nothing," I reported. "An empty room."

"And what of the music?" Grayson questioned.

"Absent, as was any strains of conversation," I responded.

Jack puckered his lips at the admission.

"Hearing things in your old age?" Grayson quipped.

I narrowed my eyes at him. "Hardly. These incidents would continue. In one instance, I overheard part of a conversation between two individuals."

"Two individuals? Did you see them? Or merely hear their voices?" Grayson inquired.

"In the events I've just described, no, I did not spot them."

Grayson raised his eyebrows at me. "Have there been others where you have seen people?"

I nodded. "Several to this moment. To be completely candid, the first apparition was not spotted by myself."

"Who?" Jack inquired.

"A chambermaid. She had taken ill one day, and Wilson said it was not a normal illness. I inquired after the girl's condition to find she had insisted she spotted a woman in the front hall."

"Another of the staff, perhaps," Jack suggested.

I shook my head. "No, the woman she described could not have been a member of this household, staff, or family."

"How do you know?" Jack asked.

"Her attire," I responded. "It could not have been the attire of anyone within this house. The woman she described wore trousers!"

The room fell silent for a moment at the admission. "Tell them about the others," Jaime instructed.

"I questioned the girl about the details and recorded them. Though we would have many additional occasions by which to assess them. On several more occasions, I along with other members of the household would encounter other apparitions."

"Were they always of the same trouser-clad woman?" Grayson asked.

"No," I responded. "There were different individuals. Some men, some women. All dressed differently and with different appearances."

"A variety of ghosts?" Jack said in a questioning tone as he scratched his head.

I pointed at him. "A starting theory that I postulated myself. I began to take careful notes to test the hypothesis." I patted the journal on the table in front of me. "I recorded every instance and began to notice a pattern."

"A pattern?" Jack questioned.

"Indeed. The people we spotted in similar attire were always in the same area. And these occurrences tended to happen when I had been in specific areas of the castle."

"Tell them your theory," Jaime prompted.

"One may assume specters roamed these halls when considering the incidents separately and occurring at random. However, when the information is studied, it presents a rather different picture. Ghosts, as you suggested, Jack, are an implication of a past individual still lurking on the property in some alternate form.

"My theory is quite the opposite." I paused and scanned their faces. "I propose we are viewing some window into the future."

My theory reduced my companions to silence. Grayson grasped his brandy glass and stood. He stalked from the table, his eyes narrowed, and his lips pursed. I allowed them a moment to consider my proposal.

Several more minutes passed before I prodded the group for some response. "Has no one any response?" I inquired.

"I must say, sir," Jack began, "it is a most fantastical theory. I am not certain what to make of it. I have never encountered anything of this nature."

“And you, Grayson?” I said, turning to him. He stared out the window. “Have you encountered anything of this sort in your dealings?”

He remained silent for a moment. He puckered his lips and raised his eyebrows as he stared into his brandy. “Not much,” he admitted. “I’ll give your theory consideration, run it past Celine. Perhaps she has had an experience of this nature. Shall we join the women?”

“Just a moment,” I said. “I would like to hear Jaime’s reaction. The theory is new to him, also.” I spun in my seat to face Jaime.

He swallowed hard and leaned forward in his chair. “I am afraid it has rendered me rather mute,” he answered. “Though my initial sentiments lie close to Jack’s statements. Most fantastical. Could it even enter the realm of possibilities? To glance into the future?”

“Grayson, you may be the best of us to answer that,” I suggested.

He swallowed the last of his brandy. “Anything is possible,” he responded. “Shall we?” He motioned toward the door.

“Of course,” I answered. We left the conversation behind in favor of rejoining our wives for after-dinner drinks.

I must admit, the result of the conversation befuddles me. I did not expect an answer but rather a more spirited discussion about the nature of the strange manifestations. While Jaime always errs on the side of caution and even Jack suggests several plausible theories, Grayson’s silence on the matter baffles me. With his experience with supernatural occurrences, I expected some idea or at least an assessment of mine. I have never known him to be so mum on a subject. Perhaps it was the addition of our fourth member, Jack, that prompted his reticence. I shall make it a point to discuss this further in private.

Until then, I have no more answers than I had before the conversation.

Cate sighed as she closed the laptop. She had learned nothing new other than Douglas planned to discuss the thus unidentified time-rips with his male guests.

A knock sounded at the door. Jack and Molly entered. Molly collected Cate’s dinner tray and said her goodnights before heading off for her final duties of the day.

Jack collapsed into the armchair next to Cate. “How’d the research go?”

Cate frowned at her closed laptop. “It didn’t. I tried a search on our newest housemates Grayson and Celine Buckley.”

“And?”

“Nothing. I found an obscure article on a town in Maine founded by a Buckley family but I’m not sure if they are related. I didn’t delve too deep into searching records. If we can finagle more information from them, it would give me a starting point for more research.”

“Anything else on our future?”

Cate offered him a smile and a chuckle. “The entirety of his final entry in the second journal is the discussion you’ll have following dinner. It should be an interesting conversation for you.”

Jack raised his eyebrows. “What, that’s it?”

Cate shrugged. “You didn’t want to know too much about your future.”

Jack shook his head at her. “All right. I’ll go in unprepared. Nothing but genuine reactions here.”

“Guess we have our mission then. More information on the Buckleys and one wild, but genuine conversation.”

“1792, here we come!”

* * *

Cate paced the floor of her sitting room as she waited for the sunrise. Unable to sleep since she experienced another nightmare and with her upcoming time travel trip, she climbed from her bed in the wee hours of the morning, settling on her chaise after noting the details of her nightmare.

Again, she was chased by an unidentifiable man. Again, she raced through the halls with her heart pounding. Again, she found herself unable to sleep afterward.

Instead, after recording the details, she had turned her attention to fretting over their upcoming trip. She had found nothing in Douglas’s journals to assist with the growing problems of the time slips. Would they make progress tonight? If they didn’t, what would it mean for them moving forward? Would the time slips continue? Would they grow worse? Would they become what Douglas described in his journals?

Who were Douglas’s mysterious guests? What supernatural experience did they possess? What was Douglas referring to? And would Grayson Buckley be identified as the man haunting Cate’s dreams?

Cate’s mind spun out of control. Questions crowded in. Questions with no answers. She had hours to wait before their journey would begin. Prior

to leaving yesterday, they had left a note for Douglas informing him they planned to travel to town early and request their luggage be sent on to the castle then finish some business in the area.

With their excuses made for earlier meals, they would spend most of their day in the present. She planned to work on Douglas's third journal. She hoped she could keep her mind focused on the work.

Her nervous energy drove her outside for a walk following her breakfast. She spent the early morning hours at the loch. After pondering her questions again while waterside, Cate meandered up the path toward the castle. Riley and Bailey raced ahead of her. She was in no hurry to return, frustrated with the events of late.

As she approached the castle, Jack emerged from around the corner. He carried a dog under each arm. Her eyes widened at the sight.

"Riley and Bailey! What have you two gotten into?" She eyed the two dogs. Mud covered their front legs and faces.

"Dug another hole in the garden," Jack said.

"I'm sorry," Cate answered as she hurried to relieve Jack of the dogs.

"No problem. The little rascals seemed to thoroughly enjoy their hole digging. I've got Sir Riley," he answered as he passed Bailey to Cate. "I'll carry him in for a bath."

"Thanks," Cate said.

They entered through the kitchen door.

"Uh-oh," Molly said as she spied them with the dirty dogs. "A few cute pups got themselves in trouble again."

"Yep," Cate replied. "And they're going to get a bath for their antics!"

"Ooooooh! Naughty puppies!" Molly teased. She grabbed Riley from Jack's arms. "Need a hand?"

"I've got it," Cate answered. "You two have enough work already!"

"Nay," Mrs. Fraser argued, "Miss Molly can help you bath the pups. And then I've got a nice juicy bone for them. A reward for their bath!"

Cate chuckled. "They are only getting their bath because they dug another hole in the back garden!"

"No matter to me," Mrs. Fraser insisted. "I plan to spoil the little monkeys."

"Your plan is working. This is their third time with their dig-fest!"

After their baths, Cate settled the dogs in the library with their prize. She spent what was left of her morning inputting cipher code from journal

number three. With her mind distracted, she made slow progress.

After lunch, she packed several items to be laid out in their bedroom in the 1790s before preparing for her trip. She pulled her hair into a style similar to Olivia's with curls cascading over her shoulder. After dressing in her day dress, she gave both Riley and Bailey a kiss on their head and promised to be back as soon as she could.

She met Jack in the hall, and they returned to 1792. They skipped the front door, sneaking straight to their bedroom from Douglas's lab. Cate unpacked the items she brought as Jack hid their suitcase under the bed.

"That should do the trick," she said after completing the task. "Time to dress for dinner."

"I will be in the sitting room area," Jack said.

"You sure you don't want to change first?"

"No, thanks. I'd rather not spend a second longer in the ancient monkey suit than I have to."

"Because that ensemble is so much more comfortable?" Cate inquired of his breeches and overcoat.

"Much. Like my comfy pj's."

After they both dressed for dinner, Jack escorted Cate to the castle's front sitting room. Her pulse quickened as they trekked through the halls and descended the main staircase. Soon, one of her questions would be answered. Was Grayson Buckley her nightly visitor?

They proceeded into the sitting room, finding only Douglas and Olivia inside. "Ah, Jack, Catherine!" Douglas said. He poured brandy into a glass and handed it to Jack as they approached the sofa. "Can I get you something, Catherine?"

"Sherry, please," Cate answered as she eased onto the couch.

Douglas poured the cocktail and handed it to Cate before he introduced them to Olivia.

"Jack and Catherine MacKenzie, this is my wife, Olivia."

Jack bowed to her before he joined Cate on the sofa. "Lady MacKenzie, it is a pleasure to meet you."

"Olivia, please!" Olivia said in an even and easy tone.

"And how was your morning business, Jack?" Douglas inquired. "I was shocked to find you'd already gone this morning when Wilson delivered your note! And Catherine, too! You must be quite the adventurer!"

“Yes,” Olivia chimed in, “I quite expected you’d like to rest after your journey.”

“I wanted Catherine to experience a bit of the Scottish countryside,” Jack answered. “I did not give her much choice about joining me. The business proved fruitful.”

“Excellent,” Douglas responded. “And how did you find the surrounding area?”

“Beautiful,” Cate answered.

“Is it much different than where you are from?” Olivia questioned. “You are American, yes?”

“Yes,” Cate said. “Quite different, though I was raised in the city, not the country.”

“And were you able to sort your luggage? Wilson did not seem to think it was delivered.”

“Yes,” Jack answered. “We had it sent on this morning.”

With a broad grin, Douglas rose from the couch opposite Jack and Cate as Jack finished his statement. “Welcome! Wonderful timing!”

Cate twisted in her seat as Jack stood. A dark-haired man with spectacles escorted a red-haired woman.

“Come in, come in!” Douglas encouraged, pouring additional cocktails for each.

He joined everyone near the fireplace. “Please meet my cousin, Jack MacKenzie, and his wife, Catherine. Jack, Catherine, this is my estate manager, Jaime Reid, and his wife, Aria.”

Cate smiled as she noticed Jack’s posture stiffen as he gripped the hand of his ancestor. Greetings were given all around before the couple who had arrived in the carriage yesterday appeared in the doorway.

“There they are!” Douglas said, welcoming them into the room. “Come in, I have several introductions to make. Jack, Catherine, Jaime, Aria, please meet one of my oldest and dearest friends, Grayson Buckley, and his wife, Celine. Gray, Celine, this is Jaime, my estate manager, and Aria.”

“Yes, I believe we met once, Mr. Buckley,” Jaime said as he shook Grayson’s hand. “At a gathering in London, though I am not certain you’ve met my wife, Aria. And I haven’t met Mrs. Buckley.”

“And this,” Douglas said after Jaime finished, “is my cousin, Jack, and his wife, Catherine.”

Cate’s heart rose into her throat as she waited to hear the man speak.

CHAPTER 20



“Pleased to meet you, sir,” Jack said as he grasped Grayson’s hand. Cate offered a wavering smile.

Grayson Buckley grinned broadly at Jack. “Certainly a pleasure to meet Douglas’s family.”

Cate’s chest collapsed in a long breath at hearing him speak. American. Not the man haunting her nightmares, she noted.

“Grayson, you and Catherine share a common nationality. I may begin to worry about an insurrection,” Douglas said followed by a boisterous laugh.

“Oh? American, are you?” Grayson said, his stormy blue eyes studying Cate.

She nodded. “Yes. I, too, hail from the other side of the pond.”

“Whereabouts?”

“Philadelphia,” she fibbed. “And you?”

“Massachusetts, north. A small town named Bucksville. I doubt you’ve heard of it. You’re from a far more civilized region,” he said with a laugh.

So, he was related to the family she’d read about in the Wikipedia article, Cate mused. Perhaps she could use this knowledge to track down more information on him.

Wilson announced dinner and they filed into the dining room. As was custom, Olivia took her seat one place left of the head of the table, Grayson found his place to her right at the table head. Jack sat to Olivia’s left. Aria

sat on Jack's other side. She found herself placed between Grayson and Jaime with Celine next to Douglas, who sat opposite Grayson.

Cate glanced to Olivia for her cue on the direction of her first discussion. Olivia faced Grayson to begin a conversation. Following her lead, Cate turned to her right to talk to Jaime.

"Good evening, again, Mrs. MacKenzie," Jaime said with a broad grin. Cate couldn't help but notice how similar his smile was to Jack's.

"Please, call me Catherine," Cate instructed. "Have you lived in Scotland your entire life, Mr. Reid? Your accent is distinctly Scottish, it reminds me of Jack's."

"Indeed, I have. And please call me Jaime. I grew up in the town of Dunhaven. With Lord MacKenzie."

"Oh!" Cate exclaimed as she pretended not to know. "I did not realize Lord MacKenzie grew up in the area."

"Aye, born and raised in the town of Dunhaven. We were schoolmates."

"How interesting!" Cate responded. "And have you worked with him since?"

"No, Lord MacKenzie left the area, made his fortune then returned. He hired me on then."

"And do you enjoy the work? Managing the estate?"

"I do," Jaime answered. "I find it most interesting. And what about you, Catherine? How are you enjoying Scotland? Do you find it a large change from Philadelphia?"

"I am enjoying it very much. There is a vast amount of natural beauty to be appreciated here. It is quite different from my urban life."

"How did you meet Jack?"

"We were seated together at a dinner party my aunt hosted while Jack was in town on business. How did you meet your wife?"

"Aria is also a resident of Dunhaven. We knew each other for much of our lives. It was a good match since we both wished to stay in the area near our families."

Cate smiled at the statement as she caught Olivia turn toward Jack out of the corner of her eye. This signaled for everyone to turn their attention to the person on their left for conversation.

"Hello again, fellow American," Grayson said as Cate turned toward him.

“Hello,” she said with a smile. “I hope no one suspects we are planning a revolution. Seating the two Americans next to each other is quite a risk.”

“Indeed,” Grayson said with a chuckle. “We may be making them nervous.”

“Good fortune for them we are separated from your wife. Is she also American?”

“No,” Grayson informed her. “French, actually. Though, she lost most of her accent after our marriage.”

“Oh, how interesting. And what does one do in Bucksville, Mr. Buckley?”

“Grayson, please,” he said with a broad grin. “My family owns a fleet of fishing ships there.”

“And is the town very large?”

“No, quite small. Very similar to Dunhaven. And nothing compared to what you’re used to in Philadelphia. In fact, my father would argue that Philadelphia is woefully overcrowded.”

Cate chuckled at the comment, more because of the definition of overcrowded in the 1790s. As they finished their conversation on their hometowns, the staff arrived with the first course.

The conversation turned to include the entire table.

“How are all our visitors enjoying Dunhaven?” Olivia prompted as she lifted her soup spoon to her mouth.

“I am enjoying it very much,” Cate assured her with a smile.

“As am I,” Celine answered. “The countryside is most beautiful. It reminds me of Massachusetts.”

“And do you enjoy it there? It must be quite a change for you,” Douglas followed up.

“But a welcome one,” Celine answered.

“Celine is originally from France, though she spent most of her life in Martinique,” Grayson explained.

“Oh, the island? Was life very different there?” Aria inquired.

“Yes,” Celine admitted. “Island life is quite different in some ways, and in others, no different.”

“Do you miss it?” Jack questioned.

Cate glanced at Celine as she answered. “No. After my father’s death, Martinique held no charm for me. I much prefer Massachusetts. Or wherever my husband may be.” She shot a glance to Grayson with a smile.

“Oh, yes, terrible shame about Marquis Devereaux,” Douglas answered. “Our deepest condolences, Celine.”

“Thank you,” she answered with a curt smile.

“Grayson, how is your cousin, Alexander? Still enjoying life across the pond?” Douglas asked, changing the subject.

“Indeed. He is quite well. The exterior of his new home was nearly complete when we departed. He anticipated it to be finished before winter set in. Then they would begin work on the interior.”

“And it is a replica of your estate here, is it not?” Olivia inquired.

“Yes, of the country estate. He has copied every detail. A piece of England in his new home, he says.”

“How interesting,” Cate added.

“Yes. If you and Mr. MacKenzie venture back to your home, you must visit with us. Though I warn you the journey to upper Massachusetts may prove arduous.”

“Thank you,” Cate replied. “I am certain the excursion is well worth it.”

The conversation turned to the weather and the surrounding area. Cate learned little more about the Buckleys or the time rips. Douglas’s plan to bring it up after the ladies left the party meant she would likely learn nothing.

As the meal ended, Olivia suggested the women retreat to the sitting room, leaving the men to discuss business. The ladies settled on the sofas near the roaring fire.

“How long were you at Grayson’s home, Celine?” Olivia inquired as they settled.

“We stayed a short while. Gray’s mother fell ill. We departed shortly after her recovery.”

“To leave again so shortly after all the traveling you did for your honeymoon, you must be quite worn out!” Olivia answered.

“I do not mind,” Celine answered. She turned her attention to Cate. “Catherine, it seems you do a fair amount of traveling also.”

Cate nodded and smiled. She swallowed hard, trying to compose herself. The women’s ice-blue eyes seemed to gaze through her. “Yes. Jack’s business requires a fair amount of traveling. Though I do not mind it either.”

“I am afraid Aria and I are rather homebodies,” Olivia admitted.

“Yes, I have barely traveled to London,” Aria admitted. “Though I believe I much prefer the Scottish countryside. I am afraid I am not fond of larger cities. I suppose it is what one becomes used to.”

“Grayson’s father expresses a similar sentiment about cities,” Celine answered.

“Douglas and I traveled a fair amount, though I prefer to remain settled. At least at this stage of life.”

“You certainly have a lovely home to remain settled in,” Cate offered.

“Douglas spared nothing when it came to the building of Dunhaven Castle,” Olivia answered. “The result is quite lovely. I wondered, or rather worried when he told me of this grand plan what the outcome may be.”

“It is quite lovely,” Cate agreed.

“I agree,” Celine added.

Olivia paused a moment then sighed. “I hope the loveliness outweighs the oddities.”

“Oddities?” Celine questioned.

“Yes,” Olivia informed her. “Some of the castle’s occupants, including Douglas, have experienced strange events. The town is stirring with rumors of a haunting or cursed land. One of our maids claims she saw a woman wandering the halls. She fled in the middle of the night, leaving a note behind calling Dunhaven Castle a cursed place.”

“Surely nonsense,” Cate said. “Stirred by the enormity of the castle. It must produce illusions.”

“I quite agree,” Olivia answered. “I hope the matter soon is closed with a simple explanation.”

The conversation ceased for a moment before turning to spring blooms and flower shows. The men rejoined them after another forty-five minutes. Conversations remained light until the post-dinner drinks broke up.

After wandering through the upstairs halls to make it appear they were going to bed, Cate and Jack snuck to Douglas’s secret lab and returned home.

They returned to their time exactly thirty-two minutes from the moment they departed. Jack breathed his customary sigh of relief.

“Whew!” Jack exclaimed. “Another successful mission.”

“How did your post-dinner discussion go?” Cate inquired.

“Wow, right into it, huh? Do I at least get to change my clothes?”

Cate raised her eyebrows at him. "Okay, okay. I'll let you get out of the monkey suit."

"Thanks. And besides, shouldn't you already know the outcome, Madame Fortune?"

"I want to hear it from the horse's mouth."

"I hope you'll return the favor and let me in on the secret women's meeting."

"Of course. The floral shows will blow your mind."

"Ooooh, I'll change as fast as I can!"

They parted ways with the plan to meet in the library after changing their clothes. Cate wandered into the room long after Jack had slumped into his favorite leather armchair. Riley bounded toward him and leapt into his lap. Bailey followed, choosing to remain on the floor but propped his front feet on Jack's legs for a petting.

"Hello, boys," Jack said. "I'm glad you missed us even though we were only gone for half an hour."

"Crazy, isn't it?" Cate said with a sigh as she collapsed into the chair next to Jack.

"And exhausting. So, post-time travel analysis. What have we learned?"

"We have learned that Grayson Buckley is NOT the man haunting my nightmares."

"Right, he's American! I did not see that coming! So, he's innocent."

"He is," Cate answered.

"You don't sound happy about that."

Cate sighed as she considered the statement. "I guess I'm not. We've ruled out Grayson Buckley, the only suspect we had for this guy's identity. So, we're no closer to finding who this is. Which means we're no closer to solving that mystery."

"We're also no closer to solving the mystery of the time rips turning into time slips," Jack added.

"Nothing came out of your meeting of the minds following dinner?" Cate inquired.

"I'm going to point out again that you know the outcome of this conversation. You've read it already, haven't you?"

"Perhaps his account wasn't accurate. Besides, I'd love your take on what happened."

“Douglas laid out the odd events, beginning with misplaced items. Then he overheard phantom music and conversations. And finally, the events escalated to physical manifestations. A maid witnessed a woman in the front hall and then Douglas also began to see people.”

“Did anyone offer any explanation?”

“I went with the standard haunting scenario.”

“And Douglas did not agree.”

“He did not. It’s almost like you know what happened.”

Cate narrowed her eyes at him. “Please, continue.”

“Douglas said ghosts were windows into past lives, but he believed the events they experienced were windows into the future.”

“How did Grayson Buckley react to that?”

Jack shook his head and pursed his lips for a moment before speaking. “He didn’t say much. He offered to run it past Celine, then suggested we join the women.”

“Did his reaction seem odd?”

Jack shrugged. “I suppose in thinking about it, yes, it did. Though perhaps he doesn’t know anything about it.”

“This is the man Douglas pinned most of his hopes on. He wanted to run this past Grayson because of his supernatural experience. What does that even mean? And why was Grayson so quiet on the subject?”

“In retrospect, yes, it seemed like he wanted to avoid the subject. Perhaps he didn’t want to speak candidly in front of Jaime and me. And, yes, Douglas asked if Grayson ever ran across anything like this in his ‘dealings.’ That’s an odd statement. What type of dealings does someone have that involve time travel?”

“That’s exactly what I wondered!” Cate answered. “What supernatural dealings do the Buckleys have?”

“You talked to him at dinner. Did he say anything interesting?”

“Not much. He is from Bucksville. I found a Wikipedia article about the town before we left. Maybe I can use that to track down more information about him.”

“And his wife is from Martinique.”

“Yes, and the daughter of a Marquis! She must be someone. What supernatural dealings could they have? Perhaps he’s referring to the island customs, voodoo.”

“Voodoo? Like pins in dolls?”

"It's a bit more subtle than that, but yes. Caribbean islands were well-known for voodoo customs."

"Could be that, then. But why would Douglas assume that could help with his glimpses into the future?"

"I'm not sure," Cate admitted with a sigh.

"Did you learn anything interesting from the women?"

"Not really. Olivia mentioned the supposed hauntings. She hoped it would die down soon. Rumors are abounding in town."

"That's it? Nothing else?"

"Not really," Cate said with a shrug. "Though..." Her voice trailed off as she crinkled her brow.

"What?"

"It's nothing," she said as she waved her hand in the air to dismiss the idea.

"What? Come on, Cate. Don't hold back now."

Cate shrugged again. "It's probably stupid but... there's something odd about Celine."

"She's French. It's how they are."

Cate giggled at the statement. "That's not true. No, it's something else. She asked me a question and when she looked at me it was like she could see right through me."

"It's the voodoo."

"I guess time will tell."

"Well, if you get any odd pains anywhere, we'll know who to suspect first."

"Very funny," Cate said with a groan. "I certainly hope not."

"I certainly hope we get more information and soon. The way Douglas talked, the uncontrolled time rips seem to escalate. We need a solution and fast."

"I'll work more on the journals tomorrow. I'm not sure I can concentrate after our double day."

"Tomorrow's a new day, Cate. Get some rest. Besides, it's nearly time for dinner!"

"Second dinner, you mean," Cate corrected.

"Yep, second dinner. The best part of time traveling. Repeat meals!"

"Speaking of time traveling..."

"We should go back tomorrow. We need to keep searching for answers."

“I agree,” Cate answered. “I’ll translate journal three in the morning, and we can travel back for dinner again. How’s that?”

“Works for me,” Jack said with a groan as he pushed himself out of the armchair. “I’d better be heading down for that second dinner.”

“Enjoy,” Cate said as he moseyed across the room.

* * *

Cate ran through the castle’s halls. She stumbled down the main staircase in a desperate attempt to flee. She pushed through the sitting room doors, tugging her dress’ train behind her. With wide eyes, she searched for a hiding spot.

Footsteps followed her. Cate raced across the room and sank behind the sofa. She crawled under the slim console table, realizing its narrowness would fail to hide her completely.

Men’s shoes clacked across the hardwood floor. They stalked into the room slowly and deliberately. The noise stopped. Cate held her breath. Her pulse raced and her hands trembled as she bit her lower lip.

The footsteps commenced again. They approached her hiding spot. She spied legs coming around the sofa. The man stopped again. After a moment, he spun, his footsteps receding across the room.

“Soon, Catherine, soon,” the man said. His footsteps departed into the foyer. As the front door banged shut, Cate awoke.

Another nightmare, Cate reflected as her heart returned to normal speed. This one came with a warning. The man’s words rang in her mind.

Soon, Catherine, soon.

CHAPTER 21



Cate set her cup of tea next to her laptop as she blew out a shaky breath. Her nightmare last night still bothered her, particularly the ominous warning. His words rattled through her mind. Soon, Catherine, soon.

Cate shuddered as she pulled a shortbread from the saucer, a preemptive reward for her decryption work this morning. She nibbled on one as she popped her laptop open, shoving the nightmare from her mind, forcing herself to concentrate on her work.

She'd spent yesterday morning entering ciphertext from the third journal into a document but hadn't decrypted it yet. She planned to begin that process now. With any luck, she'd learn more about how to control the time rips, the curious Buckleys, or anything that may help them.

Cate copied several pages of text into the decipher program and clicked the "GO!" button. A colored circle spun around and around as she waited for decoded text to appear. She took another sip of tea and enjoyed more of the shortbreads. Molly's latest batch tasted fantastic. She made a mental note to pass her sentiments along to Molly when she saw her next.

After another few moments, text filled in on her screen. She copied it to her decrypted document. She started another round with the program as she read the next journal entry.

Having a laboratory in the castle is simply glorious! I have spent several days working on my inventions. With my own space, Olivia can no longer lament my materials lying about. It has caused something of an

awakening in me. Ideas now swirl in my mind constantly. I have the room to draft their sketches and work on multiple projects at once.

And I have finally begun on my larger projects! Projects for which our previous abodes did not provide sufficient space. Indeed, my stairway project is shaping up quite nicely, though it has produced no results yet. And my seclusion chamber is nearly ready for use. I wonder if results will be more readily forthcoming from it.

I shall try it soon. Jaime insists I should not, but I cannot see the harm in it. Today's project is something quite different. I am attempting to produce a light source without fire. I believe it would be a most useful invention as using flame for light can be tedious.

Cate's brow furrowed as she read the start of the entry. She glanced at the journal from which she'd copied it. She paged to the back cover. Had she selected the wrong journal? Was this not the next journal?

She narrowed her eyes, spotting the small "3" penciled into the bottom corner of the interior back cover. She checked the other journals but found no other threes among them. This must be the correct journal. The opening entry made no mention of Grayson Buckley, the time rips, or anything related to the final entry in the second journal.

Cate scanned the remaining text in the passage. It discussed Douglas's first attempt at creating a lightbulb and his findings. No mention of anything that could help them existed in what she had decrypted.

Behind her text document, the decryption program announced the completion of the next set of text. Cate skimmed the text. She offered a frustrated sigh as none of it related to Douglas's discussion of the time rips.

As she considered her next move, Cate reached for her teacup. She took a sip, but no warm liquid reached her lips. She frowned down at the empty cup and saucer. Perhaps a refill would assist her in planning.

With her empty cup and saucer collected, she wandered the halls to the kitchen, lost in thought. Why had the journal jumped? Why did Douglas behave as though the time rips were suddenly unimportant? Why did his focus shift? And would she find more in the subsequent journals? Perhaps she should decode a portion of each of the remaining journals to determine if any additional information existed in them.

Cate resolved to try that tactic as she moseyed down the hall to the kitchen.

She found Mrs. Fraser and Molly enjoying their cuppa.

“Oh, Lady Cate! I could have collected the teacup,” Mrs. Fraser said as she entered.

“I’m actually looking for a refill,” Cate answered.

“Research going that good, huh?” Molly joked.

Cate nodded as she set the kettle on with fresh water to boil. “That’s about the size of it. Oh, Molly, this latest batch of shortbread is really good!”

“Thanks!” Molly exclaimed.

“Aye, I quite agree, Lady Cate,” Mrs. Fraser answered. “The next test is to bake them with no supervision!”

The tea kettle whistled on the stove and Cate poured herself a fresh cup. As she dunked the tea bag into the steaming water, Jack entered.

“Okay, she’s all ordered. I got the one you liked and...” His voice stopped mid-sentence as he stared at Cate. “Lady Cate! What are you doing here?”

“My, that’s some greeting. It is *her* castle,” Molly teased.

“Aye, it is,” Jack answered. “But I don’t often find her in the kitchen of her castle mid-morning.”

“Just making a cuppa,” Cate responded.

“Didn’t you have one already?”

Mrs. Fraser guffawed. “When did you become the tea police?”

Jack ran his fingers through his hair and offered a nervous chuckle. “No tea police here,” he said with another chuckle. “Just... well, anyway.”

“So, what did you get ordered?” Cate inquired.

“Huh?” he questioned.

“When you came in you said you had gotten something ordered.”

“Oh, right,” Jack answered. “Manure. Yep, ordered the manure for the garden.”

Cate knit her brows and frowned.

“Not a pleasant conversation, you’re right,” Jack added.

“It’s not that. You mentioned you got the one someone liked. Who likes manure?”

“Oh,” Jack said with another nervous chuckle. “I meant the one the flowers like.”

“Oh,” Cate answered. “Got it. Yes, the plants probably do like manure. Well, I’ll leave you to your day!”

“Okay, bye!” Jack said. Cate offered him a confused glance, her eyes narrowed as she collected a few more shortbread cookies and returned to the library.

She spent the rest of the morning copying excerpts from half of the remaining journals. None of them mentioned any references to the timepiece, time rips, time travel, or the Buckleys. She slouched in her desk chair. Unless something changed in the second half of the journals, they’d learn nothing from these. Their only hope remained with traveling back to Douglas’s time.

The news would not sit well with Jack, she reflected, as a knock announced her lunch. She left the journals in favor of her favorite armchair during the meal.

Jack joined her following lunch. Molly departed with the lunch tray as he sank into the armchair next to Cate.

“Ordering that manure really wore you out,” Cate teased.

“Aye,” he admitted.

Cate narrowed her eyes at him.

“What?” he questioned.

“That conversation just seemed... strange.”

“Strange? No, just... I never talked to Gertrude about manure.”

“I see,” Cate murmured.

“Anyway, how’s your research going? Anything to help us?” Jack responded before Cate could say anything further.

“Well...” Cate began. Molly’s reappearance in the library interrupted the conversation.

“Molly?” Cate questioned. “Is everything okay?”

Molly stumbled into the room. Cate’s lunch tray remained clutched in her hands. White knuckles wrapped around each handle. Her jaw hung agape. Her eyes stared ahead without seeing. Her skin, normally golden and warm, was an ashy white.

“Molly?” Cate asked again as she climbed from her chair. Jack followed Cate as she approached Molly who stood unwavering in the doorway. “What’s wrong? What is it?”

Molly’s bottom lip quivered as she attempted to form words. Jack tugged the tray from her hands and set it on the desk as Cate guided her to an armchair.

Molly eased into it, still staring straight ahead. Her brows pinched together, and she frowned. Cate glanced at Jack as she perched on the chair's arm. She rubbed Molly's shoulders. "What is it, Molly? Are you not feeling well?"

Jack rejoined them, sinking into the chair next to Molly. "Molly, are you okay?" he questioned.

Molly took a deep inhale. Her eyes darted around the room before settling on Cate. She grasped Cate's hand then glanced between Cate and Jack. "I think... I think I just saw a ghost."

"What?!" Cate exclaimed. She shot a look to Jack. "Where?"

"I-In... in the hall," Molly stammered.

"Okay, Molly. Take a deep breath and calm down. Then tell us everything."

Molly nodded and pushed her hair behind both ears. She took a deep breath and blew it out before she continued. "I picked up your tray and stepped into the hall. I started down the hall toward the kitchen and... there she was!"

"She?" Jack questioned.

"Yes. Wearing a long dress. Old-fashioned. And her hair was swept up." Molly waved her hand behind her head to demonstrate.

"What was she doing?" Cate inquired.

"Walking. Just... walking. Toward the foyer."

Cate nodded. "Did she see you?"

Molly shook her head. "No, I froze. I didn't know what to do. I... I..."

"It's okay," Cate said, grasping Molly's hand and squeezing.

"I'm not crazy!" Molly burst out.

"I didn't say you were," Cate replied.

"Bu-but you said the castle wasn't haunted, but I think it might be!" Molly cried.

"Let's not jump to conclusions just yet," Cate soothed.

"I saw a ghost, Cate!" Molly shouted. "I'm sorry," she said in a trembling voice. "I'm sorry. I just... I saw something, Lady Cate. I saw... No, not something. A woman. I saw a woman."

"Funny trick of the lighting?" Jack suggested.

Molly shook her head but didn't respond. "We believe you," Cate assured her. "But I wouldn't get too worked up just yet. If you see her again, please tell us. I want to keep track of this."

“What are we going to do if she’s a ghost?” Molly breathed.

“Let’s cross that bridge when we come to it,” Cate said.

“She didn’t harm you,” Jack answered. “Even if she is a ghost, and I’m not saying she is, it may just be a nuisance, not a problem.”

“Yet,” Molly added.

“Molly, let’s not get too worked up. This could be anything.”

Silence fell over the group. Cate glanced at Jack. He gave a slight shrug.

“Let me get you a cup of tea,” Cate offered.

“I can run down for it,” Jack said.

“No,” Molly insisted. “No, I... I’m okay. You’re right. I saw something. I don’t understand what it was, but I definitely saw something. But it’s no reason to panic. It’s an old house. It could be anything. And even if it was a ghost, so what?! So I live in a haunted castle. At least I live in a castle.”

Molly stood on wobbly legs. She took a deep breath as she steadied herself. Cate leapt to her feet with her arms outstretched toward Molly in case she fainted.

“I’m okay,” Molly insisted as color returned to her face. “I better get this tray downstairs. Mrs. Fraser will be wondering what happened to me.”

“I’ll walk you down,” Jack said.

“No, no, I’m okay. I don’t need an escort.”

“Are you sure?” Cate asked. “If you’d feel better with someone going with you, one of us can walk you down.”

Molly shook her head and firmed her jaw. She squared her shoulders. “I’m good,” she stated with a nod and a snuffle.

“Okay, if you’re sure,” Cate said.

“I am,” Molly assured her with a smile. She retrieved the tray from the desk and stood in the doorway. After another deep breath, Molly disappeared into the hall. Cate snuck to the door and popped her head into the hall. She followed Molly’s retreating form.

As Molly vanished around the corner, Cate returned to the armchairs. Jack raised his eyebrows at her. “That’s not good,” he said.

“No kidding,” Cate answered as she collapsed into her armchair.

“These time slips are growing worse. Tell me you found something in those journals.”

Cate shook her head. “Nope. Nothing.”

“Nothing?” Jack sighed as he paced the floor. “How far are you from finding something do you think? Is he mentioning anything close to a solution?”

Cate remained silent for a moment. “That’s where things go from bad to worse.”

“What do you mean?” Jack questioned as his pacing ground to a halt.

Cate glanced up at him, fixing her eyes on his. “Douglas’s writing has ceased to mention manifestations, time rips, time travel, Grayson Buckley or anything relating to our problem entirely.”

“What?!” Jack cried. His eyes darted around the room as if searching for an answer. “What is he detailing in the journals?”

“His inventions. Journal three discusses his attempt to make a lightbulb.” Cate sank her head into her hands with a deep exhale.

“Oh, you’re kidding. Are they out of order? Did you miss a journal?”

“I checked! And I started to randomly pull excerpts from the remaining journals. I made it through half. Not a single reference.”

Jack collapsed into the armchair next to Cate. He shook his head in disbelief. Jack’s head dropped onto the chair behind him.

“I’ll keep checking both the other journals I haven’t tried and more excerpts from the ones I checked already,” Cate continued.

Jack shook his head at her statement. “We can’t depend on those,” he admitted. “We need another solution. We’ve got to step up our game in the past.”

Cate paused before responding. “But how? Douglas has his suspicions, but it doesn’t seem like he’s formed any final conclusions yet.”

“Perhaps we can nudge him in that direction,” Jack suggested. “I could tell him I agree with him. That I’ve been considering it and have concluded he is correct.”

Cate pondered Jack’s suggestion. “We could try. I’d be interested in finding out Grayson Buckley’s response to that. Both you and Douglas judged his behavior to be odd.”

“Perhaps he deems Douglas is crazy.”

“Douglas seemed to expect Grayson to be his biggest ally in this. Or at least for him to offer some solution, perhaps even have some experience with these situations.”

“If I reopen the subject after dinner tonight, perhaps we’ll get a clearer picture. If he ignores it again, we may have something. If not, perhaps we’ll

finally figure out what supernatural experience this guy has.”

“Okay, there’s our plan. Our very weak plan,” Cate said with a sigh.

“At least it’s a plan. We’ll try our best to push Douglas’s discovery so we can find out how he controlled these time rips and hopefully use that information to fix our problem.”

“Before Molly sees another ghost.”

“Aye, before Molly or anyone else ends up in a time period not their own.”

“Meet you around four to head back?”

“Sounds like a plan,” Jack agreed.

* * *

Cate pulled on her eighteenth-century attire as worry creased her brow. Would they make any progress today? If they didn’t, what would happen? In both other instances when she and Jack had investigated in the past, it hadn’t spelled disaster if they failed. This time it may. The future of the castle may depend on their success. If they failed, the time slips could worsen. The castle could become uninhabitable, leaving anyone who chose to stay in it prone to trips to other centuries with no warning.

She finished fastening her dress and fussed with her hair. For the first time since her arrival at the castle, reluctance to time travel coursed through her. She feared failing. They would not fail, she promised herself. They could not. She pushed her shoulders back as she cemented the idea in her mind. They would solve this.

She gathered her train and navigated to the library where she found Jack.

“Ready?” He inquired.

“Yes,” Cate said, resolute. “Let’s go solve our problems.”

“There’s the spirit, lassie,” Jack said with a grin as they descended into the laboratory.

“Well, I suppose the burden lies on you. It is you who will be privy to those secret meetings of the male minds.”

“Complete with billowing clouds of cigar smoke and decanters of brandy,” Jack answered. “And don’t discount your work, Lady Cate. Flower shows are serious business!”

Cate narrowed her eyes at him as she suppressed a giggle. She held out the timepiece. "Here we go!"

They activated the timepiece and the second hand slowed to a crawl. The lights blinked out, replaced by the blackness characteristic of the closed-off, secret room. They snuck from the lab, through the library, and into the foyer before climbing the stairs to their bedroom.

Once inside their bedroom, Cate discovered a note addressed to them both. She flipped open the folded paper.

Jack and Catherine - I hope your business is progressing well. You are going to run poor Catherine ragged with your traipsing about the countryside! I jest, though I'm certain Olivia would enjoy seeing Catherine for tea.

I do hope we shall see you today for dinner. We have another guest joining us. Quite unexpected but it should prove most entertaining for the group! I should very much like for you to meet him.

If you return in time, please do not delay in presenting yourselves for dinner.

- Douglas

Cate read the note aloud as Jack peered over her shoulder at it.

"Ohhh, a mystery guest!" Jack exclaimed. "Wonder who this guy is that Douglas is so interested in introducing us to?"

She pursed her lips as she considered the note. "Another relative?"

"I hope it's not someone who needs a land attorney."

Cate giggled at the prospect. "Tell him you have too many clients already."

"Good plan, Lady Cate. Plus, my real talent lies in criminal law, not land."

"If it's a relative, I hope it's not someone who knows the family well. Our cover could be blown!"

"Let's keep our fingers crossed it's someone who needs a land attorney." Jack held his hand out. "Sorry, fellow, my client list is full," he practiced.

"Convincing! Well, I suppose we shouldn't delay dressing for dinner!"

"Don't want to be late to meet my newest client," Jack joked.

After changing for dinner, Cate and Jack arrived at the sitting room to await the meal. Olivia, Douglas, Aria, and Jaime awaited them.

“Good evening, Jack and Catherine!” Douglas greeted them. “I am so pleased you could attend!”

“We received your note,” Jack replied. “I am glad my business concluded in time.”

“As am I. We are most fortunate...” The arrival of Celine and Grayson Buckley interrupted Douglas’s statement. “Celine, Gray, good evening.”

“Good evening, Douglas,” Gray answered with a broad smile. “I understand we have more company this evening.”

“Indeed.”

“Additional family?” he inquired.

“No,” Douglas admitted. “Though I am most enthusiastic about this unexpected development!”

“Care to elaborate?” Jaime inquired.

“In due time, my good fellow, in due time.” Douglas poured cocktails for everyone. It appeared he intended to keep mum regarding the surprise dinner guest. Not family, Cate ruminated. Their cover should remain intact then. She pondered as she sipped her sherry who could induce this giddy reaction from Douglas.

As the dinner hour neared, Wilson entered from the foyer and offered a slight nod to Douglas. “Won’t you all excuse me?” Douglas said in a gleeful tone. “Olivia, would you please?” He motioned for her to join him in the foyer. With a grin on his lips, he hurried from the room with Olivia.

Cate stood and approached Jack. “Moment of truth,” she whispered.

“At least he’s not family,” Jack breathed.

Cate gave him a nod, her eyebrows raised to acknowledge the win.

Within a few moments, Douglas returned with another man. The man stood a bit taller than Douglas. Perfectly tailored clothing evidenced his lean form. His dark hair, tied back in a queue, topped his chiseled, regal features.

Cate witnessed a shared glance between the Buckleys. Were they familiar with the new arrival, she wondered?

“Ladies and gentlemen,” Douglas announced. “We have the wonderful fortune to have a duke join us under our roof. If you would all join me in welcoming Duke Marcus Northcott! Duke Northcott, please.” Douglas motioned into the room. “Allow me to fix you a cocktail and introduce you to our other guests.”

Duke Northcott offered a tight-lipped smile as he surveyed the room.

“Who the heck is this character?” Jack whispered to Cate as their eyes followed him across the room.

Cate glanced to the Buckleys again as she answered. “I’m not sure.” She narrowed her eyes as she noted the set expression on Celine Buckley’s face. Her husband wore a matching unimpressed look. “But it seems as though our new friends, the Buckleys, know him.”

Aria and Jaime joined the Buckleys near the fireplace as Douglas handed a scotch to Duke Northcott. They spoke a few words before Douglas motioned toward Cate and Jack.

He sauntered toward them with Duke Northcott in tow. “Duke Northcott, I am so pleased for you to make the acquaintance of my cousin, Jack MacKenzie, and his wife, Catherine.”

The man’s dark eyes flitted to Jack then focused on Cate. He studied her, a smile bordering on a smirk formed on his lips. His stare disconcerted her, but she forced a smile onto her face. Jack’s hand hung in the air as the Duke ignored it, directing his attention solely on Cate.

She offered him her hand, which he accepted. His fingers brushed hers, sending a shiver down her spine. Cate ignored her instinctive response. “A pleasure to meet you, Duke,” she said.

His eyes met hers. “Hello, Catherine,” he said in a crisp British accent. Cate’s heart leapt into her throat and blood went cold. Her stomach somersaulted and her knees went weak. Her hand trembled in his and her lower lip quivered as she struggled to pull herself together.

That voice. That haunting voice. The same voice from her nightmares. In two words, she had identified the man who had chased her, tormented her, haunted her for months. Duke Marcus Northcott.

CHAPTER 22



Cate swallowed hard as she forced a weak smile onto her lips. Jack cleared his throat and thrust his hand out further. “Duke Northcott, how fortunate we are to dine with you,” he said.

Duke Northcott offered him a displeased glance and murmured, “Yes.”

“Allow me to introduce you to the rest of the group,” Douglas offered, signaling for the Duke to move toward the group near the fireplace.

“Friendly guy,” Jack murmured. Cate gulped the rest of her sherry as she spun away from the newest member of their group. “Cate? Are you all right?”

Cate shook her head without answering. She bit her lower lip, her forehead creasing. “What is it? Are you sick? Do you need to sit down?”

Cate met Jack’s gaze. “It’s him.”

Jack’s brows knit for a moment before his eyes went wide. “Him? As in the guy in your nightmares? That’s him?” Jack whispered.

Cate offered a clipped nod and she swallowed hard.

Jack studied the man across the room as he greeted Jaime, Aria, Grayson, and Celine. “Our new friends seem to share your sentiments regarding Duke Northcott,” Jack commented.

Cate twisted to face the scene as she recovered from her shock. “Celine looked less than pleased when Douglas announced him.”

Jack surveyed the scene a moment longer. “Who is this character? Why would he be lurking around your subconscious?”

“And what history does he share with the Buckleys?” Cate added.

“Would you prefer to go? I could make our excuses. Say you felt ill. Caught the vapors,” Jack said with a wink.

Cate shook her head and squared her shoulders. “No. We need answers. We must see this through. Perhaps we’ll get a twofer! Solve both mysteries in one fell swoop.”

“You sure?” Jack inquired.

Cate nodded and let out a deep breath. “Yes.” She narrowed her eyes at the Duke as he chatted with Olivia and Douglas. “I need answers. WE need answers.”

“If you want an escape just shout “PICKLES” and I’ll make an excuse.”

Cate swung her head to face Jack, an incredulous expression on her face. “Pickles?”

“Yeah. It’ll be our signal word.”

Wilson entered and announced dinner before Cate could respond to Jack’s escape word plan. The group entered the dining room and found their seats. Cate’s muscles stiffened as she noticed her seat to the left of Duke Northcott.

She met Jack’s eyes across the table and offered him a grimace as she stepped toward the table. The chair slid in behind her. She turned to find Duke Northcott easing it toward her. She offered him a curt smile as she lowered to her seat.

The man took his seat next to her. Olivia turned to her left to speak with Grayson. Cate breathed a sigh of relief as she faced Jaime for their pre-dinner conversation.

“Good evening, Mrs. MacKenzie,” Jaime said.

“Mr. Reid,” Cate greeted him. “And how are you this evening?”

“Splendid,” he responded. “A most fortunate turn of events to welcome a Duke!”

“Yes, Douglas seems thrilled with the development,” Cate agreed.

“Aye, to welcome a Duke to his humble country estate in the highlands!” Cate held in a chuckle at the description of the large, ornate castle as humble.

“Duke Northcott is well-traveled. He should provide a most entertaining evening,” Jaime babbled. His enthusiasm brimmed.

“It seems the Buckleys are acquainted with Duke Northcott,” Cate began when Olivia turned to her right to speak with Jaime.

Their unbalanced party had left an awkward conversation between Douglas, Duke Northcott, and Celine, though from the corner of Cate's eye she noticed Celine remained silent. As they turned, Celine took the opportunity to speak with Jack, seated to her right.

Cate swallowed hard and forced a smile onto her lips as she faced Duke Northcott.

"Good evening again, Catherine," he said.

Cate found the tone of his voice disconcerting. After hearing it on a near-nightly basis, the mere sound garnered a fear reaction from her. She fought to keep her heartbeat steady and not shiver as he spoke.

"Good evening, Duke," she answered. "I trust your travel here was pleasant?"

"Rather tedious, however, I am most pleased to have arrived in this unique location. I imagine your journey to have been quite a bit more taxing."

Cate's brow furrowed at his statement.

"Your accent," he continued. "You are also American."

"Also?" she questioned.

"Yes, Buckley is also an American."

Cate noted the tone he used as he spat out Grayson's name and the lack of salutation that accompanied it. What history did they share, she wondered?

"Oh, yes," Cate answered. "Yes, though we are from very different parts of the country."

"Oh? You are not also from Massachusetts?"

"No, Philadelphia."

Duke Northcott narrowed his eyes at her. "Hmm," he murmured as though weighing her statement for its truthfulness. "And you married a Scotsman."

"I did, yes."

"An odd lot, you Americans. And how remarkable that two Americans should arrive at Dunhaven Castle at the same time."

"A happy coincidence in my opinion."

He narrowed his eyes at her statement. "Yes, well, you Americans are rather easy to please. Though..." He paused as his dark eyes studied her face. "There appears to be something unique about you, Catherine. I should look forward to speaking with you further during my stay."

Cate suppressed a shudder at the statement. The serving of the first course postponed any further conversation, much to her delight.

The dinner proceeded with light conversation. Celine remained quiet for much of the meal. Grayson interjected comments here and there, mainly aimed at Douglas. Duke Northcott's descriptions of world travel dominated much of the conversation. True to Douglas's word, his colorful stories passed the time despite Cate's trepidation about the man.

Halfway through the meal, she began to wonder why her subconscious mind seemed so terrified of him. He possessed an old-fashioned charm that made him rather likable. Still, she reflected, something about him distressed her. What?

She glanced up as she pondered the question to find Jack's eyes on her. He raised his eyebrows at her. She nodded to answer his silent question. She was okay.

As the meal ended, she found herself relieved to leave the men behind and escape Duke Northcott's side. As they settled in the sitting room, her mind remained in the dining room. Jack planned to brooch the subject of the manifestations haunting the castle with Douglas. What response would he receive, she ruminated? Would Duke Northcott's presence hamper their plan?

Aria and Olivia chattered about the Duke's colorful tales about a remote region in Africa. Their voices provided little more than background noise for a distracted Cate. Celine also remained silent.

Within moments, Grayson entered the room. The other men trailed behind him.

"Oh!" Olivia exclaimed, unprepared for the sudden entrance of their male counterparts.

Grayson stalked to Celine. "How are you feeling, darling? Would you prefer to retire early?"

"Yes, if you wouldn't mind. Olivia, I am so terribly sorry, but I am rather under the weather."

"Not at all!" Olivia responded. "I do hope you are feeling better tomorrow."

"Thank you," Celine answered as she clutched Grayson's hand and stood.

Jack entered as the two crossed the room to depart for the evening. He shot Cate a confused glance. She answered with a shrug.

“Leaving?” Douglas questioned as he entered with Duke Northcott.

“Yes, please accept our apologies,” Grayson responded. “Celine has been feeling unwell. I suggested she rest.”

“Of course. I hope you improve soon, Celine,” Douglas said.

Jack poured himself a drink as the Buckleys said their goodnights to their hosts. Cate joined him at the drink cart. “That was quick,” she whispered. “I’m guessing you had no luck.”

“Not a shred,” Jack answered. “I didn’t even get the words out before I was interrupted.”

“Grayson seems intent on getting Celine out of here.”

“Is she that sick, do you imagine?”

“No,” Cate answered. She narrowed her eyes as she followed the departing forms of Grayson and Celine Buckley. “No, I don’t think she’s sick at all.”

The group spent another forty-five minutes chatting before Duke Northcott announced his departure. Cate and Jack spent another few moments with the remaining group before taking their leave, feigning fatigue from their business earlier.

“Should we head straight to the library?” Jack inquired as they stepped into the foyer.

“Yes,” Cate agreed. “While the remaining group is still accounted for.”

As they proceeded toward the library, angry, hushed whispers carried down the hall. Cate ceased walking mid-step. She held her finger to her lips and signaled for Jack to listen.

The voices seemed to come from around the corner. Cate tiptoed toward the other hallway. Jack crept behind her. She ducked into a parlor and hurried across the room. Two large double doors on the adjacent wall opened into the other hallway. She eased the door open a crack and peeked out. Jack hovered behind her, peering over her head.

“Is that...” he began.

“Celine Buckley,” Cate answered. “With Duke Northcott.”

Celine’s posture was stiff and her jaw set. “Why did you follow me here, Marcus?” Celine demanded.

“You already realize the answer to that question, Celine,” Duke Northcott answered.

“Leave, Marcus. Stop making a fool of yourself.”

Duke Northcott grasped her by the arm and dragged her toward him. Cate shrank back from the door, her eyes wide as his quick and fierce actions startled her.

“Do not presume to tell me what to do, Celine. I shall be thought no more a fool than you who cannot settle in one place for more than months at a time. People will begin to wonder, dear, what you are running from?”

“Or *who*,” Celine spat at him.

“Unfortunately for you, my reputation precedes me. It opens doors for me. Yours does not.”

“You overestimate your appeal, Marcus. Though you always have.” Celine wrenched her arm from his grip. “There is nothing for you here. Go.”

Duke Northcott straightened his cravat and smoothed his jacket. A smirk crossed his lips. “Au contraire, my dear. There is something odd here. There is a reason you came here.”

“To escape you!”

Duke Northcott rolled his eyes at the statement. “When will you cease this charade and take your rightful place? Your behavior is childish.”

“I will *never* stand beside you.”

“Very well, Celine. Insist all you’d like but you know the score. I shall not leave unless you are at my side. Besides, something draws me here. There is something that intrigues me. And I shall not leave until I determine what it is. I suggest you learn to manage your emotions, though, unless you plan to embarrass Buckley by leaving every dinner party early.”

Celine set her jaw. “There is no managing my enmity toward you!” she hissed before she stormed down the hall.

Duke Northcott stared after her for a moment before he retreated in the opposite direction. “Wow,” Cate whispered.

“Yeah, no kidding,” Jack answered.

“Those two definitely have a history.”

“Must be a humdinger, too!”

“Come on,” Cate urged. “Let’s get back home and discuss what we’ve learned so far!”

They checked the hallway before darting down it to the library. They descended into Douglas’s unoccupied laboratory and returned to the present. After changing into their normal clothes, they met in the library to discuss the dinner party and their next steps.

Jack collapsed into his favorite armchair with Riley in his lap. Cate collected Bailey and eased into the chair next to him.

“Well,” Jack began. “One mystery down, two to go.”

Cate reflected on his statement. “Duke Marcus Northcott. So, he is the man haunting my dreams.”

Jack nodded. “That’s the one solved.”

“But why?” Cate questioned.

“And that’s one of the mysteries yet to be solved. The other is the time rips and how to control them.”

“Yeah, what happened at your man meeting? Grayson popped in way earlier than anyone expected!”

“I’m afraid that may be my fault,” Jack responded.

Cate raised her eyebrows. “Really? What in the world did you say?”

“Nothing!” Jack exclaimed.

Cate puckered her lips at him, prompting him to continue. “Really, nothing! We settled at the table after you ladies left. Well, most of us did. Grayson wandered around the room and settled in front of a window to glare out of it.”

“Glare out of it?” Cate questioned.

“That’s putting it mildly. If looks could kill, whoever stood on the other side of that window would have been dead.

“Anyway, I started to bring up the discussion from last night. I got the words, ‘Douglas, about your theory from last night’ before Grayson interrupted me.”

“What did he say?”

“We shouldn’t dwell on that. Not with someone as illustrious as Duke Northcott in our midst. I propose, gentleman, we disband and rejoin the ladies. And with that, he was out the door. Douglas seemed a bit puzzled, and he stammered around a bit but suggested we follow Grayson’s lead.”

“So, you did not speak about anything involving the time rips at all.”

“Not even for a second,” Jack admitted.

“Ugh,” Cate groaned. “This is frustrating. We’re making no progress on *any* front!”

Jack nodded as he stared at the crackling fire in the fireplace. “We need to keep at it. Before Molly ends up in another century again.”

Cate sighed. “I suppose we’re back at it tomorrow with another dinner party.”

“Should I try to bring it up again?”

Cate pursed her lips in thought before shrugging. “Maybe?”

Jack slid his eyes toward her. “You okay?”

“Yeah,” Cate admitted.

“You sure? You seem... distracted. Perhaps your midnight visitor is still rattling around in your mind?”

“That’s another front we need some progress on. I’m going to do a little more research on him and both Buckleys. See if I can find anything. Why is he chasing me around in my sleep? Who is this guy? And what is his connection to me?”

“Did you learn anything from him during your dinner conversation?”

“Nothing other than he’s quite a snob. And he seems to hold a heavy dislike for Grayson Buckley.”

“Not surprising. It sounds as though he has a history with Grayson’s wife.”

“Unrequited love? You imagine he was after her and she turned him down for Grayson Buckley?”

“It seems likely,” Jack answered. “Celine asked him why he followed her.”

“And he told me they were well-acquainted.”

Jack raised his eyebrows. “Ooooooh, now we get all the bawdy details!”

“And he seemed to be quite surprised that Grayson and I were not acquainted.”

“Really? He can’t possibly think America is that small. He’s well-traveled, he seems to have a good understanding of the world.”

“Yes, I found it odd, too. He acted almost as though I was being disingenuous with him.”

“All right, so tomorrow’s plan is to learn more about this Duke Northcott guy and see if we can push the time rip conversation to a place where we can gain some information.”

Cate nodded in agreement. “And in the meantime, I’ll continue to work on researching these people and deciphering a few more excerpts from the journals.”

“Sounds like a plan. Same time, same place tomorrow?”

“Same time, same place!”

* * *

Cate pulled her laptop onto her lap after dinner. Her eyes threatened to close with each blink, but she was determined to seek information on the people visiting the castle in 1792. With a deep sigh, she opened her search engine and began searching for information on the people she and Jack had recently met.

Her previous searches on Grayson and Celine Buckley had resulted in very little. She used the additional facts they'd learned, however minimal, to tease any information she could from the internet.

Douglas had mentioned the Marquis Devereaux's untimely death. Cate entered his name into her search bar. The first result was a Wikipedia article detailing the governors of Martinique in colonial times. Cate scanned the list finding Marquis Gaspard Devereaux listed from 1774 to 1786. She clicked his name and scanned the brief article.

Outside of detailing his major accomplishments as governor, the article also described his untimely death. The man was murdered on 1 August 1786 as he traveled to board a ship bound for France by a seaman in a botched robbery.

While intriguing, the article provided no information about Celine or any of the others. With heavy eyelids, Cate pushed the laptop closed. She'd try when she was fresh in the morning. Despite the early hour, her extended day caught up to her. She took one final walk with the dogs as the setting sun painted the western sky.

* * *

Cate stared at her laptop the next morning. She'd performed a variety of web searches to seek information on her new old-fashioned friends. Outside of a handful of obscure references, she found nothing.

She stared out the window with her chin cupped in her palm. She'd need to try a new avenue. She toggled her laptop screen on again and navigated to several historical records databases.

She began her search with Grayson Buckley. After several moments of searching, the database returned a birth record from the year 1760. The details on the record appeared to match with the Grayson Buckley she'd met.

Cate searched for his death certificate but found none. She expanded her search beyond the state of Maine, formerly Massachusetts, to cover the entire United States. After several moments the screen showed NO RESULTS. She tried again, this time using a worldwide search. The search wheel spun in an endless circle before the screen indicated a failed search.

She sighed and dropped her head. Missing records were not surprising though the result, or lack thereof, still proved frustrating.

She moved on to Celine Buckley née Devereaux. Cate found no records of her birth in Martinique. She tracked down a record in Lyon, France, but again, she found no death certificate. Where had Grayson and Celine lived at the end of their lives, she pondered?

Cate moved on to the third person of interest: her nightmare companion. She searched the United Kingdom for records on Duke Marcus Northcott. The search returned none. She knit her brows. No records at all, she ruminated? A man of his ranking surely was recorded. She expanded the search to other likely areas for his birth. She found no record of the man. Odd, she brooded, no documentation about Duke Northcott's life could be found. It was as though he didn't exist.

Cate sighed as she slouched in her chair. At a dead end with the investigation of the people of 1792, she moved on to processing excerpts from the remaining journals. After an hour of work, she had decrypted portions of three more journals. None of them mentioned the time rips or the timepiece.

With a frustrated groan, Cate slammed the laptop shut. She rubbed at her tired eyes. At the rate they were going, this would never be solved. She glanced around the room wondering how much longer they could inhabit Dunhaven Castle.

CHAPTER 23



Cate blew out a long breath as tears threatened. If the current state of events continued, her home would become uninhabitable. She bit her lower lip as she blinked away her tears.

“Time for a break,” she announced to Riley and Bailey.

Cate rose from her chair and stretched. She rolled her head around, easing the kinks from her neck. “How about a walk, boys?”

Riley leapt to his feet and raced to Cate’s side. Bailey climbed to all fours and leaned into a stretch before trotting toward them.

Cate strode down the hall and out the front door with both dogs in tow. They wandered to the loch.

Cate perched on the bank as the dogs frolicked nearby. She stared out over the calm water. It reflected the surfaces around them like a mirror. Cate spotted the castle’s image in the pond. Was she losing her home, she wondered? What would happen if they made no progress with controlling the time rips? Her mind went one step further. What happened if she made no progress in determining why Duke Marcus Northcott haunted her dreams? Would she not only lose her home but her mind as well?

As tears threatened, Cate stood from the bank and called the dogs to her. They would solve this problem. With a determined stride, she set off toward the castle. She wound through the back garden. Jack pounded in a few stakes to train a set of rose bushes.

“Good morning, Jack,” Cate called to him as the dogs dashed ahead to greet him.

“Good morning, Lady Cate,” he answered. “On a break?”

She nodded without speaking. “Well, that doesn’t sound good. Any progress?” Jack inquired.

Cate shook her head. “Not really,” she admitted. “I can’t seem to find any information on any of our new friends. And I worked on three of the six remaining journals and found no references to the time rips or the timepiece.”

“I wasn’t holding my breath on the journals giving us any information, but I thought at least you’d find something interesting on the Buckleys or that Duke. He seemed fairly well-known.”

“That’s where this gets weird,” Cate said. “It’s not that I can’t find anything interesting, it’s more that I can’t find anything at all.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean there are no records of them. Nothing.”

“None of them?” Jack inquired.

“I found a birth record for a Celine Devereaux in Lyon in 1770 and one for Grayson Buckley in 1760 in Massachusetts, now Maine. But I can’t find any death records on either of them.”

“Is that odd?”

Cate shrugged. “Given the years they lived in, it’s not entirely surprising that records are missing. But I’m surprised to find nothing on them. Especially with their wealthy status.”

“And how about our newest snobby friend, Duke Northcott?”

“He’s even stranger. I can’t find a single record on him anywhere. It’s like he never existed. And that’s even more surprising than the elusive Buckleys. He’s a Duke. His lineage would have been kept track of! Those types of things were important to people in that era.”

“And still is to some!” Jack exclaimed. “But you’re right. This is odd.”

“So, we’re stuck. Yet again.”

Jack shook his head. “We’re going to have to step up our efforts in the past. I hate to pin all our hopes on Douglas, but he’s all we’ve got.”

“I agree one hundred percent, but we’ve got no choice. We have to get our information straight from the horse’s mouth.”

“And hope it solves our problem.”

Cate nodded in agreement. “So, I’ll see you at four for the next round.”

“Yep,” Jack agreed.

“All right, until then, I’ll try the last few of the journals. Come on, boys, let’s...” Cate’s voice trailed off as she glanced around. Neither dog was in sight. “Now, where did those two get off to?”

“Probably chasing each other around the garden,” Jack suggested.

Cate narrowed her eyes. “Or digging around in it.”

Jack winced. “Oh, yeah. They have their spot they love to dig.”

“And I’d bet that’s where they are,” Cate said with a sigh. “I know two pups who are going to need a bath.”

“Need help fetching them?” Jack questioned.

“No, finish your roses. I can get them.”

“Well, it’s almost time for lunch,” Jack responded. “I’ll finish this after.”

Cate began her walk to the side garden in search of the dogs. Jack trailed behind her. “Ah, now I understand,” Cate teased. “Lunch is calling your name.”

“Darn right, Lady Cate,” Jack answered.

They rounded the corner and strode across the lawn toward the side garden. “Riley! Bailey!” Cate called.

Cate navigated to their favorite spot. There they found two dirty dogs. Riley crouched over a small indentation in the earth while Bailey pawed at it further.

“THERE you are!” Cate exclaimed in an exasperated tone. “What is it about that spot that is so intriguing?”

“Perhaps another dog buried a bone there in another era.”

“Maybe. If we ever solve the mystery of the misbehaving time rips, this is the next one we need to solve.”

“Lady Cate, I will happily solve this mystery if we can stop slipping in and out of other eras,” Jack said with a grin.

“You grab Riley, I’ll get Bailey.”

“And straight to the washtub for you both,” Jack said as he scooped a dusty Riley into his arms.

* * *

Cate spent her early afternoon hours translating more passages from the remaining three journals. The selected excerpts she processed made no

mention of anything beyond odd experiments.

Cate sighed as she tossed the final journal onto the desk. She closed her laptop and headed to her bedroom to change for their upcoming trip to 1792. With any luck, they'd learn something there.

When she was dressed, Cate met Jack in the library, and they returned to the past. "Whew," Jack said as they arrived in their bedroom in 1792. He tossed himself across the bed. "I get nervous every time we have to use that timepiece."

"It seems to be working for normal time travel."

Jack picked his head up to stare at her. "Say that again."

"Huh?" Cate asked.

"Normal time travel. I never thought I'd hear a statement where we referred to time travel as normal. Yet it oddly makes sense."

Cate chuckled despite the dire situation they discussed. "I get nervous every time Molly retrieves my meal tray. I may have to walk it back to the kitchen myself."

"And incur the wrath of Mrs. Fraser? You're taking your life in your hands there, Cate."

"Better that than have Molly slip into who-knows-when again!"

"That doesn't solve the problem, anyway. You could slip into who-knows-when and then what?"

"At least I'd know what happened!" Cate countered. A moment of silence passed between them before Cate asked, "Hey, you're not wandering around the castle at night, are you?"

"Me?" Jack inquired in an incredulous tone. "No way. You couldn't pry me out of my bed with those time rips opening without warning! Are you?"

"No," Cate responded. "Not since the last time you found me asleep in the library. Although, a time rip exists in my bedroom that has opened twice already so if I don't show up for breakfast one day..."

"Look in the 1920s," Jack answered.

Cate nodded. "How you'll get there is another story."

Jack crinkled his brow. "That's a good point, Lady Cate. What if you did disappear? We'd have no way of retrieving you. You're the only one who has access."

Cate sighed. "I'd love to duplicate this," she said, dangling the timepiece in her fingers, "but we have no idea HOW it works."

“No, we don’t. But with any luck, we will soon, lassie. But not if you don’t get dressed for dinner.”

“Jack Reid. The picture of optimism. Whoever would have thought?”

“Time travel changes a man.”

* * *

Cate and Jack changed for dinner and convened with Douglas, Jaime, Olivia, and Aria in the sitting room. Absent from the room were the Buckleys and Duke Northcott. Perhaps one or both of them departed, Cate mused.

“Ah! Jack, Catherine, welcome!” Douglas greeted them. “Catherine, I am beginning to worry about you.”

“Oh?” Cate inquired, uncertain of his meaning.

“It appears my cousin, Jack, is running you ragged every day! You’re both gone before breakfast!”

Cate smiled at the comment. “I quite enjoy seeing the countryside.” Douglas raised his eyebrows at her. “I’m an American,” Cate continued, “we are quite a sturdy stock!”

Douglas burst into laughter at Cate’s comment. “And very good sports,” he replied. His eyes turned toward the open doors. “Ah, here is the lion’s share of our remaining party.”

“Don’t let Northcott hear you say that,” Grayson answered. “He would argue he, himself, is the lion’s share of any party.”

Cate turned her gaze to the door as Grayson and Celine entered. Behind them trailed two men. Both tall, one with sandy blonde hair, the other with medium brown. The man with the brown hair glanced to Cate and offered a shy smile.

“And how are you both settling in? I trust your rooms are sufficient?” Douglas inquired of them.

“More than sufficient, very comfortable, Lord MacKenzie,” the blonde answered. “Thank you again.”

“No trouble at all, sir! What a joy to fill these rooms with our friends!” Douglas responded. He turned to Cate and Jack. “Catherine, Jack, please meet our newest arrivals! We have been most fortunate to receive so many unexpected but cherished guests! This is Michael and Damien Carlyle,

Celine's cousins. Michael, Damien, this is my cousin, Jack, and his wife, Catherine."

Everyone greeted each other and Douglas offered drinks to the newcomers. Cate noted their American accents. She sipped her sherry as she eyed the newest members of their party. Michael and Damien Carlyle, she repeated mentally. Two new names to search. Perhaps these cousins would provide her with some lead.

Jack raised his eyebrows at her as the conversation flowed in the room. She returned the gesture. "Curiouser and curiouser," she whispered as they sat together on the loveseat.

The arrival of Duke Northcott interrupted much of the cocktail conversation. Cate surveyed the reaction of the Carlyles to his arrival. From their stiffened postures and lack of conversation, she judged them to share the same sentiments as their cousin, Celine. Their sudden appearance almost seemed as though she had summoned them for support. Of course, Cate reflected, that idea was ridiculous. In 1792, it would take months for word to even reach the American shores, let alone for them to travel to the highlands of Scotland.

"May I introduce you to Celine's cousins..." Douglas began as Duke Northcott entered the room.

He offered a smirk, adding, "We are acquainted."

"Oh. I hadn't realized," Douglas answered.

"More Americans," Duke Northcott grumbled. "We are beginning to be overrun, Douglas."

"Indeed, indeed," Douglas said with a hearty laugh, though Cate deemed Duke Northcott's comment less of a joke and more his actual sentiments.

Wilson announced dinner and everyone filed into the dining room. Much to Cate's relief, she found her seat between the brothers Carlyle. As Olivia chatted with Duke Northcott to her right, Cate and Michael discussed life in America.

"Also, an American," Michael noted as Cate turned toward him.

"Yes. From Philadelphia. And you?"

"Damien and I hail from New York," Michael answered.

"And you are cousins of Celine's?" Cate inquired.

"Yes. Rather distant, though since she has recently spent some time in the States, we have had the opportunity to spend more time with her."

“She is originally from France, is that correct?”

“Correct, from Lyon.”

“Life for her in the States must be quite different from both France and Martinique.”

“I would imagine so, yes.”

“And what brings you to Scotland, Mr. Carlyle?” Cate questioned.

“Business,” Michael responded. “Damien and I are furthering our fortunes with various investments.”

“What is your business?”

“Ship-building, mainly, though we are expanding our interests,” Michael responded.

Cate smiled at the response as Olivia turned, prompting her to begin her conversation with the man on her left, Damien Carlyle.

Damien smiled at her as she turned toward him. “Good evening, Damien,” she greeted him.

“Hello,” he said. “How fortunate to meet you.”

Cate furrowed her brow at the statement. “Because we are both Americans. We share that in common,” he explained further.

“Ah, yes,” Cate answered. “And you are from New York?”

“Yes, New York. Though we have recently spent a great deal of time on Gray’s family’s estate in Massachusetts.”

Cate nodded. “I have never traveled that far north.”

“You would very much enjoy it, I presume,” he said. “Perhaps one day, you shall.”

“Perhaps,” Cate answered. “How fortunate you were able to travel to Dunhaven when your cousin is visiting.”

“Yes, very. Gray mentioned a business venture to pursue when they left Massachusetts for Scotland. Michael and I decided to pursue it and traveled behind them.”

“Was your journey very taxing?”

“No, we enjoyed calm seas for most of the voyage.”

“How fortunate. Which ship did you travel on?”

Damien’s eyes widened and he glanced away from Cate. He stammered for a moment before Wilson arrived with the footmen to serve the first course. They did not return to the conversation. His hesitance stuck in Cate’s mind. Why had he reacted so strangely, Cate wondered?

As light conversation proceeded through the main course, Cate's mind dwelt on the new circumstances surrounding them. The arrival of the Carlyles threw another monkey wrench into the works. The larger party meant less ability for Cate and Jack to discuss the time rips with Douglas. And by extension, less chance they would retrieve the information they needed.

The rate at which new guests arrived, they would never have the opportunity to discuss this with Douglas. Cate found the dinner tedious given the new arrivals.

At the meal's conclusion, Grayson suggested everyone reconvene for nightcaps in the sitting room. It seemed he hoped to avoid the private conversation amongst the men once again this evening. No one objected.

As they filed from the dining room, Jack rejoined Cate. "Well, this is going to be tricky."

"You've read my mind," Cate breathed. "The Carlyles are a bit strange. And their presence doesn't help our cause."

"No. Neither does Grayson Buckley actively destroying any chance we have to discuss the time rips."

"We need a new plan."

"Yeah, and fast. But for now, it appears our night is a bust."

The group spent another hour making stilted conversation over post-dinner drinks. During the course of the nightcaps, Cate swore she caught Duke Northcott staring at her more than once. His gaze unnerved her more than she liked to admit.

After a tedious sixty minutes, the party broke up. Cate and Jack followed the other guests upstairs and navigated to their bedroom. They waited several moments before sneaking downstairs. After creeping down the hall and into the library, they accessed Douglas's lab and returned home.

"Whew," Jack exclaimed as they slipped back to their time.

"Not quite the sentiment I am ready to express but I suppose it's good to be home," Cate said with a sigh.

"Yeah, I'm frustrated, too," Jack answered.

"Change and discuss?" Cate asked.

"Yeah," Jack answered.

He took a step toward the wooden staircase leading from the lab when a quiver raced through the room. Jack stopped in his tracks and spun to face Cate.

Cate stared at him. He seemed to shimmy in front of her. "Jack!" Cate shouted.

"Cate?" he exclaimed.

Cate rushed toward him and grasped his hand. He pulled her close to him as the room shuddered around them. The lights flickered on and off, then began to appear and disappear. Darkness consumed them over and over.

Cate clutched at Jack, wrapping her arms around him. After a moment, darkness surrounded them. In the dim light, Cate glanced around then at Jack.

"Are we stuck?" he inquired.

"I think so," Cate said in a shaky voice.

CHAPTER 24



Cate pulled the timepiece from around her neck and listened. “I don’t hear any ticking. I can’t see the face to confirm it’s slow, though.”

“So, we’re back in 1792.”

“Yeah,” Cate agreed.

“And the timepiece won’t work, right? This is what happened to you before and it didn’t work.”

“Right.”

“So, now what? Do we just wait here until the time rip opens again?”

“We could try the universal rip. I never assessed whether or not that portal would work.”

“Okay, let’s try...”

A scraping noise sounded above them. “Shh!” Cate warned.

They glanced upward. Light shone at the top of the stairs.

Jack glanced at Cate, his eyes wide. “We need to hide!” Cate whispered. Cate searched the room for a hiding spot. “There!” She pointed to a partially built wooden staircase. She pulled Jack toward it and crawled underneath. Jack followed her. Together, they crammed into the tight space as footsteps descended the stairs.

“...interesting turn of events,” Douglas’s voice echoed throughout the space.

“Quite. A bevy of unexpected guests,” Jaime responded. “Olivia must be at sixes and sevens with the sudden change.”

The two men reached the bottom step and entered the space. Cate and Jack pressed as far under the wooden structure as possible. They peered between the risers as they held their breath.

"I have explained to her no one expects her to balance the party on such short notice."

"Not to mention the upset to the household, though. The poor woman must be overwhelmed with her first major house party turning into a widespread event."

"You've no sense of adventure, Jaime," Douglas answered.

"You've too much. How you take these things in stride is beyond me."

"There's not much else to be done, is there? And I do not mind the added company, though it rather impedes the conversations I intended to have with Grayson."

"The arrival of Jack MacKenzie did not stymie your crusade for information. What's changed?"

"Several things," Douglas replied. "The arrival of our additional guests for one."

"Two of whom are related to Celine Buckley. I shouldn't expect them to be shocked or bothered by the discussion."

"Perhaps, though there is Duke Northcott."

"You assume he will find the conversation ridiculous. Perhaps spread a nasty rumor about you?"

"No," Douglas responded. "It is something Grayson said."

"Oh?"

"Yes. He seemed most insistent we do not discuss it in his presence. You witnessed his reaction after dinner yesterday. And this morning he mentioned being cautious in retelling my tales in our expanded company."

"He seems to have a strong dislike for Duke Northcott."

"Yes, I gather it has something to do with Celine."

"A love triangle?" Jaime questioned.

"Something of that sort. I did not inquire after the details as I believe them to be none of my business."

"Indeed," Jaime answered. "And perhaps best left as a private matter. Though given the circumstances, perhaps Grayson's caution stems from his dislike of the man rather than any real concern."

Douglas pursed his lips as he pondered it. "I trust Grayson's judgment. We proceed with caution until we can discuss the matter privately."

“All right,” Jaime agreed. “I shall follow your lead.”

“Good. I hope to be able to discuss this further with Grayson soon.”

“Please keep me informed in the event he has any conclusions.”

“Yes, I will. Well, I suppose I should allow you to depart for the evening. The hour is growing late.”

“Aria will thank you,” Jaime said with a chuckle.

“Poor woman, I should not have kept you this long! Allow me to walk you out.”

The two men disappeared up the stairs. A scraping noise signaled the closing of the secret passage above. The room descended into near darkness. The dim flicker of a single lit wall lantern did little to fight back the blackness.

Silence consumed the dimly light space surrounding them. Cate let out a breath, realizing she’d been holding her breath for much of the conversation.

“Do you suppose it’s safe?” Jack whispered after several moments passed.

“Yes,” Cate answered. “At least I hope so.”

Cate grasped Jack’s hand and they crawled from under the wooden structure. “We have to go back, Cate, we have to go back! Should we make a run for the back hallway?”

“I guess so,” Cate answered.

“Okay, come on. Be careful.” Jack tugged her toward the staircase. They inched along in the shadows.

As they crossed the room’s center, a low-pitched vibration resounded throughout the room. Jack stopped dead, causing Cate to bump into him. “What is that?” he inquired.

“I’m not sure,” Cate admitted.

The noise sounded a second time before lights burst across the room. Cate squinted at the blinding glare, holding her hand in front of her eyes to shield them. Jack stumbled back a step as the brilliant flash seared his eyes.

After a moment, Cate removed her hand from her forehead. She gasped. “Jack!” she exclaimed, tugging on his arm.

“What is it?” he inquired, his eyes still slits.

“The lights!”

“Yeah, they’re blinding!”

“We’re back!” Cate cried. “We’re back!”

Jack opened his eyes and glanced around. A smile crossed his face. "The lights!" he shouted with a grin. "Come on, let's go before they disappear again."

"Agree," Cate answered.

They dashed to the stairs and climbed them two-by-two. Cate plowed into the library above with Jack right behind her. Each let out a sigh of relief as they glanced around the modern library.

"Oh, wow. Thank heavens," Jack blurted as he caught his breath.

Cate puffed with exertion from their race up the stairs. She nodded in agreement.

"We need a plan, Cate," he said after another moment. "This can't continue."

"I agree. It appears to be getting worse."

"Change and meet here to discuss an updated plan," Jack repeated.

"This time, let's hope we stay in this century-long enough to get that far," Cate responded.

They parted ways to change and returned to the library.

"We made it," Cate said as she hurried through the double doors, finding Jack lounging in his usual armchair.

"Yes, thankfully," Jack answered as Cate slumped into the chair next to him.

"Now for the plan," Cate replied.

"Do you have anything in mind? We need to speed up our information-seeking before this wobbling between centuries worsens."

Cate's shoulders sagged. "Not really. I can search for records on the two new additions to the group, perhaps. I'm not certain that will help us."

"No," Jack answered. "I'm not sure it will either. We need real information about the time rips. And that Duke guy and why he's stalking you in your dreams."

"The larger problem is the time rips. Let's focus on fixing that problem first."

"I'll take answers on either front, to be honest."

"Let's go over what we've learned."

"That's easy. Nothing," Jack retorted with disgust.

Cate shook her head. "That's not quite true."

"Were we at the same dinner party? The one hijacked by loads of new people so we couldn't discuss anything with Douglas."

Cate offered him an unamused glance. “Yes, smarty-pants, we were at the same dinner party. But we learned several things there and during Douglas’s conversation amidst our accidental trip back to 1792.”

“Care to enlighten me? Other than Douglas lamenting the inability to learn anything about the time rips, I didn’t glean anything. By the way, I am totally on his wavelength with that.”

“Douglas confirmed what we already suspected. Grayson Buckley does not want to discuss this with others around. Specifically with Duke Northcott present.”

“Right,” Jack said. “He neither trusts nor likes Northcott. Due to some love triangle with his wife.”

“We also learned that Douglas trusts Grayson’s judgment. Implicitly, it seems. He’s following his suggestion to keep mum on the subject.”

“How does this help us?”

Cate shrugged. “It helps us identify who we can trust. We can trust Douglas. And probably Grayson. Douglas trusts Grayson, so by extension we can trust Grayson.”

“What if Douglas is wrong? Perhaps that’s why there’s no more in the journals about his trusted friend, Grayson.”

“Even if that’s true, we can still trust Douglas. We’ve got to speak with him about the time rips.”

“But according to Douglas, he hasn’t learned anything from Grayson because he’s not been able to speak with him about anything because of the new arrivals.”

“No, but we can give him support for his theory and perhaps spur him to create the timepiece.”

“And tell us how he does it,” Jack added.

“That, too,” Cate agreed.

“As much as I hate to say this, we need to go back earlier in the day and try to catch him alone.”

“I agree, but can we do it?”

“With the time differential, yes. We make the excuse of errands in town or the like. Even if we’re gone twenty-four hours, that’s only a little over ninety minutes. No one would miss us.”

“Okay, so we go back earlier. What if we get nowhere with Douglas? From the sounds of it, Douglas doesn’t know anything more than when he brought it up to us a few nights ago.”

“Then we move on to Grayson and hope we can trust him. Douglas seems to be waiting on some information from him.”

“Do you expect he knows anything?”

Jack shrugged. “I’m not sure. Perhaps not. That may be why he hasn’t given any clue to Douglas.”

“Someone has to know something!” Cate groaned. “Douglas figured this out! We wouldn’t have this timepiece if he didn’t.”

“And no one seems to understand how,” Jack lamented.

“No, not even Randolph, his grandson, knew the secret. Why?”

Jack remained silent for a moment. “Perhaps...” His voice trailed off. “Eh, never mind, I’m just tired.”

“What?” Cate prodded.

“Perhaps Douglas never figured it out. Perhaps someone else did and gave him the timepiece.”

“Like Grayson Buckley?” Cate inquired.

Jack nodded and pointed at her. “You got it.”

“Even more reason to speak with Grayson Buckley,” Cate advocated.

“What about his cousins-in-law?” Jack inquired. “Do you imagine we’d have any luck trying to get information out of them?”

Cate shrugged. “I’m not sure. They are a bit strange.”

“Strange?” Jack questioned. “What do you mean?”

Cate considered the question a moment as she puckered her lips. “Something just seemed off. Nothing specific, just a gut reaction, I guess.”

Jack smirked at her.

“What?” Cate asked.

“Perhaps it’s the younger one. What was his name, Darren?”

“Damien,” Cate corrected.

“Right, Damien. Perhaps it’s his constant grinning at you,” Jack suggested.

The crease in her forehead deepened. “So, he’s friendly. So what? No, it’s not that. Here’s an example, I asked him what ship he and his brother crossed on. The question seemed to make him nervous, and he couldn’t answer it.”

“So?” Jack said.

“So, it’s 1792. They would have spent weeks if not months aboard that ship. You would expect they would recall the name. Especially given that he and his brother are in the business of ship-building!”

“Perhaps he’s terrible with names. Though I expect it’s nerves that has got him tongue-tied not lack of memory.”

“He seems friendly enough, but perhaps he’s backward,” Cate suggested.

“Or perhaps it’s the company,” Jack countered.

“You mean the Duke?”

Jack rolled his eyes. “No, I do not.” Cate pursed her lips. “Oh, come on, Cate. He’s always stealing glances your way, grinning at you, nervous when he speaks to you. He’s got a crush on you!”

“What? That’s ridiculous!” Cate argued. “We’ve just met. He doesn’t even know me.”

“It’s not. And he’s got eyes, hasn’t he?”

Cate offered a dubious glance in Jack’s direction. “I don’t agree. And even so, it’s too bad for him I’m a married woman,” she said with a wink.

“Darn right you are! Would be a terrible shame to ruin that perfect marriage to that perfect man.”

“And all over a dalliance with a ship-builder,” Cate joked.

“But perhaps that flirtation can elicit some information,” Jack suggested.

“Are you actually proposing that I flirt with Damien Carlyle to get information?”

Jack shrugged a shoulder. “I’m merely suggesting that if the opportunity presents itself, you may try talking a bit more to him. In an effort to impress you, he may slip up and say something useful.”

Cate raised her eyebrows. “If the opportunity presents itself, I’ll see what I can do. No promises, I still think he’s just the nervous type.”

“We’ll see. All right, so our plan is we return tomorrow, maybe after lunch. We seek out Douglas and speak with him. If that fails, we try to get any information we can from Grayson and his friends.”

Cate nodded. “Okay.”

“We should also inquire about Duke Northcott. Solving our time rip problem may not resolve your nightmare issues. We need to work on that, too.”

“I’ll admit he gives me the creeps. I caught him staring at me a few times after dinner.” Cate shuddered as she recalled his eyes on her. “He’s even more intimidating in person.”

“That’s why we need more information on him, too. Tomorrow afternoon. We start solving both our issues tomorrow afternoon.”

* * *

After eating a second dinner, this time in her own time period, Cate grabbed her laptop from the desk. Despite extreme sleepiness, she hoped to gain some information about the newest arrivals at Dunhaven Castle in 1792.

She forced her eyes to focus on the screen in front of her as she typed into the records database. A search for Michael Carlyle in eighteenth-century New York revealed nothing. A similar search for his brother, Damien, also yielded no results. She expanded the search to include other areas within colonial America but again found nothing. She tried a search of French records, wondering if they hailed from the same area as their cousin, Celine, but she found no evidence of that.

On a whim, Cate entered their names into the search bar of her browser. She turned up little more than a reference to a Michael Carlyle of Carlyle Industries, a multinational and modern corporation, not the shipbuilders of the 1700s. No mention of Damien Carlyle existed.

Cate slammed the laptop shut in frustration. They’d go back to 1792 blind. Again.

CHAPTER 25



Cate stared at her open laptop as she ruminated over the lack of information she found on anyone they'd encountered in 1792. She puckered her lips as she stared into space, her finger tracing the rim of her morning cuppa.

A shrill jangling cut through her brooding. She grasped her phone and focused on the screen. The caller ID display read Isla Campbell.

Cate swiped to accept the call. "Good morning, Mrs. Campbell, how can I..." Cate began as Mrs. Campbell's excited voice interrupted her. Cate held the phone a short distance from her ear, afraid the noise may damage her hearing.

"Lady Cate!" she shouted on the other end of the line. "Oh, thank HEAVENS you answered. I took a chance calling you this early in the hopes I would not be forced to postpone my announcement. I have the most wonderful, exciting, outstanding news!" Mrs. Campbell paused a moment as she caught her breath.

Before Cate could speak, Mrs. Campbell gushed, "We have been selected to host the President's Ball!"

"Oh!" Cate responded as she processed the news.

"Isn't it simply wonderful? Oh, after all these years, I have finally achieved it! The President's Ball! Oh, we must start planning immediately! I've already created a list of items we'll need to discuss. With your anniversary party only six weeks before the ball, we'll have our hands full!"

“Well, congratulations, Mrs. Campbell! I hadn’t expected to hear the news until next week!”

“Oh, thank you, Lady Cate, thank you! I couldn’t wait to tell you the news! I had to call the moment I hung up with the selection committee. Apparently, they were so thrilled with our application, we clinched the spot without much discussion! Of course, we were the first to be informed.”

“YOU clinched the spot with YOUR application, Mrs. Campbell,” Cate corrected. “I can take no credit for it. I know you poured your heart into it before you submitted it. And your ideas are wonderful.”

“Well,” Mrs. Campbell said with a chuckle, “I’m sure your name added to it. Though I believe the ideas I’ve presented are exceptional, particularly compared to some of the previous events.”

“I have no doubt they are. You are a master of creating an event.”

“Why, thank you, Lady Cate. Now, when shall we begin our planning? I’m tempted to begin today, though I really need to vet through my ideas more carefully and gather some materials. In short, I am unprepared for today as tempted as I am.”

“That’s fine, Mrs. Campbell. Today is quite busy for me, anyway. Perhaps next week?”

“Yes. Yes, that should work nicely. Perhaps Wednesday if your schedule suits? That gives me several days to gather materials, samples, and the like. It’ll give us a nice start.”

“That’s perfect. Shall we plan for 9 a.m.?”

“Excellent, Lady Cate. I shall see you at 9 a.m.! Have a wonderful rest of your day. I know I will!”

Cate said her goodbyes to Mrs. Campbell and the line went dead as Mrs. Campbell disconnected the call. The woman’s excitement was obvious even over the phone.

Cate leaned back in her desk chair as she pondered the event. She imagined Mrs. Campbell flitting around, overseeing every detail. Guests meandered through several areas of the castle as they perused auction items. They commented on the beautiful backdrop the Scottish castle provided.

As they wandered among the displays, the room shuddered. A low boom resounded in the halls. Thunder sounded overhead. Rain poured from the skies. Shouts and startled screams emerged from the crowd as people began to fade away. Specters from previous centuries replaced them, stalking among the group as though they belonged.

The remaining event-goers shrieked in horror as friends and family vanished. Panic ensued. People raced from the castle in various directions. Chaos reigned as people fled from any exit they could find.

Cate bit her lower lip. They must solve the problem of the time rips before hosting any events. Before tragedy struck. She shook the disturbing images from her mind as she swallowed the last of her tea.

Instead of dwelling on them, Cate traversed the hallways and descended to the kitchen. “Knock, knock,” she said as she rapped her knuckles against the door jamb.

“Oh, Lady Cate! Need a refill?” Mrs. Fraser inquired.

Cate shook her head. “No, just returning my teacup.”

“There was no need for that. We could have grabbed it when we brought your lunch!” Mrs. Fraser assured her.

“Well, I have some news I thought I’d share, so I made the trek.”

“News?” Molly inquired.

Cate nodded. “Yes. I just got off the phone with Mrs. Campbell.”

A sigh escaped Mrs. Fraser’s lips at the mention of the librarian’s name. “What did the ninny want? I suppose to clutter your schedule with a discussion about linens. Or perhaps to debate lady locks versus eclairs.”

Cate chuckled at the assessment, all of which was plausible with Mrs. Campbell. “No,” Cate responded. “She called to inform me that we have been selected to host the Presidents’ Ball.”

Mrs. Fraser raised her eyebrows. “She finally did it.”

“That she did,” Cate said. “And she is more excited than I’ve ever heard her!”

“I can imagine,” Mrs. Fraser replied. “She’s talked about hosting this event for years.”

“We begin our discussions next Wednesday.”

“Next Wednesday?” Molly inquired. “I’m surprised she waited that long.”

“Aye, I cannae believe it either.”

“She aims to be prepared with various things before the meeting.”

“What meeting?” Jack asked as he pushed through the kitchen door.

“Isla has landed herself the Presidents’ Ball,” Mrs. Fraser informed him.

“Oooohhh,” Jack answered, his face a mask of dismay. His shoulders sagged as he processed the news. “You’re kidding?”

“Doesn’t sound like it,” Molly answered.

Jack grimaced, his lips forming a pout. “There will be no managing her on this one,” he muttered.

“We’ll have to do the best we can,” Cate said. “Oh, while you’re here, Jack, do you have a minute to discuss something?”

“Aye, whatever you need, lassie. Unless it’s a roller coaster suspended from the tower roof for the Presidents’ Ball.”

“No, it’s not that,” Cate assured him.

He followed her from the kitchen as she retraced her steps to the library. After a proper greeting to Riley and Bailey, Jack sank into his armchair. “This conversation isn’t regarding some outrageous request from Mrs. Campbell for her latest venture, is it?”

“No. So far, no outrageous requests. But we’re not meeting for a few days, so that gives her plenty of time to come up with a few.”

“Oh boy,” Jack groaned. “That’s more than enough time. I fully expect a rollercoaster that circles the castle and dives from the turret roof.”

Cate chuckled at him. “You may prefer the Dunhaven Castle Coaster to the information I have.”

“What is it?” Jack inquired. He snapped his head in her direction and stared at her. “You didn’t disappear into another time again, did you?”

“No,” Cate assured him. “Nothing that dramatic. Just more of the same. I searched for some information on our newest friends last night.”

“And?”

“And nothing. I couldn’t find a thing on them. No birth records, no death records. Nothing. It’s like they don’t exist.”

“Like Northcott,” Jack noted.

“Yep. So, again, we have nothing.”

“Well, we don’t have *nothing*. You’ve got your beauty and witty charm to use with Damien,” Jack said with a wink.

“Oh, right,” Cate said. “No worries at all then.”

“Only a couple more hours to wait.”

Cate nodded without responding.

“What’s this? Cate Kensie not looking forward to time travel? Is this the first time I’m less nervous than you?”

“It might be,” Cate admitted. “I feel like no matter which way we turn, the walls are closing in on us. When I hung up with Mrs. Campbell, all I could imagine was people disappearing right and left from the party into

various time periods. And people from those time periods popping into our party. Partygoers ran screaming from the castle and Mrs. Campbell's efforts were all for naught."

Jack leaned forward in his seat and reached for Cate's hand. He gave it a squeeze. "We'll get through this, Cate."

Cate's face scrunched with upset. "I feel like I'm losing my home."

"That's not going to happen," Jack assured her. "We'll get through this. We'll solve this. Together."

Cate took a deep breath and squeezed his hand. She nodded and offered Jack a weak smile. "You're right. Douglas figured this out once. We just need to get that information from him."

"And we're going to. In the next few days, if not today."

"Okay! Thinking positive," Cate said, broadening her grin. "See you at one-thirty?"

"One-thirty! Then we get answers!"

Cate spent the rest of her morning decrypting passages from the remaining three journals. Nothing pointed toward a solution to their problem. With a sigh, Cate closed her laptop, leaving any hope of a solution behind.

After lunch, Cate dressed for her trip back and met Jack in the library. "Let's go get some answers!" she exclaimed as they descended into the lab below.

"There's the Cate Kensie I know!" Jack said with a grin.

They activated the timepiece and returned to 1792. They tiptoed up the wooden stairs and peered through the peephole into the library.

"Olivia is there!" Cate whispered.

"Shoot!" Jack hissed. "Any chance we can sneak out without her realizing?"

"The bookcase makes a loud grinding noise when it opens and closes. She'll hear it. We'll have to wait."

They settled on the staircase to wait. "We really can't catch a break, can we?" Jack grumbled. "So much for our big plan to come back early!"

Cate grabbed his hand. "We'll catch one," she said.

The cold dampness penetrated through Cate as they huddled on the stairs waiting for an opportune moment to sneak from their hiding spot. A shiver passed through her, and Jack pulled her closer to him.

"Cold?"

“A little,” Cate admitted. “I didn’t prepare to be down here this long. I should have brought a sweater.”

“A famous Cate Kensie cardigan?”

“Something a little more period-appropriate, maybe,” Cate answered.

“With any luck, we won’t be down here much longer.”

They waited a few more moments before the sound of a door closing reached them. Cate leapt from her seat against the hard wooden stair and peered from the peephole.

“She’s gone!” Cate exclaimed as Jack hovered behind her. “Let’s go!”

They pushed through the secret passage into the library. “Now to find Douglas,” Jack murmured as they stepped into the hallway.

“The office?” Cate suggested.

“Let’s try it.” The pair hurried through the halls to the castle’s office space. They knocked at the door but received no response. Jack twisted the knob and pushed the door open a crack. “Douglas?”

He received no answer. He pushed the door open further. An empty chair sat behind the desk. “He’s not here,” Cate said with a sigh.

“Any other ideas?”

“Sitting room? I’m not sure.”

“We’ll head there and try,” Jack agreed. They backed from the office and navigated the halls. As they retraced their steps past the library, Wilson appeared in the hallway.

“Oh, Wilson!” Jack called.

“Yes, sir?” Wilson inquired as he ground to a halt.

“We are searching for Douglas. Would you happen to know where he may be?”

“Lord MacKenzie is away on business. He will not return until just before dinner, sir.”

Cate’s heart sank at the news. They really couldn’t catch a break, she lamented. “Is there something I may do for you, sir?” Wilson prodded when he received no response.

“No, thank you, Wilson,” Jack answered. “We’ll speak with him later.”

“Very good, sir. If you require anything, please do not hesitate to ask.”

Jack nodded to him, and Wilson continued his trek down the hall away from them. Jack shook his head at the development. “Unbelievable,” he muttered.

“Now what?” Cate inquired. “Should we wait for Douglas? Or try to find Grayson?”

“Maybe. Let’s... Let’s sit down and regroup. Discuss the pros and cons of moving on to Grayson without talking to Douglas first.”

“Okay,” Cate agreed.

Jack grabbed her hand and pulled her toward the sitting room. As they entered the foyer, the sitting room doors swung open. Grayson, Michael, and Damien strode from the room.

“Oh, Jack,” Grayson said. “How fortuitous to run into you. I had hoped to discuss some business with you. Do you have a moment?”

Jack glanced at Cate before clearing his throat. “Well...” he stammered. “Ah... actually, Mrs. MacKenzie and I were about to enjoy a walk around the property.”

“Might we ask you to postpone for a short while? My apologies, Mrs. MacKenzie.”

“Ah, if I may interject,” Damien said, “perhaps I could escort you on the walk. While my company may pale in comparison to Mr. MacKenzie’s, we can still take in the beautiful grounds.”

“Oh, well...” Cate hesitated as she glanced at Jack. He offered a slight shrug and a nod.

“We’ll walk the property tomorrow, dear,” Jack promised. “I am certain you’d enjoy company other than mine for an afternoon after all the business I’ve dragged you on.”

Cate forced a smile on her face, uncertain if this was the best plan. She glanced at Damien who offered her a wide smile.

“Excellent!” Grayson exclaimed as he motioned for Jack to follow him into the sitting room. “I appreciate your patience, Mrs. MacKenzie.”

Grayson clapped Jack on the back and slid his arm around Jack’s shoulders as he guided him through the sitting room doors. “Now, we have several questions for a man of your skills, Jack,” he said as Michael closed the doors behind them. He offered Cate a curt smile as she gazed at their disappearing forms.

Damien stepped into her line of vision. He still wore a large grin on his face. “Shall we?” he said as he offered his arm to her.

Cate gave him a soft smile as she wrapped her hand around the crook of his arm. “I have not yet walked the property,” Damien said as they stepped

into the cool spring air. "Though the view from my bedroom window seems picturesque. Quite lovely. Rolling hills and all that."

The gravel crunched under their feet as they stepped onto the circular driveway. Damien scanned the horizon. "Which way? Do you have a preference?"

Cate did not so she suggested the path toward her favorite spot on the property in modern times: the loch. "Perhaps this path."

Damien nodded as they set off around the castle. After a few moments, Cate noticed his eyes sliding sideways to glance at her. She forced her mind to come up with conversation to fill the awkward silence. "So," she began as he said, "Have you..."

"Oh, my apologies," Damien said.

"No, please, Mr. Carlyle, no apology needed."

Another awkward pause passed between them. "You were saying?" Damien prompted.

"Oh, please, I believe you were trying to speak," Cate answered.

"No, no, please. Ladies first!" Damien said with a clumsy chuckle.

"Oh, ah," Cate stumbled as she sought to recall her inquiry. "So, you are from New York but your cousin, Celine, is from France?"

"Yes, just outside Lyon, though she moved to Martinique at a young age. French though, definitely. Not like me. I am American. My brother and me. Both of us. Americans." Cate held in a chuckle at his babbling. Perhaps Jack had a point. Was he nervous?

"How fortunate that she has moved to the States and nearer to you."

"Yes. We visited her once in Martinique, but Massachusetts is much closer."

"Indeed," Cate answered.

Silence spanned the next several steps. "It seems you are very well-traveled," Damien said to Cate.

"Oh, not very, no. Only from the States to Scotland."

"How did you meet Jack?"

"He was seated next to me at a dinner party."

"Oh, in Philadelphia?"

"Yes," Cate answered. "He was in the States on business."

Damien nodded at her. "And your business is ship-building?" Cate inquired.

“Yes, shipbuilding, that’s it. That’s my business. The building of ships! Big ships, small ships. All sorts of ships.” He offered another nervous chortle.

Cate scrunched her forehead at his statements. His behavior seemed odd to her. Something about him struck her as strange though she couldn’t put her finger on what it was. They reached the loch and Cate gazed over the water. This spot brought her such comfort in her time. In this year, though, her mind raced in a thousand directions.

How was Jack faring? What questions was he fielding? Could he fake his way through them? Would he learn anything that would help them? How long would she stand here with Damien before they returned? What could they discuss on the return trip? Could she elicit any information from him? Jack suggested she use an opportunity with Damien for this purpose. She felt unprepared to do so.

Cate pretended to gaze out over the water at the moors beyond.

“What a beautiful spot,” Damien declared after a moment.

“Yes, quite.”

“You’ve selected well,” Damien said.

“I’m certain every path leads to a beautiful spot,” Cate answered.

After another moment, Cate suggested they return.

“Oh! All right,” Damien agreed after seeming surprised at the request.

As they meandered the path back toward the castle, Cate took a chance with a random question. “Are you well-acquainted with our other guest as well? Duke Northcott.”

She studied Damien’s reaction to the question. She swore his muscles stiffened and his jaw tensed. Did the dislike of the Duke extend beyond Grayson to the Carlyles as well?

“Yes, we are acquainted,” he said in a clipped tone.

“Have you...” Cate began as Damien interrupted her.

“You would do well to stay away from him,” he blurted.

The reaction surprised Cate, though she agreed with the sentiment. Duke Northcott unnerved her. But what bothered the Carlyles about him, Cate wondered?

“That is a bold statement, Mr. Carlyle. Is there an explanation behind it?”

Damien stopped walking and spun to face Cate. “He’s not a nice man. You’d be wise to stay off his radar.”

Cate's brow furrowed at his statement. She gazed at him with narrowed eyes as he resumed walking, tugging her up the path with him.

"How long do you and Mr. MacKenzie plan to stay?" Damien questioned, changing the subject.

"We are uncertain of our plans," Cate answered, her mind still pondering his previous statement.

As they approached the castle and rounded the corner to the front, Cate spotted a large carriage pulled by four jet-black horses stopped in front of the door. Damien's jaw tensed again. He ground to a halt.

"Perhaps you'd care to view more of the property," he suggested.

Cate shook her head. "I should return to ascertain if Jack's business is concluded."

"I am certain it is not. Grayson had several questions to discuss. My bedroom overlooks this side of the castle, and the gardens appear quite lovely. Let us..."

"No," Cate argued. "I am quite tired. I would prefer to return."

Damien hesitated. He glanced at the carriage again before he returned his gaze to Cate. He nodded and motioned for her to precede him into the castle.

They stepped into the foyer. The sitting room doors stood open. The room was empty. Cate's heart beat faster. Where was Jack?

"Catherine!" Duke Northcott's voice called. "Is that you?" She glanced down the hall to their right, noting a man's figure approaching in the shadows. Details of her many nightmares flooded her mind. Damien's reaction added to her sense of fear.

"Quick!" Damien whispered as he grasped her arm and guided her into the sitting room.

He pulled her through the room, his pace fast enough to cause her to trot to keep up. They exited through the other doors into another hall. Damien continued to tug her down the hall.

"Catherine?" Duke Northcott's voice called to her again.

"Come on," Damien encouraged.

Panic filled Cate. Her pulse raced and her head swam. Her breathing turned ragged as they continued their race through the halls.

Damien ducked into the tearoom. He eased the doors shut, locked them and backed away. He held his finger to lips.

Cate's apprehension grew. While the Duke caused unease, so did Damien Carlyle. He was not who he pretended to be. His comment earlier gave him away. He warned her to stay away from the Duke. He warned her to stay off his *radar*. An interesting choice of words, Cate ruminated, since radar would not be invented until the early twentieth century. One question burned in her mind as she stood behind locked doors, hiding from Duke Northcott. Who was Damien Carlyle?

CHAPTER 26



Cate stared at the man in front of her. He took a step toward her, and she inched backward away from him. His brow furrowed at her reaction. He stepped forward again. She backed up several steps.

“Stop! Don’t come any closer!” she warned.

“What’s wrong?” he asked.

“Who are you?” she demanded.

“Damien,” he answered.

Cate shook her head. “No, that’s a lie. You’re not telling me the truth.”

“I am,” he insisted. “I...”

“No!” Cate interrupted. “No, you’re not. Tell me who you really are, Damien Carlyle.”

“I...”

A noise interrupted Damien. The doorknobs on the doors Damien locked moments earlier twisted and turned.

“There’s no time for this,” Damien argued. “We need to go.”

Cate shook her head again. “I’m not going anywhere with you until you tell me the truth!”

Pounding sounded on the door outside. “Catherine!” Duke Northcott’s voice called.

Damien gulped in air before he rushed to Cate. He grasped her hands. “I can explain. I promise. I’m not lying, not really. But you must trust me. We can’t let him find us.”

Cate frowned. She had no desire to be near Duke Northcott, but she did not trust Damien either. Her eyes darted around the room as she considered her options.

“Please,” Damien continued, “please, you must trust me. We need to go.”

The doors rattled in the jamb as Duke Northcott again attempted to open them. Cate caught her breath as she saw the doorknobs twisting again. Then the room went silent. With slow precision, the key Damien used to lock the doors withdrew from the lock and clattered to the floor.

Damien twisted to identify the source of the noise then spun to face Cate again. “Now or never, you’ve got to make a call.”

Cate swallowed hard. Her stomach rose to her throat and her knees felt weak. She glanced between Damien and the door. After a moment, she nodded. “Let’s go.”

Damien squeezed her hand in his and pulled her to the doors on the opposite wall. He swung them open and peeked into the hallway. “Clear,” he announced and pushed Cate ahead of him.

They hastened down the hall away from the tearoom as the doors burst open. “Catherine!” Duke Northcott called again.

They reached the end of the corridor. A door to a small parlor provided the only exit from the hall.

Damien moved toward it. “No,” Cate said. “It’s a dead end. We’ll be trapped there.”

“We’re trapped now anyway. Perhaps we can hide.”

Cate shook her head. Panic crowded her mind as she scanned the hall. In her nightmares, this man had chased her all over the house. In one of them, she had landed in this exact situation, stuck in a dead-end hallway.

“Catherine,” a sing-song voice called behind them.

Cate groaned as her mind ran through their limited options. Her heart skipped a beat as her eyes focused on an object. The candelabra hung just above her eye level. She reached out and grasped it, tugging hard toward the floor.

The candelabra gave way, sliding down the wall as a panel swung open. “In here!” Cate exclaimed. She hurried inside the dark tunnel. Damien followed her, pushing the panel shut behind them. They inched back a few steps into the darkness.

Damien clutched at Cate's hand as they overheard the door to the parlor swing open on creaky hinges. Cate held her breath and bit her lower lip as she waited in the darkness. She strained her ears for signs of Duke Northcott's retreat.

Instead, another sound reached her ears. Breathing. The breathing emanated from behind her, not next to her. Someone else was hiding in this passage. The scenario was identical to her dream where she hid in a dark passage with another unknown individual.

Cate squeezed Damien's hand. He wrapped his arm around her. Cate stood on her toes and leaned toward Damien's ear. "Someone's here," she whispered.

She felt Damien's muscles stiffen. He ceased breathing for a moment. The slow rhythmic breathing from behind them continued.

Footsteps sounded in the corridor beyond. Damien pulled Cate back a few more steps, bringing them closer to the other person.

"Is someone there?" he breathed.

"Damien?" a woman answered. Cate recognized Celine's voice.

"Celine?" Damien whispered back.

"Yes, it is me."

"Celine, what are you doing down here?"

"Searching for the source of the anomalies."

The footsteps in the hallway outside circled but did not retreat.

"Marcus," Celine huffed.

"Yeah," Damien answered. "He followed us here. He's after Cate."

Cate's brow creased deeper, and a frown formed on her face. She had only been introduced as Catherine. Yet Damien called her Cate, her nickname. Who was this man?

"We must leave. He cannot learn what these walls house," Celine answered.

"I agree. Could you give us some light? Maybe there's a way out of here beyond the secret door."

Celine did not respond. She pondered the meaning of Damien's statement. Perhaps Celine carried a candle or lantern, though Cate did not understand how Damien knew this.

A loud pounding sounded against the wall. Cate jumped at the sound, startled. Her heart skipped a beat before it sped up.

"Celine, come on!" Damien insisted.

“This may not be wise,” Celine answered.

“She’ll be fine. Come on, we’re running out of time.”

A bright blue light burst in the dark space. Cate shielded her eyes. What type of lantern did Celine carry that produced this light? Cate blinked a few times and lowered her hands. She peered with narrowed eyes at the light now illuminating the space.

Cate gasped at the scene in front of her. A bright blue luminous ball floated above Celine’s hand. It glowed and crackled with energy.

“Thank you,” Damien breathed as he began to search the walls surrounding them.

Cate stood speechless. In her dream, a blue light blinded her before she awoke. Was this the source of that light? What was it? Who were these people?

Cate stumbled back a step as her legs threatened to betray her. “Whoa,” Damien said, grabbing Cate to steady her. “You okay?”

Cate shook her head. She attempted to pull out of his grasp. “It’s okay, we aren’t going to hurt you,” Damien insisted.

“Who... What...” Cate’s eyes darted around the room. “What is she? Who are you?”

“It’s difficult to explain...” Damien began.

“Try!” Cate insisted. “You... first you mentioned radar, which isn’t invented yet, then you called me Cate, and now... this! Who are you?” Cate signaled toward Celine’s floating ball of light.

“Damien. You know me.”

“I don’t!” Cate insisted.

“Yes, you do. Just not as Damien Carlyle. But you know me. As Damien Sherwood. You know... Decoder Exploder guy! I’m not from this time. But neither are you, right? You’re Cate Kensie, aren’t you?”

Cate’s mind raced at his words. Damien Sherwood? Her email contact for the decryption program? But how? How had he time traveled here? And why?

The pounding on the wall sounded again. “I’ll explain everything but now we need to find a way out of here.” He tugged her forward.

Cate shook her head and pulled back again. “No. What...” Cate began, unable to finish her thought. She motioned toward the floating ball of light.

“She’s a very special woman,” Damien answered. “And a good friend to have.”

“I won’t harm you, Cate,” Celine said as she placed her free hand on Cate’s arm. “Marcus, on the other hand, may. He is a dangerous man. We must go.”

Cate swallowed hard as she glanced between the two of them. A scraping sounded behind them and candlelight began to flood in through the opening panel. Damien cursed under his breath. Celine whipped the ball of light toward the secret door. It exploded against the panel, sealing it shut with a crackle of electricity.

Celine pulled another light ball from thin air and waved it in front of her. “There!” she exclaimed.

Cate squinted her eyes and detected a small opening in front of them. Damien clasped her hand in his and dragged her toward it. Using Celine’s light, they navigated through a series of passages, winding deeper underground.

The air grew cool and damp. The walls turned from manmade to natural stone. They continued to follow the winding path. After several more yards, the path sloped upward.

“We must be close to the end,” Damien surmised.

“Yes,” Celine agreed.

“Wonder where we’ll come out.”

“Hopefully far from Marcus,” Celine answered. “Then we have many things to discuss.”

Cate’s mind still swam with questions as they climbed upward in the stone tunnel. She began to wonder if she was trapped in one of her nightmares. None of this made sense. Nor was it possible. People couldn’t generate fireballs from thin air.

She stopped walking for a moment.

“Are you okay?” Damien inquired. “Do you need a break?”

Cate shook her head and squeezed her eyes shut.

“Cate?” Damien questioned.

Cate opened her eyes and glanced around. Her circumstances hadn’t changed. Perhaps she wasn’t dreaming. “This can’t be real,” she murmured.

“She is in shock. She is panicking,” Celine assessed. “Can you carry her?”

“No, don’t,” Damien countered. “She’ll be okay.”

Cate’s eyes grew wide at the conversation. What were they suggesting? She backed a few steps away, intending on retreating through the passage as

fast as she could.

“Cate! Wait!” Damien shouted. He raced ahead of her and blocked her way. “It’s okay. No one is going to harm you.”

“No?” Cate questioned. “What is she proposing to do to me that requires you to carry me afterward?”

“To put you to sleep,” Damien said. “That’s all. She’s got this ability to just touch your cheek and BAM! You’re asleep. It can be handy at times. It doesn’t hurt, she’s used it on me. She...” Cate blinked and shook her head at his babbling. “Anyway,” he continued as he noticed the mask of confusion and shock on her face, “she won’t hurt you. Let’s just get out of this place and then we’ll explain everything.”

“O-o-okay,” Cate stammered.

Damien smiled and nodded to her. They continued up the passage. The walls changed again from natural stone to blocks.

“This looks manmade,” Damien noted. “We must be close to the end.”

Within a few moments, they entered a large, cavernous space. Still cool and damp, stone walls surrounded them. No obvious exits existed. The remaining three sides looked solid.

“What is this place?” Damien inquired.

Cate’s mind churned. She pushed aside the questions plaguing her and focused on the question at hand. Where were they? Her mind combed through the structures on the estate.

“There’s a private cemetery on the grounds with a crypt. Could this be it?” she pondered aloud.

“Oh, maybe!” Damien exclaimed. “Is there a way out of it?”

“I’m not sure,” Cate answered. “I’ve never been inside it. I spend most of my time at the loch.”

“Wait,” Damien said. “Wait, your castle... the one you mentioned in your email is this castle? You own Dunhaven Castle in our time?”

Cate cocked her head as she stared at him. Her mind returned to the oddity of the situation facing her. “Yes. How did you know me?” she questioned.

“I recognized you.”

“We’ve never met.”

“No, but the internet is a wonderful thing!” Damien answered. “I searched you when Ken emailed me about you. Your picture was still on Aberdeen College’s website. I recognized you the second I saw you.”

That explained his odd grins at her, Cate mused. "Okay," she responded. "And you're Damien Sherwood. But how are you back here? In 1792?"

"Michael and I traveled back to help Celine with the Duke. He's really bad news, Cate. I wasn't kidding."

"How? Using the time rips?"

"We can continue this discussion once we've safely returned to the castle," Celine argued. "We must search for an exit."

"Right," Damien agreed. "Can you shine your light in the corners?"

Celine held the fireball higher and stepped toward the corner opposite them. She and Damien wandered around the chamber, scanning the walls. "There!" Damien shouted.

A small ring protruded from the block above their heads. Damien reached up, grasped it, and pulled downward. A screeching filled the space and a clanking sounded as a portion of the block wall swung toward them.

Fresh air rushed in as daylight streamed into the chamber. Celine extinguished her ball of light and they stepped into the outer chamber. Several stone coffins filled the space. Empty markers accompanied them. Prepared for Douglas and his family, the crypt sat empty awaiting its occupants.

"The castle is this way," Cate said as she stepped out of the mausoleum.

"We should go there straight away," Celine suggested. "We have much to discuss."

"I must find Jack!" Cate exclaimed.

"He is with Gray," Celine assured her.

"Yes," Damien agreed. "Gray will ensure he is okay."

"I'd like to see for myself."

"We'll hurry," Damien promised.

They set off on the most direct route to the castle. As they approached, Cate noted the obvious absence of the carriage and its four jet black horses.

"Marcus has departed," Celine stated, "for the moment."

"I'm sure he'll be back for dinner," Damien said. "Can't wait!"

Cate detected the deep antipathy in their voices. Their history with Duke Northcott must be long and painful, Cate surmised. Celine pushed through the front door of the castle. She crossed the foyer and ascended the stairs.

"Wait!" Cate called. "I must find Jack! He was in the sitting room with Grayson and Michael."

“He will have moved to our suite when Marcus arrived,” Celine called without stopping her climb. “Come.”

Damien offered his hand to Cate with a wide smile. “Come on,” Damien said. “It’s okay. I’m sure he’s fine.”

Cate eyed them both before accepting his hand. They climbed the stairs and followed Celine to their suite. Celine pushed open the doors to a large sitting room.

“Celine, are you alright?” Grayson inquired.

“Yes, I am fine.”

“Where is Catherine?” Jack demanded.

“Here!” Cate called as she released Damien’s hand and pushed through the door.

Jack offered a relieved sigh as Cate joined him near the loveseat. Damien closed the door behind them. Cate noted Michael standing near the fireplace.

“Did you find anything?” Grayson asked Celine.

“Yes and no,” she answered. “Damien was correct.”

Grayson side-eyed Jack and Cate before continuing. “Do you imagine they can help?”

“That is what I plan to find out.”

Michael tugged at his collar, loosening and removing his cravat. “Can we dispense with some of these formalities now that we’re all on the same page?”

“Apparently, I am not on the same page. I’m not even sure I am in the same book! Would someone mind cluing me in on what’s going on?” Jack questioned. “We’ve been discussing odd business questions for over an hour. And we moved to your suite for some strange reason which I still do not fully understand. I am starting to suspect you have an ulterior motive.”

“You are correct, Mr. MacKenzie,” Grayson admitted.

“Oh, come on,” Michael grumbled. “You’re not from this century. You’re time travelers.”

CHAPTER 27



Jack's eyes went wide, and he collapsed onto the loveseat behind him. "That does it!" he exclaimed. "We really are terrible at this."
"Don't sweat it," Damien said. "We're not that good either."

Jack's jaw went slack at the admission. "You...You are..." Jack's eyes scanned the room as his unfinished sentence hung in the air.

"Time travelers," Damien said with a grin. "Oh, just Michael and me. Celine and Gray are really from this time."

"I hate time traveling," Michael murmured as he shook his head.

Jack glanced up at him sharply. "Me too!"

"Wandering around in centuries that aren't your own. It's just... there are no bathrooms, people died of typhoid and other diseases. What part of this makes you grin like that?" Michael asked Damien.

"It's fun!" Damien countered. "Immersing yourself in another time. When people viewed the world in a far different way."

A smile formed on Cate's lips. "That's exactly what I said!" Cate exclaimed.

"Can we stick to the subject at hand rather than our love or lack thereof for the art of time traveling?" Grayson interjected.

"I still don't understand how you time traveled," Cate said. "Are there time rips in other locations?"

"Time rips?" Grayson questioned.

"Yes," Jack answered. "The phenomena Douglas described a few nights ago after dinner. They are the result of time rips. People shifting in and out

of their own time and into others.”

“Several exist in the castle,” Cate explained further. “They all lead to different years.”

Celine nodded. “These are the aberrations in time-space I detected. But how did you use them?”

“We control them with this,” Cate said, holding up her timepiece.

“A watch?” Michael questioned.

“Yes,” Cate responded. “I’m sorry, I’m still confused as to how you two time traveled.”

“Through a time portal,” Damien answered. “Celine possesses the ability to open time portals.”

Cate glanced at Celine, her mouth agape. Damien informed her she was a special woman. He wasn’t kidding. Jack slouched further down the sofa as shock settled around him.

“How do you use a watch to time travel?” Michael inquired.

“You go to the location of the time rip leading to the year you want to travel to,” Cate explained, “and you rub the face. That triggers the time rip to open and allows you to slip through it.”

Damien peered at the timepiece.

“May I see it?” Celine requested.

“Sure,” Cate answered. She slipped the chain from around her neck and handed the gold timepiece to Celine.

“Why is the watch stopped?” Damien asked. “Is time paused in your year when you use it?”

“It’s not stopped,” Jack informed him. “It keeps time in the present. But time there moves more slowly than it does here.”

“Really?” Damien said.

“Yes. Fifteen minutes here is only one minute in our time,” Cate explained.

“Yes,” Celine answered, handing the timepiece back to Cate. “These distortions do not behave as normal time portals. They are distended in some way. It’s what twists the passage of time at different speeds.”

“Is that not the case when you time travel?” Cate asked Damien.

“No, though Celine can open portals to whenever we’d like so we can, essentially, defy time passage in some cases.”

“How does the timepiece interact with the distorted time portals?” Michael inquired.

“We don’t know,” Cate admitted. “Which is why we’re here. There are no extra pieces inside that we could identify. For all intents and purposes, it appears to be a normal pocket watch.”

“It is enchanted,” Celine answered.

“By whom?” Grayson asked. “Can you tell?”

“Me,” Celine replied.

Cate’s eyes went wide, and she sank onto the loveseat next to Jack. “So, that’s how Douglas did it,” she murmured.

“So, your enchantment allows them to control the time rips?” Michael asked.

“Yes,” Celine answered. “It keeps them closed until activated. Then, they open.”

“Which solves Douglas’s problem,” Grayson added. “His supposition that he was glimpsing snippets of the future was correct. Though he had no way to control when he would see them. That timepiece gives him the ability to close them.”

“Marcus must never find out about this,” Celine stated. She glanced at Cate and Jack. “You two should return home at once.”

“No,” Cate argued. “We can’t.”

“We’ll handle things with Douglas,” Grayson assured her. “Celine is correct. The Duke is dangerous. You shouldn’t be here.”

Cate shook her head again in disagreement. “We cannot leave for two reasons.”

“Which are?” Grayson fired back.

“In our time,” Jack explained, “something is going on with the time rips. They are popping up randomly. We can’t control them anymore.”

“Right,” Cate answered. “Which is why we’re here. To learn how Douglas controlled them so we could solve our problem. And second, we must ensure Douglas invents the timepiece and Celine enchants it, so we can travel to this time in the first place.”

Celine pursed her lips at the admission. “The timepiece has ceased to function in the future?”

“Not exactly,” Cate answered. “It still interacts with the time rips, but it doesn’t always keep them closed. At times, we’ll slip into another era despite not activating the timepiece.”

“And the timepiece won’t work to get us back when that happens,” Jack added.

“Yes, that’s right. If we don’t get this fixed, the castle will become unlivable,” Cate said.

“Can you help them, Celine?” Damien inquired.

Celine shook her head. “Not from here. Not from this time. The enchantment that exists on that timepiece works with the aberrations I studied here. It should work.”

“So, these time rips have morphed in some way in the future?” Michael proposed.

“It appears they may have if this enchantment no longer holds them closed,” Celine responded.

“Then you’d need to study the distortions in the future to create something that would control the new rips,” Damien suggested.

“Yes,” Celine said with a nod of her head.

“Would you return with us to our time to study it?” Cate inquired, her voice filled with hope.

Damien shook his head. “No need,” he said. “We live in that time. We’ll just meet you there!”

Jack shook his head. “You and Michael live in that time,” he said. “We need her though.” He pointed to Celine.

“No, we all live in that time.”

“But you said only you and Damien were from our time.”

“I mean, technically that’s true,” Damien answered. “This Celine and Grayson are native to this era, but they also exist in our time period. It’s complicated. The point is we can help you. You can return home now, and we’ll be there to help.”

Cate sank onto the couch again as the complex discussion threatened to cause her brain to implode. “Come on; you time travel, you have to be open to the possibility that things exist that are well beyond your comprehension and knowledge,” Damien said as Cate remained silent.

“All right. I’ll trust you,” she answered after a moment.

“Good!” Damien answered. “Then we’ll plan to meet you tomorrow.”

“For now, you should go home,” Celine repeated. “You cannot stay here. It is far too dangerous with Marcus.”

“Who is this guy? Why is he such a concern?” Jack questioned.

“He is a very dangerous man,” Celine answered.

“Yeah,” Damien chimed in. “He’s really bad news.”

“Evil,” Michael added.

“Which is why you must go and leave the rest of this to us,” Grayson insisted.

“But...” Cate began.

“No,” Grayson argued. “This is not up for debate. It’s far too dangerous. And this secret must be protected. At all costs. We will discuss the problem and solution with Douglas.”

“We’ll tell him to leave you a note in one of those journals you’re decrypting!” Damien exclaimed. “And then we’ll see you tomorrow in your own time and we’ll solve your problem, too.”

Damien took her hands in his. “Trust me, Cate,” he said as he stared into her eyes.

Cate scanned their faces. She hated to leave things to chance. She wanted to ensure everything worked properly. What if something went wrong? These people had more experience with this man, though. He haunted her for months in her dreams. Perhaps this was why. Perhaps staying was a mistake and would lead to more trouble. If she continued to have nightmares, she could discuss them with Celine and Damien in her own time. She would trust them. She had to.

She twisted to face Jack. He shrugged at her, suggesting the decision was up to her. “Okay,” she agreed with a nod. “I’ll trust you. We really need your help. And I’ve had terrible nightmares about that man. I have no desire to be near him.”

“You’ve had nightmares about the Duke?” Damien inquired.

Cate nodded.

“Even more reason for you to leave,” Grayson chimed in.

“Please give Douglas our apologies,” Cate said as guilt washed over her. She’d leave her ancestor without saying goodbye. She could visit again when things settled down, she promised herself.

“We will. We will explain everything to him,” Celine answered. “Now go. Collect your things and return to your own time.”

The group said their goodbyes with the promise of seeing one another the next day. Cate and Jack stepped into the hallway as Grayson closed the door behind them. “You okay?” Jack asked Cate once they were alone.

“Yeah,” she said with a slight nod.

“You sure? You’re certain you’re okay with this plan?”

“I am,” she answered with a sigh. “It’s not what I would have picked first but I agree we should leave. Duke Northcott spotted me with Damien

earlier and chased me through the house.”

“What?!” Jack exclaimed.

“It was just like my dream. I felt as panicked as I did in my nightmares. I’d prefer to be away from him.”

“All right. Then we’ll gather our things and get out of here.”

“Plus, I trust Damien. I know it sounds odd, but they are time travelers, and he happens to be from our time. He’s the one who helped me with the journals.”

“The decryption program guy?”

“One and the same. Odd coincidence, huh?”

“Or not,” Jack suggested. “Either way, let’s get out of here.”

They threaded through the halls, heading to their room. As they rounded a corner into another hallway, Cate spotted Douglas coming toward them.

“Catherine! Jack! How fortunate I bumped into you both. I was just searching for you.”

“You were searching for us?” Cate inquired.

“Indeed. I hoped to have a word with Jack. Oh, I hope you do not mind, Catherine. I expected you would be resting before the dressing gong, and I could steal Jack for a few moments.”

“O-oh...” Jack stammered. “Catherine and I were just...”

“I promise not to take too much of your time, cousin Jack,” Douglas promised.

“Go on, dear. I am perfectly capable of returning to our room to rest on my own,” Cate said.

Jack smiled at her, and Cate gave his hand a reassuring squeeze. “I promise not to keep him too long, Catherine.”

“Take your time,” Cate answered.

“See you soon, dear,” Jack said as he allowed Douglas to lead him toward the main stairs.

Cate watched as they disappeared around the corner before continuing to their bedroom. Perhaps Jack would be able to pass along a few sentiments before they departed to explain their sudden absence.

Her mind spun with the latest developments as she rounded the corner into the hallway housing their bedroom. With her mind distracted, she failed to notice the man there until it was too late.

Cate stopped short just before she ran into him. A smirk crossed his face. “Hello, Catherine,” Duke Northcott hissed.

Cate's eyes grew wide, and she swallowed hard. Her pulse quickened and her knees threatened to buckle.

"Oh my! Have I left you speechless?" he questioned.

"Duke Northcott," Cate said, her voice a hoarse whisper. "You startled me."

"Did I? My sincere apologies, Catherine. Though I hoped to speak with you. Perhaps I would not have been forced to seek you out here had you not disappeared earlier this afternoon."

"Disappeared?" Cate repeated. "I am not following."

He narrowed his eyes at her. "You did not hear me call to you earlier when I was on the estate?" he said, phrasing it as a question.

"No. My apologies. I did not."

He stared at her as she fibbed about their near encounter earlier this afternoon. She wondered if he could tell she was lying. Perhaps, though there was something else about his eyes. Something that disturbed her. She swallowed hard again.

"Though I cannot imagine what you desired to speak with me about," Cate added as the silence became unbearable.

"Really? Can't you?" He raised an eyebrow at her as he left the statement hang in the air for a moment. "I find you a most interesting woman, Catherine."

He pressed closer to her. Cate inched backward. "Oh," she murmured. "I assure you I am not very interesting."

"Oh, but you are! You do yourself a disservice speaking in that manner."

"Perhaps we can continue our conversation over dinner," Cate suggested in an attempt to end the conversation.

"But that simply won't do," Duke Northcott countered.

"I am very sorry, Duke, but I do not have a moment now. I hoped to rest before the dressing gong."

"You avoid me, Catherine," he said, catching her arm as she attempted to skirt around him. "Why?"

"I do not. I am only tired and wish to rest before dinner."

"There is something very strange about you," Duke Northcott said. She held his gaze a moment. Perhaps he would let her go now. "I am determined to find out what it is."

She forced a weak smile onto her face. “Perhaps over dinner,” she suggested again.

“I already told you, Catherine, that will not do.”

He tightened his grip on her arm and yanked her closer to him. His other hand reached for her face. Her eyes grew wide as she stifled a scream. The cool flesh of his fingertips brushed her cheek. A strange sensation came over her entire body at once. The hairs on her neck stood on end, her stomach somersaulted, her knees buckled, and her vision began to close to a pinpoint. Cate felt her body slumping to the floor as the world crashed around her.

CHAPTER 28



Cate's eyelids fluttered open. She blinked several times to clear her blurred vision. She laid on her side in an unfamiliar room.

Candlelight flickered its dim light across the small room from the table next to the bed on which she lay. She inhaled a sharp breath as she recalled the details of her last memory. She stood with Duke Northcott in the hallway leading to her bedroom. He had approached her. They had disagreed about the timing of a conversation, and she had fainted. Where was she now?

Cate pushed up to sitting as she glanced around her new surroundings. Her body ached with fatigue and her mind was clouded. Random thoughts crowded her brain though she could not process them. Still groggy, she attempted to swing her feet to the floor below her. A wave of nausea passed through her as she tried to stand.

She collapsed back onto the bed behind her as she swallowed the bile creeping up into her throat before she attempted to stand again. On wobbly legs, she hovered for a few moments next to the bed before she stumbled across the floor. She fell against the door as she attempted to twist the handle and pull it open. It did not budge.

Her fists pounded against the door. "Help!" she called. Tears streamed down her cheeks, and she choked down a sob. Cate spun to scan the room. A small window adorned the wall across from her. Darkness stared back at her from beyond it. She raced to it and attempted to pull it open. The window was stuck fast.

Cate peered at her surroundings. She spotted lights in the distance on the moor. From the vast area the lights stretched over, Cate assumed the structure was Dunhaven Castle. After another sob, Cate struggled with the window again, rattling it in its frame. It did not open. She scanned the area closer to her. The moonlight cast shadows across the fields. It appeared she was nearer to town than the castle, perhaps on the outskirts. If she could escape, she could run to town for help.

Footsteps sounded on the floorboards outside the small room. Cate's breath caught in her throat. She searched for an object she could use to defend herself. She found nothing in the sparsely decorated room.

The clank of a key sounded, and the door swung open. Cate pressed into the opposite corner, her breathing ragged. A dark-skinned man stepped into the room. He carried a small tray. A teacup and several biscuits sat on it. "Hello, Miss Catherine," he said, his accent sounding South African, "I have brought you some food."

Cate's brow furrowed at the statement. He slid the tray onto the small wooden table near the door and spun to depart. "Wait!" Cate called. "Please wait!"

He turned back, his hands clasped in front of him, a calm expression on his face. "Yes, Miss Catherine?"

"You must help me! I... I do not know how I came to be here. I must return to Dunhaven Castle. My husband is expecting me."

"I am sorry, Miss Catherine, Duke Northcott requests you to remain here. Please if you would like something more to eat, simply request it from me. My name is Dembe."

"No!" Cate shouted as he departed from the room. The lock engaged, leaving Cate trapped again. She banged against the door as she pleaded for help. None came.

Cate returned to the bed and collapsed onto it. With a frown, she stared at the tray of food across the room. Her stomach growled. She wondered about the time. How long had she been gone? Had Jack sought her and found her missing? Were they searching for her?

She pulled the timepiece from under her dress and stared at it. The second hand crept around the face. Tears stung her eyes as she realized she was not the only one trapped. Without the timepiece, Jack was stuck in 1792. If they never found her, he would be trapped here forever, doomed to live and die in an era centuries before his birth.

She, too, was trapped. She would never see Riley and Bailey again. What would become of them? Of Molly? Of Dunhaven Castle?

Tears rolled down her cheeks. She gave into her panic and wept. After a few moments, Cate swallowed hard and wiped at her cheeks. Crying helped nothing and would solve none of her problems, she reminded herself.

"Pull yourself together, Cate," she told herself. "You need to think."

She swallowed hard again and took a deep breath. Squaring her shoulders, she stood and lifted her chin and strode to the door. She pounded against it. "Dembe!" she called. "Dembe?"

Footsteps sounded on the stairs leading to her second-story room. The lock clanked and the door pushed open. Cate backed a few steps away.

"Yes, Miss Catherine? May I retrieve something for you?"

"What time is it?"

"It is 2 a.m." He glanced at the tray. "You have not eaten."

Cate shook her head. "I do not want it."

"Please, Miss Catherine, eat some food."

Cate set her jaw. "I demand to see Duke Northcott."

"He is not available. He plans to visit you in the morning." The man's cool demeanor rattled Cate. While he seemed kind, nothing she said seemed to affect him. Appealing to him to assist her would not work.

She tried anyway. "Dembe, please. People must be searching for me. They are undoubtedly worried. You must help me. I am here against my will."

"Please, eat, Miss Catherine. It will help settle your nerves."

"Settle my nerves?" Cate shouted. "I have been kidnapped and am being held prisoner here! Tea and cookies will not settle my nerves!"

Dembe opened his mouth to answer when a shadow loomed behind him. "What's this? Catherine's awake already?" Duke Northcott skirted around Dembe and stepped into the room.

Cate stumbled backward a step as he entered. "Yes, Duke Northcott," Dembe answered. "She awoke several minutes ago. I brought the food as you instructed." He motioned toward the tray.

"And yet Catherine has not touched her food. Tsk tsk, Catherine. You must be hungry. You've missed dinner!"

"I do not want your food. I want to go home."

"You Americans are always so onerous. You demand this. You insist on that. Though the simple truth is we cannot achieve everything we desire,

dear. You must learn this lesson. Now, eat the snack Dembe has prepared for you and go back to sleep. We shall discuss things further in the morning.” Duke Northcott lifted the teacup on its saucer and offered it to Cate.

“No!” Cate insisted.

“Oh, come, Catherine. Dembe has gone to great trouble to prepare you a nice cup of hot tea with fresh biscuits in the middle of the night.” He picked up a biscuit and waved it at her.

Cate knocked it from his hand. It skittered across the floor leaving a trail of crumbs. Duke Northcott raised his eyebrows at her and set his jaw.

“Obstinance is not a quality I prize in women, Catherine. If you refuse Dembe’s treat, then you shall go hungry.”

“Then I shall go hungry,” Cate stated despite her rumbling stomach.

“How unfortunate for you,” Duke Northcott answered. “And for poor Dembe who waited to prepare it.”

“And poison it?” Cate shot back.

Duke Northcott roared with laughter. “Poison it? Whatever for, my dear?”

“To kill me,” Cate suggested.

“Why would I go through the trouble of bringing you here to poison you? There are so many other more interesting ways in which I could achieve this feat. I’d not resort to the mundanity of poisoning someone with a cup of tea.”

Cate’s brow furrowed as she considered the question. “Do not tax yourself, dear,” Duke Northcott continued after a moment. “Dembe did not poison your biscuits nor your tea. Did you, Dembe?”

“No, Duke,” Dembe answered in his soft voice.

“Then why did you bring me here?” Cate demanded.

“As I’ve already told you, we shall discuss it in the morning. Now, eat.”

Cate eyed the teacup perched on the saucer in Duke Northcott’s hand. He raised it toward her again. Cate set her jaw as she accepted the saucer. She sipped from the cup at the sweet, creamy English tea. Duke Northcott passed the plate of remaining cookies to her.

Cate set it on the small night table. She sank onto the bed as she nibbled the cookie’s corner.

Duke Northcott smiled at her as he caressed a lock of her hair. “Good girl,” he said. “I trust you will be able to sleep after you’ve eaten. I shall see

you in the morning. Good night, Catherine.”

He spun on his heel and exited the room. Dembe stepped toward the broken cookie strewn across the wooden floorboards. “I’ll do it,” Cate offered, rising from the bed.

“No, Miss Catherine. Please eat. I shall clear the mess.” Dembe removed a handkerchief from his pocket and collected the crumbs and the discarded cookie. “Is there anything else, Miss Catherine?”

“No, Dembe, thank you.” He nodded his head and stepped to the doorway. “Oh, Dembe?” Cate added.

“Yes, Miss Catherine?” Dembe asked as he twisted to face her.

“I’m very sorry about earlier.” She raised her teacup to him. “Thank you. The tea and cookies are very good.”

“I am pleased you are enjoying the meal. Good night, Miss Catherine.”

He pulled the door shut and Cate heard the lock engage. She sipped at the warm tea, finding it brought her more comfort than expected. Her mind reeled. Why had Duke Northcott brought her here? What did he want from her? And what would he do to get it?

Her mind wandered through frightening scenarios as she finished the cookies and tea. She set the dishes on the tray and wandered to the window. Light from Dunhaven Castle danced in the distance. Cate pressed her hand against the glass as she stared at it. Her forehead rested against the cool windowpane as she continued to study the lights. They must have noticed her absence by now. Poor Jack. “Jack,” she moaned. “I’m sorry.”

Another few moments passed before exhaustion crept over Cate. Her eyes became heavy and her limbs felt like lead. Had the tea contained a sleeping draught? Or was her adrenaline from the distressing situation waning?

She wandered from the window and collapsed onto the bed. With drooping eyelids, she stared at the flickering flame of the candle. What would become of her, she wondered, as she drifted off to a dreamless sleep.

* * *

Cate awoke the following morning to bright sunshine streaming through the room’s single window. The candle’s wick smoked after having burned down to its end. Melted wax stuck to the table under the candleholder.

Cate rolled onto her back and stared at the ceiling for several moments before she rose and ambled to the window. In the daylight, the clear outline of Dunhaven Castle dominated the landscape in the distance.

She scanned the property closer to the house. No defining features stood out. If she could manage to escape, she spotted nothing to hide her flight.

Cate jimmied the window again but could not open it. She crossed to the door and tried the knob. Still locked, she realized, as she tugged against it. She paced the small area between the door and the bed as she considered her options.

A knock sounded and the lock disengaged. Cate spun to face her visitor. Duke Northcott strode into the room.

“Good morning, Catherine!” he said with a wide smile. “Up and about already? I should have thought after your rather taxing experience last evening you would prefer to sleep late.”

“I prefer to be informed as to why I am here,” Cate countered. “Why did you abduct me?”

“Abduct is such a strong word. I prefer to say I strongly and enthusiastically persuaded you to leave with me.”

“But you didn’t!” Cate argued. “You dragged me here, unconscious and against my will!”

The corners of Duke Northcott’s mouth turned down as his bottom lip raised in an upside-down smile, forming a mouth shrug. “A rather trivial difference in the description of the event.”

Cate’s eyebrows shot up and her jaw fell open at the statement.

“Well, shall we put aside the debate on how you happen to be here and go to breakfast?” He offered her his arm.

Cate’s expression remained unchanged. “No!” she exclaimed after a stunned moment.

“Oh, really, Catherine! Must you continue to be so obstinate? You surely do not object to a well-prepared meal! Dembe is quite a good cook, I promise.”

“I demand to know what is going on!”

“Tsk, ts,” he clicked his tongue at her. “You are in no position to demand anything, dear Catherine. Let us try to be congenial, shall we? There is no reason for this bitterness between us.”

Cate blinked at him as she attempted to understand the request for cordiality from her kidnapper. She would learn nothing from him unless she

complied with his demands. She bit her lower lip and sighed as she reached for his arm.

“A wise choice, Catherine,” Duke Northcott said with a nod.

He led her down a narrow stairway and through another hallway before they entered a dining room. Cate’s eyes scanned every area, memorizing as much as she could, searching for an exit. As they approached the table, he pulled her chair out and seated her before sitting across from her.

Dembe waited in the corner of the room. As Duke Northcott sat down, he scurried from the room and returned in moments with a tray. He set it on the sideboard and lifted two plates which he placed in front of Cate and Duke Northcott.

Cate eyed the poached eggs on her plate with the side of cured bacon. “May I bring you anything else?” Dembe questioned.

“No, Dembe, not unless Miss Catherine requires anything else. She appears unimpressed with her meal.”

“No, it looks most appealing, thank you.” Cate picked up her fork to begin eating. Dembe retreated to his corner. Cate took a few bites of her food before setting her fork on her plate. “Now will you tell me why I am here?”

Duke Northcott raised his eyebrows at her. “You are a most impatient woman, Catherine,” he answered.

“I often find myself impatient when kidnapped, yes,” Cate answered.

He grinned at her. “Your sense of humor is most entertaining. Perhaps, first, we shall discuss why you ran from me yesterday and where you managed to disappear to.”

Cate returned to her meal, focusing her gaze on her plate. “I do not know what you are speaking of,” she insisted.

“Yes, you mentioned that yesterday. I do not believe you. I believe you were very much aware that I called to you. And that you deliberately avoided me. With the assistance of that stooge Damien Carlyle.”

Cate’s fork clattered to her plate. “What difference does it make?”

“It makes a great deal of difference to me, Catherine. As I’ve told you, you are a most interesting woman. Your actions intrigue me.”

“I am not that interesting,” Cate contended.

“I shall be the judge of that,” Duke Northcott countered. “Tell me about yourself, Catherine.”

“There is little to tell. I lived in Philadelphia for most of my life until I married Jack. After our marriage, we traveled to this country for Jack’s legal practice.”

“A Scottish lawyer won your heart? Oh, dear Catherine, you have settled poorly. With your beauty, you could have attained a better match!”

“I love Jack,” Cate answered.

“Love is for fools and ladies’ novels. And I do not take you for a fool, Catherine.”

“I do not agree,” Cate said.

He shrugged. “Either way, your marriage is most odd to me.”

“Your opinion on my marriage does not concern me.”

“Fair enough. What brought you to Dunhaven?”

“My husband’s business. He is a distant cousin of Lord MacKenzie and we hoped to visit family whilst here.” Cate glanced up to find his eyes on her. She held his glance as she slipped the knife from the table and into the folds of her dress.

After a moment, he raised his eyebrows. “Are you certain that is all there is to the story?”

“What else would there be?” Cate inquired.

He narrowed his eyes at her. “I conjecture there is more.” Cate remained silent, tending to the food on her plate. “Why were you walking with Damien Carlyle yesterday?”

“Grayson Buckley requested a moment to discuss business with my husband. Mr. Carlyle kindly offered to escort me on a walk around the property in my husband’s stead.”

“How well do you know the Buckleys?”

“I have only just met them when they arrived at Dunhaven Castle.”

“And the Carlyles?”

“The same,” Cate answered.

“Damien Carlyle seems oddly protective of you for someone he’s only just met.”

“Duke Northcott, I do not know what you are referring to.”

“I am referring to your wild fugue through the castle with Damien Carlyle yesterday resulting in your strange disappearance in a dead-end hallway. Where did you go and why is Damien Carlyle so invested in protecting you?”

Cate was running out of answers that skirted the truth. She shrugged. "I cannot answer that. After our walk, Mr. Carlyle offered to show me an interesting trinket he'd spotted in the castle. I followed him to another room to view it. I did not hear you calling to me and I certainly did not disappear."

He held her gaze for a moment before speaking. "No. There is more to the story. There is something odd about you, Catherine. I cannot put my finger on it, but I believe there is something you are hiding."

Cate returned her attention to her plate and finished the final bites of her meal. "I have ways of gaining information, Catherine," Duke Northcott warned.

"There is no more information to gain," Cate informed him.

"We shall see," he answered as Dembe cleared their dishes.

Cate wiped the corners of her mouth and set her napkin on the table. "Shall we?" Duke Northcott asked as he stood from the table.

Cate swallowed hard and rose, anxious about what may happen next. Duke Northcott led her to the hallway and toward the cottage's front door. "Perhaps you would care to read in the sitting room for a time."

Cate rubbed the back of her neck at the statement, and she did not respond. Her focus remained on the door in front of her. Freedom lay on the other side. It stood mere yards from her. Could she make it? If she could make it to the grass beyond, perhaps she could call for help. Perhaps someone would spot her and help her.

Cate considered her options. This may be her only opportunity for escape. She must try, she determined. Her hands trembled as she slid her arm from his. She shoved him against the wall and raced to the front door. She clutched at the doorknob, twisting and turning it as she tugged. No key sat in the keyhole. The locked door prevented her from any escape. Tears streamed down her cheeks as she realized the situation.

Behind her, Duke Northcott recovered. He smoothed his cravat and jacket before approaching her. He clapped his hands in a slow, methodic manner. "Bravo, Catherine, Bravo."

Cate spun to face him and pressed against the door. Her breathing turned ragged as he stalked toward her. "Oh, do not cry, dear," he said. "It was a brave though gravely miscalculated move." He removed a handkerchief from his pocket and offered it to her, waving it between two fingers. "Take it."

Cate snatched it with a trembling hand. She pressed it to her face, drying her tears. "Let us resolve this matter once and for all. You cannot escape, my dear." He pulled Cate away from the door and swung it open. He motioned toward the outside. Cate smelled the fresh air and felt the cool breeze on her damp cheeks. She glanced to Duke Northcott then through the door. "Well, go ahead, my dear, try to depart."

Cate's brow furrowed and she stepped forward. As she attempted to step over the threshold, she ran into an invisible barrier. She lifted her arm and pressed her hand forward. Her hand could not breach the doorway.

She twisted to face him. "There. You see? It is quite impossible for you to leave. Not until I allow you. Resign yourself, Catherine. You are stuck here."

A fresh wave of panic and nausea swept over Cate. Her breakfast threatened to fly back up her throat. She bit her lower lip, and her hand found the cool metal of the knife hidden in the pocket of her dress. She clutched it, wrapping her fingers around the handle. She had no other options now. She had to strike.

CHAPTER 29



Cate slid the blade from the folds of her dress. She raised her arm high and swung down. Duke Northcott caught it mid-swing. The knife grazed his hand but clattered to the floor as he gripped and squeezed her wrist. Blood trickled from the small cut which seemed to disappear almost as soon as it opened.

“Ow!” Cate shrieked.

Duke Northcott slammed the front door shut. “Do not do something you will regret. I will not tolerate these games, Catherine,” he roared at her. “I have been a most accommodating host. Yet you attempt to harm me?” He drove her back against the wall. She crashed into it as he pressed against her.

“Let me go,” she wailed.

“Come, Catherine, you have not earned any favors.” He yanked her up the front stairs and dragged her down the hallway to her room. He pulled the door open and tossed her inside. She stumbled a few steps before collapsing to the floor in a heap. “There you shall stay until our next conversation. Perhaps by then, you shall have learned to behave.” He swung the door shut and the lock engaged.

Cate climbed to her feet as tears stained her cheeks. She threw herself against the door and pounded on it. “Let me go! Let me go!”

Her sobs went unanswered. She slid down the door and crumpled to the floor. Within a few moments, a sound reached Cate’s ears. She sniffled as she lifted her head, straining to hear.

Hoofbeats resounded. Cate pulled herself to standing and hurried to the window. She searched the landscape outside. A carriage approached, pulled by two chestnut horses. The carriage slowed to a halt outside the front door. The coachman dismounted and opened the door for the occupant.

Celine climbed out. Cate's eyes grew wide. She banged against the windowpane. "Celine! Celine!" she called. "Celine, I'm here!"

The woman stormed to the front door, oblivious to Cate's pleas. Cate raced to her door and pressed her ear against it.

"Marcus! Marcus!" Celine's voice called in the foyer.

"Celine," Duke Northcott answered. "What a pleasant surprise."

"Where is she?" Celine demanded.

"Where is who, my dear?"

"You know very well who. Where is Catherine MacKenzie?"

Cate's heart leapt. Jack must have told Celine she was missing. Celine must have deduced Cate's location. She was saved! Cate hammered her fist against the door. "I'm here, Celine! Celine! I'm up here! Help!"

"I have no idea what you are talking about, Celine," Marcus answered.

"Don't you?" Celine countered.

"No, I do not. I am sorry to hear the poor girl is missing. Though perhaps there is a more reasonable explanation than accusing me of some involvement in her disappearance."

"You are the reasonable explanation, Marcus. You chased her through the house yesterday. You've taken her. Where? I demand to know."

"A tale you've no doubt gathered from that dimwitted ally of yours, Damien Carlyle. I grow weary of these accusations, Celine. First, I am responsible for Elizabeth Buckley's strange illness and now an ocean away, I am the responsible party for a missing woman. It is most likely she's run off to escape that dullard of a husband she has. It really isn't that surprising, Celine."

"That's a lie!" Celine screamed at him.

"It's not," Duke Northcott retorted, his voice calm and measured, bordering on taunting. "He is rather dull. A useless man if I've ever met one. He may even make Grayson Buckley seem appealing."

Cate overheard a scuffle. "I wouldn't if I were you, Celine. I suggest you depart before you say or do something you'll regret."

"I will find her, Marcus. And she had better be unharmed." Cate heard footsteps retreat from the house.

“Oh, Celine! I hope she is found. What a terrible shame it would be if anything were to happen to a beautiful woman like that!” he called, his voice raised.

Cate rushed to the window. Celine emerged from the house and approached the carriage. She climbed aboard without a glance back. “No, wait!” Cate shouted. “Celine, wait!”

Cate groaned as the carriage pulled away. “No,” she moaned. “Come back!” Her bottom lip trembled as she slogged to the bed and sank onto it. Not only did an invisible barrier trap her inside this house, but it also prevented others from seeing or hearing her. How? What sorcery was this? Who were these people? And how could she fight against it?

* * *

Cate paced the floor of the bedroom as the sun descended in the sky. Celine had not returned. No one had visited the house. She had watched Duke Northcott depart in the early afternoon. His carriage traveled in the opposite direction of Dunhaven Castle. Where was he going, she pondered?

As the dust settled in his wake, Cate tried the door and window again. She could not budge either.

“Dembe!” Cate called as she banged on the door.

Footsteps climbed the stairs and approached her door. The lock clanked and the door swung open. “Yes, Miss Catherine?”

“Where has Duke Northcott gone?”

“Business, Miss Catherine. He will return in the early evening to dine with you.”

“Dembe, please,” Cate pleaded, “please, I cannot stay here. I’m frightened.”

“Perhaps some tea will soothe you, Miss Catherine,” Dembe offered.

Tears stung Cate’s eyes. “No, Dembe, no tea. Thank you.” Cate stalked away from him to stare out the window.

“I shall bring it in case you change your mind.” With that, the man exited. He returned in moments with a steaming cup of tea and set it on the small table before leaving Cate alone again.

As the sun dipped below the horizon, Cate spied Duke Northcott’s carriage return. He strode into the house. Thirty minutes later, he knocked at

her door.

“And how are you feeling this evening, Catherine?” he inquired as he led her to the dining room.

“Frustrated,” Cate answered.

“I am sorry to hear that,” he said as she took her seat.

“Perhaps you can alleviate my frustration,” she said after a moment.

He raised his eyebrows at her and set down his fork. “What an interesting proposition. Continue.”

“Why have you brought me here?”

“My reasons are my own,” he answered. “I shall share them when the time is appropriate.”

Cate set her jaw as she considered her next question. “If you cannot answer that, perhaps you can explain to me what you are.”

“What I am?” he repeated.

“You caused me to faint with only a touch. You have created some sort of unseen barrier that prevents me from leaving the house even through an open door. I scratched you earlier with the knife and you healed immediately. These things are not normal.”

“Your intelligence impresses me, Catherine. Even in a frightening situation, you keep your wits about you. You pay careful attention to detail even under these ominous circumstances.”

Cate narrowed her eyes at him. “Compliments will not distract me from my question.”

He smiled at her. “You do not give up. Admirable. In different circumstances, we may have made fantastic allies.”

Cate cocked her head. “I cannot imagine ever aligning with you.”

“Never limit your options, Catherine. Life can offer us strange circumstances in which we must accept what we imagined we would not.”

“You have not answered my question,” Cate reminded him.

“You must accept that there are things in this world beyond what you may expect.”

“Such as?”

“Suffice it to say I possess several unique abilities that allow me to navigate the world differently than most others.”

“Unique abilities,” Cate repeated. “Such as the ability to heal your wounds in seconds?”

“Your interest in me is flattering, Catherine. And your curiosity in these affairs is a most attractive quality.”

“I only wish to learn the circumstances that surround me.”

“Oh, I do admire you, Catherine. Despite your assumptions to the contrary, I find you a most interesting woman.”

Their conversation continued through the meal but did not delve further into Duke Northcott’s strange abilities. Cate spent time after dinner reading in the sitting room before Duke Northcott returned her to her room, locking her in for the night.

* * *

Cate woke from a dreamless sleep before the sun crested the moors. With the candle burned down and only minimal light, she laid in bed as the sun rose. Painting the sky like a watercolor, the sun’s light brought her some solace. She imagined lounging in her own bed, surrounded by her two buddies, Riley and Bailey.

Tears threatened as she wondered if she would ever see them again. Marcus Northcott’s strange abilities baffled her. And what she couldn’t explain pushed her mind to explore places she’d rather it didn’t.

As the sun rose fully into the sky a quiet knock sounded at the door. The lock released and Dembe pushed the door open. He set a tray of breakfast on the small table near the door.

“Breakfast, Miss Catherine,” he announced.

“Thank you, Dembe,” she responded as she rose. “Is Duke Northcott not here?”

“Duke Northcott will return for dinner with you, Miss Catherine,” the quiet man informed her before pulling the door shut.

Cate eyed the tray and its carefully prepared meal. Perhaps a solitary breakfast was preferable, she pondered, as she took a bite of her poached egg. The downside to the solitude was her wandering mind.

When Dembe collected her breakfast tray, he brought several books to entertain her. Despite her best attempts, Cate found reading impossible. She resorted to pacing the floor, stopping occasionally to stare out the window.

After what seemed like an eternity, Dembe brought her afternoon tea. Cate settled onto the bed afterward. The waiting wore on her. What did this

man want from her? Would she ever escape and see Jack again? Would they return to their time?

* * *

Cate's eyes fluttered open as the setting sun painted her room a brilliant shade of red. She pushed up to sitting, pulling her cheek from her tear-soaked pillow. She had cried herself to sleep hours ago after Dembe had brought her a small meal and warm cup of tea.

Cate sniffled as she scanned the room. A large box trimmed with a blue satin ribbon sat on the small table across from her. She rose and approached it. A folded note sat atop the white box.

Cate snatched it from the lid and flipped it open.

My dearest Catherine -

I look very much forward to dining with you this evening. I imagine the conversation we share will be illuminating. Please accept this dress as a token of my advanced appreciation for the evening. I expect to see you in it when I call for you.

~ Marcus

Cate frowned at the note. It read like something from a bad Lifetime movie. She had no desire to dine with the man, though she assumed she had little choice in the matter.

Cate slid the ribbon from around the box and pulled off the lid. A blue satin dress lay inside. Cate ran her fingertips across the fine material. In any other circumstance, this may be exciting. In her current predicament, it was anything but.

Cate pulled the dress from the box and laid it across the bed. She eyed the satin dinner gown. A rich blue color and trimmed with lace, the dinner gown was the picture of nobility in this era. She attempted to assuage her trepidation by distracting herself with the beauty of the dress. Though she could not repress the shudder that passed through her body as she pulled it on.

After dressing, Cate perched on the edge of the bed. She pulled the timepiece from beneath the bodice of her dress. A sudden urge to hide it overcame her and she shoved it into a pocket of the dress.

The sun sank below the horizon and darkness crept across the sky. Moonlight shone through the window.

A knock sounded on the door. The bolt clanked and the door pushed open. Duke Northcott strode into the room, his hands behind his back. He studied Cate, a smile crossing his lips. "I see you found my gift. I hope you appreciate it. You look lovely, my dear."

Cate did not respond. He narrowed his eyes at her. "Smile, dear. I have paid you a compliment."

Cate forced a weak smile onto her face as she held back tears. Pleased with her effort, Duke Northcott continued. "Good. Now, no woman is complete without some form of jewelry. I find this piece particularly stunning. And a perfect match to your blue eyes." He swung his hands from behind his back. They clutched a velvet jewelry box. He popped it open. A large sapphire necklace lay inside. Diamonds trimmed the teardrop-shaped sapphire.

Cate's eyes widened. No stranger to fine jewelry since her inheritance of Dunhaven Castle, this piece was spectacular. "If you'll allow me." He motioned for her to stand. Cate recoiled as his hands swept her hair away from her neck. The weighty sapphire pressed against her skin as he fastened the necklace behind her. "There." Cate spun to face him. "C'est magnifique, dear Catherine! Shall we?" He extended his arm to her.

Cate accepted it as the strangeness of her circumstances rattled through her mind. In another situation, Cate may find the man charming. When being held hostage, the sentiment was tempered by her discomfort and fear.

Duke Northcott seated her at the candlelit table and took his seat across from her. Dembe bustled about the room, delivering their first course. Cate sipped at the soup.

"Have you recalled any interesting tidbits about yourself you've forgotten to mention to me, Catherine?"

Cate glanced at him across the table. "No. I have hidden nothing from you."

"I find it difficult to believe a woman like you hides no secrets behind that beautiful facade."

"I am a simple woman. I have no secrets."

"Hmm," he murmured as he returned to his soup. "I visited the castle this afternoon."

Cate set her spoon down and raised her eyebrows at him. He glanced up at her. Satisfied he had captured her full attention, he continued. "The family is in quite a tizzy over your absence. I passed my condolences along to your husband through Douglas. I understand the poor man is quite upset."

"Are you telling me this to torment me?"

"Torment you? I assumed you'd be pleased!"

"Pleased?! Pleased that you've abducted me? Pleased to learn of the upset it's caused? Which part of what you've conveyed do you expect me to be pleased with?"

"Clearly your husband grieves your absence. He must care for you very deeply. I assumed this would please you."

"If you are concerned with pleasing me, you could let me return to him."

He chuckled at her statement. "You are a worthy sparring opponent, Catherine. You remind me of another woman with which I am acquainted."

"I assume the answer to that request is 'no.'"

"You assume correctly, my dear. Interesting or not, you are far too valuable to me to return."

"My husband has no funds to pay a ransom. I am not very valuable."

"It is not money I desire," he informed her. "You are valuable in other ways."

"What ways?" Cate inquired.

He offered a half-smile. "I prefer to keep those to myself for the moment. Unless, of course, there is something interesting you'd like to share with me in return."

Cate sighed and her shoulders sagged. "I do not understand what you expect me to share. I have lived a simple life. I do not have any secrets."

"Yes, so you've said. And perhaps you are being genuine. Perhaps not. Either way, I shall find the truth eventually. I always do."

He stared into her eyes as he spoke. Cate held back a shudder. They spent the rest of the meal conversing about polite topics. Cate found the juxtaposition of polite conversation with her circumstances jarring when she considered it.

After dinner, Duke Northcott invited Cate for a nightcap in the sitting room. Cate sipped at the brandy and stared at the flames dancing in the fireplace. A growing sense of dread filled her with every sip. What

intentions did he have for her? At what point would he enact them? Could she play along long enough to keep herself alive to be rescued? Was a rescue even possible?

When she finished her drink, he relieved her of her glass. "You should rest, dear," he said.

"I am not tired," Cate countered. She preferred not to be locked in that bedroom again. And each minute that passed brought her closer to her doom, she fretted.

He offered her a brief smile. "I must insist, Catherine," he said. He approached her and caressed her cheek. Cate opened her mouth to protest, but no sound emerged. Her eyelids and limbs grew heavy, and her vision closed to a pinpoint. Her head lolled to her chest as she experienced the sensation of being lifted into someone's arms.

* * *

Cate's eyelids fluttered open. With bleary eyes, she took in her surroundings. Her eyebrows knit as she failed to recognize the location. Something cold and hard pressed against her back.

"Hello, Catherine," Duke Northcott said as he knelt next to her.

"Where am I?"

She pushed her hands to either side as she slid her eyes around to scan her new environment. Stone walls surrounded her as she lay on her back. Cate's eyes darted frantically as she attempted to make sense of it. Her stomach leapt into her throat as she realized she lay in the family crypt. Duke Northcott had placed her in one of the unused stone coffins.

"No," she cried as she attempted to sit up. Tears formed and escaped from the sides of her eyes.

He pressed her back into place. "Now, now, Catherine. Do not give in to panic. You are a stronger woman than that."

"No," Cate repeated. "Please, don't."

"I am afraid I must. Though it does pain me. You have such potential, Catherine. Perhaps in another circumstance."

Cate breathed raggedly as panic swept through her. She attempted to rise again but with a wave of his hand, Duke Northcott pinned her into

place. Cate struggled to move, achieving nothing more than wiggling and squirming.

“I shall miss your feistiness.” He reached to her and pushed a lock of hair from her face. His hands fell onto the necklace. “Keep this as a reminder of me.”

“No, please,” Cate sobbed. “I am valuable. You said so yourself. Please!”

He smiled at her. “Yes, you are. We are about to learn just how valuable. Do not fear, Catherine. If your friends are as clever as I expect them to be, you shall not perish. If they are not, well... let us not speak of that possibility.”

He stood and stared down at her. “Goodbye, Catherine. For now. If you do hold a secret, I shall learn it. In time. Though at the moment, I have achieved my goal. Celine’s focus is centered on me. I shall cease my cat-and-mouse game with you. For now. I do hope we shall meet again.”

Cate’s eyes grew wide as he began to push the large stone over the top of the coffin. “No! NO!” she screamed.

Light narrowed to a slit before disappearing entirely as the stone cover came to its final resting place. Tears streamed from Cate’s eyes as she pounded against the cool stone above her. “No! No! Please! Duke Northcott!”

Cate bit her lower lip as she wept. She attempted again to shift the stone above her. She pushed at it, trying to move it from every angle. She pulled her knees up until they pushed against the stone above, but she could not budge it.

Cate let her limbs collapse as sobs wracked through her. When tears no longer flowed freely, Cate wiped at her face. She sniffled as she attempted to regain her composure. She took a deep, steadying breath. As she inhaled, her mind pondered the amount of air she may have remaining. Did she have hours? Twelve? More? Less?

Cate’s mind spun as she considered the duration of life she had left to live. She attempted to control her breathing, forcing herself to take shallower breaths. She closed her eyes and focused her attention. Her thoughts turned to Jack. He would be stuck here unless he could retrieve her remains. If they found what was left of her, he could retrieve the timepiece and return to their time. He could take care of Riley and Bailey.

The thought of the poor pups left behind brought fresh tears to her eyes. She fought against them, fought to maintain control of her emotions. Duke Northcott suggested she may be found. Was it false hope? No, she insisted. It couldn't be. Someone would find her as he hinted. They had to. She clung to that hope as she drifted in and out of consciousness.

Cate's head lolled to the side. A haze clouded her mind as she drifted in and out of a responsive state. A scraping noise filled her ears. She attempted to rouse herself, but her lightheadedness prevented her. Cool air brushed past her cheek. Garbled voices sounded overhead. Light and darkness played across her closed eyelids.

"Lift her out," a garbled female voice instructed.

Cate experienced the sensation of being pulled up. Arms wrapped around her, and she floated briefly before her body settled onto a hard stone surface.

"Is she alive?" a male voice posed.

"Come on, Cate, be okay," another clearer voice said. Cate recognized Damien's voice. She fought to regain her senses and open her eyes. Her head rolled from side to side, and she moaned. Warm skin touched hers. Fingers wrapped around her hand and squeezed. "That's it, Cate. Come back to us."

"Find Michael and Jack," Celine's voice said.

"You'll be all right?" Grayson inquired.

"Yes, bring them here. Quickly," Celine answered.

Cate moaned again, squeezing her eyes together. Her lips moved without forming words. After a moment, her forehead pinched and she forced out, "Damien."

A renewed squeeze of her hand. "I'm here, Cate. Can you open your eyes?"

Cate's eyelids fluttered open. The world blurred in front of her, and her eyes threatened to close. Celine leaned closer to her. "Take a deep breath and listen to the sound of my voice."

Cate concentrated on her voice as she breathed deeply. Celine whispered a few Latin words as she placed her palm on Cate's cheek.

Cate gasped for breath, her eyes opening wide and her muscles tensing. After a moment, she relaxed. Her breathing returned to normal, her vision cleared and her muscles relaxed. She glanced around at her surroundings.

She lay in the family crypt next to the coffin that had been her prison only moments ago. Damien and Celine knelt over her. Damien clutched her hand.

As she opened her eyes, he grinned at her. “Hey,” he said. “Welcome back.”

Cate focused on his face. Her lips trembled and tears formed in her eyes. “Hey,” she answered in a shaky voice. A tear escaped her eye and rolled down her cheek. Damien wiped it away.

“Don’t cry. You’re safe. Nothing is going to happen to you now. It’s okay, Cate.”

She smiled at him as she fought her tears of joy and squeezed his hand. “I didn’t think I was going to make it,” she choked out.

“We weren’t going to let you die,” Damien assured her. “Me, Michael, Gray, Celine, Jack, and his grandfather haven’t stopped searching for you since you disappeared.”

Cate’s brow furrowed at the statement. “Jack’s grandfather?” she murmured.

Damien smiled and nodded at her. “Yep. Stanley Reid. Nice fellow, it seems. Extremely worried about you though not more than Jack. Poor guy was beside himself.”

“He can’t return to our time without me,” Cate explained.

“I don’t imagine that was the reason for his upset. Besides, he could get home with Celine’s help which is how he got Stanley.”

Cate’s mind swam with the details, and she struggled to keep up with the conversation. “Just rest for a minute,” Damien soothed as he patted her hand.

Celine rubbed her cheek. “How are you feeling?” she questioned.

“Better,” Cate admitted. “Happy to be alive.” She pushed herself up to sitting.

“Careful, easy,” Damien warned.

“I’m okay,” Cate assured him. “I just...”

The mausoleum door burst open. Jack’s figure appeared limned in moonlight. He stopped at the door, peering into the vault. “CATE?!” he exclaimed as he searched for her.

“JACK!” she called, reaching her hand out to him.

He raced to her, skidding to a stop next to her and dropping to his knees. Damien retreated a few steps, allowing him access to Cate. He scooped her

into his arms. His pounding heart thudded in his chest against Cate's ear. "Thank God you're okay," he gasped as he held her tightly. She wrapped her arms around him in a tight embrace. "I thought I'd lost you," he said as he released her and cupped her face in his hands. Tears shone in his eyes.

She grasped his hand in hers as fresh tears spilled onto her cheeks. She nodded, unable to speak as she considered the possibility that he nearly had, indeed, lost her. She swallowed the lump in her throat. "Are you okay?" Jack questioned.

"Yes," Cate choked out. "Yes, I'm fine."

"She's okay," Damien chimed in, putting his hand on Jack's shoulder. "We found her in time. She was a little groggy but she's okay."

"Great job, buddy," Michael said, clapping Damien on the shoulder.

Grayson entered moments later with a winded Stanley Reid. Cate could have cried again at the sight of him. "Mr. Reid!" she exclaimed.

He sidled to her and puffed a few breaths before he spoke. "Aye, lassie. You gave us all quite a scare!" Cate reached out and grasped his hand, squeezing it. He returned the gesture. "I am ever so glad you're all right, Lady Cate."

"I'm sorry. I..."

"You don't have to explain, Cate," Jack hushed her. "I'm just glad you're all right."

"No, you don't have to explain," Michael assured her. "We all know who is to blame and it's not you."

"I didn't tell him anything," Cate insisted.

"He does not know the secret?" Jack inquired.

Cate shook her head. "No."

"Great job, Cate," Damien said with a grin.

"Impressive, Catherine," Grayson added. "He is a difficult man to hide the truth from."

"He kept insisting I was hiding something. I just kept denying it. And eventually, he brought me here and put me in that..." Cate stopped before she voiced the word.

"At least he only suspected and did not know you were hiding something," Michael said.

"He said he used me to get to Celine. Why?" Cate questioned.

"It's a long story," Damien assured her.

“One not to be told now. You three must return to your time,” Grayson said. “Before any more harm befalls you at the Duke’s hands.”

“I agree,” Celine added. “You must return at once.”

“What about Douglas... our time rip problem...” Cate began.

“Douglas understands everything about the time rips, including where we came from,” Jack informed her.

“Celine has already enchanted his pocket watch, it’s finished,” Grayson added.

“And don’t worry about your problem,” Damien added. “We’ll be there tomorrow to help you with it.” He rubbed her shoulder and gave her a reassuring smile.

Cate glanced around at all of them.

“Come on, lassie,” Stanley said. “Time to go home.”

Jack climbed to his feet and offered her his hand. He pulled her to standing. “Easy,” he cautioned. “Can you stand?”

“Yes,” Cate said as she steadied herself on her feet.

“How do you feel?” Damien asked. “Faint? Can you walk?”

“I can walk. I’m a little shaky but I can make it.”

“You sure? I can carry you,” Jack offered.

The statement made Cate giggle. “I’m sure. Despite it being 1792, I do not need to be carried to the castle like a damsel.”

“Even so, I’d love to sweep you off your feet, Cate,” Jack joked.

“I’m glad to see you haven’t lost your sense of humor, Jack,” Cate teased.

“We should go,” Grayson urged.

The group filed out of the mausoleum. Dunhaven Castle dominated the landscape in the distance, its lights a beacon in the darkness. The sight sent Cate’s heart soaring. If she wasn’t so weary, she’d have run to the castle.

“What time is it? How long have we been gone?” Cate asked Jack as they trudged up the path.

“Almost one in the morning,” Jack answered. “You’ve been gone over sixty hours. Don’t worry, I’ve been back and made an excuse that you were in town and may be there for hours. If you returned for dinner, you’d be okay on your own.”

“Wow,” Cate mumbled.

“You sure you’re okay, Cate?” Jack asked as Cate stared ahead, lost in thought.

“Yeah, I’m fine. I just... I’m sorry you had to go through that,” Cate explained.

“I honestly am not sure how I held it together during that conversation with Mrs. Fraser and Molly,” Jack admitted. “But it’s nothing compared to what you’ve been through.”

Cate grasped his hand and squeezed it. “I’m fine.”

“A fact for which I am very thankful,” Jack said, returning the hand squeeze.

“As am I, lassie,” Stanley chimed in. “Though I must admit, it gave me quite a rush when we hopped back to another era.”

“A rush, Pap, really?” Jack inquired.

“I don’t hate time travel as much as you, Jackie,” Stanley said with a chuckle. “I rather enjoy it. When Lady Cate isn’t missing, of course.”

Jack wrinkled his forehead at him. Michael caught up to them and clapped Jack on the back. “I hate it as much as you do, pal. If you ever want to compare notes, give me a call.”

“I just might do that, friend,” Jack said. “I cannot understand how anyone enjoys this.”

“Oh, come on, it’s amazing!” Damien replied. “We’re living in another culture, basically.”

“I agree, Damien!” Cate said. “It’s fascinating! Outside of the kidnapping part.”

“You two can keep it,” Michael said with a roll of his eyes.

“He’s a real stick in the mud,” Damien complained. Cate giggled at the statement; one she’d often used to describe Jack’s resistance to time travel.

“Speaking of keeping things,” Jack said. “Where did you get this?” Jack pointed to the dress and necklace.

“From our mutual friend,” Cate said.

Jack raised his eyebrows. “He gave you a sapphire and diamond necklace? Is it real?”

“Oh, I’m sure it is,” Damien answered.

“It’s fairly heavy,” Cate added with a shrug. “He told me to keep it to remember him.”

“Oh, wow, this guy kidnaps you then gives you a gift to remember him by? What kind of psychopath is he?” Jack questioned.

“Don’t ask,” Michael called over his shoulder. “You really do not want to know.”

“He’s right,” Damien said with a shudder.

Cate’s glance flitted between both men. Both shared an intense hatred for Duke Northcott. After her trouble with the man, she could only imagine what they had endured at his hands.

They continued up the path toward the castle together. The group talked and laughed, relieved the ordeal was over.

As they rounded a bend in the path near a clump of trees, a man strode into the path in front of them. He clapped his hands in a slow, dramatic fashion.

The group ground to a halt as they came face to face with Marcus Northcott. “Well, well, I see the merry band has succeeded in retrieving dear Catherine. Bravo, Celine.”

Jack pushed Cate behind him, shielding her from the man. Michael and Damien filled in on either side of him to further cover Cate. Cate clung to Jack as she peered over his shoulder.

“No thanks to you, Marcus,” Celine spat at him.

“Au contraire, my dear. After all, I gave you the clue. I had high hopes you would find her. I preferred you did. I rather like Catherine.” Duke Northcott peered over the group and waved a hand to Cate. “Good to see you looking so well, my dear.”

“We need to get out of here,” Damien whispered to Michael.

“I’m all over it, buddy,” Michael said, his eyes darting around the area. “Make a break for those trees?”

“What? Are you crazy?” Jack breathed. “We can’t leave Celine alone with him.” Cate glanced around. Grayson and Stanley had fallen behind on the trek. She spotted them approaching. Grayson’s eyes went wide as he witnessed the scene. He pulled Stanley from the path, hiding him behind a large oak.

“Believe me, she’ll be fine,” Michael answered.

Damien reached back and grasped Cate’s hand as he began to inch toward the grove of trees.

“And where do you think you’re going, Mr. Carlyle?” Duke Northcott inquired. Cate jumped as a bolt of lightning sailed from Duke Northcott’s hand and struck the dirt next to Damien. He danced a few steps back away from it.

“Stop, Marcus,” Celine shouted. She flung a large blue ball of energy toward the man. He deflected it with some sort of ray.

Cate stared wide-eyed at the battle, her jaw hanging agape. She wondered if perhaps she had fallen asleep and was trapped in a dream. What was she witnessing? What were these people?

CHAPTER 30



Cate stared aghast at the battling between Marcus Northcott and Celine Buckley.

Marcus raised his eyebrows at her. “Oh, I think not, dear. I’m only warming up.” He cupped his hand. A crackling ball of light formed above it. Lightning blazed inside. Cate stood stunned at the sight. Duke Northcott lobbed the ball toward them.

Michael and Damien reacted quickly. Damien grabbed Cate by the shoulders and dragged her behind a large tree in the grove. Michael tackled Jack to the ground, rolling off the path with him and down a small grade.

The lightning ball exploded in a brilliant flash, charring the ground underneath it. Cate covered her mouth as a squeal emerged. “Get down!” Damien hissed as he pulled her lower.

“Celine!” Cate shouted.

“Shh, she’s fine! We’ve got to go!”

“No!” Cate argued. She attempted to stand and run to Celine, but Damien pulled her down.

She glanced across the path. Michael held Jack at bay, also. Michael emphatically gestured toward the castle as he shook his head, catching Damien’s eye. He motioned again toward the castle. Damien nodded.

“We can’t run away!” Cate countered. She struggled against Damien’s grip. “We must help Celine! We can’t leave her.”

“All right, Marcus,” Celine said. “If you insist on having this out, let’s.” She narrowed her eyes and swung her hands out to the sides. Her foot

stomped on the ground as she let out a shriek.

Cate ceased grappling with Damien as she witnessed the scene unfold. Overhead the skies darkened. Black clouds obliterated the moon and stars. Thunder boomed and lightning tore through the sky. Celine's fingers crackled with electricity.

"As cool as this can be to watch, we need to get out of here," Damien urged. "As you can see, she's quite capable of taking care of herself."

Damien grabbed Cate's hand and pulled her away from the scene. They kept low to the ground as they raced toward the castle. Cate risked a glance back as the battle between Celine and Duke Northcott continued.

Lightning flashed between them. Balls of fire slammed into trees and charred them. Brilliant orbs of light flung in every direction. The dazzling display almost mesmerized Cate. Damien tugged on her arm, urging her to continue.

They hurried to the castle and Damien ushered Cate inside through the front door. She stood speechless in the foyer for a moment as she reflected on what she'd just witnessed. Booms of thunder and blasts of lightning still sounded, announcing the continuation of the battle outside.

Moments later, Michael ushered Jack through the doors. Jack's face betrayed his confusion and astonishment. "Cate!" he exclaimed. "Did you see that?"

"Yes," she nodded, her eyes wide. "What was that?"

"A battle between two supernatural beings," Michael informed him.

"And something you want to be far, far away from," Damien assured them.

"I'm not sure I can believe what I just saw," Cate responded.

"Me either," Jack agreed.

"You two time travel," Damien answered. "You can't honestly question the existence of other supernatural things."

"Oh, I can and I will!" Jack insisted. "Accepting time travel was one thing, this is completely bonkers."

"Bonkers or not, it exists," Michael answered. "And there is a dark side. One you want to stay away from."

"And one this secret needs protecting from. The fact that it's still hidden in our time suggests your family is very good at it," Damien said. "And now it's time for you two to go home."

“No,” Jack countered. “Pap isn’t here. I have to find him. Oh, what if he’s...”

Douglas emerged from the sitting room with Stanley. “Pap! Thank heavens!” Jack exclaimed.

“Yes, Grayson brought me here before returning to help Celine.”

“Oh, Catherine!” Douglas exclaimed. “Oh, how fortunate they have found you. I have been beside myself with worry. I wished to join the search though they maintained I should wait here. Dreadful business, this.”

“You three need to return home,” Damien said.

“Yes, with a device something like this!” Douglas exclaimed as he brandished the timepiece. Noticeably missing was the inscription. He grinned from ear to ear. “I was most pleased to learn I was correct. Much to Jaime’s chagrin.”

Cate smiled at him. “It is an incredible discovery, isn’t it?”

“Most definitely!” Douglas agreed. “Though Jaime views it as a burden, particularly given the circumstances surrounding us now.” Douglas turned serious for a moment. “Oh, Catherine, I am so very sorry about what happened to you. My own progeny stolen from under my roof. Perhaps Jaime has a point.” He turned pensive.

Cate clasped his hand in hers and patted it. “I am unharmed, Douglas. And while the secret must be protected, that doesn’t mean it can’t also be celebrated.”

Jaime joined them in the foyer. “Oh, Catherine, thank heavens! I have been worried about you.”

She smiled at him. “We found her in the nick of time,” Jack assured him.

“Good, quite good.” He clapped Jack on the back.

“Does he know?” Cate whispered to Douglas.

“Indeed,” Douglas confirmed. “Three generations of Reids from various centuries standing in my foyer. Incredible!”

Cate gazed at the scene. Stanley, Jack, and Jaime talked, smiled, laughed, and shook hands. Despite the gravity of the situation, they were incredibly fortunate.

“I hate to break up the family fun,” Michael interjected, “but you three need to go.”

Douglas spun to face Cate and took her hands in his. He studied her face, much like a father studying his child. “I wish we did not have to part

so hurriedly. Though I hope when all has settled perhaps we may enjoy a more leisurely visit.”

“I look so forward to that, Douglas,” Cate answered.

“If you can convince Jack. He is, after all, a Reid.”

Jack stepped toward him and extended his hand. “Sir, after this visit, I will never view time travel in the same way. And I will likely complain but I will never object to visiting family. You exhibited a phenomenal level of understanding and assistance in a difficult situation. I will never forget it.”

“Anything for family, Jack,” Douglas said as he grasped his hand. “Now, I suppose you should be on your way.”

Cate nodded. “Yes, we should be,” Cate lamented, the familiar feeling of sadness creeping over her as she prepared to leave her family behind in another time.

“As I understand it, certain areas lead to and from certain time periods,” Douglas said. “Lead the way to your home.”

Cate gave an uncertain glance to Damien as she attempted to formulate the words to ask about his help in their own time. Damien beat her to it.

Damien grasped Cate’s hands in his. “Don’t worry, we’ll be right behind you. Well, sort of. We’ll see you tomorrow and we’ll get you all squared away with your little problem.”

Cate nodded again. “Okay, thank you. And thank you again for finding me. I...”

Damien shook his head as he interrupted her. “There’s no thanks necessary, Cate. I’m glad you’re safe.”

“You’ll be safer once you’re away from you-know-who,” Michael reiterated. “And as much as I’d like to continue sharing our mutual hatred of time travel, it’s time for you three to leave.”

The group said their goodbyes before Cate, Jack, Stanley, Douglas, and Jaime stepped from the foyer. Cate glanced back as they continued down the hall toward the library. Damien nodded and waved as he disappeared into the sitting room. She wondered if she’d actually see him the next day as he promised. It all seemed too strange for her to process.

She and Jack led the way to the library. Jack crossed the room and pressed the stone to trigger the mechanism to open Douglas’s laboratory. Douglas’s eyebrows raised as the bookcase swung open.

“The time rip is...” he began.

“In your secret lab, yes,” Cate finished for him.

A half-smile crossed his lips and he chuckled. "Fitting," he murmured.

The group descended the stairs into the cool air below. Cate held out the timepiece. Jack and Stanley both grasped it with her. "Goodbye, Douglas," she said.

"Goodbye, Catherine. And good luck," he answered.

Cate nodded and the three activated the timepiece. Cate smiled at Douglas just before he disappeared from her sight, replaced by a glaring light standing where he had stood only seconds before.

"Whew," Jack breathed as he pressed his hands over his chest. "It's good to be back."

"Aye," Stanley agreed. "Good to have the lassie back where she belongs." He squeezed her arm and gave her a nod.

"The lassie is quite glad to be back where she belongs, too," Cate said.

"You must be exhausted," Jack stated. "I'll tell Mrs. Fraser you're back but are feeling under the weather and going straight to bed."

"You'd better not," Cate warned. "That will send Mrs. Fraser into a tizzy, and she'll fuss over me to no end. I'll change and let her know myself."

"Cate, you've lived through days and only four hours have passed! You've got to be exhausted."

"Well, yes and no. I'm too wired to be exhausted. I feel like so much has happened. Would you mind if we had our usual post-time travel discussion? Mr. Reid, you're welcome to join us."

Stanley smiled at her. "Thank you, but I'll pass and leave you and Jackie to your discussion. This old man is heading home to sleep off the time lag!"

"I'll drive you," Jack said.

Stanley waved at him. "Bah, I'm not THAT old. I'll walk."

"Pap..." Jack began.

"Take care of Lady Cate," Stanley insisted. "I'll take a stroll through the property to the cottage before a nice long sleep. The fresh air will do me good. I'm glad you're okay, lassie." He winked at them before disappearing up the stairs.

Jack's eyes followed his departure. "He's one tough bugger. I am wiped out!"

"If you prefer to change and relax, we can postpone our discussion."

“No, like you, I am also wired. Some of the things we witnessed I’m not sure I can process. I’d feel better if we talked about it.”

“Okay, sounds good. Usual spot after we change?”

“Perfect. Unless you prefer to rest, I can come to you.”

“No, that’s fine. I’d rather make everything look as normal as possible for Molly and the Frasers.”

“Good idea. Okay, see you soon.”

Cate nodded and they parted ways. Cate pushed through the doors into her suite. Riley and Bailey lifted their heads from their fireside spot. Tears welled in Cate’s eyes as she spotted them. “Riley! Bailey!” she exclaimed as she rushed to them with her arms outstretched. She gathered both pups to her, showering them with kisses and ear scratches. Memories of her predicament rushed into her mind. She recalled wondering if she’d ever see her two beloved pups again.

She wiped a tear from her cheek as she pushed the disturbing memories away. She had survived. She would focus on that.

Cate forced herself to stand and change her clothes. The sooner she was back to normal, the better, she figured. Her eyes fell to the large gemstones as she pulled the necklace from around her neck. “Keep this as a reminder of me,” Duke Northcott’s voice echoed in her head. With a shudder, she dumped the piece in the bottom drawer of her jewelry armoire. Perhaps she could donate it for the auction at the President’s Ball.

Before meeting Jack, Cate navigated to the kitchen. She knocked on the door jamb. “Just wanted to let you know I’m back, though I’ll handle my own dinner.”

“Oh, Lady Cate!” Mrs. Fraser said. “No need. I’ve just finished preparing your dinner and was going to put it in the refrigerator with a note. You’ve saved me the trouble.”

“Thank you, though you didn’t have to do that,” Cate answered.

“We didn’t want you making cereal for dinner,” Molly said with a chuckle. “And besides, with me here full-time, if you’re late for dinner, I can always make it whenever you’re back.”

“Thanks, Molly. Though, again, not necessary. By the way, while I was in town, I got a text from...” Cate stumbled for a moment as she attempted to explain. “A friend. He is in Scotland and may stop in for a few days beginning tomorrow. I apologize for the short notice, he...”

Mrs. Fraser waved away Cate's concern. "No problem at all, Lady Cate. Your friend is most welcome in your castle anytime! Is he a picky eater? Any food allergies?"

Cate shook her head. "No, and he has a guest or two with him. With the short notice, I don't expect you and Molly to be responsible for meals. We can eat in town, or I can order in. Please don't go to any trouble."

"I'm starting to wonder if you dinnae like my cooking, Lady Cate," Mrs. Fraser teased.

"It's nothing like that," Cate assured her. "But with this last-minute development, I don't expect you both to be whipping up meals for a crowd on short notice."

Mrs. Fraser shook her head. "Two or three guests is hardly a crowd. Molly and I are quite capable and if you've no special requests, it should be an easy task. Molly and I will make up a few bedrooms tomorrow morning for them. I'll put them in the hallway near your suite."

"I am indebted to you both," Cate said. "And I can take my meal with me along with Jack's. After my surprise trip into town, we got behind on our discussions about the leak we've been dealing with."

"Dining in the library, is he?" Mrs. Fraser questioned.

"Yes, at my request," Cate said.

"Well, Molly can help you carry the trays. Are you feeling all right, Lady Cate?" Mrs. Fraser asked as Cate slid her tray off the counter.

"Yes," Cate assured her. "Just a little tired, but I'm fine!"

"Be sure you get plenty of rest tonight before your guests arrive! You don't want to catch a cold with all the entertaining you'll be doing."

"I will," Cate promised.

Molly followed Cate to the library with Jack's dinner tray. Both dogs raced ahead of them to greet Jack. "Special delivery," Molly said as she set the tray down for Jack.

"Thanks, Molly," Cate said before Molly slipped through the doors on her way back to the kitchen.

Cate collapsed into the chair next to Jack. He sank back into the armchair and slouched with a long exhale. "Did that just happen?"

"Which part?" Cate questioned.

"Any part. All parts. Every part," Jack answered.

Cate shook her head. "I've been wondering that myself. It's surreal."

"What was going on between those two... what did Michael call them?"

Cate's eyes widened. "Supernatural creatures," Cate answered.

"The guy threw a lightning bolt from his hand!" Jack exclaimed.

"And Celine can open time portals. Oh, and levitate light balls from her hand. She did it in the secret passage when Damien and I were hiding from Duke Northcott there. I nearly collapsed."

"I would have collapsed," Jack said. "I nearly did when she opened the time portal to send me back here. And gave me a charm to return to 1792 with Pap. And the other two with her. Just calm and casual like nothing's amiss. Hey, you two time travel, you should be okay with supernatural things!" Jack mimicked.

"So that's how you got back, huh? I was wondering. I can't believe we met other time travelers," Cate said with a shake of her head. "Though it explains a lot."

"It explains nothing. Things just keep getting more complicated."

"Well, it explains why I couldn't find anything on Michael Carlyle or Damien. First of all, Damien's last name is Sherwood, not Carlyle and second, the information I found on Michael Carlyle from the modern-day is correct. There wasn't a Michael Carlyle in 1792. It also explains the origins of both the warlock story with Douglas and the tales from town about the events on a certain March evening when the skies clouded, and lightning went from the ground to the sky."

Jack shook his head at the turn of events. "Yeah, every tale begins with a kernel of truth, I guess."

Cate nodded. "Those people witnessed the battle between Duke Northcott and Celine. So did we, up close and personal. Thank goodness for Michael and Damien who probably saved our lives."

"I like Michael. He seemed like a good guy."

Cate offered a wry glance. "You just like him because he hates time travel, too."

"Like I said, he seems like a good guy," Jack answered.

"Do you suppose they'll show up tomorrow? Damien and Celine? Michael, perhaps?"

Jack shrugged. "I'm not sure. I don't know what to expect. They insisted they would, and I sincerely hope they do because without them our problem isn't solved. Though I honestly cannot imagine they will just pop up at the door."

“How can Celine exist in 1792 and here? Does she time travel from the past to the future?”

“I suppose we’ll find out,” Jack answered. “Or not if they never show.”

Silence passed between them for a moment while each of them picked at their food. “Are you certain you’re okay, Cate?” Jack questioned after a moment.

“Yes,” Cate assured him. “I’m okay. Damien found me in time. I mean, I was in and out but...”

“No, that’s not what I mean,” Jack interrupted. “I mean like mentally also. You spent days with some supernatural creature. Did he hurt you? He didn’t throw any lightning bolts at you or anything, did he?”

Cate chuckled at the ridiculous-sounding statement. “No, no lightning bolts. We were talking and then he touched my cheek and I passed out. When I woke up, I was in a bedroom. Frightened but unharmed. He was actually charming in a strange sort of way.”

“Charming?!” Jack guffawed. “Are you crazy? This guy kidnapped you!”

“No, that’s not what I meant. For a deranged kidnapper, he was quite the conversationalist. An old-fashioned gentleman. I wonder what happened between him and Celine? And Damien and Michael?”

“I shudder to think you were forced into a conversation with that man. I’m glad we are away from him. I hope forever. It’s clear both the Buckleys and Carlyles detest him. Or rather the Carlyles and Sherwoods, or whatever. There has to be a strong reason.”

“Perhaps we’ll learn more tomorrow... if they show up.”

“I really hope they do. After all this, I hope our problems are all solved.”

“Me too,” Cate admitted. “Me too.”

* * *

Cate laid awake for most of the night. Tension lodged between her shoulder blades as she tossed and turned, unable to sleep. Would Celine and Damien arrive tomorrow? Would she slip away into another era before they came? Would another nightmare of the Duke disrupt her sleep? Perhaps her nightmares stemmed from the danger she faced from him. Perhaps now that

she was saved and away from him, the nightmares would cease. They had solved one problem with ensuring Douglas had a method to control the time rips. Had they solved two and relieved her nightmares as well? Time would tell.

Still, the most crucial problem remained unsolved. Time rips opened and closed without warning, swallowing her, Jack, and now Molly. How much longer could they survive like this before tragedy struck?

As the sun rose over the moors, Cate rose from her bed and paced the floor of her suite. Whatever today brought, she prayed it moved them closer to a solution. Following breakfast, Cate took a stroll with Riley and Bailey. She stared out over the calm waters of the loch.

As they returned to the castle, the dogs bounded toward their favorite spot in the garden. Cate shooed them away before they could do any more damage, hurrying them into the castle's kitchen.

"How was the walk?" Molly asked.

"Pleasant, as always," Cate responded.

"Any word from your friends?" Molly inquired.

"No, nothing yet," Cate answered. "Unless they've popped in already this morning!"

"Nay, Lady Cate," Mrs. Fraser answered. "No one's arrived yet."

"Didn't they give you an ETA?" Molly questioned.

"They didn't. I'm not sure they knew how long it would take them to wrap up their business and get to Dunhaven," Cate fibbed. "I'm expecting them this afternoon, but I don't have a definite time."

"Well, either way, we'll be prepared," Mrs. Fraser answered. "I've got lunch planned for everyone and if we don't use it today, we can use it tomorrow."

"Thanks, Mrs. Fraser, you really are the best."

"Spending the day with your journals again?" Mrs. Fraser asked.

"Yes, they are fascinating," Cate said, though she didn't imagine she could focus on any work. "They will make a great addition to my book!"

"Anything about Douglas being a warlock?" Mrs. Fraser quipped.

"Sorry, no candid revelation about him being a warlock."

Molly bit her lower lip. Cate assumed she was fretting over her odd experience from two days prior. Molly had made no mention of her ghost sighting after the initial conversation, but Cate could tell it still bothered her.

“All just gossip,” Mrs. Fraser answered, waving her hand in the air to dismiss the rumors.

“Yep,” Cate agreed. “Well, I’ll be upstairs, and I’ll let you know if I hear anything from Damien!”

Cate wandered upstairs with the dogs in tow and settled in the library. She stared at the journals before paging through them. She opened a document on her laptop to continue typing ciphertext but found herself unable to concentrate. Instead, she opted for pacing the library floor.

Hours wore on as Cate waited for some word from Damien. She sat down at her laptop to email him multiple times before deciding against it. Morning crept to afternoon and Cate finished her lunch. After handing the empty tray to Molly, a knock sounded at the door.

“Got a minute?” Jack asked as Molly skirted past him.

“Yep. Come on in.”

“About the leak,” Jack said in a loud voice as he pushed the doors shut. Once closed, he spun to face Cate. “Anything?”

Cate shook her head. “Nope, nothing. Not even an email. I keep wanting to email him but I’m afraid of his reaction. What if this was all some kind of weird joke or odd coincidence?”

“He said he knew you, right?”

“Yes, he’s the one who sent the program.”

“That is an odd coincidence,” Jack said as he shook his head. “Perhaps too odd.”

“Do you think he was using me to get information or something?”

“To what end?”

“To learn about the time rips? I’m not sure,” Cate said with a shrug. “Nothing makes sense anymore. With everything that’s happened over the past few days, my mind is swimming. Up is down, left is right. I can’t make sense of anything.”

“After the past day. We’ve lived through days, but it’s only been a day here.”

Cate’s eyebrows shot up. “Perhaps that’s it. We lived through days. Perhaps when Damien said tomorrow, he meant tomorrow from the day we were living. Which is days from now.”

“Days where anything could go wrong,” Jack lamented.

Cate sighed. “Yep.”

“So, do we just wait for days?” Jack questioned.

“I don’t see what other choice we have.”

“And what do we do in days if they don’t show up then?”

Cate shrugged and opened her mouth to answer when a loud thud sounded at the front door.

CHAPTER 31



Cate raised her eyebrows and glanced at Jack. “Could it be?”

They hurried down the hall to the door. Cate’s heart hammered in her chest as she placed her hand on the door handle. She glanced at Jack who offered an encouraging nod.

Cate swallowed hard and pulled the door open. Her eyes went wide as a variety of emotions surged through her from shock to relief. Damien, Celine, Michael, and another man stood outside the door. They appeared identical, more or less, to when Cate had seen them less than twenty-four hours ago in another century.

“Hi, Cate!” Damien said with a broad grin. “Long time, no see!”

A moment of lightheadedness passed over Cate as she took in the situation. They had come. Perhaps now they could solve their problem.

“And not a moment too soon,” Jack answered.

“Yes,” Cate agreed. “Come in, please.”

Cate ushered them into the foyer. “The old place looks good,” Damien quipped.

“Looks better in this century if you ask me,” Michael said. He glanced at Jack. “I assume you have bathrooms.”

“That we do, mate, that we do!” Jack answered.

He and Michael shared a knowing glance.

“I hope you don’t mind,” Celine began. She sounded distinctly American, having lost all traces of any of the slight French accent she carried in 1792. Her blond locks now flowed freely rather than being pinned

up in an upswept style and she wore modern clothes. Though nothing else about her had changed. "I brought Gray's cousin, Alexander, to help."

"Not at all," Cate answered. "We appreciate all your help. Gray..." Cate phrased the last word as a question, leaving his name hanging in the air.

"Is at home in Maine," Celine said with a smile, realizing the question Cate implied. "He can access Alexander's reference library if we need information."

She smiled at Celine then turned to Alexander, who extended his hand to shake hers. "Lady Cate," he greeted her in a crisp British accent. "A pleasure to meet you. I was most curious when I learned of your predicament."

"We hope you can help," Jack said. "Oh, by the way, Cate and I are the only two in the house who know the secret so, mum's the word." Jack held his finger to his lips.

"Got it," Damien responded.

"We're pretty good at secrets," Michael assured him.

"Shall we go into the sitting room?" Cate offered.

"I'll let Mrs. Fraser know everyone is here," Jack said. "You can explain the loads of fun we've been having with the time rips."

"Okay," Cate said with a nod.

Jack strode down the hall as the rest of the group shuffled into the sitting room. "He's not staying?" Damien questioned as he sat next to Cate on the loveseat.

"No," Cate said with a shake of her head. "It may appear a bit odd for my estate manager to stay while I'm entertaining."

Damien's brow furrowed. "Oh," he murmured. "I thought... never mind."

Cate cocked her head at him. "What?" she asked.

Damien shrugged. "I thought you two were actually married. It's just... weird to realize you're not and he's your estate manager."

"Ohhhh," Cate responded with a knowing nod. "Yes, we usually pretend to be a married couple when time traveling. It may look odd for a man and woman to be traipsing around the Scottish countryside unwed in past eras."

Damien smiled and nodded. "Good point. You two do a good job of it. Smart!"

Cate returned his smile.

"No more trouble with the Duke?" Michael inquired.

“No,” Cate answered. “Since we returned late yesterday afternoon, nothing.”

“We were worried he may have followed you here,” Damien answered.

“I’m glad he didn’t,” Celine added. “What can you tell us about the problems you’ve been experiencing with the time rips? We’ve filled Alexander in but it’s best if you reiterate the details. The last time I spoke with you was over two hundred years ago.” Celine chuckled at the last statement.

Cate remained silent for a moment as she processed Celine’s admission. The woman sitting in front of her had lived for over two hundred years. Or was she merely making a joke?

“For us, it was just yesterday,” Damien said. “But for Celine, it was two hundred years ago.”

Cate nodded and swallowed hard as Damien confirmed Celine’s age. She had, indeed, lived for over two centuries. The fact astounded Cate and she found it difficult to pull her thoughts together.

“Well...” Cate began before pausing as she attempted to collect her thoughts.

“Take your time,” Damien said, patting Cate’s arm. “It’s a lot to take in.”

Cate cleared her throat and began. “As Jack and I told you yesterday... or two hundred years ago,” she began with a nervous chuckle. “When I arrived at the castle, the time rips were controlled by the timepiece. To open a time portal, we’d activate the timepiece and be able to slip back and forth between eras.

“But then in the last two weeks or so, we’ve experienced some disruptions with the time rips. They open and close at random and we can’t control them with the timepiece. The timepiece still slows to represent the entry into the time portal, but we can’t open and close it like usual. Instead, we’re just sucked into the other time period and stuck there until we get pulled back.”

Celine narrowed her eyes and pursed her lips as Cate spoke.

“Does it happen in every rip location?” Damien questioned.

Cate shrugged. “I’m not sure. I haven’t ventured to all the locations where we know time rips exist, to be honest. Though it doesn’t always happen where there is a time rip. My bedroom is a prime example. It leads to 1925. Twice I’ve been sucked back there and returned within a few

moments, but I've slept in that room for the past two weeks and all but two times remained in my own century.

"It has occurred in the rip leading to 1792 multiple times as well. And there's something else. It seems to be occurring in places where we didn't realize a rip existed. For example, the hallway leading to the library. We had no knowledge of a time rip there and several people have been sucked back in time. Of course, we do not have an exhaustive list so it may not be a new location."

"Hmm, so that makes it impossible to tell," Damien said. "Unless you spend a decent amount of time in the rip location it may not happen."

"As far as you knew there was no time rip in the hallway, right?" Michael questioned.

"Right. And it happens to everyone, even people without the timepiece. My housekeeper-in-training, Molly, got sucked into a time portal a few days ago. She swore she spotted a ghost. She has no idea a real, live woman stood in front of her and she was in another era."

"I'd like to see the locations, one where a known time rip exists and the other where you didn't realize one existed," Celine requested.

"Sure," Cate agreed. "If you'll follow me, I can show you one of each."

Everyone rose and headed toward the foyer except Michael. "You coming?" Damien inquired as he sat drumming his fingers on the chair's arm.

"Nope," he answered.

Cate furrowed her brow at his response. "It's not very far..."

Michael interrupted her. "I have no desire to be in a location where I could accidentally slip back in time with no way to return. I'll stay right here. Oh, unless you've slipped into another time period here?"

"No, we've never had it happen here," Cate answered.

"Yet," Damien said with a wink and a grin as he left a frowning Michael behind. "He has no sense of adventure."

Cate chuckled at the statement as they joined Celine and Alexander in the foyer. Cate led them down the hall toward the library. She stopped before they reached it. "This is the hallway where we've experienced a lot of activity. Prior to this, we didn't realize any time rips existed here, but both Jack and I along with Molly have slipped into the past."

Celine nodded as she glanced around the space. Cate remained silent for a moment as she watched Celine. After a moment, her eyes flitted around

the space trying to determine what Celine was seeing.

Celine narrowed her eyes and reached her hand out. She spread her fingers, twirling them as she swiveled her wrist as though grasping something. Cate scrunched her eyebrows together and stared at the invisible item Celine grasped.

Alexander raised his eyebrows at her. "This wasn't here in 1792," Celine informed him.

"Interesting," he answered as he stared at her hand. "What are you seeing?"

"What are YOU seeing?" Celine asked, directing the question back to Alexander.

"A distortion," Alexander said. "Portals usually have smoother edges. This one is rough, distended."

"And spiked," Celine added.

Alexander narrowed his eyes and leaned closer to her hand. Celine grabbed his hand. "It's easier to feel them."

"Oh, yes," he answered as she guided his hand. "I feel them now."

Cate stared at the scene unfolding, unable to make sense of it. "This is..." she murmured under her breath, unable to finish the statement.

"Weird," Damien finished for her. "Yeah, I know. You get used to it. They are far more perceptive than we are about these things."

"Are the time portals you use invisible?" Cate questioned.

"No, not even to us. When Celine opens a time portal, you know it. The wind is howling. It sounds like a train coming straight for you and a giant black hole opens."

Cate raised her eyebrows at the description. "Wow. That's... well, I'm not sure I would have gotten Jack into one of those."

Damien chuckled. "Michael only went into one because Gray shoved us through while we were both still in shock over the whole 'witches and warlocks exist' thing."

Cate pursed her lips. "You seem to have lived quite an interesting life, Damien."

"And you don't even know the half of it," he said with an eye roll.

"Where is the other?" Celine inquired.

"In Douglas's lab. This way."

Cate led them into the library. "Wow! Great library!" Damien exclaimed.

“Thank you! I can’t take credit for decorating it, but I enjoy it quite a bit.”

Riley and Bailey stood and stretched from their spots near the fireplace. They each eyed the newcomers. Bailey sniffed in the air at them before giving a shrill bark. Riley offered a few yips too.

“Oh, dogs!” Damien exclaimed.

“Yep. Meet Riley and Bailey,” Cate said. “My two best buddies! Boys, quiet!”

“Are they friendly?” Damien asked.

“Yes,” Cate answered. “Just a little barky.”

Celine approached them, squatting down and extending her hand. She stared at each of them. The dogs seemed mesmerized by her presence. Both quieted, approached her, and sat as she scratched their ears.

“Now there’s a trick worth having,” Cate quipped.

She continued across the room and pressed the stone trigger on the fireplace’s edge to open the secret passage to Douglas’s lab.

Damien’s eyes grew wide, and his jaw dropped. “Wow, cool, a secret passage!”

Cate plugged in the lighting before they proceeded down the stairs. “This was Douglas’s secret lab. We discovered it a few months ago. The dogs kept barking at the bookcase. We assumed there was a leak somewhere but then we discovered all this.”

“Woowooow!” Damien breathed. He gaped around at the various contraptions Cate had sorted through. “Douglas was quite the inventor.”

“Yes, he was. I’m still sorting through his journals and notes, but he was quite a visionary.”

“No doubt the time traveling helped,” Damien answered.

“It’s likely, yes,” Cate responded. “This area contains a time rip. This is how we accessed 1792.”

Celine nodded. “Yes, I see it.”

“Is it like the other? Distorted?”

“Yes, it is,” Celine answered.

“And also has a few spikes,” Alexander chimed in.

“I studied a few of these when I visited in 1792. Would you mind if we wandered around and observed?” Celine asked.

“Not at all,” Cate answered. “Feel free.”

“Thanks.”

Celine and Alexander departed, leaving Damien and Cate alone in the lab. Damien peered around the space. "You can have a peek around if you'd like," Cate offered.

"Thanks!" Damien replied. "This is so cool. All these inventions in a secret lab!"

Cate didn't respond right away. "Oh, sorry. I didn't mean to treat your home like a curiosity shop," Damien added.

"No, not at all. I treat it like one!" They both chuckled before Cate continued. "I'm just... I find it interesting you are so fascinated by this."

"Why?" Damien asked as he studied the lightbulb prototype.

"You seem to have lived a life far more interesting than a few secret passages and some strange inventions."

"Ah, you mean the supernatural stuff," Damien conjectured.

"Right. I cannot imagine living with... well, whatever you live with on a day-to-day basis."

"You mean with the fireballs and time portals and stuff?" he inquired as he squinted at the staircase to nowhere.

"Yes, that. And the living for centuries. And the weird touch that makes you pass out. Duke Northcott did that to me twice."

"Yeah, Celine can do that, too. It can be helpful when you can't sleep! But it is super weird."

Cate nodded as Damien continued his exploration of the lab. "So, is Alexander..."

"A centuries-old warlock, too, yeah."

"But you and Michael are..."

"Just humans, yep," Damien said as he completed his circuit of the room.

Cate shook her head. "You say it all so matter-of-factly. I don't understand how you do it!"

"Well, when I first found out, I freaked out. But I've since gotten used to it. You get used to it," Damien replied. "And you have a freak out, albeit a more tempered one, every now and again when you find out about even more strange stuff you never realized existed."

His last statement produced a chuckle from Cate. "It's good to realize you aren't just cool as a cucumber while chaos reigns around you. I feel completely inept at dealing with this. The whole thing makes my brain hurt."

“It takes some getting used to. But at least now you know there are other people in the world dealing with the supernatural... oddities of the world. You’ll always have a friend in me... use us as a sounding board if you need one.” Damien gave her an awkward grin and a bit of color rushed into his cheeks. “Shall we head up? Maybe check on Michael?”

“Sure,” Cate agreed.

They climbed the stairs into the library and navigated to the sitting room. Cate pushed through the doors with Damien behind her. They found the space empty. Cate’s stomach turned over as she eyed the empty armchair across the room.

“Uh-oh,” she murmured as she glanced around in search of the man. “Do you think he tried to follow us or went for a walk? Or got sucked into a time portal we didn’t know existed?”

“Mmm, probably the former. Celine didn’t mention a time portal here. Let’s go check around for him,” Damien suggested.

As they re-entered the foyer, the sound of loud laughter reached their ears. Cate glanced up the main staircase, following the sound. Michael and Jack rounded the corner from the hall and descended the stairs. The two talked and laughed as though they were old friends.

“There you are!” Damien called.

“Yes, we were just taking the luggage up,” Michael said, thumbing toward the upstairs.

“Aye, and having quite the discussion,” Jack said as he continued to chuckle.

Michael clapped his arm around Jack’s shoulders and pointed his finger at him. “We have GOT to have this guy out to Bucksville. Especially right around the time you start discussing time travel as the solution to any problem we have. He can talk some sense into you.”

“Listen, mate, I’ve got the same problem here,” Jack said, motioning to Cate.

“It’s not that I mind using it as a method to solve problems, but I cannot fathom what these two enjoy about it,” Michael added.

“Neither can I. Though I must admit, meeting my ancestors has been well worth the inconveniences.”

Michael gave a half-smile. “Okay, you have a point there.”

“We’ve never met any ancestors,” Damien chimed in.

“If you have the chance, take it,” Jack said.

“Noted,” Michael replied. He faced Damien. “Where are Celine and Alexander?”

“Exploring the castle and studying the time rips.”

“Anything so far?”

“They are appearing in new locations than Celine noted in the 1700s and they are distorted and spiked.”

“What does that mean?” Jack questioned.

“No idea,” Damien said with a shrug. “But I’m guessing the spikes and distortions are what’s causing your problems.”

“What could cause new rips to appear?” Cate asked.

“What caused them to be there in the first place?” Michael inquired.

“I’m not certain,” Cate answered.

“Perhaps they always existed,” Jack suggested. “The land was considered cursed.”

“Alexander and Celine may have a better idea. We can connect over dinner and determine what they’ve come up with,” Damien suggested.

“Oh, could we keep dinner conversation time rip-free and save it for afterward? Then Jack can join, and the Frasers and Molly won’t overhear anything,” Cate said.

“Sounds good!” Damien responded.

“Would you like to head back into the sitting room?” Cate questioned.

“Would you mind if we took a look around the castle?” Damien inquired.

“Not at all. Would you like the full tour?” Cate asked.

“Sure,” Damien answered with a grin. “If you don’t mind!”

* * *

The group gathered in the sitting room following their evening meal. Mrs. Fraser and Molly provided them with hot cocoa and shortbread cookies as an after-dinner dessert as they settled in. After Cate assured her she could take care of the cleanup, Molly agreed to retire for the evening to read in her room.

Jack slipped into the room shortly after Molly’s departure. “I hope you didn’t start without me,” he quipped as he slid into an armchair near Cate.

“We wouldn’t dream of it,” Cate assured him. “Though I must say I’m more than curious about what you’ve found.”

“As am I, though I’m more interested in whether or not you’ve found a solution,” Jack added.

“A solution, no, but information, yes,” Celine answered.

Cate’s shoulders sagged a bit at her response. With no solution in sight from the only person who could help them, perhaps their problem would never be solved.

“Don’t worry. Celine will find one,” Damien assured her.

“What did you learn?” Michael prompted.

“A few things,” Celine began. “First, the portals, or time rips, as you call them, remain distorted as they were in 1792. This is what causes the time differential when you travel through them. That remains unchanged. Which explains why whenever the timepiece interacts with one it slows when you slip through.”

“Okay,” Cate said. “That makes sense.”

“The second major thing we learned is that new portals are opening in locations they did not exist in before,” Celine continued.

“Like the one in the hall to the library?” Jack inquired.

Celine nodded. “Yes. That one did not exist in 1792.”

“But others did? Beyond the rip we used to access that year?” Cate questioned.

“Yes,” Celine confirmed. “Several existed already in 1792, but there are far more now.”

“Since they are new, would the timepiece not control them?”

Damien shook his head. “That can’t be the problem,” he inferred.

Cate glanced at him and scrunched up her face. Damien explained, “If that was the case, you’d only slip into and out of new portals. But you’ve been slipping into and out of ALL the portals. Even the ones the timepiece used to control.”

“Right, D,” Celine confirmed. “Which leads me to our third discovery. The spikes surrounding the portals. They weren’t there in 1792. The time portals are morphing.”

“Morphing? How? Why?” Jack asked.

“We’re not certain why, perhaps due to the new portals emerging,” Alexander answered.

“Is there a way to re-enchant the timepiece to take the transformations into account?” Cate asked.

“That’s what we’re still figuring out,” Celine responded. “You said this has all occurred over the span of a few weeks?”

“Yes,” Cate said with a nod. “Actually, within two weeks.”

“Right, Monday marks two weeks since we’ve noticed the issues. The issue seems to be becoming more prevalent by the day.”

“So, this is progressing and fairly quickly,” Damien said.

“It seems to be,” Cate agreed.

“I’d like to assess where these time rips are tomorrow,” Celine answered. “If we can determine how they are morphing, if they are growing, how many are appearing, and whether or not the spikes resorb, we may have a better idea how to combat the issue.”

“How is this different from in Douglas’s time?” Cate questioned. “He also experienced random openings of the time rips like we are.”

“He did, yes,” Celine answered. “I enchanted the watch to hold them closed unless he opened them. Those portals were only distended, not spiked.”

“So, you need another enchantment,” Michael suggested. “One that handles whatever the spikes do.”

“Therein lies the issue,” Alexander commented. “Other than circumventing the current enchantment at times, we aren’t sure what the spikes do.”

“Any theories?” Jack questioned.

Celine and Alexander shared a glance.

“Nothing beyond pure conjecture,” Alexander said.

“That glance between you suggests more than pure conjecture,” Jack countered.

Celine heaved a sigh. “The working theory is that the portals are morphing and melding to become a universal time portal.”

CHAPTER 32



“*A* what?” Cate asked, her eyebrows shooting high.

“A universal time portal,” Celine repeated. “It’s a...”

“A portal that can access any point in time,” Damien finished for her as he stared into space, amazed by the idea.

“You mean... go anywhere in time?” Jack asked.

“Yes.”

“How? Would you just slip through the portal and end up in a random era?” Cate questioned.

“No, you’d need a mechanism to control when and where you’d travel to, right?” Damien conjectured.

“Yes, which explains why the timepiece doesn’t effectively work,” Celine answered.

Jack wiped his brow. “Universal time portal,” he repeated. “This is...”

“Amazing,” Cate finished for him. “Access to any time you want or need. Absolutely astounding.”

“A real game-changer,” Damien agreed.

“And a more dangerous secret,” Jack added.

“Yes,” Celine concurred. “Access to a specific set of years is one thing but access to any year is another. The secret must be kept as quiet as possible.”

“If that is what’s going on here,” Michael chimed in. “You said you weren’t certain, right?”

“Right,” Celine admitted.

“Okay, so assuming you are correct, is there a way you can control the universal portal? Some mechanism like the timepiece that can be used to open and close the portal and control the date you travel to?” Damien inquired.

“In theory, yes, though I’d need to do some research to get everything correct,” Celine answered.

“We plan to call Gray after our discussion and research some references in my library,” Alexander added.

Damien nodded.

“What if that’s not what’s happening?” Michael questioned.

“We’d have to determine why the timepiece is failing to control the rips, both old and new. In theory, it should interact with either. If they remain separate, we need to determine how to deal with the spikes to create a device that properly holds them closed unless activated.”

“But you believe you *can* find a solution, right?” Jack inquired.

“Yes,” Celine answered. “We can find a solution to control this.”

“How certain are you?” Jack asked. “I’m sorry,” he added, “I don’t mean to sound ungrateful or distrustful, but the stakes are high for us. If this continues, it puts everyone in the castle in danger and makes it far more likely the secret will be discovered. Short of shutting the castle down to any outsiders and telling anyone who sets foot inside the truth, there’s not much we can do.”

“I understand,” Celine answered. “But I’m certain. I’ve seen a universal time portal before. When I saw it, it had already finished its formation. But the descriptions of the melding rips into the universal portal match what we’re experiencing here.”

“So, you have some experience with this?” Cate asked with hope filling her voice.

“Yes,” Celine said. “Not with creating a device to interact with them but with the phenomenon itself. Though I’m confident we can get this under control.”

Cate breathed a sigh of relief at Celine’s statement. “Okay,” she said. “Thank you.”

“Yes, thanks,” Jack said. “Looks like we wait to see what’s happening tomorrow then.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Damien agreed. “Should we hit the hay for the night? I’m tired! We took a flight here. I haven’t used commercial air travel

in a while.” He stretched and yawned.

Cate giggled as she nodded. “Sure, I’ll show you to your rooms.”

“Thanks!”

The group followed Cate upstairs and she pointed out their bedrooms. After a brief discussion with Celine about the best location to place a call to Gray, Cate and Jack departed, continuing to their bedrooms.

As they neared Jack’s door, Cate sighed. “So, what do you think?” she asked.

Jack shrugged and pursed his lips before answering. “I honestly don’t know. I hope they can fix this. They seem to think they can, and they did help Douglas, but maybe they’re being overconfident.”

“They seem determined,” Cate said. “They did show up as they promised. And Celine seems to have some knowledge of what’s happening.”

Jack shook his head. “Unbelievable,” he said.

“What is?”

“She’s seen one of these things before. A universal time portal? And there’s another one somewhere? And people time travel all the time. These people time travel all the time!”

“I know! My mind is swimming. All this time we assumed Dunhaven held this secret that existed nowhere else. I guess it was a rather narrow view of the world.”

“I suppose you’re right,” Jack answered. “It was rather naive to assume we cornered the market on time travel.”

Cate nodded in agreement. “They seem so savvy about all of this.”

“Well, I guess when you’ve been dealing with it for over two centuries, it’s second nature.”

Cate shrugged. “Michael and Damien are both human, so they couldn’t have been dealing with it for longer than they’ve been alive. They seem to take it in stride. At least Damien does. He talks about it like it’s normal.”

“Perhaps when you’re living with it on a constant basis, it becomes normal. Kind of like us and time traveling. A year ago, I’d have locked you in the looney bin if you’d discussed time traveling to solve a crime, now it’s barely shocking.”

“Maybe,” Cate said pensively.

“You okay?” Jack inquired.

“Yeah,” Cate said with a nod and a smile. “It’s just that this whole situation is still incredible to me. It’s hard to process.”

“I understand exactly what you’re saying. My mind can’t wrap around everything we’ve learned and experienced in such a short time. And now the universal time portal bombshell on top of it all.”

“Right! A universal time portal? I mean, my mind is racing in a thousand different directions at the possibilities of that but at the same time it seems too impossible to believe!”

“Why? We had time portals to specific years, why not one to any year?”

“I don’t know why that seems more improbable than the former, but it does. Perhaps they’ve got it wrong, though.”

“Time will tell. Pun intended, lassie,” Jack said with a wink.

“You should try your stand-up comedy routine on the newcomers.”

“Yeah, they seem to have a great sense of humor for the time travel jokes. Well, perhaps Michael does. He’d get it.”

“You really like him, huh?”

“Ah, yes. A fellow man who appreciates the downside of time travel as much as I do. Yes, I like him very much.”

“A comrade in arms, is it?”

Jack nodded. “It seems you’ve found one in Damien. I still think he likes you.”

“I think he’s just a nice guy who wants to help,” Cate countered.

“Well, either way, let’s hope he can. Or Celine can.”

“I’ll keep my fingers crossed,” Cate said as she flashed a set of crossed fingers. “I suppose we should head to bed.”

“You feel okay sleeping in a room with a morphing time portal?” Jack inquired.

“I guess so. Probably better than I did before.”

“Better than before?” Jack questioned.

“Yeah. At least if I disappear this time, Celine can send you back to find me!”

“Good point.”

“And besides, your bedroom isn’t very far from mine. For all we know, the time portal has already expanded well beyond the confines of my bedroom. You could get sucked back, too!”

“At least we’d be together in 1925 or wherever we got sent,” Jack conjectured.

“True. Well, anyway, if I don’t show up for breakfast tomorrow, ask Celine for help to come and find me.”

“Will do. Good night, Cate.”

“Good night, Jack.”

Cate continued down the hall to her bedroom suite. Riley and Bailey had already wandered into the bedroom and curled in their beds during her conversation with Jack. “You two are both lazy bones,” Cate said as she changed into her nightclothes. The comment earned a sigh from Riley and a sideways glance from Bailey and nothing more. “I don’t suppose you two have any insight on whether or not Celine and Alexander can help us.”

Bailey’s eyes closed to slits and Riley spun onto his back, his front feet reaching high in the air as he settled in for the night. “I guess that’s a ‘no,’” Cate said as she crossed the room toward her bed. “At least you didn’t end up filthy from digging in the garden today.”

As Cate crossed the room, she hesitated in front of her jewelry armoire. Her lips parted and her brow furrowed as she stared at the bottom drawer. She shook her head and took another step toward her bed before returning her gaze to the armoire.

Cate took a tentative step toward the jewelry box. Her hand lingered on the drawer’s pull. Her mind focused on the contents of the drawer. She attempted to push them aside. She’d rather dwell on her time rip troubles than this, but her mind did not allow her.

Instead, Cate pulled the drawer open and stared at the necklace laying inside. The sapphires and diamonds sparkled against the drawer’s black velvet interior. Cate ran her fingers over the necklace. The stones, cool to the touch, mesmerized her. “Keep this as a reminder of me,” Duke Northcott’s voice echoed in her brain.

Cate lifted the necklace out of the drawer and held it up. It sparkled in the light; the diamonds dancing next to the sapphires. Cate bit her lower lip. Would she suffer more nightmares about the Duke or had they solved this problem? Why had he given her the necklace? And why was she so drawn to it?

Cate held it up to her neck as she glanced in the mirror. She raised an eyebrow at her reflection. She’d never owned anything so ostentatious. Not even the jewelry she’d inherited was this extravagant. Perhaps that was the draw.

As she stared at her reflection, Cate's mind regressed to her time with Duke Northcott. After a moment, she shook the thoughts loose from her head. No, she promised herself, she wouldn't dwell on it. The events still disturbed her. There was no reason she should be drawn to this necklace. It only reminded her of her frightening experience.

Cate shoved the necklace into the drawer and slammed it shut. She swallowed hard as her fingers lingered on the drawer pull, threatening to open the drawer and retrieve the necklace again. With a determined step, Cate pulled herself away from the armoire and climbed into her bed.

With any luck, she'd have a nightmare-free night again. And with a little more luck, she'd have a safe home tomorrow.

* * *

Cate stretched and yawned as she meandered down the hall for her pre-breakfast walk with the dogs. A night of tossing and turning as she pondered her predicament left her feeling drained. Riley and Bailey bounded in front of her, scurrying down the main staircase's thick carpeting and disappearing into the hallway leading to the library.

Cate raised an eyebrow at their path as she padded down the stairs. This was not the usual circuit to the outside. She plodded down the remaining step and turned the corner into the hallway.

She spotted Riley and Bailey in a perky sit at Celine's feet. They stared up at her as though waiting for instructions. Alexander scratched Riley's head.

"Good morning," Cate called. "You're both up early."

"Good morning," Celine answered followed by Alexander. "Yes, trying to get a handle on where we're at with the time portals today."

"It seems you've garnered a few adoring fans," Cate said.

Celine glanced down at the pups with a smile. "What cute fans to have!" Riley leapt to his hind legs to receive a head scratch from Celine.

"I'll let you finish your exploring. We can discuss your findings after breakfast."

Cate called the two reluctant pups away from Celine's side and out the front door. As she rounded the castle, she found Damien wandering in the back garden.

“Good morning,” she greeted him. “Wow, you’re all early risers.”

“Good morning, Cate,” Damien said. “Yeah, I don’t sleep much. My mind never shuts off.”

“I understand completely,” Cate responded. “I’m the same. I had a miserable night last night.”

“Worried about the time portals?” Damien inquired.

“Yes, and a few other things.”

“Don’t worry too much about the time portals. Celine and Alexander will fix it. What else was on your mind? Oh, sorry, you don’t have to answer that. I don’t mean to overstep,” Damien said as they followed the dogs around the castle’s exterior.

“No, it’s fine,” Cate said. “You have a lot of confidence in Celine, huh?”

“I do. She’s never let me down and she’s well-versed in a good many things like this.”

“Sounds like she’s at least got some experience with a universal time portal.”

“She probably saw one when she was engaged to the Duke.”

Cate ceased walking a moment. “Celine was engaged to Duke Northcott?”

Damien nodded as he waited for Cate to catch up.

“Yep. For three years before she married Gray.”

Cate’s jaw went slack as she processed the information. “I told you it was a long and complicated story.”

Cate shook her head. “You aren’t kidding.” She paused for a moment before adding. “That was the other thing keeping me up last night.”

“Our long and complicated story? It could probably fill a book or maybe be a whole series,” Damien said with a chuckle.

“While the details of your long and complicated story did cross my mind, it was more Duke Northcott who kept me tossing and turning.”

Damien halted and spun to face Cate. “What do you mean?”

“Nothing specific. Perhaps I was just worried I’d have another nightmare about him. Before I went to sleep, I took out the necklace he gave me. Something compelled me to want to see it.”

“Compelled you?”

“Yeah, it was weird. And I kept hearing his voice over and over telling me to keep the necklace as a reminder of him.”

“Did you have another nightmare after that?”

“No,” Cate admitted. “Though I may not have slept enough to have one.”

“But you’ve had nightmares involving him before?”

“Yes, for months. It became almost a nightly occurrence. Though I had no idea who he was. I only realized it was Duke Northcott when I met him.”

“What were the dreams like?”

“Varied with the consistent theme of Duke Northcott chasing me.”

Damien pursed his lips and narrowed his eyes as Cate continued. “At first they centered around the library. The nightmares began before we found the secret passage to Douglas’s lab and the time rip to 1792. Then he began to appear in them. He’d chase me or grab me and begin dragging me away.”

Damien halted and spun to face Cate. “Cate, get rid of that necklace. And forget about the Duke.”

“I’d love to,” Cate admitted. “I’m just not sure my mind will let me. With any luck, the nightmares are a thing of the past. I’m hoping my encounter with him relieved them.”

“I’m sorry you had to go through that. If we could have prevented it, we would have. It must have been terrifying.”

“It was. I’m trying not to dwell on it.” A moment of silence passed between them before Cate spoke again. “Hey, can Celine heal herself? Like if she gets cut or something?”

“Yeah, why?”

“I nicked Duke Northcott with a knife while trying to escape and he bled for a second before the wound disappeared. I’ve been wondering if I was seeing things.”

“Oh, wow! I’m impressed! That was really, really brave, Cate! You went after him with a knife?” Damien chuckled. “I’d have paid to see that.”

“It wasn’t that impressive. And it obviously didn’t work,” Cate lamented. “Anyway, I hope I’m rid of him.”

“He is trouble. If you start having nightmares again, please let me know. The last thing you need is the Duke poking around at you with no one to help.”

“I have Jack,” Cate reminded him.

“Jack has no experience with that man and is no match for his supernatural powers. Just do me a favor and promise me if you have even a whiff of a nightmare, or he starts pervading your thoughts, or anything

involving him, you'll call me. Or text me. Or email. Or whatever form of communication you prefer."

Cate chuckled at his long-winded request. "I promise I will contact you. Knowing me, I will use *all* the communication methods."

"Fine by me, send out an alarm on all channels. Just don't go it alone, deal?"

"Deal," Cate promised. She scanned the horizon. "Where did those two get off to?"

"Uh-oh. I wasn't paying attention, I'm sorry. I didn't see. I hope they didn't go too far or run away!"

"No," Cate said. "They're around here somewhere. And I have a good idea where. Follow me."

Damien followed Cate around to the side garden. A yip sounded from within the bushes.

"Sounds like you were correct," Damien said.

"And I'll bet they're both digging a nice hole right over here," Cate continued as they rounded the hedge.

Cate stopped dead and put her hands on her hips.

She raised her eyebrows and stared at the two dogs as they stood near a growing hole. "Just as I suspected," she said to them.

"Found an old bone?" Damien suggested.

"I have no idea, but they're always here digging around and staring at this spot. Come on, you two, let's go." Cate ushered them back toward the castle with Damien's help. The two entered the dining room for breakfast, meeting Michael, Celine, and Alexander.

Following the meal, Celine suggested they discuss their latest findings. They agreed to meet in the hallway outside the library after Cate retrieved Jack.

With the two dogs following Celine as though she were a large, juicy steak, Cate slipped down the stairs and started down the hall to the kitchen. Voices floated from inside. By the sounds of it, she'd catch Jack before he went outside.

She quickened her step, determined to catch him before he left. The voices turned from incoherent to intelligible words.

"... have any updates?" Mrs. Fraser inquired.

"Not beyond what I've already shared," Jack answered.

"And you're sure they're doing the special thing on it?"

“Aye, called twice to confirm.”

“Good, there is no room for error,” Mrs. Fraser chimed in.

“We need to figure out how we can keep this secret,” Molly said.

CHAPTER 33



“*I* agree,” Jack began as Cate neared the door. “We’ve really got to... CATE!”

“No, we can’t tell... CATE!” Molly exclaimed as Cate entered.

“Hello,” Cate said as she scanned their faces. “Everything okay?”

Everyone murmured an affirmative response, all speaking at once.

“What would be wrong?” Molly added with a nervous chuckle.

Cate shrugged in response. “You seemed a bit surprised to see me.”

“Well, you’ve got guests. We assumed you’d be with them. You startled us, is all,” Mrs. Fraser said. “Is there something you need? Tea, perhaps?”

“No, thanks, Mrs. Fraser. I just wanted to steal Jack for a moment. About the leak. Celine noticed it this morning, I wanted you to take a peek.”

“Oh, sure, absolutely. Let’s head up right now.”

“Okay. You could finish your discussion first and then head up if you’d prefer.”

“Discussion? What discussion, no discussion here,” Jack babbled.

“We weren’t even talking,” Molly added.

“Right,” Cate said with a knitted brow. “Well, let’s head up then.”

Jack and Cate proceeded up to the main floor and met the others in the hallway. Michael stood several feet from the group.

“Better safe than sorry,” he noted as they passed him.

“So, you’ve found something?” Jack inquired as they approached the others.

“Yes,” Celine said. She strode several feet away, stopping nearer to the library door.

“Yesterday, the time portal ended about here.”

“Yes, I remember that’s where you were when you said the portal was distended and spiked,” Cate answered.

Celine nodded as she stalked several feet closer to them. “Today, the portal ends here.”

Jack raised his eyebrows at the change. “That’s a growth of several feet.”

Celine nodded. “At least,” she confirmed. “In less than twenty-four hours.”

“What does this mean?” Cate inquired.

“I’m almost one hundred percent certain my theory is correct. This is becoming a universal time portal.”

“So, they’ll need a new mechanism to control it,” Damien commented. “Something that can control where they go when entering in addition to keeping the portal closed.”

“Right,” Celine confirmed. “And I need to modify the enchantment to hold this shut unless opened. It’s a bit trickier with a universal time portal than one leading to the same date in another year, but it’s doable.”

“What do you need from us?” Jack inquired.

“Some time. We’ll need to make sure what we’re doing works. As the portal grows, the spikes are lessening. I’d like to get a better idea of the final form. I’ll continue to observe this today while we create a solution to control this,” Celine answered. “And I’ll also need a device that can accept a date input.”

“Okay,” Cate said with a nod. “Is there anything we can do in the meantime other than find a new device?”

Celine shook her head. “No, we’ll keep an eye on all the portals and once we’ve got a solution, we’ll test it out on whatever device you give me and hopefully be all set!”

“Test it out?” Jack questioned. “As in, activate it and time travel?”

“Pretty much,” Celine confirmed.

Jack heaved a sigh.

“I’ll test it,” Damien offered.

“No, no,” Jack replied. “It’s our issue, we’ll test it, but thanks.”

“In the meantime, try to relax,” Alexander said.

Jack nodded. "Easier said than done."

"And possibly easier outside of the castle walls," Cate suggested. "Would you two like to take a trip into town? There are no time portals there." She directed her final statement to Michael.

"Best idea I've heard all day," Michael answered.

With Jack heading outside for some groundskeeping, Cate, Michael and Damien headed to town for most of the day. They returned just before dinner. The group gathered in the dining room for the meal.

"Any news?" Cate inquired.

"The portals seem to be stabilizing," Alexander mentioned.

"That's good, right?" Cate asked.

"Yes, very. The spikes are receding which means the portals will be less volatile. I expect the spikes will be gone tomorrow."

"Portals?" Damien questioned. "There are still multiple, they didn't merge."

"Yes and no," Celine answered. "I detected a portal in the hallway overlooking your back garden that seemed to be a universal portal in one direction only."

"That's correct," Cate answered. "You can return to your own time from wherever you are in that hallway."

"That portal has merged with the portal in the hallway outside the library. They now form a universal time portal in both directions that spans from the back hallway through the secret passage we used to escape Marcus and into the hallway near the library. But the other portals still exist and lead to their respective years."

"Are they also less volatile?" Michael inquired.

"They seem to be stabilizing. You shouldn't get sucked into them at random anymore and the original timepiece should still control them without any issues," Alexander explained.

"But it will not control the new one?" Cate asked.

"No," Celine said with a shake of her head. "For that, we'll need a new controller."

"Will this do?" Damien questioned. He pulled a gold pocket watch from his hoodie pocket. "It's not a family heirloom like yours but it's similar. Small, easy to hide, and has a date function."

Celine eyed it over Damien's shoulder. "Yes, that should work."

Cate stared at the gold pocket watch as Damien flipped it open. Similar to hers, though missing the distinctive crosses on the top, it would provide an excellent new controller for the time rips.

“When did you...” Cate began.

“You were speaking to the shop owner in the antique store, and I found it. I wanted to surprise you! I hope you like it.”

Cate smiled at him. “Thank you, Damien. I love it. I’ll always remember you when I use it.”

“Looks like we’re set,” Celine said. “Alexander and I will work on creating an enchantment to close the universal portal and use the new timepiece as the controller.

It will also work for the old time rips, though you won’t need to set the date for those.”

“Great! I can’t wait to tell Jack. Maybe we’ll all rest a little easier now.”

* * *

When Cate emerged the next morning from her bedroom, she found Jack pacing the hallway outside her suite.

“Hey, everything okay?” she asked.

“Couldn’t sleep. I’m anxious. Do you think they can solve it?”

“Celine seemed confident. I guess we’ll find out today.”

Jack nodded and held up his crossed fingers.

“Let’s hope.”

“I’ll get an update at breakfast. Let’s meet in the library hallway after and see where they are.”

“Sounds like a plan. Hey, we’ll miss you at breakfast today.”

“I’ll miss you all, too. But I’ll schedule one with you once our new friends have departed.”

“I’ll let Mrs. Fraser know so she’s not startled by your request on an off day,” Jack joked.

“I can’t miss my staff breakfast for the week!”

When Cate reached the dining room, she found herself alone. She hadn’t run into any of her guests outside on her walk with the dogs nor on her way out.

Instead, the new gold timepiece lay at her seat with a sealed envelope next to it with CATE scrawled across it.

Cate pulled the envelope open and flicked open the note.

Cate -

Here is your brand-new time travel device! Celine and Alexander worked through the night to make sure we had this under control.

Michael and I tested it thoroughly with both the old time portals and the new universal one. Works like a charm! We may have scared a person or two when we popped in out of thin air, oops.

Just kidding! The advantage of time travel in the middle of the night is there aren't a lot of people wandering around the halls.

We also noted the time portals are still distended, so your time difference still exists. We tested this too. It still seems to be about one minute in the present to every fifteen minutes in the past. At least some things didn't go haywire!

Anyway, we'll probably sleep in, but rest assured, no one will disappear into any random time portals anymore! See you later, alligator. Sorry that was lame.

See you later, Damien

P.S. I had Celine and Alexander recreate the look of your old timepiece with the new one. No one will suspect you've replaced it!

Cate's heart skipped a beat as she read the note.

She picked up the new timepiece and held it in her hands. The two crosses now graced the top of the pocket watch. She opened the cover, finding the familiar engraving on the inside.

Only the face differed now. A smile formed on her lips as she lifted the original timepiece from around her neck.

Cate opened the clasp and slid the original pocket watch from the chain, replacing it with the new one. She slid the original timepiece into her cardigan pocket. She'd need to discuss with Jack what to do with it.

As she pondered the question, Mrs. Fraser and Molly popped into the room. "Lady Cate! You're all alone!" Molly exclaimed.

"Yes, I am," Cate confirmed. "It looks like everyone is sleeping in." Cate waved the note in the air before sliding it into her pocket. "So, I'm on my own. Mind if I join you for our usual breakfast?"

"We never mind if you join us, Lady Cate," Mrs. Fraser answered.

“Here, let me take something off your hands,” Cate said, reaching for the water pitcher from Mrs. Fraser. “I’m terribly sorry you had to drag all this up for nothing.”

“The exercise didn’t hurt me! It’ll keep me spry at my age.”

“You aren’t THAT old, Mrs. Fraser,” Cate countered.

“Tell that to these old bones,” she said as they descended the stairs.

“Lady Cate!” Jack exclaimed from his seat at the table. “Fancy meeting you here.”

“She got ditched,” Molly joked with a giggle.

“It’s true,” Cate confirmed as she slid into a seat across from Jack. “I found a note saying everyone else decided to sleep in, so it looks like I’ll get my regular staff breakfast after all!”

“Lucky us,” Mr. Fraser said.

Cate grinned at him as Mrs. Fraser put the final preparations on their breakfast. “I’ll put this away for the sleepyheads to eat later,” she said as she stowed the fruit plate and yogurt in the refrigerator.

The group settled in for their breakfast. The tension that hung over Cate for the past several weeks eased away as she no longer worried they may all disappear. She itched to tell Jack the good news.

After the group finished their meal, Cate requested Jack’s presence upstairs.

“About the leak?” Jack inquired as they headed out the kitchen door.

“Yep,” Cate confirmed. “We may have it under control.”

They continued down the hall and ascended the staircase. As Jack pushed the door shut, he twisted to face Cate. “Are you serious?” he whispered.

Cate nodded. She pulled the note from her pocket and handed it to him. “I found this at my seat this morning along with the new timepiece. It seems they fixed the problem.”

“And this is the new one?” Jack questioned as he motioned to the timepiece around Cate’s neck.

“Yes. I switched them out this morning. I have the old one in my pocket. We’ll need to find a safe place to keep it.”

“The safe,” Jack suggested. “It should be secure there.”

“That’s what I was thinking,” Cate agreed.

Jack stared at the note for another moment. “Hmm,” he murmured. “Do you think this is it? Problem solved?”

“It should be,” Damien said with a yawn as he stumbled down the main staircase. He smiled at them. “Good morning.”

“Good morning,” Cate answered. “And thank you!” She held up the timepiece.

“You’re welcome. Feel free to test it yourselves, but Michael and I did a pretty thorough analysis last night in a few locations, both old and new.”

“We just may do that,” Jack answered. “Not that we don’t trust you. It’s just that...”

“You want to see it for yourselves, so you’ll rest easier. No, I understand,” Damien answered.

Cate smiled at him. “After a few weeks of time troubles, it would be nice to verify that we’re firmly in control again.”

“Sure, give it a go!” Damien said. “Oh, one thing I forgot to put in my note. In the old time rip locations, you don’t need to set the date. The timepiece will just transfer you to the same date in the other year no matter what you input. In the new time rip, the one that extends from the library to the back hall, you’ll need to set the watch’s date before activating it. You’ll then return to that date at the same time of day as when you activate it. So, for example, if it’s 8 a.m. and you set the date for June first, 1834, you’ll go back to June first, 1834 at eight in the morning.”

Cate nodded. “Got it.” She glanced at Jack. “Want to try it now?”

“As much as I don’t want to, yes, I do. Like you said, it would be nice to confirm we’ve got this solved.”

“Oh,” Cate said as they began to part ways. “Mrs. Fraser has breakfast in the fridge for you.”

“Great! I’m starving. I’ll just pop down and grab it if you can point me in the direction of the kitchen.”

“You can go through the door in the dining room, down the stairs and hall straight into the kitchen.”

“Got it,” Damien answered. “Thanks!”

Damien spun on his heel and continued down the hall to the dining room. Cate turned to Jack with her eyebrows raised. “Ready?”

“As I’ll ever be. Let’s test this bad boy out!”

“Wow, you almost seem enthusiastic.”

“If Michael was willing to test this out for us, then I should be!”

“Should we start with a new time rip or an old one?” Cate asked as they headed down the hall.

“An old one,” Jack responded. “If it works there, I’ll feel a smidge more confident that we won’t get stuck in the new one.”

“Don’t trust them?”

“I do, I just can’t believe we have a universal time portal and it’s working.”

Cate chuckled as they entered the library. “Douglas’s lab?”

“Sounds good,” Jack agreed. “We can easily tell if it’s working if the lights go out!”

They opened the bookcase and descended the stairs. Cate held out the new timepiece. Jack wrapped her hand in his. Her eyes flitted up to Jack. He offered an encouraging nod. Cate took a deep breath and focused on the timepiece. In unison, she and Jack rubbed the face to activate it.

Within seconds, the second hand began to slow. The lights flickered then blinked off, disappearing from their sight. Darkness surrounded them.

“Looks like we made it,” Cate said.

“Yep,” Jack answered, still clutching her hand.

“Good enough or did you want to take a peek around and verify this is 1792?”

“I’m happy to assume it is,” Jack answered. “Let’s head back and try the universal location. Unless you have an objection.”

“No,” Cate said. “I trust that it is.”

They reset the timepiece and returned to their time. The blaring lights announced their arrival in the correct year.

“Well, we know the return trip worked,” Jack said with a sigh of relief.

They climbed the stairs and headed to the hall. “Should we try this here?” Cate questioned.

“Didn’t Damien or Celine mention a secret passage?”

“Yes,” Cate answered. “It’s here.” She led him through the halls to the trigger. Cate pulled the scone on the wall and the hidden panel swung open.

“Perhaps we should duck in there and try it. Less chance of running into someone.”

“Good idea,” Cate answered. “Oh, do you have your cell phone on you? We may need a flashlight.”

“Got it,” Jack said as he dug in his pocket for the flashlight and toggled it on.

They stepped into the dark passage and pushed the panel shut behind them. “What year should we try?”

“An old one,” Jack answered.

“Really? Have a fondness for the olden days, huh?”

“It’ll be easier to tell if we’re actually back in an old time. There won’t be any lights on the walls.”

“Okay,” Cate answered as Jack aimed the flashlight at the timepiece. “How’s March 30, 1803?”

“Sounds like a perfect date to me!”

Cate set the date and held out the timepiece.

“Okay, here goes nothing.”

Jack pushed out his lips as he stared at the timepiece for a moment before he grasped it. They activated the mechanism and waited as the second hand slowed.

“Seems to have worked,” Cate whispered as the second hand crept around the face.

“Yeah,” Jack said with a nod. “Now to check if we’ve made it to where we expected.”

“Check your cell phone.”

“For what? The latest news from 1803?”

“No. You should have lost your Wi-fi signal when we slipped back.”

“Oh, right.” Jack toggled on his display. “Yep, it’s gone.”

“Okay, let’s check the hallway.”

“Where’s the trigger to get out?” Jack inquired.

“I’m not sure,” Cate answered. “We wandered through the passage for a while before we ended up in the mausoleum. We never went out this way.”

Jack shined the light on the wall near the secret panel. They studied the area before they found a small handhold on the panel. Jack curled his fingers around it and pulled. The panel lurched open a slit.

Light streamed into the passage. Cate peeked into the hallway. Candlelight flickered against the walls. “Candles!” Cate exclaimed in a hushed whisper.

“Yeah,” Jack responded, peeking over her head. “So, we’ve traveled somewhere back in time.”

“How can we tell if it’s 1803?”

“Find a newspaper and check the date?”

Cate bit her lower lip. That would require them to traipse through the castle. They weren't dressed for the occasion which was only the first issue with the plan.

As Cate considered the plan, a giggle sounded in the hallway. Cate peered into the hall, spotting a small child toddling down. Dark curls adorned his head. He wore a wide grin as he continued to patter toward them.

A woman rounded the corner. "Look! It's Olivia!" Cate breathed.

"I see her," Jack answered.

"And that little boy must be..."

"Finlay MacKenzie, just where do you think you're off to?" Olivia said.

The child let out another giggle before Olivia caught up to him and scooped him into her arms. Another woman followed her. "My apologies, Lady MacKenzie," she said as she collected the boy from Olivia. "He is quite energetic and insisted on finding his father."

"It is quite all right, Nanny Mae. Children are permitted a bit of mischief once in a while."

As they disappeared from the hall, Cate pushed the panel closed. "Well, that confirms what we needed to know for the most part. If that was Finlay MacKenzie we're in 1803. He was born in 1801 and he looked to be about two. That would put us where we thought we were."

"Do you want to confirm the exact date?"

"It's too risky," Cate answered. "We shouldn't be wandering around the castle. Especially in these clothes!"

"What's this I hear? Cate Kensie not being impulsive enough to roam around another century?"

"Is this Jack Reid arguing to parade around another time period?"

"Indeed it is, lassie. I want to be sure this thing works before we use it and get into more trouble than we're after!"

"Okay," Cate answered. "How do you propose we find a newspaper?"

"There should be one in town."

"How are we going to get to town? In these clothes? There has to be a better way."

"I'm sure they have one in the castle, I'm just not sure where. Douglas would have read it, surely."

"That's it!" Cate said, snapping her fingers.

"What's it?"

“Douglas! If we can find Douglas, we can ask him. He’s aware of time travel. He knows us. He wouldn’t question us showing up and asking the date!”

“Okay, great. The question is: can we find him?”

“We can try!” Cate said. “It was just after eight when we arrived. At this time of the day, Douglas was likely finishing breakfast and heading to his office.”

“Let’s try there first. We’re not far from it.”

Cate nodded and found the handhold in the panel.

She slid it open a few inches and they perused the hallway, finding it empty.

“Let’s go as quick as possible,” Jack said, grabbing Cate’s hand.

He led her into the hall. They rounded the corner and sprinted down the hall to the office. The door was ajar. Jack peered in before pushing through the door.

“Douglas, pardon the interruption,” Jack panted as he pushed the door shut behind Cate.

Douglas leapt from his seat, his eyes wide.

“Jack! Catherine!” He studied them up and down.

“Hello, Douglas,” Cate said. “Sorry to barge in like this but we needed your help.”

“Of course, anything. What is it? Are you in some sort of trouble? Is it Duke Northcott again?”

“No,” Cate assured him. “We’re not in any trouble. We’ve had some developments with the time rips in our time and we’re hoping to assess whether or not we’ve got the situation under control.”

“Developments? How interesting! What has happened?”

“New time rips have opened. We’re investigating where they lead,” Cate answered.

“Could you tell us the date today?” Jack inquired.

“Yes, of course. Today is 30 March, the year of our Lord, 1803,” Douglas answered.

Jack breathed a sigh of relief and glanced to Cate. She nodded to him with a closed-mouth smile. “Judging by the expressions on your faces, I’d say that answer was what you hoped to hear.”

“It is,” Cate answered. “Exactly what we hoped to hear. Thank you.”

“Yes, thank you, Douglas. For everything,” Jack responded. “We won’t take up any more of your time. And we’ll leave the way we came.” Jack offered a wink.

“So soon? Oh, what a shame. I had hoped to visit with you again.”

“Perhaps another time when we’re more appropriately dressed,” Cate said with a chuckle.

“Let’s plan for it, Catherine. I do hope to visit with you again.”

Cate grasped his hand in hers and squeezed it. “I promise we’ll visit soon.”

As Cate and Jack prepared to depart, a knock sounded at the door. Everyone froze.

CHAPTER 34



Douglas pressed a finger to his lips before he called, “Yes?”
“Lord MacKenzie,” Wilson’s voice answered. “I have your morning post.”

“Oh, of course,” Douglas called. “Just a moment.” He eyed Jack and Cate. “You must hide!”

“Where?” Cate whispered.

“Behind the door, I shall only open it a crack.”

Cate nodded and she and Jack hurried out of sight as Douglas inched the door open. “I’ll take them, Wilson, thank you,” Douglas said as he reached through the door.

Cate spied the butler’s confused expression through the small crack. “Yes, of course, m’lord.”

“Oh, Wilson, would you please fetch me a cup of tea.”

“Right away, m’lord,” Wilson said with a nod as he spun on his heel to retreat to the kitchen.

Douglas slammed the door and spun to face Cate. “Give him a moment to clear the hall, then it should be safe.”

They waited a moment before Douglas peeked into the hallway. Finding it empty, he nodded to them. “Go now,” he urged.

Cate smiled and nodded to him as Jack grasped her hand and tugged her into the hallway.

Douglas gave her a smile and a nod as she spun to leave the room. “Oh, Catherine?” Douglas called before they stepped from the room.

“Yes?” Cate asked as she twisted to face him.

“I left you a note in my journals as Damien suggested. I hope you found it.”

“I’ll check for it the moment we’re back,” Cate answered.

He smiled and offered another nod. “Goodbye, Catherine. And good luck.”

“Thank you,” she said. “We’ll see you soon.”

After peeking into the hall again, they snuck to the secret panel and slipped inside. Together, they activated the timepiece and returned to the present.

“Are we back?” Jack inquired as the second hand sped up to its normal speed.

Cate grasped the panel and inched it open. She peered into the hallway. Damien meandered around near the passage.

“Yep, we are,” Cate answered. She pulled the panel open and stepped out.

“Whew,” Damien exclaimed. “You scared me!”

“Sorry,” Cate said. “I figured you were waiting for us.”

“I was. Everything go okay with your tests? Went to the right date, returned all right, no problems?”

Jack joined them in the hall, pocketing his cell phone. “Yes,” he answered. “Seems to work as you said.”

Damien beamed at them. “You should be all set now!”

“Yes,” Cate agreed. “Damien, you saved me and my home. Saying thank you feels so trite but thank you.”

“Really, no thanks is necessary. I’m glad we could help. And if you have any trouble at all, we’re just an email, text, or call away.”

“I’m so glad this is over,” Jack said. “We can get back to normal life again without worrying about people disappearing.”

Michael strode toward them, a bag slung over his shoulder. “Everything working okay?” he asked as he approached Damien.

“Perfectly,” Cate answered. “We were just thanking Damien, though the simple words don’t feel like enough.”

“No problem at all,” Michael assured her.

Cate eyed his bag. “Going somewhere?”

“Home,” he answered. He pointed to Damien. “I brought your bag down for you, too.”

“Already?” Cate exclaimed. “Can’t you stay a few days at least? Enjoy the castle a bit? It’s the least we can do for all your help!”

“Sorry,” Damien answered. “Duty calls.”

“Trouble at home?” Jack questioned.

“When isn’t there,” Michael said with a chuckle and a roll of his eyes. “You ready?” he inquired of Damien. “Celine and Alexander are waiting in the foyer.”

“Yep.”

“We’ll at least walk you out,” Cate said.

They navigated to the foyer, meeting Celine and Alexander. Luggage sat near the front door. “Everything okay?” Celine asked.

“Yes, the timepiece works great, thank you!” Cate responded.

“If you have any trouble at all, just contact us,” Celine replied. “But you should be in the clear from here on out.”

“I told Damien that a simple thank you just isn’t enough. We’re eternally grateful to you for all your help.”

“No, thanks is necessary,” Celine assured them.

An awkward silence passed over the group. “Are you certain you can’t stay a few days?” Cate inquired.

“Yes, our apologies for rushing off, but we do have a situation brewing at home.”

“I understand,” Cate answered. “Good luck with it. If there’s anything we can do to help, please ask.”

“Yeah, we definitely owe you,” Jack added.

“Thank you,” Celine said with a smile.

“Well, it was lovely to meet all of you despite the circumstances we were in,” Cate said.

Everyone exchanged their goodbyes, shaking hands with each other. As Damien said goodbye to Cate, he added, “It was great to meet you, Cate. Don’t hesitate to call if you need anything. I’m serious.”

“Let’s plan to keep in touch,” Cate answered.

“Deal.”

As she stepped away, she overheard the conversation between Michael and Jack. “If you ever need to vent about time travel, text me,” Michael said.

“You may be inviting more trouble than you bargained for,” Jack said.

“Believe me, you can’t hate it more than I do, buddy,” Michael retorted.

The two shared a chuckle over their mutual dislike for visiting other centuries before parting ways. Cate and Jack followed the foursome outside, waving as their car pulled down the drive.

They stood for another moment as the car disappeared toward the town of Dunhaven.

“Did that just happen?” Jack asked after a moment.

“Yep, I’m pretty sure it did,” Cate confirmed. They waited another moment before Cate spoke again. “Well, I guess it’s time to get back to normal around here.”

“Sounds like a great idea to me. What’s your plan? Long walk to the loch? Reading in the library? Working on your book?”

“First, I’m going to lock this guy in the safe,” Cate said, holding up the original timepiece. “Then, I’m going to check the journals for that letter from Douglas. And then, maybe I’ll take that relaxing walk!”

“Mind if I tag along on the first two? As protector of the secret, I’d like to ensure the safety of the original timepiece.”

“Of course,” Cate answered as she strode down the hall.

“You know, as protector of the secret AND you,” Jack said as they walked, “you really put me through it this time.”

“Sorry about that,” Cate responded.

“It’s okay. I’m only teasing,” Jack said. “But, Cate, if anything had happened to you...”

He stopped and stared into her eyes. His lips attempted to form words but none came.

“Cate, I...” he began.

“Nothing happened to me,” Cate interrupted. “Let’s focus on that.”

“You’re right,” he said with a nod.

They entered the office. Cate’s mind recalled their encounter with Douglas in this room less than an hour ago as she crossed to the wall safe. She typed in the number then pressed her thumb onto the digital fingerprint scanner. The door released and swung open.

Cate pulled the original timepiece from her pocket. “You served us well,” she said as she placed it inside the safe.

“Now, it’s time for a new era,” Jack said as they closed and locked the safe.

Cate sighed. "Well, that should do it! Let's check for Douglas's note."

She led the way to the library. Douglas's journals were scattered across the desk.

Cate plopped into the chair and grabbed the last journal. She scanned the pages for any hint of the note Douglas mentioned.

"Here," Jack said after scanning journal number ten.

"This could be it." He pointed to letters scrawled on the last page of the final journal.

"Maybe!" Cate exclaimed. "This page is blank in all the other journals."

She opened Damien's program on her laptop and copied the text from the page. She clicked the button and waited as the program worked. In moments, decrypted text appeared.

"This is it!" Cate exclaimed as she scanned the first few words.

Dearest Catherine,

I hope you have found this note and are well in your time. The situation still astounds me at times though the good fortune to have met a descendent, however far removed, will remain a high point in my life.

I do regret the trouble you experienced while visiting my time and hope it has not followed you to yours. More than that, I hope it has not soured you on time traveling as I do desire to meet with you again. How extraordinary to share a conversation or break bread with my progeny.

Rest assured, Grayson and Celine Buckley along with her cousins, the Carlyles, have made sure I can control the time rips and have protected me from any harm from the foul Duke Northcott.

Perhaps this will be the end of the rumors of hauntings within these halls, though I doubt it. A new set of gossip abounds in the town already following the night you returned to your time.

No matter, we know the truth. And we shall remain the sole keepers of that truth along with the Reids. The secret shall remain protected through the generations.

Remember, Catherine, only travel for good, never for personal gain, do no harm, and do not travel to a time in which you already exist. Also, there is a distortion in the time rip, causing the time you travel from to move slower than the time you visit. These were the rules imparted to me by the BUCKLEYS and that I shall impart to my heir and on down the line until it is imparted to you.

As a MacKenzie, you have a solemn duty. Though one I view as a privilege. I hope you will, too.

Good luck, Catherine.

And goodbye.

Yours,

Douglas MacKenzie

A smile crossed Cate's face as she read the note.

"And there it is," Jack said. "Looks like the Buckleys solved all our problems!"

"He really was an interesting man," Cate said as she stared at the screen.

"Yes, he was," Jack agreed. "He'll make a great addition to your book, minus the time travel stuff."

"I'll be sure to leave that part out. But his inventions alone are worth several chapters!"

"And now you have time to explore them without worrying about disappearing into another time period!"

"Yep," Cate said with a grin. "But first, I think a nice long walk is in order. What do you say, boys?"

Riley and Bailey leapt to their feet, ready to enjoy the grounds. "I'll escort you out. M'lady," Jack teased with an extravagant bow.

Cate chuckled as she proceeded in front of him and to the front door. As she opened the door, both dogs raced past her and into the yard. They rounded the corner as Jack and Cate stepped on the path.

"We really should make good on that promise to visit Douglas," Jack said.

"Wow, I'm impressed!" Cate exclaimed as they meandered the path toward the side garden. "Jack Reid suggesting time travel."

"It is a gift. And I'd like to live life to the fullest. Particularly since one of us almost didn't get that opportunity."

"I'd really rather not dwell on how close I came to not seeing another birthday. Though, for whatever reason, I kept the necklace Duke Northcott buried me with. Damien told me to get rid of it. I don't know why I didn't. It is a beautiful piece of jewelry. Maybe I'll give it away as an auction item at the President's Ball. But for now... I don't know..." Her voice trailed off.

"I would get rid of that thing long before the ball. Damien's right. Speaking of, odd people, those Buckleys and their friends."

“Definitely. The lives they must lead are...” Cate’s voice trailed off as she tried to formulate an appropriate comparison.

“The stuff you read in books or see on TV,” Jack finished.

“Good description,” Cate replied.

“At least our lives can now return to normal,” Jack said. “Only the odd, controllable time travel trips now.”

Cate nodded with a chuckle as the side garden came into view. Her eyes scanned the horizon for the dogs. She stopped in her tracks as she spotted them. Her lips parted as her jaw went slack.

“What is it?” Jack inquired as he noted the expression on her face.

She swallowed hard. In response to his question, Cate raised her arm and pointed toward the dogs.

Jack followed the direction of her finger, his eyes going wide at the sight. Cate stumbled two steps forward as she raised her hand to cover her mouth. “Riley! Bailey! Leave that,” she choked out in a shaky voice after a moment.

The dogs dropped the item they play-fought over and bounded to Cate. Cate scooped Bailey into her arms as she continued toward the now-larger hole near the bushes. Jack grabbed Riley and followed her.

“Oh,” Cate groaned with a frown. “Now we know why they’ve been digging.”

“Yep,” Jack answered.

They approached the discarded “toy” and stood over it, each of them staring down at it. In contrast to the bright green of the springtime grass, lay a collection of white bones. Cate’s eyes swept across the object from top to bottom. She identified a radius, ulna, wrist bones, and hand bones that extended to skeletal fingers.

“Someone’s buried in your side garden, Lady Cate,” Jack noted.

“Yes, but who?”

“Another mystery,” Jack answered with a deep sigh. “So much for getting back to normal.”

* * *

THE END

A SPY AT DUNHAVEN CASTLE



A CATE KENSIE MYSTERY

*For Catherine Marie HuWalt, named after my grandmother who provided
the model for Cate Kensie*

CHAPTER 1



Cate shivered despite the warmer spring weather. She pulled her cardigan closer around her as she bit her lower lip.

“It’s definitely human,” the police officer said, as he bent over a set of white bones exposed in the soil of Dunhaven Castle’s side garden.

“We suspected as much,” Jack answered.

The man stood and brushed the dirt from his fingertips. “We’ll get someone up here to remove the remains. I’m no expert, but I’d venture to say they’ve been here a while. We’ll send them out for analysis, but I wouldn’t hold your breath on any major findings. These cases are pretty difficult to make headway on.”

“Thanks, Ben,” Jack said, extending his hand for a shake.

Ben Thomson nodded and offered to see himself off the estate, disappearing around the corner of the castle.

Cate sighed and pressed her hand to her forehead. “That poor person,” she lamented. “Killed and buried in a garden like they were meaningless.”

“Well, they’ve been found now,” Jack said.

“Yes, thanks to Riley and Bailey.” The two small dogs, who had been shut inside the castle walls after digging up the skeleton, had made the gruesome discovery.

Cate stared at the makeshift grave with its white bones poking through the dirt, contrasted by the bright spring grass. She narrowed her eyes at it.

“Caaaate,” Jack warned.

“I wonder...”

“Caaaaaate,” Jack chided.

“Who it is,” Cate finished.

“Cate! Now, don’t go starting your wondering. Every time you wonder, we end up in a whole host of trouble.”

“My wondering has solved more than one mystery at Dunhaven Castle and has righted several wrongs.”

“And it’s also gotten you nearly drowned, both of us shot at, and you nearly killed when that psychopathic supernatural...” Jack stumbled around for the word, “creature,” he finally spat out, “put you inside a coffin! We’ve done our fair share of righting wrongs. Including the last wrong we righted.”

“Yes, at least we’re no longer in danger of disappearing into another century,” Cate agreed. She stared down at the timepiece around her neck – a new pocket watch pendant. It had the ability to control the new universal time portal which had emerged within the castle walls.

After months of slipping in and out of other eras at whim, Cate and Jack, with the help of an odd set of new friends from across the pond who called themselves the Shadow Slayers, managed to tame the time rips.

Jack nodded in agreement. “Yes, thanks to our other unique friends in the supernatural world. Speaking of, did you get rid of that necklace?” Jack referred to the ostentatious sapphire and diamond necklace Duke Marcus Northcott gave Cate when he had held her hostage in the 1700s. Despite the negative memories associated with it, Cate kept it in her jewelry box. She found herself unable to part with the priceless object, though this had little to do with the value. For some reason, Cate felt a strong draw to it.

Cate avoided his stare, scuffing her foot into the grass. “Caaaaaate,” Jack prodded.

Cate pulled her lips back into a half-grimace. “No, I didn’t.”

“Why not? That madman nearly killed you! Cate, get rid of it.”

“I will. I just... I’ll give it to Mrs. Campbell for the auction at the Presidents’ Ball. I’m sure she’ll be thrilled with it.”

“No,” Jack disagreed. “Get rid of it now. Chuck it in the bin, toss it in the loch, anything. Just get it out of the castle.”

“If I do that, I’ll need a distraction, so, it’s a perfect time to dive into a normal mystery!”

Jack started to nod, then quickly turned his motion into a head shake. He puckered his lips. “Why would you need a distraction?”

“That necklace is... I told you, I feel some connection to it. Getting rid of it will be difficult. So, I’ll need a distraction. And this mystery is the perfect thing!”

“Now, Cate...”

“Jack! There’s a body in my garden! This will be the talk of the town. And with the upcoming party, we need some answers!”

“That is where you’re wrong. The party is in six weeks. All the rumors will have died down by then.”

“Yes,” Cate agreed, “because we’ll have solved the case.”

Jack shook his head at her. “Oh, Lady Cate, there’s never any stopping you, is there?”

Cate raised her chin and smiled at him. “Nope!”

“Well, I suppose I can hope this is an open and shut case by the police and we’ve got no investigating to do.”

“We’ll see,” Cate said, as they began their hike back to the castle.

“I’ll put some temporary fencing around the crime scene to keep the dogs away from it until they remove the bones.”

“Thanks. They’ve done enough damage already.”

“See you later, Cate,” Jack said with a salute, as she ducked through the castle’s front doors. Her two furry friends, Riley and Bailey, bounded toward her.

“Hello, boys,” Cate said, as she crouched to ruffle their fur. “Well, thanks to you two, we have another mystery to solve. Jack’s eternally grateful.”

Riley kissed her on the cheek in response. “He’s putting up a fence to keep you two out of there until the police can remove the bones.”

“Oh, what a terrible thing,” Mrs. Fraser said, as she passed through the foyer. “Has little Benny left?”

“Little Benny?”

“Aye, the officer.”

“Oh, right,” Cate said.

“He’ll always be little Benny to me. I can remember him being just a wee lad and now he’s a police officer. Investigating a body in the garden!”

“He’s sending a team to remove the remains and then I guess they’ll do an investigation. Try to identify who it is. He didn’t hold out a lot of hope since it’s a cold case.”

Mrs. Fraser shook her head with a somber expression on her face. “Well, I suppose at least once the body’s been removed, the poor person can be properly laid to rest.”

Cate nodded in agreement. “Will you be taking your dinner in the library tonight?”

“Yes,” Cate said, with another nod. “Thanks, Mrs. Fraser.”

Mrs. Fraser continued down the hall, disappearing down the stairs leading to the kitchen. Cate checked her timepiece. She had some time before dinner.

She raised her eyes up the massive main staircase, following its red-carpeted stairs up to the next floor. She bit her lower lip as she ascended the staircase, the dogs trailing behind her. Cate stared upward as her fingers absentmindedly caressed the banister on the way up.

She wandered through the halls and pushed through the doors to her private sitting room. She navigated across it and into her bedroom. Her eyes fell on the large jewelry box standing against the adjacent wall.

Cate crossed to it. With a tilt of her head, she gazed down at a drawer just above the curved legs. Her fingers lingered on the drawer pull as her mind conjured an image of the jewelry piece inside. She pictured the eleven sapphires surrounded by diamonds creating the collar of the necklace. From it hung a large teardrop sapphire, also encrusted in diamonds.

She swallowed hard as she recalled receiving it while held captive at Duke Northcott’s rented home on the outskirts of Dunhaven in 1792. Her eyebrow arched as she remembered him sweeping her hair away to fasten the clasp. Her pulse quickened as his voice echoed in her mind. “Keep this as a reminder of me.”

Cate slid the drawer open. The necklace lay framed by the black velvet inside the drawer. Cate reached for it. Her fingertips glided across the jewels. She stared unblinking at its opulence. The gems sparkled in the light. Her fingers lingered on the large central sapphire.

Cate’s breathing turned ragged, and her heart thudded in her chest. Her mind went blank and all she could see was the necklace. The world melted away around her.

Something touched her leg. Cate’s brow furrowed, but she continued to stare at the necklace. The sensation on her leg continued. Cate tore her eyes from the shiny object and glanced to her side. In an instant, her mind snapped back to reality.

Riley stood on his hind legs, his front feet planted on Cate's thigh. "Hey, buddy," she said with a smile, as she reached to scoop him up.

"Lady Cate?" she heard Molly's voice call. "Lady Cate? Yoo-hoo!"

Cate slammed the drawer containing the necklace shut and hurried to her sitting room.

A smile spread across Molly's face as she spotted her. "There you are."

"Yes, I just ran to freshen up."

"Must have been some refresh," Molly said. "It's after five!"

"What?" Cate questioned. She glanced at her timepiece. She'd come upstairs shortly after four. She hadn't spent an hour here. The watch's face told a different story. The second hand ticked by, and the others indicated a time of 5:04 p.m. Cate winced at the watch.

"Something wrong, Lady Cate?" Molly asked.

"No, just lost track of time."

"Oh, well, I'm not surprised," Molly said, waving her hand in the air. "You're always doing that with your research and whatnot. Anyway, nearly time for your dinner. I just wanted to check to see if you wanted blueberry pie or cherry. Mrs. Fraser and I made both."

Cate nodded and smiled as she crossed the room. "Uh, blueberry, thank you," Cate said. Her mind flitted back to the blue jewelry steps away. She shook her head, clearing the image from her mind. With it pushed aside, she followed Molly from the room, Riley in her arms and Bailey in tow behind her.

* * *

Cate awoke the next morning with the alarm screaming in her ear. The sun was already peeking over the moors in the distance. Cate slapped the alarm to silence it before pushing up to sit. She dangled her legs over the edge of the bed. Cate's eyelids threatened to close as she rubbed her face.

She sat for another few moments in an exhausted stupor before she finally rose and padded to the bathroom, hoping a shower could help clear her head.

When Cate emerged dressed for the day, she still struggled to stifle a yawn. What had left her so exhausted, she wondered, as she roused the

dogs from their beds? After breakfast, Cate joined Molly and Mrs. Fraser in the kitchen for a cuppa, craving the caffeine.

“When are the police returning for the...” Molly paused, her eyes darting side-to-side before she whispered, “bones.”

“Today,” Cate announced, after a sip of the sweet tea.

“Ugh, terrible business,” Mrs. Fraser said.

Cate nodded. “Yes, I agree.”

“I, for one, will be glad when the bones are gone.”

“Me too,” Cate admitted. “Jack put up a temporary fence, so the dogs don’t get at it again.”

Molly shivered.

Mrs. Fraser eyed her. “Someone walk over your grave?”

“No,” Molly countered, “Cate walked over someone else’s and now their bones are laying in the garden.”

“Superstitious, Molly?”

Molly pursed her lips and shrugged. “Maybe a little.”

Mrs. Fraser chuckled. “Well, the bones will be gone soon enough.” She patted Molly’s arm.

“Not soon enough.”

“You’re really worried!” Cate said, peering over her teacup.

Molly’s eyes widened. “There is a body buried in the side garden. Someone was probably murdered and dumped in a shallow grave there. And now her sorry excuse for a resting place has been defiled. This is the perfect recipe for a ghost.” She slapped her hand against the table with a determined expression.

“There are no such things as ghosts, Miss Molly,” Mrs. Fraser said.

Molly didn’t respond. Cate narrowed her eyes at her friend.

Mrs. Fraser continued, “In all my years at Dunhaven, I have never encountered so much as a stray wisp of smoke, let alone a ghost. It’ll be all right.”

“After creepy Douglas and his devil-worshipping, I just feel unsettled.” Molly’s eyes grew to the size of saucers, and she focused blankly at the table in front of her, before she snapped her eyes up to Cate’s. “You don’t think... ohhhhh.” She groaned and shook her head.

“Don’t think what?” Cate asked.

Molly swallowed hard and leaned forward. She whispered, “That Douglas killed her during one of his satanic ceremonies?”

CHAPTER 2



Cate cocked her head and frowned. “No. In all the research I’ve done, nothing has given any indication Douglas was a devil worshiper, nor that he engaged in any strange ceremonies, *nor* that he killed anyone!”

“But...” Molly flicked her eyes to Mrs. Fraser. “Emily’s story...”

“Was just a story, Molly,” Mrs. Fraser assured her.

“With Damien’s help, I translated all of those journals. They detailed his experiments, all of which were pretty standard scientific stuff. No weird occult obsessions or anything.”

Molly’s forehead wrinkled as she processed Cate’s statements.

Cate bit her lower lip, her face pinching with concern. When the time rips were misbehaving, one had opened and swallowed up an unsuspecting Molly. She had slipped back to some unknown century and encountered a castle resident wandering through the hall. “Molly, is this about the...”

“No,” Molly interrupted before she went further. “No. And it’s okay. I told Emily.”

“Aye, and I convinced her she did not see any woman roaming the front hallway.”

“Now that I think about it,” Molly explained, “I’m pretty sure I saw a curtain fluttering or something similar. Definitely *not* a woman.”

Cate smiled and nodded. “Good. Because this castle is *not* haunted.”

“I’ll still be glad when the bones are gone,” Molly said.

“Mrs. Fraser,” Cate said, “do you know of any disappearances? The police said not to expect much in the way of solving this, but my curiosity is piqued.”

Mrs. Fraser narrowed her eyes and focused her gaze at a random spot in the air. After a moment, she shook her head. “None that I recall. We haven’t had a murder or missing person in Dunhaven in my lifetime.”

“At least we’re living in a safe town, even if there are ghosts,” Molly said with a chuckle.

“There are *no* ghosts!” Cate insisted. “Though, you’re right. While it’s good to know Dunhaven is safe, it’s really puzzling. If incidents are that rare, you’d think this would be easy to track.”

“Perhaps it will be, Lady Cate,” Mrs. Fraser said, as she began to clean up from their tea.

“Let’s hope so! I’d really like to have some closure. And someone else may be looking for it, too.”

“I think young Jack would just like the bones out of the garden, especially with the party coming up.”

“Ha!” A sarcastic laugh burst from Cate’s lips. “He said we have plenty of time before the party.”

“Aye, we do. But six weeks will be gone in the blink of an eye.”

“I agree. And if this hasn’t happened in a while in Dunhaven, it will be the talk of the town.”

“You know it, Lady Cate,” Mrs. Fraser said, pointing to her.

“Well, I suppose I should get out to the garden. The police should be here soon to exhume the body.”

Molly groaned. “Can’t be soon enough.”

“Why don’t you leave the dogs with us?” Mrs. Fraser suggested. “I’ll spoil them with a few nice bones. Of the regular kind – *not* the human kind.”

“And a few extra treats,” Molly said.

“Thank you so much. I’d really prefer them to be in here than bounding around trying to steal someone’s remains.”

Cate left her two furry friends with her two human friends as she stepped from the kitchen into the bright sunshine. She shielded her eyes as she began her walk toward the side garden.

A bright orange plastic fence was strung around the makeshift grave. Jack stood nearby with the DCI Ben Thompson, who had done the initial

assessment yesterday.

“Good morning,” Cate called to them.

“Good morning,” Ben answered.

“Hello, Lady Cate,” Jack said. “No dogs today?”

“Mrs. Fraser and Molly are watching them. So we won’t have any rascals running around trying to snag any of the bones.”

“I understand it was your dogs who unearthed the remains,” Ben said.

Cate nodded, pressing her lips together in a thin line. “Yes, they did. They’ve been digging in the spot for weeks and yesterday before we called you, they pulled a few of the... well, they pulled some of the remains out.”

Ben pursed his lips and nodded. “You know, Lady Cate, you really do not need to be here. I understand this is very upsetting.”

Cate forced a weak smile. “It’s okay. I’d like to be here.”

“All right,” he said. “We’re going to get started then.”

Within moments, Cate’s quiet side garden turned into a flurry of activity. An entire crime scene unit descended on the sight. Photographs were taken from every angle. A tarp was laid out, and the crime scene unit meticulously began to lay out the skeleton and recreate the body.

The process took hours. Cate stared at the bones laid on the tarp. She wrapped her arms around her and bit her lower lip. The forensics team continued to poke at the gravesite.

Cate crinkled her brow. “Are they missing something?” she asked Ben.

“Checking for anything else, like jewelry or a weapon. Anything we can use to either solve the case or identify the person.”

Cate nodded in understanding and returned her gaze to the bones in front of her. Jack approached her. “You okay, Lady Cate? I can handle the rest if you’d like to head in.”

“I’m okay. Just wondering who this poor soul was,” Cate answered.

“It is a shame,” Jack admitted.

“With any luck, the police can identify her.”

Jack side-eyed her. “Her?” he questioned, glancing at Cate.

“The skeleton looks small. I’m just making an educated guess.”

Jack raised his eyebrows and cocked his head. “Good assessment. I guess we’ll find out if you’re right soon enough.”

“Mrs. Fraser said she can’t recall any murders or disappearances in her lifetime, so if it’s not a common occurrence, it should be easy, right?”

“Right,” he agreed. “My fingers are certainly crossed. If the police can identify this person, we’re in the clear from any of your harebrained schemes.”

“My schemes are not harebrained,” Cate argued.

“They’re half harebrained at best. Plus, I’d like to avoid... well, you know,” Jack said, raising his eyebrows at Cate.

She smiled at him. “So, you’re already considering it to solve this mystery, huh?”

“I am not. I’m already thinking of ways to avoid it.”

Cate arched an eyebrow, a playful grin on her face. She nodded in response.

“What?” Jack questioned.

“Nothing.”

“That look was not nothing, Lady Cate.”

Cate shrugged and held in a giggle. “Methinks the gentleman doth protest too much.”

“Oh, ho, ho, very funny, Lady Cate. Don’t quote Shakespeare to me. I’m being serious.”

“Shakespeare is always serious. Hamlet was very serious.”

Ben wandered toward them, ending their conversation. “We’re just about finished. We’ll be out of your hair soon.”

“And you’ll let us know if you find anything?” Cate questioned.

“As a courtesy, yes, I’ll let you know.”

“We appreciate it,” Jack said, shaking hands with the man.

“Well, I suppose that’s that. Now we wait,” Cate said.

“Aye,” Jack agreed. “And I can take down the orange fence.”

“Yep,” Cate said. “I’ll bet the dogs will be all over this on their next trip out.”

Jack checked his watch. “I suppose it can wait until after lunch. I’m starving!”

“You’re always starving,” Cate said.

They began their walk back to the castle’s kitchen door. “That’s the only plus point to time traveling,” Jack said. “Double the meals.”

Cate shook her head at him. “At least you’re finding a silver lining.”

* * *

When Cate sat down at her computer after lunch, she found her mind wandering back to the body in the garden. Her lack of focus made it impossible for her to work on her book detailing the castle's former occupants. Instead, she opted for a long walk with the dogs. She allowed them plenty of time to sniff around the newly disturbed dirt.

"No more bones, boys," she told them, though they now seemed interested in the smells left by the live humans who visited earlier today. "If only you two could give us a hint about who this was."

Riley wandered to Cate's side and stared up at her. "Yes, Riley, another mystery. And I can't stop wondering who this person was and how she ended up in our garden."

Riley offered a small whine in response. Cate tore her gaze from the dirt patch where the body had been only hours ago and ruffled the fur on Riley's head.

"Let's go do some research," she suggested. She called to Bailey and the three of them returned to the castle. Cate threaded her way through the halls to the library.

As she crossed to her desk, her eyes fell on the bookcase concealing the passage to Douglas's secret laboratory. Her mind skipped to a different era. She smiled to herself as she recalled meeting the castle's builder and her ancestor.

The smile slowly faded as she recalled the other events of 1792. A shiver shook her, and she ceased walking. The memory of being entombed alive in the family's crypt by Marcus Northcott embedded itself in her mind. She swallowed hard as she recalled cool stone pressed against her back and the sensation of being confined. His voice echoed in her head. "I'm finished with you, for now." Her lower lip quivered in response to the recollection of being plunged into darkness as the stone coffin's lid slid over top.

She twisted her head and her eyes slid upward. The urge to see the necklace he had given her overcame her. She took two steps toward the hallway before she stopped. Her mind clouded and pain shot across her forehead. She pressed her fingertips against her temples as she squeezed her eyes shut.

Cate blew out a long breath. She opened her eyes to find two furry faces staring up at her. She gave them a weak smile. "I'm okay," she said, in a

shaky voice. She wrapped her arms around her midriff and rubbed her arms. Goosebumps pocked her skin.

She shivered again and bit her lower lip as she stumbled to the desk across the room. Cate collapsed in the chair and covered her face with her hands. Being haunted by the disturbing memory of being buried alive was not surprising. However, being drawn to the necklace she wore during the escapade bothered her. Why would she long to see an item associated with so much torment?

A cold, wet nose nudged at her arm and a set of tiny paws rested against her thigh. She uncovered her face and found Riley and Bailey watching her.

No matter the circumstances, her two dogs could always soothe her. She pulled them both onto her lap and snuggled them close. She offered them both a kiss on the head. Riley returned the gesture, giving her a lick on her cheek.

“Thanks, buddy,” she said, as she rubbed his back. “I’ll be okay. I just need to get some distance from it.” She nodded as though trying to convince herself. “Maybe the necklace reminds me that I didn’t die.”

Bailey cocked his head at her words. “Yeah, even I think that’s a weak argument, Bailey.”

She sat for another few moments enjoying the comfort of her two pals. “Maybe what I need is a new project. And maybe the body in the backyard is just the thing.”

With another kiss on the top of each of their heads, Cate sent the two pups off for a nap by the fire. She popped open her laptop and waited for it to wake.

As the laptop performed its start-up tasks, Cate swiped at her cell phone. She found a new text message waiting. Cate smiled at the screen as she tapped to read the text from Damien Sherwood. His help during the last crisis at Dunhaven Castle had been invaluable, and the pair had promised to keep in touch.

Hey Cate, just checking in to see how things are going with you. No more trouble with wonky time portals, I hope.

It was nice of Damien to check in, Cate mused, as she typed a response. *No more time portals appearing at random. Thanks for checking! Just a skeleton in my garden.*

She set the phone aside and tapped into her email account, finding it filled with mostly junk. Her phone chimed as she finished deleting her junk

mail. She found another text from Damien.

A skeleton in your garden? Seriously? Like a human one? Seems like you have your hands full.

Cate responded: *Yes, a human one. I really hope we can find out what happened and who it was. I feel terrible about it.*

As Cate considered researching her current problem, Damien responded with lightning speed. *Speaking of feeling terrible... I hate to bring this up but... any more nightmares? And did you get rid of that necklace?*

Cate pursed her lips. She hadn't suffered from a nightmare last night, though it may be too soon to tell if she was rid of them for good. The trickier question concerned the necklace. Damien shared the same sentiments as Jack did about the ostentatious object. She struggled to explain away her reasoning for hanging on to the item.

She answered: *No nightmares last night. Let's hope the trend continues!*

Within seconds, she received a response. *I noticed you didn't answer about the necklace.*

Cate puckered her lips. Damien was too clever for his own good, she noted as she typed back to him. *Didn't chuck it yet, but I'm going to get rid of it soon!*

An incoming text popped onto her screen before she could toggle off her display. *Don't wait. Get rid of it NOW.*

Cate clicked off her phone and set it on the desk next to her laptop. She pulled up her search engine, but before she could type a word, her phone chimed again.

I'm serious, Cate... get rid of it, don't wait. And don't ignore me.

The message from Damien was followed by an emoticon with the tongue sticking out. Cate replied assuring him she was not ignoring him and that she would get rid of it. Her mind added the word "eventually", but she left that out of her message.

Her mind turned toward the necklace. No one wanted her to keep it. Why didn't she get rid of it like they asked of her? Perhaps she was too stubborn for her own good. Perhaps it was their insistence that held her back and made her want to keep it until she got rid of it on her own terms.

Perhaps it was something else. Her brain clouded as she dwelled on the necklace, its diamonds and sapphires sparkling in her mind's eye.

CHAPTER 3



She shook her head to clear her mind, pushing images of the necklace away. “I can’t get rid of it yet,” she mumbled aloud.

With her mind made up, she pushed herself to focus on her laptop. Cate began with a series of Google searches regarding missing persons in Dunhaven. Several results populated on her screen. Several of the top hits were about missing people, but not within the vicinity of Dunhaven. Cate continued to sort through the list of results, finding it offered little in the way of information.

She refined her search and scanned the new list of results. Nothing pointed her toward any information regarding the body. It appeared Mrs. Fraser was correct. People didn’t disappear in Dunhaven.

Cate leaned back in her chair, tenting her fingers. She narrowed her eyes as she considered other avenues to pursue. With no news stories from Dunhaven regarding missing persons, who could the individual buried in her backyard be?

Cate pulled a sheet of paper from the desk drawer and jotted down a few notes.

Person not from Dunhaven - no news reports of a missing person - at least not recently

Cate tapped the pen against her lips. She added: *Could the disappearance be older than news reports listed online?*

She made a note to inquire with Mrs. Campbell at their meeting tomorrow. Perhaps they had old news articles predating those on the

internet that could identify the person.

A new idea occurred to Cate, and she jotted down the words: *Someone from out of town?*

Perhaps, Cate ruminated, the disappearance was not of a Dunhaven resident. Perhaps the person was visiting on vacation, in town for business or some other reason when they were killed. Then a record of them should exist. Surely, someone reported them missing at some point.

She may need to expand her search into neighboring towns. What if the person came from even further than that? She'd cross that bridge if she came to it.

Cate leaned forward and began to type another search when the doors to the library opened. Molly carried a tray with Cate's dinner.

"Time to quit working and eat!" she announced.

"I wasn't getting very far anyway," Cate admitted, as she stood and stretched.

"Working on the book?" Molly asked.

"No. I was actually trying to see if I could find any information on our former side garden resident."

Molly winced. "I'm not sure I want to know, but did you find anything?"

"Not a thing. Though I'm not sure what I expected to find."

"Well, I'm certain you'll solve it eventually," Molly said. "I've never known Cate Kensie to be stuck for long."

Cate offered her a smile as she settled into her leather armchair. She hoped Molly was correct. She really wanted to solve the mystery of the garden guest.

* * *

Cate's heart beat hard against her ribs. Her pulse raced. Her breaths came in short, shallow gasps. She struggled to move, but found herself unable to.

The figure of Marcus Northcott loomed over her. He spoke, promising her he was finished with her. For now. He pressed his hand over the necklace, his icy fingers brushing against Cate's skin.

"Keep this to remember me by," he said.

He grasped the stone lid and began to shift it over the coffin's top. Her lower lip quivered as tears clouded her vision. It narrowed to a pinpoint as darkness closed in around her.

The cold stone of the coffin pressed against her. Her arms were pinned at her sides. The weight of the sapphire and diamond necklace pressed against her collarbone. The pressure from Duke Northcott's hand as he placed it against the necklace lingered on Cate's skin. It felt as though his icy fingerprints were burned into her skin.

"Help!" she screamed. "Help me! Don't leave me here!"

The tears spilled from her eyes and ran sideways down her face, wetting her hairline. "Please, don't leave me," she whimpered again.

* * *

Cate gasped as her eyes shot open. She gulped air, her eyes darting around her bedroom. She squeezed her lips together, forcing herself to slow her breath. She fumbled with the lamp on her night table, knocking it over as her trembling hands attempted to flick it to the on position.

The two lumps on her bed shot up to standing. Riley hurried to Cate's side and Bailey offered a yip in response to the crash.

"Sorry, guys," Cate said with a wince. She pushed herself up to sit and dangled over the side of the bed to grasp the lamp. She grabbed it by the shade and hauled it upward, setting it upright on the table.

With a groan, she covered her face with her hands before sliding them over her hair. Cate settled back into her pillows. Out of the corner of her eye, she spotted her dream journal. The details of her nightmare flooded back into her mind. She bit her lower lip as her fingertips glided over the smooth, cool cover.

Cate pulled the book onto her lap and flipped through the pages. Page after page flashed in front of her eyes. Written words in her own handwriting outlined months of terrifying dreams involving Marcus Northcott.

Should she detail this nightmare in the journal? It involved Marcus Northcott. They all involved Marcus Northcott. That was the only similarity to the others, though.

Unable to fall asleep, Cate grabbed her pen and began to write. While she did not find it abnormal to suffer from a nightmare about the frightening ordeal she'd just experienced in 1792 at the hands of that man, she hoped it had nothing to do with the others in the journal.

She desperately wished her bad dreams were over and her latest one was merely a remnant of a terrifying experience. She snapped the journal closed and slid it onto her night table. She reached for the light, but changed her mind, deciding to leave it on as she tried to drift back to sleep.

After a few moments, she braved it, flicking off the light and plunging the room into darkness. In the quiet blackness, she stared out the window at the starry sky.

The glow of the half-moon cast long shadows across her floor. She found herself unable to close her eyes. Fear still coursed through her veins.

She reached toward her bare neck framed by her flannel pajama collar. She rubbed her fingers along her collarbone. The image of the sapphire necklace flashed through her mind. Her thoughts dwelled on the jewelry.

Her eyes flicked to the jewelry box across the room. She focused on the bottom drawer. After a moment, she rose from the bed and wandered to the wooden armoire. The drawer slid open, and she spied the sparkling jewelry even in the darkened room.

Cate reached for it, letting her fingertips glide over the smooth, polished stones. She curled her slender fingers around the center stone and lifted the necklace from the drawer. With it clutched to her chest, she strode back to bed, climbed in, and nestled under the covers.

Holding the necklace close to her heart, she closed her eyes and drifted off to sleep in minutes.

* * *

When Cate awoke the next morning, the sun was already cresting the moors. It painted the sky a brilliant shade of red and purple. Cate rolled onto her back and took a deep breath. She became aware of her hand, balled in a fist with the sapphire necklace still clutched within her grasp.

The memory of her dream and subsequent reaction flooded back into her mind. Why had she risen and retrieved the necklace? And why had it seemed to calm her?

Cate recalled drifting off to sleep shortly after returning to bed with the necklace. Perhaps she'd just been too weary to do anything but fall asleep then, Cate ruminated. Maybe the necklace was unrelated to her falling asleep.

Cate stretched and climbed from her bed. She deposited the necklace in the bottom drawer of the jewelry armoire, before continuing on to begin her day.

Instinctively, she found herself returning to the spot where the bones had been exhumed the previous day. As the dogs chased each other around a row of bushes, Cate stared at the dirt.

"Who were you?" she whispered. "And what happened to you?"

With no answers forthcoming, Cate returned to the castle for a warm breakfast before her morning meeting with Isla Campbell.

While scheduled for nine, Cate had no doubt she'd see Mrs. Campbell at the stroke of 8:45 a.m. The party planning whiz barreled up the driveway in her sleek black car, her brakes screeching to a halt at precisely quarter to nine.

The slight woman flew from her car and raced to her backseat to gather her materials. "Oh, Lady Cate," she exclaimed, as she pulled folders, fabric swatches, a calendar, a tote bag filled with hidden items and more from her car, "I cannot begin to tell you how excited I am."

"I can imagine. Landing the Presidents' Ball is quite a feat, I'm told," Cate answered. "Can I help you with anything?"

"Oh, no, no, no. I've got it!" She kicked the door shut and turned to face Cate with a grin. "Ready!"

Cate led her into the sitting room. Mrs. Fraser already waited with a tray of tea. "I beat you to it, Lady Cate," she said. "Already brought tea. And Molly's tried her hand at these new lemon crisps. I put some shortbreads out, too, just in case, but I think you may enjoy these."

"Oh, Emily, hello," Mrs. Campbell said. "Got the youngster showing the old dog some new tricks, eh?"

Cate bit her lower lip and offered a slight shake of her head toward Mrs. Fraser. By the woman's expression, she was sure Mrs. Fraser was fuming. Molly would get an earful about the "ninny" the moment Mrs. Fraser returned to the comfort of her kitchen.

"Not really," Mrs. Fraser said. "I'd not be much of a baker if I'd never heard of a lemon crisp before. Just allowing the 'youngster,' as you put it,

to spread her wings and bake something of her choosing. She's got to have a signature item."

Mrs. Campbell offered a tight-lipped smile that bordered on a smirk and a shoulder shrug before plopping onto the loveseat. She began arranging her party planning paraphernalia around her, putting a nonverbal end to her conversation with Mrs. Fraser.

"If you need anything else, Lady Cate, just ring."

"I will, thank you, Mrs. Fraser. Please tell Molly the lemon cookies look delicious and, of course, I can't resist your shortbreads."

Mrs. Fraser offered Cate a smile, before retreating through the doors leading to the back hall.

Mrs. Campbell continued to lay out her materials before snatching a large leather folder from her tote bag. She unzipped it, revealing a notebook and pen inside. After removing the pen, she drew in a deep breath, exhaled sharply, and raised her eyes to meet Cate's.

Cate smiled at her. "Where would you like to begin?" Cate asked.

"Well," Mrs. Campbell began, "I hate to begin here, but I feel as though I must."

Cate's mind shot forward, preparing for what she believed was inevitable.

Mrs. Campbell leaned forward and whispered, "The body." She pursed her lips and raised her eyebrows.

"Yes, of course," Cate answered. "The remains have already been removed, so that won't be an issue. And..."

"It's not just the bones," Mrs. Campbell said. "It's the rumors, of course. A body... found on the grounds of Dunhaven Castle." Mrs. Campbell pulled the corners of her mouth into a frown and shivered dramatically.

Cate opened her mouth to respond, when Mrs. Campbell continued. "It's simply ghastly!"

"Well, if anyone can turn this around, I'm certain you can," Cate said. "And as Jack pointed out, we have six weeks before the anniversary party and nearly three months before the Presidents' Ball. The rumors should have run their course by then."

"Let's hope," Mrs. Campbell said.

"On that note," Cate said, before they moved on to other topics, "I wondered if you could be of any assistance with identifying the remains."

Mrs. Campbell furrowed her brow, and she shook her head as though shocked. "How could I possibly help?"

"Well, you are always a wealth of information to assist me with my castle research. I wondered if you may have any information on unsolved disappearances, new or old, that may explain who this may be."

"I don't know of any castle occupants who went missing; certainly none of the earls or countesses," Mrs. Campbell said.

"I haven't come across anything of that nature either. Though I haven't come across anyone who's gone missing in the Dunhaven area," Cate answered.

"No, disappearances are not common here," Mrs. Campbell agreed.

"I can't help but be curious," Cate prodded. "I feel somewhat responsible since the poor person was found on my property."

"Oh, don't be silly, Lady Cate. Certainly, no one blames *you*!"

"Still, I'd like to learn as much as I can. Would you mind helping me track down any news stories that may be relevant?"

"I shall have the assistant librarian gather any materials that may be applicable!"

"Wonderful. Do you mind if I stop in tomorrow to pick them up?"

"Not at all! I'll text her right now." Mrs. Campbell tapped at her phone before setting it down and smiling. "There we are."

"Thank you so much, Mrs. Campbell."

"I am always happy to be of assistance."

"Now, about the party," Cate began.

She was interrupted by Mrs. Campbell's waving finger. "Oh, this is far more than a party," Mrs. Campbell corrected. "The Presidents' Ball is an *event*!" She waved her arms in the air with flourish to punctuate the statement. "It takes place over the span of several days..."

Cate was exhausted already. Mrs. Campbell continued on with her explanation: a formal dinner Friday evening, an auction and ball on Saturday with various other side events, and a brunch on Sunday to close the event. The line-up did little to alleviate Cate's apprehension. She smiled as detail after endless detail paraded through her mind.

Mrs. Campbell seemed to have a handle on everything, as usual. She suggested castle tours, garden tours, a photo opportunity with Cate, a garden tea party, an evening concert, and more. Cate's eyes bulged at the amount of planning it would take the pull this off. The ever-confident Mrs.

Campbell seemed unbothered by the level of preparation, stating simply, “I want to make this the best Presidents’ Ball the association has ever experienced. I want it to be talked about for years to come.”

“Well, I certainly think it will be that!” Cate answered, after she detailed her itinerary.

“Now, I’ve got a great deal to coordinate, but do you mind if I take up just a tad more of your time to go over a few minor things for your anniversary party?”

“Not at all!” Cate answered.

They spent another hour discussing modifications and details for the party six weeks away. After that, Mrs. Campbell seemed satisfied with their work. Cate showed her out, waving as she shot off down the driveway on a mission to find the perfect something-or-other for one of the parties.

Cate glanced down at her timepiece hanging from her neck. The noon hour approached. Her rumbling stomach also announced the time. She returned to the sitting room and grabbed the tea tray before heading downstairs to lunch with her staff.

She giggled as she heard Mrs. Fraser’s voice filtering down the hall as she approached the kitchen.

“... cannae believe she is *still* here. That infernal woman does not understand how to be respectful of other’s time. I only hope she won’t be joining us for lunch. Or worse, make poor Lady Cate late. The poor girl is likely starving.”

“I had plenty of cookies to tide me over,” Cate remarked, as she entered the kitchen and set the tray on the counter.

“Ah, Lady Cate, thank goodness she’s finally left you alone,” Mrs. Fraser said.

“It was a doozy of a meeting, that’s for sure,” Cate answered, as Molly cleared the tray.

“What did the party czar do today to upset you, Mrs. Fraser?” Jack inquired, as he pushed through the door with Mr. Fraser trailing behind him. “I could hear you all the way outside most of the morning.”

The statement elicited another chuckle from Cate.

“She called me an old dog!” Mrs. Fraser exclaimed, snapping her dishtowel against the counter. “The nerve of her. Calling me old and a dog.”

Jack lifted his eyebrows at the statement.

“She asked if Molly was showing the old dog a few new tricks with the lemon crisps.”

“Ohhh,” Jack said, with a nod of understanding.

“That’ll be the day,” Mrs. Fraser said with a harrumph. “I know all the tricks there are to know. And don’t you forget it!” She wagged her finger at Molly.

“I have no doubt, Mrs. Fraser,” Molly answered.

Jack plopped into his seat at the table. “And what outrageous requests does she have for these parties?”

Cate sighed as she eased into a chair across from Jack. “Well, she asked how quickly an oak tree grows.”

Jack furrowed his brow. “Why?”

“She hoped you could plant one now and that it would grow large enough in six weeks to hang a swing from for a photoshoot.”

“Is she insane?”

Cate shrugged. “I told her I did not believe that was likely. Then she asked if it was possible to uproot a large enough tree and transplant it.”

“That does it,” Jack said, slapping his hand against the table. “She’s certifiable.”

“At least no snow machine.”

“No,” Jack answered, “but it will be summer for both parties. I’m surprised she hasn’t asked us to harness the sun and pull it closer to ensure warm weather.”

“There were some discussions about contingency plans for inclement weather. She has a large number of events scheduled outside. She said since Mr. Fraser seems so talented with his garden designs perhaps he’ll enjoy the challenge of creating a magical garden display for each party.”

“I suppose I should take that as a compliment,” Mr. Fraser said in his soft-spoken manner.

“Wait until you hear what she wants before you decide,” Jack cautioned.

“For the anniversary party she requested something along the lines of The Secret Garden,” Cate said with a shrug. “And for the Presidents’ Ball, she said ‘whimsical fairyland, like in Dance of the Sugar Plum Fairies.’”

Mr. Fraser’s eyes widened, and he cocked his head. After a moment, he blew out a breath. “I’ve got some ideas. I’ll sketch them up.”

“You never cease to amaze me, Mr. Fraser,” Cate said.

“As long as you like them, Lady Cate, that’s all that matters.”

“Because we know Mrs. Campbell will never be satisfied,” Jack added.

“It’s pretty bad when it’s easier to impress a countess than a librarian,” Molly said.

“And I’m still raw over her calling me a dog,” Mrs. Fraser added, as they set the lunch on the table.

“Speaking of,” Cate said, “where are the dogs?”

CHAPTER 4



Everyone glanced around the room in search of the two missing pups. “Oh, there’s one,” Jack joked, pointing at Mrs. Fraser.

She swatted at him with her dishtowel. “Watch yourself, young Jack, I don’t have to hold my temper with you like I do with her.”

Jack held his hands up to defend against the flying towel as he laughed. “I’m only joking, Mrs. Fraser. Anyway, I think you’d better ready your fighting skills for Lady Cate. It seems you’ve lost her dogs.”

“Those two rascals are somewhere about,” Mrs. Fraser said. “They went tearing out of here about fifteen minutes ago. I assume they heard something.”

“Oh, no,” Jack groaned. “I hope it’s not another body.”

“You and me both!” Cate exclaimed as she rose from the table. “That’s another thing Mrs. Campbell is having a fit about.”

“Really?” Molly inquired.

“Yes. The rumors and all of that after we found a body on the grounds. She doesn’t want it to dampen the festivities. I told her it would die down before the first party.”

“News doesn’t always die down in Dunhaven,” Mrs. Fraser said.

Cate called down the hall to both dogs. “Really?”

Mrs. Fraser gave a slow shake of her head and puckered her lips. “Didnae you figure that out when everyone here knew the story about Douglas and the odd occurrences here?”

“Good point,” Jack said, as Cate gave another call down the hall. “Everyone knows about devil-worshipper Douglas and that’s been over two centuries.”

“Aye, and it still hasn’t died down,” Mrs. Fraser answered.

“You have a point,” Cate answered. The sound of claws and scampering feet echoed through the kitchen. Two small dogs scampered into the room moments later. “There you are! And where have you two been this time?”

“Finding a secret passage?” Mrs. Fraser inquired.

“Digging up bones?” Jack asked.

“Chasing ghosts?” Molly questioned.

“Probably just being rascals,” Mr. Fraser ended with.

“Definitely that,” Cate answered, pointing at Mr. Fraser. “Look at you two.”

A sheen of dust covered Bailey’s gray fur, making him a shade lighter than normal and a cobweb clung to Riley’s face, haphazardly draped from the top of his head and down his ear before hooking onto a whisker and dangling from his chin.

Cate swiped the cobweb away while Molly dusted Bailey with a rag.

“Ah, they look like you, Lady Cate, when you’ve been crawling around in a closed-off area.”

“Yes,” Cate agreed. “I wonder what closed-off area they managed to get themselves off to.”

“We may have to follow them next time,” Molly suggested. “Maybe they found something cool.”

“Looks like all they found is dirt,” Mrs. Fraser said. “We may want to have the CLEANING company follow them.”

Cate chuckled at the suggestion as she returned to her seat. “I hope the police can figure out who this is. Maybe that will put an end to the rumors.”

“They didn’t seem to be too certain they’d find anything,” Jack said.

“No. I asked Mrs. Campbell to put together a list of articles about disappearances in the area that may connect to it. We’ll see what she comes up with.”

“Well, if there’s a dark secret lurking, you’d better believe Isla Campbell knows all about it,” Mrs. Fraser said.

“That’s what I’m counting on, Mrs. Fraser,” Cate said with a wink.

* * *

Cate spent her afternoon working on her manuscript. After her visit to 1792, she had a wealth of information and insight on the castle's builder, Douglas MacKenzie. Though she found it easy to detail Douglas from a personal perspective and her writing flowed easily, her mind continued to return to the latest mystery.

Even after climbing into bed after a long evening stroll around the property, Cate's mind couldn't settle. It bounced from topic to topic. She began first with the skeleton in the garden. She pondered who it could be and why they were buried there. She wondered if they'd ever determine answers to those questions and strategized ways to search for information.

Her mind turned to another topic, as her fingers absentmindedly caressed the soft fur on Riley's head. Where had her two friends disappeared to earlier? They usually did not roam around the confines of the castle. What had drawn their attention? Perhaps they'd heard Cate call her goodbye to Mrs. Campbell and sought her out. Cate shook her head. That didn't seem likely. Surely she would have run into them if that was the case.

Cate rolled her head to the side and glanced down at Riley and Bailey. "Where did you two disappear to today?" she whispered. Riley adjusted his head, his dark eyes peeking at her before slowly drifting shut again.

With no answers, Cate closed her eyes. Thoughts whirled through her mind. Images flashed past: the garden, Riley's cobwebbed face, Bailey's dusty back, a skeleton, a mysterious shadow of a person, a lightning bolt, a fireball, the family crypt, a blue satin dress. Cate drifted to sleep as her mind focused on one image. A blue sapphire and diamond necklace.

* * *

The alarm chirped, stirring Cate from a sound sleep. Blindly, her fingers found the clock and silenced it. With a deep inhale, Cate rolled onto her back and stretched.

As she reached overhead, something smacked against her headboard. The scraping sound caused Cate to snap her eyes open. She glanced up at her fist. Something dangled from it. Cate pulled it toward her chest and sat up. She reached for her lamp and flicked it on, squinting against the bright light that filled the room.

Cate's lips parted as she stared at the item in her hand. The large teardrop sapphire gleamed in the light. The smaller sapphires, surrounded by diamonds, dangled from her open palm.

Cate swallowed hard, the crease between her eyes deepening as she stared at the necklace. "How did I get this?" she whispered.

Cate went over the events of the previous night in her mind. She'd drifted off to sleep pondering the mystery of the skeleton and the dogs' disappearance. Her mind had flitted from thought to thought after that.

She recalled thinking about the necklace before falling asleep, but she did not recall rising from her bed and retrieving it.

She must have done it, she assumed. She must have risen at some point and wandered over to get the necklace, then crawled back in bed with it. Perhaps she was half-asleep when she did it. Perhaps she had sleepwalked. A frightening thought, but she couldn't explain it otherwise.

Cate stared down at the sparkling gems. A shudder shook her body, and she discarded the necklace onto her comforter, shoving it away. She drew her knees to her chest and stared at the rejected item.

After a moment, she snatched it and hurried across the room. She shoved it into the bottom drawer of the jewelry armoire and slammed the drawer shut. With a deep exhale, she spun around and leaned against the heavy wooden furniture piece.

Jack's words rang in her mind. "Get rid of it."

Cate shook her head and left the armoire behind in favor of a shower. Her mind could not process disposing of the necklace now.

* * *

Cate emerged into the bright spring sunshine. The dogs raced ahead of her, frolicking in the cool breeze. Cate watched them as they played tug-of-war with a wayward branch Bailey found. Riley snagged it from within his brother's iron-jawed grip and pranced away with his prize as Bailey chased after him. Soon, the branch lost its luster for both dogs, and they scampered away in search of something else to play with.

Cate smiled at them as they danced around the back garden. She raised an eyebrow as she gazed out over it, wondering what plans Mr. Fraser may create to bring a magical theme to her two upcoming events. In six short

weeks, Cate would be celebrating her one-year anniversary as the Countess of Dunhavenshire.

She still recalled the moment she'd arrived in the back of Mr. Smythe's black rental car. Even after a year, Cate couldn't believe the turn of events in her life. She twisted to take in the castle behind her. Cast in yellow hues of the rising sun, the castle gleamed at her like a magical fairy tale.

She smiled at it, before turning back to clap her hands and call the dogs back. She'd take a long walk with them after breakfast before she traveled into the quaint town of Dunhaven to pick up the articles Mrs. Campbell put together for her.

After her morning trek around the property, Cate headed into town, parking near the town's center and enjoying a walk along the streets in the brisk air to the library.

"Hi," Cate greeted the assistant behind the desk with a broad smile. It was the same girl who she'd spoken with shortly after she'd arrived. The girl had never quite forgiven her for strong-arming her into borrowing materials from the library that were not meant to be lent out.

"Lady Cate, how can I help you?" she said, her lips set in a firm line, one eyebrow arched.

"I believe Mrs. Campbell had a packet for me to pick up?" Cate said.

"Lady Cate!" Mrs. Campbell called from her office behind the desk. "Good morning!"

"Good morning, Mrs. Campbell. I was just asking Beth about the packet you put together."

"Yes, of course!" Mrs. Campbell swiped the folder Beth pulled from under the desk and held it out toward Cate.

Cate reached for it, but Mrs. Campbell pulled it back. "Now, there's not much," she said, cocking her head and tapping the slim folder. "I told you there was nothing untoward that happened in Dunhaven." She waved a finger in the air. "Well," she added, "nothing untoward except some of those goings-on in the castle." She offered a coy smirk.

"Well, I suppose there has to be some excitement!" Cate said, with a hollow chuckle. "And again, thank you for putting together whatever you could find."

"Have you heard anything about the case?"

"Not yet. I hope to hear soon."

"I certainly hope we hear before the party so the matter can die down."

“I won’t let up on them until we get somewhere.”

Mrs. Campbell gave a nod of approval toward Cate and relinquished the folder to her.

“See you next week, Lady Cate. Wednesday, 9 a.m. sharp!”

“See you then!”

Cate offered a wave as she pushed through the doors into the cool Scottish morning air. She resisted the urge to claw through the folder and determine if anything could help identify the body removed from her garden. Instead, the shops caught her eye.

She shoved the folder into her tote bag and decided to spend the rest of her morning shopping. She strolled into one of her favorite boutique shops, carrying everything from handmade gifts to mainstream products.

“Lady Cate!” Harry, the shop owner, greeted her. He stared down at the floor, searching around her feet. “Where are my two favorite buddies?”

“Back at the castle, enjoying being spoiled by Mrs. Fraser and Molly,” Cate answered. “How are you, Harry?”

“Doing just fine. And you?”

“I’m doing very well, thank you.”

“Getting ready for that big party?”

“I am,” Cate said with a nod. “Will you and Helen be attending?”

“We wouldn’t miss it.”

“Good, I’m so glad. I can’t wait to see everyone there!”

Harry’s wife, Helen, emerged from the backroom. “Oh, hello, Lady Cate,” she greeted her.

“Hello!”

“Can’t wait to see everyone at the party?” she asked.

“Yep. I’m really looking forward to it.”

“Aye, I think everyone in town is. Although, I hope you’re prepared for the rumors.”

“Helen!” Harry whispered harshly.

“Well, it’s best she knows!”

“I assume this is about the latest discovery in the garden.”

Helen nodded. “Aye, the body is the talk of the town. And everyone has an opinion.”

Cate squeezed her lips together and nodded. Helen leaned closer to Cate. “They’ve got it pegged to a mistress of Randolph Mackenzie, killed in a fit of rage.”

Cate raised her eyebrows and held back a sigh. Randolph's reputation as a womanizer couldn't be further from the truth. She was nearly certain he was not the murderer.

"Or the bones of a human sacrifice of Douglas MacKenzie," Harry chimed in.

Cate's eyebrows fell and scrunched together. Another unlikely culprit, her mind echoed. Douglas had been about as much of a devil worshipper as a priest.

"Or the thief from the 1925 heist met a gory end."

Cate knew this was not the truth. "Didn't the theft turn out not to be a theft, but a misplacement of the jewelry?" she asked.

"So they say," Helen answered, crossing her arms over her chest. "I say they found those jewels and killed the person who took them."

"Now, Helen," Harry began.

"It's all right, Harry. Everyone has a theory."

"Do you?" Helen inquired.

"Sadly, no," Cate said. "I would very much like to find out what happened."

"But those answers may be buried in the past just like that body," Helen said.

Cate nodded. Buried in the past wasn't quite as much of a challenge as most people assumed. She just needed a hint as to when they were buried.

"Well, I hope they find something out," Helen said. "I'm sure either way, it'll be the talk of the town for years to come."

Cate spent another few moments chitchatting with the couple before she said her goodbyes. On her way out the door, something in the display window caught her eye. She cocked her head and studied the display.

Afraid of things that go bump in the night? Catch them on video!

"What's this, Harry?" Cate asked pointing to the small cube.

"Oh, that's a motion cam," he answered.

"A what?" Cate asked. "Sorry, I'm not great with technology."

Harry rounded the counter and approached Cate, picking up the colorful little cube. "It's a little camera. It connects to an app on your phone and alerts you when there's motion. It also records anything it sees and stores it for you to review later." Harry pulled the sign down and tossed it aside. "Ignore that. A bit of left-over marketing from All Hallow's Eve last year."

Cate lifted the cube from his hand and studied it. She handed it back and said, "I'll take one. Are there instructions for setting it up on your phone?"

"Aye," Harry said, as he grabbed a packaged one from under the display and set the display model back onto its perch. "And I can help you if you have a minute."

"Got ghosts, Lady Cate?" Helen inquired.

Cate laughed. "No, but it may be handy to keep an eye on the dogs."

"Oh, a nanny cam," Harry said with a chuckle, as he processed the sale. He pulled the box open and removed a small set of instructions, along with the cube and a short cord. "Now, this is your plug. And this little button up top is how you turn it on and off." Harry toggled it on, and a small blue light bloomed to life on top. He pressed the button again to turn it off and unfurled the instructions. "Now, have you got your phone?"

"Yes," Cate said, readying it.

"Okay, scan this QR code here and it'll take you to the app you need. Okay, good. Press to download it." He continued to walk Cate through the steps to create an account. "Now, when you get home, set it up wherever you'd like. Turn on the camera and open your app. The camera should spring up on here and you can connect them. Oh, you'll also need your wifi password."

"I've got that," Cate assured him.

"If you have any trouble, give me a call, I can talk you through it." Harry packaged everything up into the box and dropped it into a small shopping bag. "Have fun watching the pups!"

"Thanks." Cate accepted the proffered bag and headed out of the shop. After a bit more window shopping, she climbed into the car and headed back to the castle.

Cate greeted her excited pups with hugs and kisses before settling down for lunch. She stared at the thin folder from the library as she blew on her first spoonful of tomato basil soup. After her first bite of the sumptuous soup, her eyes fell to the bag next to her feet. Foregoing the articles, Cate pulled the miniature camera cube from inside and unboxed it. She glanced at the instructions as she finished her meal.

After Molly collected her tray, Cate grabbed the camera cube, her phone, and the instructions and wandered to her bedroom. The two pups followed her, but disappeared before she reached her suite.

She offered a surprised chortle when she realized she was alone. “Where are those two off to now?” she questioned aloud. She glanced at the blue cube in her hand. “I may need more of these!”

Cate entered her bedroom and glanced around the space. She crossed to a large dresser near one corner of the room and set the cube on the top. She aimed it at her bed, plugged it in a nearby outlet, and toggled it on. She swiped at her phone and selected the camera app she’d downloaded earlier. After a few moments, she managed to get the camera synced with her phone. The display bloomed to life on her screen. A video feed showed her standing in front of the camera, phone in hand.

Cate stepped aside and maneuvered the camera to have a view of most of the room. With the task complete, Cate toggled off her phone display and returned to the library.

The room was empty. Cate narrowed her eyes at the space before she retreated, heading down to the kitchen.

“Oh, hello, Lady Cate,” Molly said. “What’s up?”

“Are Riley and Bailey here?” Cate peered over the counter.

“Nope, not here.”

“Hmm.”

“Lost track of the little buggers?” Mrs. Fraser inquired.

“I did. I went upstairs after lunch and lost them somewhere along the way. I thought they may have run down here to pester you ladies for a snack.”

“No, haven’t seen them.”

“I’m surprised given that you made tomato basil soup. You know how Riley is about tomatoes. He can’t get enough of them.”

“That is so funny,” Molly said with a chuckle. She wiped her hands on a dishtowel. “Did you want me to help you look for them?”

“No,” Cate said. “They’re around here somewhere, I’ll find them.”

“If you don’t, let us know and we’ll help you look,” Mrs. Fraser offered. “Or better yet, get young Jack after them. Riley adores him.”

“He really does,” Cate said. “I’ll let you know if I can’t find them, but they couldn’t have gotten too far.”

“It’s a big castle,” Molly said with a shrug.

“Yeah, but a lot of it is closed off. Unless they’ve learned how to open doors.”

“There’s a scary thought,” Mrs. Fraser chuckled.

“We’ll find out!” Cate gave them a wave and headed back upstairs. She called the dogs as she walked, checking in the sitting room and the library again. With no sign of them, she ascended the stairs and retraced her steps to her bedroom. She found no sign of them there or along the way.

Cate scanned the hall outside her bedroom as she pondered where to look next. She bit her lower lip, forcing the growing panic down as it rose inside her.

“They couldn’t have gotten far,” Cate said to herself. Her mind spun in a thousand different directions. Had they found a hiding spot? Were they stuck somewhere? What if they were hurt?

Cate blew out a long breath. They were fine, she assured herself. The castle was huge. She could be missing them. They could be upstairs while she was down and downstairs while she was up. Maybe they climbed to the tower.

Cate roamed around to the tower stairs, continuing to call to them. She stared up the circular stone steps before she climbed them. The tower room door was closed at the top, but Cate still pushed it open and glanced around the space.

No dogs there. She returned to the hall below and descended the back stairs to the main floor.

“Riley! Bailey!” Cate shouted as she snaked through the halls.

She passed another hallway and glanced down its length. At the end, two large wooden doors led to an unused wing of the castle. She’d barely explored this area outside of a cursory walkthrough.

The doors were closed and locked; they couldn’t have gotten into the other wing. Cate took another step to continue down the hallway before she backed up. She glanced at the doors again. Was there a crack of light between them? She’d never noticed that before.

Cate hurried down the hall toward the other wing. As she approached, it became obvious one of the doors stood ajar. Perhaps this explained the dogs’ mysterious disappearance.

“Riley! Bailey!” Cate shouted as she approached the doors. She grasped the handle and began to swing the door open when two furry faces darted into the hallway. Riley wagged his feather-like tail as he stared up at her. Bailey offered a view of his bottom teeth in an awkward but heart-warming “smile.”

“There you are!” Cate exclaimed. She placed her hands on her hips and stared down at the two pups. “Is this where you’ve been sneaking off to?” She glanced into the large hallway beyond the doors. “We’re going to have to remind Jack to lock this! He must have left it open.”

At the mention of Jack’s name, Riley danced on his hind legs, his tail waving rapidly. “Yes, your friend, Jack, has given you some fun places to nose around, but not anymore!”

Cate grasped the doorknob and began to push the door shut. She stopped, her forehead wrinkling. She hesitated with the door still ajar. Something caught her attention. A familiar smell floated past her nostrils. She couldn’t place it. Why would any smell other than mustiness be wafting from the closed-off wing?

CHAPTER 5



Cate leaned into the wide hall past the doors and sniffed. Nothing more than stale air sailed through her nose. She straightened and pushed the door closed. She'd caught a whiff of something. But the scent was gone. What was it? And where had it come from?

She couldn't answer those questions. Instead, she opted to return to the library with her buddies to peruse the articles from Mrs. Campbell.

After returning to the library, Cate sank into the oversized leather armchair near the fireplace. She retrieved the folder of articles from the coffee table and flicked it open. Five pieces of paper spilled from it. She glanced at the empty interior searching for more. The minimal amount of results was a disappointing start to say the least.

The first article detailed a missing person's case from the 1970s in the neighboring town of Canberry. The write-up detailed a missing girl, aged eighteen, who disappeared from a local festival. Her absence was first reported by her younger sibling. The child, eight at the time, was found wandering around the festival alone. When asked where her older sister was, the child could not answer. She claimed the sister, named Evelyn, told her to wait near the carousel until her parents found her. The girl, however, was attracted by a large display of teddy bears and left the spot to explore the games. Other details at the time of writing were few.

Cate considered the story. Could a girl from Canberry end up buried in her garden? Perhaps, but by whom and why?

Cate flipped the page and found her hopes were dashed. The next article discussed Evelyn's return. After being found two towns away in the apartment of a man five years her senior, she had reluctantly returned to her parents' house. After a long questioning, Evelyn admitted she had not been abducted, but rather ran away with the man and intended to marry him.

Alive and well, at least at the time of the article's writing, Cate assumed she was not the woman buried on Dunhaven grounds.

She moved to the next article. A routine death in Dunhaven became a mystery when the body disappeared from the morgue. Seventy-two-year-old Duncan MacAllister died from a heart attack while dining alone in his home on 19 February 1958. While there was nothing mysterious about the manner in which he died, when his younger sister appeared at the morgue two weeks after his death to claim his body, she was informed the body was missing. She had been out of the country at the time of her brother's death and only learned of it upon her return.

An investigation was launched, but the body was not found. An obscure reference in the logbook showed an unintelligible name scrawled on 20 February. The attendant on duty recalled the man who collected Duncan's body to have said he was a cousin. The attendant could not recall the man's name nor any other details. The body was never found.

Could Duncan MacAllister have been the man buried? Why? Who would bring a dead body to Dunhaven, and for what purpose? Gertrude's mother, Mary, was the caretaker at the time. She couldn't have done it. Did someone on the property? If the bones turned out to be from a male, Cate decided she would ask Jack's grandfather about it.

She turned to the second to last article. Two tiny paragraphs skimmed over a story about a potential missing woman. Cate scanned it, noting a familiar name. Amelia MacKenzie, her great-grandmother, told the local press the woman, a traveling companion of hers, had merely left her employ. The reporter suggested the story to be more untoward, claiming the woman fled the castle in the middle of the night, though Amelia denied the allegation.

Cate set the article aside. As interesting as it may have been to the locals, she did not believe Amelia would lie to cover up any inappropriate behavior. Most likely, the local gossip mill had worked overtime, turning the small tidbit into an international story, just as they had with both Douglas and Randolph MacKenzie.

She skimmed the last article. This one showed some promise as a potential solution. A local man went missing in the 1840s. Evidence suggested the man may have fallen in with the wrong lot. An associate claimed he saw him leaving town, saying he preferred to lie low for a while. Still, others claimed he was a victim of “something strange at the castle.” His disappearance was never resolved.

Molly flitted into the room carrying a tray laden with dinnertime goodies. “Mmm, is that pie?” Cate inquired. She shoved the copies into the folder and set it on the table.

“Yes, it is. Lemon meringue. Wanted to make good use of our lemons.”

“I cannot wait to taste it. The lemon cookies are fantastic!”

“Thank you!” Molly said, beaming at the compliment. “Enjoy!”

“Thanks, you too!”

Molly flitted from the room. Cate dug into her dinner as she considered the articles. None of them offered any assistance in identifying the victim. The best option was the centuries-old unresolved disappearance. If the remains were identified as belonging to a male, they may be on to something.

With her meal finished, Cate gathered her tray and headed down to the kitchen.

“The pie was excellent,” she announced as she entered.

“Oh, thanks, Lady Cate!” Molly said, as she leapt from her seat to grab the tray. “You didn’t have to carry this down.”

“It’s fine, I needed to stretch my legs.”

“Any articles identify the uninvited garden guest?” Mrs. Fraser inquired.

“Not really. There weren’t many and there was no smoking gun, that’s for sure.”

“I’m not surprised,” Mrs. Fraser answered. “I told you not much happens in Dunhaven. I cannae even begin to guess who that may be!”

“We may never know,” Cate said with a shrug. “Though I hope we find out. Oh, Jack, before I forget, the door to the unused west wing is unlocked.”

Jack’s brow furrowed as he took another bite of his pie. “Really?” he inquired.

“Yeah. That’s where the dogs disappeared to, probably both times.”

Jack set down his fork and pushed his plate away. He stood, withdrawing a set of keys from his pocket. "I'll go lock it now."

"I'll walk you up," Cate said.

They climbed the stairs to the main floor. Jack rustled through the keys. "I'm not sure how this happened. I didn't unlock that door recently."

"You must have forgotten to lock it the last time you were in there," Cate said with a shrug.

Jack shook his head. "No, I never forget to lock it. In fact, I remember locking it. I went in there three weeks ago and I distinctly remember locking it."

"Wow, good memory," Cate said.

"Don't credit me too much, Lady Cate. I remember locking it because the damned key got stuck and I cursed it while I tried to jiggle it loose."

Cate raised her eyebrows. "Maybe your curse turned it into a magical door that opens and closes on its own."

Jack gave Cate a sour look. "I'm not magical like our friends across the pond."

"Maybe they enchanted it," Cate said with a chuckle as they reached the doors.

Jack studied them. "You're sure these were open?"

"Yep," Cate said. "Both dogs came running out."

Jack shoved a key in the lock and turned it. He jiggled the doorknob and waved a hand at it. "There we are," he said. "Locked. With you as my witness."

Cate nodded. "Thanks, Jack."

"So, nothing in those articles?"

Cate shook her head and shrugged. "No. One of them was a girl from Canberry who resurfaced – turns out she was with a boyfriend. Another was a man who had a heart attack, and his body went missing from the morgue. But there's no reason to believe someone brought him here. The third was a woman who was presumed missing. It was during World War II, and Amelia said she simply left. The only possible lead is a man in the 1840s who disappeared."

"He sounds like our best lead."

Cate nodded. "And it's tenuous at best."

"Aye. Well, maybe the police will have some information for us."

"Let's hope so," Cate said.

“Well, good night, Lady Cate.”

“Good night.”

Cate returned to the library for the rest of the evening. She re-read the articles, finding nothing new. After spending some time with a novel, she corralled the dogs upstairs to her bedroom.

Cate bit her lower lip as she stared at the small cube on the dresser in the corner of the room. She licked her lips as her finger hovered on the power button. Perhaps this wasn't a good idea.

She pulled her hand away. It wouldn't hurt, however creepy it seemed to have a video of her sleeping.

“All right, boys,” she said, as she crawled between the sheets. “Let's see how much you two walk around at night.” She laughed nervously as she shot a glance toward the camera.

Cate flicked the light off and slouched further down the bed, relaxing into her pillows. The blue light glowed across the room. Cate stared at the pinpoint of color. As she pondered what she'd see on the camera the next morning, she drifted off to sleep.

Cate awoke the next morning as her alarm sounded. With a groan, she rolled over and turned it off. She opened her eyes and found Riley staring at her. “Hey, buddy,” she said with a yawn. “Sleep well?”

As she stretched, she uncurled her fist. The sapphire necklace dropped from her hand to the duvet below with a thump. Cate sucked in a deep breath as she sat up. She ruffled the fur on Riley's head. “I see we had another active night. I guess I'll find out more when I review my camera footage.”

Riley side-eyed Cate as he yawned. “I'm not looking forward to it either, buddy.”

Bailey climbed to his feet, stretching, and sitting next to Cate. She gave him a good morning pet before she climbed from her bed and headed into the bathroom for her morning routine.

Cate glanced at her phone several times. It beeped often, alerting her to movement in the room. Each time she considered watching the video feed, her mouth went dry, and her heart skipped a beat. She had no recollection of retrieving the necklace, yet she held it in her hand when she awoke. At some point in the middle of the night, she must have climbed from her bed to retrieve it.

Cate put off the task of watching the video until after she ate her breakfast and took a long walk around the property with the dogs. As she settled in the library with a warm cup of tea, Cate stared at her phone. She blew out a long breath. “Okay, Cate,” she whispered to herself. “All you’re going to see is you wandering to the jewelry box and getting the necklace. It can’t be that bad.”

Cate toggled on her phone and selected the app. She had several alerts. Many of them were from her waking hours. She scrolled through the list, finding a timestamp shortly before midnight.

Cate pursed her lips and tapped the button to access the video feed. The video began with Cate sitting in bed. The camera must have detected her sitting up and toggled on. On the video, Cate stared ahead, motionless. After a moment, she peeled back the covers and swung her legs over the side of the bed.

She stood, gawking blindly ahead. After a moment, the video showed Cate shambling forward. Her arms hung limply at her sides as she wandered across the room. She stopped at the jewelry armoire.

With unmoving eyes, Cate reached down until her fingers struck the drawer pull. She slid it open and grasped the sapphire necklace from the velvet interior. Pushing the drawer shut, she straightened, clutching the necklace closer to her chest.

Cate watched as her video counterpart stood still for another moment before she began her slow trek across the room.

On the video, Cate paused at the doors leading to her sitting room. Her head swiveled toward them. Cate’s brow crinkled and she squinted at her face on the screen, green from the night vision. On-screen, her forehead wrinkled.

“What was I staring at?” Cate whispered.

As if on cue, her video doppelgänger’s lips moved. Cate dropped the phone into her lap as her jaw unhinged.

CHAPTER 6



Cate swallowed hard and recovered the phone, which now showed her continuing on her journey back to bed.

Cate pulled the video's counter back. Her former self sped backward. She played the video again from the spot where she'd stopped at the sitting room doors. Cate stared at the video as her image's lips moved.

Cate rewound again. She squinted at her lips, trying to make out the word. She tried five times before she gave up.

Cate clicked off her phone's display and set it on the desk. She bit her lower lip as she considered the video. Was someone in the other room? Who? What had she seen or heard while sleepwalking?

Cate spent a few more moments ruminating about the source of her speech in the video. A chime from her phone drew her back from the maze of her thoughts.

Did you get rid of that necklace?

Cate smiled at the text from Damien.

I'm working on it, she responded.

His response was delayed a moment. After five minutes, a new text appeared on her screen. *Hmmm... any nightmares?*

Cate responded with a "no" and a smiley emoticon.

That's good news! Damien messaged.

After a moment, he added: *Don't think I won't ask about that necklace again.*

Cate laughed at his message. *I'm counting on it. How are things on your side of the pond?*

Damien responded: *I'm pretty sure I could write another book about our current adventure.*

The comment elicited another chuckle from Cate, and she sent him a laughing emoji before turning her attention to her research. Before long, her focus shifted to the folder with the five articles detailing disappearances in the Dunhaven area.

Cate shuffled across the library and retrieved it. She re-read each article twice more but found no new clues to help her. Perhaps she could use these articles as a springboard for more research. She collected them and returned to her laptop.

She shuffled through and found the article about the disappearance in 1840. Cate scanned the story's details. With a fresh page in her notebook, she jotted down several key pieces of information. The man, named Angus Williams, had moved to the tiny town of Dunhaven ten years earlier. He'd been taken on to work at the Bailey farm and had stayed in his position for the entire decade he'd lived in Dunhaven. Most described him as quiet. Cate noted the dates of his arrival and departure.

A local told the reporter covering the story that Angus had been gambling and made a few enemies. He stated he'd seen the man with a sack tossed over his shoulder, walking out of town. When he spoke with him, Angus told him it was best he leave town for a while.

He was never seen or heard from again. Cate typed his name into the search bar of her browser. It wasn't an uncommon name, making most of the results she found useless. She tried to track down more information by adding Dunhaven to the search. It produced no results.

Cate searched for a more obscure result trying "1841 missing man Dunhaven." She found nothing, not even the article produced by Mrs. Campbell.

She was at a dead-end. If they wanted more information about Mr. Williams, they'd have to travel back to 1841 to get it, she mused. She wouldn't be opposed to the trip, though she was certain Jack would be.

Still, she understood his concern, and if the body buried in her backyard did not belong to Angus Williams, there was no reason to visit that time period.

Cate tried a few extra ill-fated searches before she determined this line of work was a dead end. Her lunch arrived and she abandoned the nonproductive task in favor of eating.

Her phone chimed. A message from Jack awaited her.

Anything from the police?

Not yet, she wrote back.

Jack sent back a straight-face emoji with the message: *Hopefully soon!*

Cate sent a message indicating agreement. Her mind turned from her fruitless search to her odd overnight behavior. Her thumb hovered over the cell phone's power button. After a moment, she swung it over to the screen and tapped to bring up the video. She viewed it several times, still not able to determine what her on-screen self muttered before wandering back to bed.

Cate sighed as she allowed her phone display to time out. Two nights in a row, she had climbed from her bed to retrieve that necklace. What drew her to it? And what caught her attention during her trance-like state?

Perhaps she should take everyone's advice and get rid of the necklace. She bit her lower lip as her stomach fluttered at the thought. Why was she so adamantly opposed to the idea? Was it the mere value of the object that held her back? It must have been. The necklace had to be worth hundreds of thousands of dollars, or rather pounds. This must be the reason for her reluctance, she attempted to convince herself.

The shrill ringing of her phone pulled Cate from her ruminating. An unknown number appeared on her display. Cate considered leaving it go to voicemail. Her finger hovered over the Decline icon.

She shook her head, realizing it may be the police with information about her latest discovery on the property. With a flick of her finger, Cate swiped the Accept button and pressed the phone to her ear.

"Cate Kensie," she said.

"Hi, Lady Cate," Ben's voice answered her.

"Oh, hi, Ben!" she said.

"I figured I'd give you a call and go over some of the information we've come up with on your unwanted garden guest."

"You found something?" Cate asked, as she scurried to the desk and shuffled through her drawer for a sheet of paper and a pen.

"Not really, but we do have some information."

"Oh," Cate answered, the disappointment in her voice obvious.

“I figured I’d pass it along before you called me to ask. I ran into Jackie this morning and he assured me you’d be after me for information.”

“He’s correct,” Cate said, sinking into her desk chair.

“Okay, here goes.” She heard a few papers shuffle, before the detective’s voice took on the monotone sound of someone reading the words from a page. “Uh, the vic was... oh that’s victim to you as a layperson, Lady Cate.”

“Yes, thank you, I realized,” Cate said, as she bobbed her head around in an unseen signal for him to get to the point.

“Oh, great. Big true crime fan, huh? Well, anyway, the bones of the victim belong to a female. Adult. On the smaller side, probably about five foot three or four, give or take.

“Uh...” He paused as he shuffled his papers again. “Let’s see here. Nothing definitive on age yet but the examiner puts a rough estimate at seventy to eighty years or so, again, give or take.”

Cate scrunched her face. “The bones belonged to someone who was seventy to eighty years old?”

“Oh.” Ben chuckled before continuing. “No, no, not the age of the vic. The age of the bones. The examiner figures them to have been in the ground for about seventy to eighty years.”

“Ohhhh,” Cate said as realization dawned on her. She jotted down on her paper: *Adult female, 5’4”, 70-80 years ago.*

“Right now, that’s about all we have.”

“Did the medical examiner determine a cause of death?” Cate queried.

Papers rustled. “Ah, yeah.” Another pause. “Blunt force trauma to the head. Skull was cracked and collapsed.”

Cate winced at the detail, her stomach rolling.

“Could that have happened postmortem?” Cate said, hope lacing her voice.

“No,” Ben answered immediately. “M.E.’s certain it was the cause of death, not postmortem damage.”

Cate sighed.

“That’s about it, then. Unless you have anything else, Lady Cate...”

“Actually,” Cate said, interrupting him. “I was wondering if this coincided with any open cases you had on the books.”

“Eh, what do you mean?” Ben inquired.

“Well, you know this was a female from about seventy-five years ago.”

“Give or take,” he said.

“Right. Were there any missing persons cases opened around that time that could help identify the victim?”

“Oh, ah, right. No, nothing.”

“You did go back through the records, didn’t you?”

“We did. There were no unsolved cases in Dunhaven from that time.”

“So what are our next steps?”

“Well, you have no other next steps, Lady Cate. I will widen my net, see if we can identify this person. Obviously, we won’t have DNA on file that could help, but I’ll dig deeper to see if there’s a missing person who fits the bill in the nearby area.”

“Please let me know if you find anything.”

“I will do that, Lady Cate,” Ben said.

“Great, thank you so much for the information.”

“You’re welcome, and you have a great rest of your day.”

They finished with parting pleasantries and Cate ended the call. She sighed as she stared down at the mostly blank page in front of her. One solitary line graced the top.

Cate reviewed what few details she had gleaned. She added the cause of death to the information, grimacing again as she wrote it.

She realized the information shared by Ben meant her top theory – that the deceased was Angus Williams – was now dashed by the revelation that the body belonged to a woman.

Cate flipped open the folder of articles from Mrs. Campbell.

The missing eighteen-year-old from Canberry was now more likely given her gender, however, she had been found, which ruled her out. Duncan MacAllister, Dunhaven’s disappearing corpse, could also be eliminated based on his gender, as could Angus Williams. Which left Cate with only one option. The missing woman with whom Amelia was acquainted.

Cate re-read the article again, noting the date. The date 23 September, 1942, topped the copy of the newspaper article.

Not trusting herself to do the calculation in her mind, Cate used her cell phone’s calculator. She stared at the result. The date was seventy-eight years ago. It fit within the time frame Ben had given her.

Could this woman be the one they’d just exhumed from her side garden?

* * *

Cate awoke the next morning exhausted. As sun streamed through her window, she rolled over with a groan. Clutched in her hand for the third morning was the sapphire necklace.

The appearance of the necklace surprised her since she didn't think she'd gotten enough sleep to have sleepwalked.

Cate had spent most of her previous night tossing and turning as she considered the lack of information about their garden guest. Who could she have been? Would they ever find out? The span of a decade was a long time. She and Jack couldn't search the entire time period for clues about the woman.

As Cate rose from her bed and returned the necklace to its drawer, her mind raced through the same questions it had the previous night.

The lack of information stumped her. Surely a missing person's report existed for this person. Perhaps they were casting too narrow of a net. Perhaps she'd traveled from somewhere further than the towns in the small radius around Dunhaven.

That explanation could be easily remedied by considering a larger net around the town when searching for missing persons cases ranging from 1940 to 1950. Surely with that date range and a larger search area they'd come across something to explain the body.

Another notion occurred to her. What if the body belonged to someone who had never been reported missing? Cate had assumed the person would be missed by a loved one. However, what if the killer was the loved one? Could a jealous husband have offed his wife, buried her at Dunhaven and then told a tale that his wife had run off?

Cate hated to admit it, but it was plausible. And it meant their search would be all the more difficult. With a sigh, she attempted to determine a method for tracking down a missing person who had never been considered missing.

* * *

As Cate strolled around the property following breakfast with the pups, her mind stretched for solutions. She came to none as she approached her

favorite spot on the property. Jack stood near the water.

“Hey, what are you doing here?” Cate called to him as he stood under the large tree on its banks.

The dogs raced ahead to give Jack a hearty hello.

“Lady Cate! What are you doing here?” he asked, his eyes wide with surprise.

“Uh,” Cate hesitated as she formulated a response to the question, “I always come here.”

“But I didn’t think you’d be here this morning.”

Cate furrowed her brow. Jack was acting a bit strange, she thought. Why?

“Everything okay? You seem... distracted.” She noticed his hands hidden behind his back. “What are you hiding there?”

“Hiding? Nothing. I’m not hiding anything.” He chuckled nervously as he slipped his hand into his pocket.

Cate offered a confused smile. “Anyway, as I said, I’m surprised you’re here and not breathing down Ben’s neck about who our garden guest is... or was.”

“Oh, I heard from him yesterday, though it didn’t seem to help much in identifying the person.”

“Oh?” Jack inquired.

“Yeah, I didn’t want to bring it up at dinner last night. But Ben called me yesterday afternoon. He said they determined the bones belonged to a female, about five foot four in height. On first inspection, it appears the bones had been buried for seventy to eighty years. And the cause of death was blunt force trauma to the skull.”

Jack winced before he nodded. “Do they have any leads?”

“Not a one,” Cate said, with a wistful expression. “I went through the articles from Mrs. Campbell, but none of those were helpful.”

“Not even a hint of a lead?”

Cate paused for a moment, her face scrunching in thought.

“What is that famous Cate Kensie brain mulling over?”

“Nothing,” Cate said. “The only lead I had went up in smoke when Ben said the corpse was female. There was a man in the 1840s who left town. Some people believe he was murdered. I thought perhaps he was our victim, but obviously, he’s not.”

“He also doesn’t fit within the time frame they gave for when the bones were from.”

“No,” Cate said, as she tapped her lips in thought.

“Is there something else?”

“Not really.”

“Not really means something is on your mind.”

“There was one article from around that time period. In 1942, a woman went missing. However, Amelia said she merely left for another position. So, it’s not much of a lead and apparently the girl wasn’t even really missing.”

“Amelia, as in your great-grandmother, Amelia?”

“Yep.”

Jack puckered his lips as his head bounced around. “And it’s not likely Amelia would lie. At least, we have no reason to believe so.”

“No. She was nothing but honest with us when we met her.”

“But?” Jack asked.

Cate shook her head. “But nothing. She probably isn’t our gal. We may never know who it was.”

“Cate Kensie giving up? I can’t believe my ears.”

Cate shrugged. “I was up most of the night. Outside of expanding our radius for missing persons reports in the 1940s to 1950s and getting a hit there, we may be dealing with someone who was never reported missing.”

“You mean like someone killed them then told a different story to anyone who asked?”

“Right. Maybe a jealous spouse whacks his wife on the head, then tells everyone she ran off with the neighbor or something similar. Which makes it impossible for us to track.”

Jack nodded. “That it does.”

Cate sighed and they stood in silence for a few moments.

“Well, I suppose the only way to get any answers might be to discuss it with people from that era,” Jack said.

Cate crinkled her forehead and glanced up sharply at Jack. “Are you saying...”

“Yes, I’m saying maybe we should do a little time traveling so we can solve this.”

Cate stood in stunned silence, her jaw hanging open.

“Yes, I am suggesting time travel.”

Cate's eyebrows raised toward her hairline.

"Oh, stop gawking at me and just tell me how much you appreciate my suggestion."

Cate giggled and offered him a smile. "I really do appreciate it," she answered. "But now my mind is spinning in a thousand different directions. Where do we start? With whom?"

"Perhaps Amelia is a good place to start. We know Rory and Anne, Amelia and Lucas. Get the dates from that article and we'll start there. If they have no leads, we'll go forward a couple of years and try again."

"Look at you, Jack Reid! Skipping through time!"

"After what we witnessed in the 1700s, I guess I'm ready to live a little."

"Well, I am pleasantly surprised and very pleased by your suggestion! I'll get the information from the article and try to find anything else that may help. When do you want to go?"

"How's Monday?" Jack suggested.

"Sounds perfect! That'll give me some time to dig up some information so we can tackle this!"

"Sounds like a plan. Well, I'll leave you to your loch. M'lady." Jack gave her an extravagant bow before he retreated toward the castle.

Cate sank to the ground below. Both dogs gathered around her. "Well, what do you think, boys? Do we stand a chance solving this mystery?"

Riley cocked his head to the side and stared at Cate. Bailey offered his paw. "I'll take that as a vote of your confidence!"

Cate spent another thirty minutes staring out over the loch and watching the clouds meander through the sky. When she became chilled, Cate stood and brushed herself off. "Come on, boys, let's head back and do some work."

Cate, Riley, and Bailey took a winding path back to the castle, pushing through the front door into the enormous foyer. The dogs raced away as they entered the castle. Cate flung her hands out. "Now where are you two going?"

With a roll of her eyes and a shake of her head, Cate navigated to the library. She sighed as she collapsed into the desk chair. She glanced to the folder of articles on the desk as she removed her phone from her pocket.

Her eyes lingered on the cell phone. After a moment, Cate illuminated the display and swiped at the screen to access the cube camera's app. A

colorful circle spun around the screen as Cate waited for the list of recent videos to load. She bit her thumbnail wondering what she would find. She assumed the list would be long since she'd spent a large portion of the night tossing and turning.

The screen darkened for a moment before a list of videos filled it. Cate sucked in a breath as she scrolled through the list. She deleted any before midnight since she had definitely been awake through those, and she had no inclination to watch herself toss and turn in bed.

Cate tapped the first video available after midnight. She viewed the short clip of her rolling from one side to the other before smashing her pillow into a ball and squeezing her eyes shut.

She clicked the trash can icon to delete the less-than-useful video. She moved on to the next to find a similar episode replaying on the screen. With a sigh, Cate trashed it along with the third video.

She tapped the next one listed. Occurring just after two in the morning, Cate stared at her sleeping self. Her eyebrows lifted as her on-screen self's eyes shot open. Two eerily lit, glassy balls stared at the ceiling before she slowly rose to a sitting position. Staring straight ahead, her form peeled back the covers and swung her legs over the side of the bed. She hesitated a moment before standing and shambling to the jewelry armoire.

As usual, the video version of Cate pulled the lower drawer open and retrieved the ostentatious necklace. She clutched it in her hand, holding it close to her chest as she wandered back across the room. She froze in front of the doors leading to the sitting room.

Cate tapped at the screen, wondering if the video was frozen as her counterpart stood stock still. Still playing, the video showed her frozen for several seconds, before her head whipped in the direction of the sitting room.

Cate bit her lower lip as she squinted her eyes at the scene unfolding on her phone's display. On-screen, Cate's lips curled into a partial smile, and she reached her hand toward the sitting room. A moment later, she disappeared from the camera's view.

Cate's heart pounded in her chest as she watched herself disappear from view. The video clip ended, and Cate shook her head as she hurried back to the list of videos.

She tapped on the next video. The timestamp indicated it occurred about twenty minutes after the one she'd just viewed. Cate watched the short clip

of Riley stretching before he settled back down into a ball with a sigh.

Outside of Riley and Bailey, the large bed remained empty. She'd disappeared in the wee hours of the morning for more than twenty minutes.

Another video occurring about thirty-five minutes after her disappearance appeared next. Cate played it. A shadow crossed the bed and within seconds, Cate's wandering form reappeared on camera. Still carrying the necklace, she crossed the room and climbed into bed, pulling the covers over her and drifting off to sleep.

Cate toggled off her phone's display as she let her gaze drift out the window. Where had she been for thirty-five minutes? What or whom had she smiled at before she disappeared? She shuddered as a chill passed over her. What was happening to her?

CHAPTER 7



The arrival of her lunch roused Cate from her pensive state. She'd made little progress on determining where she may have roamed to in the wee hours of the morning. And she'd done absolutely nothing regarding gathering information on the lead Jack suggested they follow about the garden guest.

Cate slumped into the armchair as she poked at the food on her plate. She eyed her cell phone warily, as though it caused the disruption overnight. The flames leapt in the fireplace across from her, catching Cate's attention. The dogs had returned from wherever they'd raced off to as she worked her way through the videos and were now snuggled near the warm fire.

An idea formed in her mind as she polished off the last bites of her meal. A smile spread across her face, and she sat up straighter. "What do you say we take a trip into town, boys?"

Riley perked up when Cate asked again, this time mentioning the car. After Molly retrieved her lunch tray, she headed to the car with both pups and drove the short distance into town, finding a parking space near the town's center. She took a leisurely stroll through the streets, allowing the dogs to explore even though she had one destination in mind.

They reached their target and Cate ushered the dogs inside.

"Well, Lady Cate!" Harry greeted her. "Back again so soon? And with the two laddies this time. Hello, boys." Harry rounded the counter and offered two treats to each dog. They scarfed them down in seconds.

“I figured I owed the boys a visit,” Cate answered.

“Aye, I missed them last time.”

Harry squatted down to give both dogs a hearty ear scratch.

“Did you get your camera set up?”

“I did,” Cate replied. “I actually came in to purchase another one. It works like a charm, and I’d like to set a few more up.”

“Oh? Well, we’ve got plenty in stock,” Harry said. He straightened and grabbed another from the display.

“And do you happen to have any of those cameras that hang from a dog’s collar?”

“We do,” Harry said. He wandered across the store and pulled an item from a hanger. “Dogs running off on you?”

“Not really,” Cate said. “But it’s a big place and I’d like to see what they do when they’re not lounging in front of a fireplace.”

“Well, this’ll do it,” Harry said, waving the packaging in the air. “Did you want one or two?”

Cate considered it. “I’ll take the one for now,” she answered. “So far, I think they’re sticking together. If I find out otherwise, I may be back.”

Henry nodded and rang up the purchase. “Which one of you nice laddies is going to be the volunteer for this?”

“Probably Riley. Bailey gets a bit fussy about clothes and collars. He won’t move very far if he has to wear a tie or a shirt.”

“Oh? Do you mind your clothes, Bailey?” The little dog wagged his pigtail at the mention of his name. “But not you, eh, Riley?” Riley cocked his head.

“No, Riley enjoys dressing up,” Cate said with a chuckle.

“No wonder,” Harry said, eyeing Riley. “You looked very dapper at the Christmas party, young sir.”

Riley cocked his head at Harry and gave a small yip. “I agree,” Harry said.

Cate raised her eyebrows.

“The laddie says he looked so fine he deserves another treat,” Harry explained.

Cate chuckled. “Oh, I’ll bet he did.”

Harry bagged Cate’s purchases and gave another treat to the two dogs before they said their goodbyes. “Now you two behave yourselves. Your mam has a way to keep an eye on you now.”

“Listen up, boys,” Cate said, “I can follow you wherever you go!”

After a few moments of small talk, Cate left the shop with her purchases. She found herself both excited and frightened. The prospect of seeing who or what was beyond her bedroom in the middle of the night was daunting, however, being able to follow the dogs to their secret spot could prove fun.

After a brief walk through town, she returned to the castle. Cate spent the remaining time before dinner setting up her additional camera in her sitting room. When she had it finished and set on the mantle to capture both the door to her bedroom and the door to the hall, she stepped back and stared at it.

“What will you show me, I wonder?” she said aloud. Two tiny feet pressed against her thigh. Cate glanced down to find Riley standing on his hind legs. Bailey stood next to him. “Don’t worry, I’ll save your camera setup until tomorrow. You’re off the hook.”

Riley’s tail waved back and forth. Cate scooped him into her arms and wandered to the chaise. Bailey jumped up next to her and she pulled him onto her lap. She balanced both dogs on her legs as she pondered what she might find on her video list tomorrow morning.

With no answers forthcoming, she left her room behind in favor of the library for her dinner. When she returned, she eyed the new camera warily. She bypassed it, trying to push it out of her mind as she continued to her bedroom.

As she slipped between the sheets, she focused on the blue light shining at her. She swallowed hard and closed her eyes.

* * *

Cate stretched as her Sunday morning alarm beeped. With an hour’s extra sleep on her staff’s day off, the sun was already beginning its ascent into the morning sky, painting it deep shades of purple and red.

Cate reached her arms overhead, uncurling her fingers. She glanced toward her headboard. Her hands were empty. No necklace lay discarded on her pillow. She glanced at her sides, finding nothing. The fleeting idea that she had remained abed for the entire night flitted across her mind.

The hope was short-lived as Cate pushed herself to sit, feeling something shift on her neck. She glanced down, reaching to her collarbone.

Her fingers caressed the thick gemstones comprising the necklace. Cate's heart sank. Not only had she arisen from her bed and retrieved the necklace, but in this instance, she had donned it during her sleepwalking escapades.

Cate reached to the nape of her neck and worked to unclasp the necklace. She pursed her lips as she stared down at it after freeing it from her neck. She shook her head. What would the cameras show her? She wasn't certain she wanted to find out what they'd caught.

She put it off, electing for breakfast and a morning walk. As she settled in at her desk in the library for a check of her email, Molly popped her head in.

"Hey, Lady Cate!"

"Hi, Molly. Going to join me for some reading on your day off?"

"Nope, I'm heading out. I just wanted to see if you wanted to come with me."

"Where to?"

"I'm going to head to..." Molly paused as she consulted a marked page in her tour guide. "Fyvie Castle. It's a bit of a drive, but I'm up for it!"

Cate glanced at her laptop and took a deep breath. "Well, I had planned..." She stopped short and narrowed her eyes. She twisted to face Molly. "To heck with what I planned! Sure, I'd love to go with you. As long as you're driving."

"Still worried you're going to drive on the wrong side?" Molly asked with a laugh.

"Something like that. Also, I'm terrible at following those GPS things."

"I'd be happy to drive."

Cate glanced at the bag sitting next to the desk. "Would you mind giving me a few minutes to set up this camera?"

"Sure! I'm in no rush! What is it?"

"A pet camera. It goes on your pet's collar, and you can see what they're up to and where they're going."

"Oh, neat!" Molly said. "Worried the boys will get up to something naughty when we're gone?"

"Mmm, no," Cate said, as she pulled the camera from the package along with the instructions. "Just curious as to what they get up to."

“Oh, gotcha.”

“Let me run up and grab Riley’s bowtie collar to slip this on.”

“Okay, I’ll read the instructions.”

Cate hurried up the stairs and dug through Riley’s things in her bedroom, retrieving his plaid bowtie. When she returned to the library, Molly had the camera in setup mode. With her help, Cate connected it to her phone’s app. She slipped it onto the collar and snapped it around Riley’s neck.

“All right, boys. Behave yourselves! Molly and I will be back later!”

With kisses on their furry heads, Cate and Molly headed out to the car for the drive to Fyvie Castle.

“So, have you been to Fyvie Castle before?” Molly asked, as she aimed the car toward Dunhaven.

“No,” Cate answered. “I haven’t done much traveling. We came straight to Dunhaven with Mr. Smythe, and I never left.”

“Lady Cate, seriously?” Molly inquired. “You’ve lived in this amazing country for almost a year, and you’ve never gone further than Dunhaven?”

“I’m not very adventurous,” Cate said. “Driving around in a foreign country is a little overwhelming to me.”

“Not me! You couldn’t hold me back!”

Cate chuckled. “I don’t intend to! Though, on a serious note, I am glad you are enjoying the country so much.”

“Oh, I am! And now I can strong-arm you into enjoying it, too!”

“I do enjoy it! I enjoy Dunhaven Castle and its grounds. And it’s even got a loch. What more could I ask for?”

“It’s still nice to see other things. Oh, speaking of lochs – how about a trip to Loch Ness?”

“That’s quite a bit further than Fyvie,” Cate responded.

“It is, but not *that* far!”

“I guess compared to some of the drives across the pond, it is relatively close,” Cate answered.

As they fell into silence, Cate checked her phone.

“Are the dogs exploring?” Molly questioned.

“Nope,” Cate answered. “Those two lazy boys are lounging in the library.”

“Sounds about right.”

Cate clicked off the display and returned to enjoying the scenery. As the trip progressed, she and Molly discussed the Scottish countryside, castles, Molly's move, and Scottish cuisine.

Molly followed the signs for Fyvie Castle as they approached. They drove down a narrow street lined with box hedges. Molly slowed as they reached the entrance where a green sign announced Fyvie Castle & Garden.

The car passed through the open black iron gates between two stone pillars. They continued up the winding road.

"Look, Lady Cate!" Molly said, pointing out her window. "They've got a loch, too!"

"So they have," Cate replied. "I think Dunhaven's loch beats this one."

Molly chuckled. "But they've got ducks!"

"They can keep the ducks. Riley and Bailey would have a field day chasing those poor things around if we had them."

Molly continued up the road. The paved portion gave way to a gravel drive, reminding Cate of her own driveway. Molly navigated to the car park.

The large, beige, stone structure rose in front of them as they walked through the garden to the castle entrance. Cate glanced out across the flat grounds. It was so different from Dunhaven's rolling hills.

After paying the entrance fee, they began their self-tour of the castle's interior. They wandered through the ornately decorated rooms one after another.

"Hmmm," Molly murmured about halfway through their tour, "I think I prefer Dunhaven."

Cate smiled. "I'm glad. And to be honest, so do I!"

"It's beautiful here but..."

"It's not home."

"No, and that hallway with the huge tapestry is kind of tight. As is this bed." Molly grimaced at a rather uncomfortable-looking four-poster bed.

"Well, now that we're sure we've cornered the market on castles compared to Fyvie, should we head outdoors for a walk?" Cate suggested.

"Absolutely. And we'll stop in the tearoom before we leave for a nice meal before heading home."

Cate answered with a nod as her phone chimed. Molly raised an eyebrow, but didn't pry.

“Oh, it’s an alert from the doggie cam,” Cate said, as she tapped the notification.

“On the move?”

“Probably stretching,” Cate said with a laugh, as they exited the castle into the bright sunshine.

The camera loaded and Cate stared at the screen. An awkward bobbling video played on the screen.

“Still in the library?” Molly inquired, as she peered over Cate’s shoulder.

“No,” Cate said, “I don’t think so.” Her brow furrowed as she attempted to make out the image on the screen.

“Wow, this is harder than I expected.”

“Yeah,” Cate admitted. “I don’t see things from floor level so I’m really having trouble figuring out where they are.”

“Oh, there’s Bailey!” Molly said, pointing at the furry form jetting past Riley on the screen.

“Where’s he in such a hurry to go?”

The camera darkened as Riley put his nose to the ground, tilting the lens toward the floor. The angle snapped upward before abruptly changing directions to race down a hallway.

“What was that?” Cate inquired.

“What?”

“When the camera angle changed from the floor view, I saw something.”

“What did it look like?”

Cate shook her head, staring off into space.

“What? Furniture leg? Wall?”

Cate pursed her lips, before she said, “No. It looked like a person’s feet.”

“What?” Molly asked, slowing to a stop as Cate continued to stare at her screen.

“It looked like someone’s feet and legs.”

“It couldn’t be.”

“No, unless...”

“Unless what?”

Cate tapped around on her phone. “Unless Jack’s at the castle. That would explain their sudden urgency to run around. I’m texting him now.”

“Oh, yeah, that could be it.”

They wandered around the property as Cate waited for a response. Cate’s phone chimed as they strolled past the loch. She stopped mid-stride.

“What?” Molly asked.

“He’s not there.” Cate snapped her gaze up to Molly’s face.

Molly winced, then shook her head. “Wait. No one could be there.”

“No one *should* be there.”

“No one can be, right? Who would be there?”

“I’m not sure, but I swear I saw someone’s legs.”

“Do you want to head back?”

Cate pressed her lips together as she gazed over the water. She swiped her phone open and accessed the pet cam app. Her eyebrows raised. “Well, it looks like they’re back in the library, lounging by the fireplace.”

Molly nodded and gave Cate a closed-lipped smile.

“So, I guess we’re good!”

“We can go if you want...”

“No,” Cate said, with a shake of her head. “I probably saw something else entirely, like a table leg or something. I’m not ruining our trip. They seem fine. And if someone was in the castle, I don’t think they’d be lounging in the library.”

“No, they’d be barking at the top of their lungs.”

“Yep,” Cate said with a chuckle. “So, let’s keep enjoying the scenery, and then I believe you promised me a trip to the tearoom.”

“I did indeed!”

They wandered around the property, taking in all the sites along with several pictures and selfies, ending their meandering at the tearoom for sandwiches and indulging in dessert. The trip wasn’t complete without a stop in the gift shop. Molly made a few purchases before they strolled to the car to return to Dunhaven.

* * *

“Well, that was a nice trip,” Cate said, as they climbed from the car back on the grounds of Dunhaven.

“Yeah, it was!” Molly agreed. “I’ll make a traveler out of you yet.”

“Oh? Got another castle trip planned already?”

“Give me the week to figure it out. I’ve got an entire list for us to get through, and now with the weather improving, I’m going to hold you to that promise to explore Scotland with me!”

“Okay,” Cate laughed.

“I’ve even got some dog-friendly spots for us.”

“I’m sure the dogs will love you for that.”

They pushed through the front door of the castle. Both dogs plowed toward them, leaping up on their hind legs as they excitedly wagged their tails.

“Well,” Molly said, as she knelt down to greet the dogs, “everything looks okay.”

Cate nodded. “I must have been seeing things.”

“I doubt that. I just think things look so different from their perspective that it was easy to think that’s what it looked like.”

“Well, how about a nice walk, boys?” Cate asked.

“Whew, I’m beat from walking, so I’ll leave you to it. I’m going up to make a plan for the summer months for us using my guidebooks!” Molly flashed her a grin.

Cate returned the expression. “I’ll look forward to seeing your proposal.”

After removing Riley’s bowtie, she ushered the two dogs out into the late afternoon air, allowing them to frolic as the sun marched toward the horizon. The two pups wrestled around on the ground before darting off to chase each other around the grass.

Cate stared at the camera she’d shoved in her cardigan pocket as she allowed the dogs some time to run. What had she seen on the camera that she’d mistaken for someone’s legs?

Table legs didn’t make sense. It looked like shoes and pants, not wood. The glimpse had been fleeting; perhaps she’s misconstrued it. Though, with no expectation of someone being in the castle, she couldn’t imagine she had concocted the image in her mind.

She scrolled to the footage on her phone and replayed the video. She paused it when the supposed person appeared. It looked like a blur on her screen. Cate played that portion of the video five more times. She couldn’t make anything out. The scene played out too fast to be certain of anything.

With a sigh, Cate clicked her phone off and returned to watching the dogs play. Her mind listed the things she needed to do before she turned in

for the night. One of the tasks was to watch the camera footage from her two cube cameras. She dreaded it.

She allowed the dogs as much time as they wanted, putting off making any discoveries of her overnight excursions. When the chill in the air finally drove them in, Cate settled in the library. She shoved her phone aside, deciding to summarize the information from the news clipping on the missing woman from 1942.

Cate noted the article was written in late September. The woman, named Ruth Harper, had not been seen in several days. She had traveled to Dunhaven Castle as a companion to Amelia MacKenzie. The servants reported they had not seen her since Thursday, four days prior to the article's writing. Cate noted the date of her disappearance along with her name and connection to Amelia.

The gossip in town prompted the reporter to inquire at the castle. Servants claimed the woman had not returned one evening, despite all her things remaining in her room. Her personal belongings had later been removed, though no sign that Ruth had returned existed. The household staff believed her disappearance warranted investigation, though the family disagreed.

Amelia MacKenzie had volunteered the information that the woman had sought employment elsewhere. The matter was dropped by the police after this admission.

It wasn't much to go on, Cate thought, as she stared down at the minimal scrawl on her paper. Questions filled her mind about the woman. Perhaps she and Jack should return to the castle before Ruth's disappearance. This may be the fastest way to gather information about her.

Cate noted that they should return in mid-September. She folded her notes and stuffed them into her cardigan pocket. As she flicked the folder containing the articles closed, Cate eyed her phone with antipathy.

With a deep inhale, she pulled it over and opened the camera app. "Moment of truth," she said, as she selected the camera in her bedroom first. Cate dismissed a few videos from her waking hours before she found one from 12:46 a.m.

With pursed lips, she tapped to play it. Once again, she slowly sat up in her bed, staring straight ahead. After a moment, she rose and wandered to the jewelry box, removing the sapphire necklace. As she strode across the room, her on-screen self stopped at the doorway to the sitting room. Her

head turned slowly toward it, and she wandered off camera. The video ended.

Cate returned to the list of videos. The next one in the list had a timestamp of 1:34 a.m. She tapped it and watched as her former self wandered back into the room. This time, the necklace was no longer clutched in her hand. Instead, she now wore it around her neck.

Cate shook her head. She'd been gone for almost an hour. Where had she gone for that amount of time?

CHAPTER 8



She backed out of the video and selected the other camera. Cate scrolled to the video at 12:49 a.m. The footage showed her wandering from the bedroom into the sitting room. She ceased walking for a moment, freezing next to her chaise. She continued to stare blankly ahead, her arms hanging limp at her sides. The necklace sparkled in her hand even in the dim light.

After another moment, on-screen Cate resumed her shambling, continuing across the room to the closed doors leading to the hallway. She stopped at the obstacle, her face inches from the closed door. After a moment, she pawed at the handles, fiddling with them blindly until the door popped open.

Cate swung the door open and disappeared into the hall. She lost sight of herself, and the recording ended. She shook her head as she played the next video, occurring around one-thirty in the morning. She, now necklace-clad, wandered through the open door and the room.

Cate bit her lower lip as the recording offered her little information. The only thing she'd gleaned was that she was roaming around the castle farther than she'd expected. But she had no indication of where she may be going or what was drawing her there. Whatever it was, it was not in her sitting room.

Cate contemplated her next steps as she gathered the dogs for one last romp outside before retiring to her suite. She could place the camera in another location, but where?

The nightmares she'd suffered from for the past several months all occurred in the library. Perhaps that was a prime place for the second camera.

When Cate returned to the castle, she collected the camera from her sitting room and moved it to the library. The blue light glowed at her, bathing the bookshelf around it in blue. She checked the display on her phone. Positioned across from the door, she could see most of the room including the entrance.

Satisfied with her work, Cate returned to her bedroom to turn in for the night.

* * *

Cate awoke early the next morning with a small ball of fur nestled next to her. While Bailey remained curled in a ball near her knees, Riley had snuggled under her chin. As she stretched and opened her eyes, Riley tilted his head and glanced at Cate, offering a lick to her cheek.

"Good morning, buddy," she said, before kissing him on his furry head. "What's with the snuggles? Not that I'm complaining."

Cate propped her head up on her hand as she gave Riley a nice belly rub. As she settled into her lean, a bulky item shifted on her neck. Cate reached for it, discovering the necklace hanging around her neck again.

"This is getting old," she said to Riley with a sigh.

Cate reached behind her for her phone. "Let's see what I did last night."

In short order, Cate found the usual video of herself wandering to the jewelry armoire, retrieving the necklace then leaving the room.

Timestamps indicated she returned almost an hour later. Riley had snuggled near her after her escapades, likely wanting to ensure she didn't sneak away again without his knowledge.

Cate shook her head as she toggled to the other camera. "Let's see if I'm wandering in the library."

Riley cocked his head at her statement. The video list loaded. Cate frowned at the screen. She tilted her head and swiped down to refresh the list. No new videos appeared. The list of videos from today remained empty.

Cate clicked her phone off and bit her lower lip as she tapped the phone against her chin. "Not to the library," she murmured. "So, where did I go?"

Cate pondered other places to position the camera. Did her roamings have nothing to do with her nightmares? If they were unrelated, she had no clues as to where she could be disappearing during her midnight romps.

After a few more moments spent petting Riley, Cate rose and readied for her day. Jack proposed they travel back to 1942 today. She felt ill-prepared for the trip. They had no idea if the lead they were following was even relevant.

Cate hadn't created a plan of action for them to follow. They'd merely be gathering some information, though what information was relevant, she couldn't say. They couldn't very well ask the woman if she planned to disappear in a few days.

Still, perhaps there would be something that would point to the impending trouble.

After a romp outside with the dogs, Cate shuttled them into the kitchen.

"Good morning, Lady Cate," Mrs. Fraser said. "I heard you explored the Scottish countryside yesterday!"

"We did!" Cate said with a grin.

"And we'll be doing more if I have anything to say about it!" Molly exclaimed.

"She'll run you ragged, Lady Cate," Mrs. Fraser teased. "I hope you saved up your energy over the winter."

Cate chuckled.

"Don't worry," Molly said. "I've built in rest days that coincide with some of the parties. We don't want Lady Cate too tired to celebrate her one-year anniversary!"

"Nay, we don't," Mrs. Fraser said. "Mrs. Campbell will never forgive us!"

"I'll save Loch Ness until after the anniversary party. You know, in case the monster gets us," Molly said with a giggle.

"Oh, Loch Ness, I haven't been there in a long time. Perhaps Mr. Fraser and I will tag along with you on that one. If you don't mind, that is."

"Oh, that would be so fun!" Molly said.

"I think so, too!" Cate agreed. "We could make a day of it. Maybe even a weekend. We'll invite Jack, too. My treat!"

"Oh, no, Lady Cate. We cannae take you up on that."

“You most certainly can!” Cate countered. “We’ll do it to celebrate my anniversary – *after* the party, of course.”

“Of course,” Molly and Mrs. Fraser agreed.

“It’ll let all of us have some time off. No cooking for either of you, no yard work for Mr. Fraser and Jack. Just a nice peaceful weekend.”

“Wow, Lady Cate!” Molly squealed. “You’re getting wild and crazy!”

“Lady Cate, wild and crazy?” Jack inquired, as he entered with Mr. Fraser. Riley and Bailey raced to greet the two men.

“That she is!” Molly confirmed. “We went to Fyvie Castle yesterday and I’m planning more outings for us over the spring and summer. Lady Cate suggested we take a weekend to Loch Ness. Give everyone a little getaway and break.”

“Wow, Lady Cate leaving the county! Get out! I can’t believe my ears.”

Cate turned from ladling her oatmeal into her bowl. “Very funny, Jack,” Cate groaned. “I left the county yesterday!”

Jack retrieved a bowl of oatmeal, saying, “That’s the first time since you got here!”

“I’m not very adventurous,” Cate said with a shrug.

“Mmm-hmm,” Jack murmured, giving Cate a knowing glance.

“Speaking of adventurous,” Molly said, as they all sat down with their breakfast. “Any word on that body?”

Cate nodded. “Yes,” she said. “I spoke with the police, and they don’t have many leads. They identified the body as belonging to a female from about seventy to eighty years ago. That’s about it.”

“They can’t connect it to any unsolved disappearances?” Molly asked.

“Not yet,” Cate answered.

“I cannae imagine they would. I told you, there have been no disappearances in the area for as long as I can remember.”

“Seventy to eighty years ago is a bit beyond your memory, Emily,” Mr. Fraser said with a chuckle.

“Aye, it is, but in a town like Dunhaven, they’d still be talking about it into my teen years if it occurred a few years before my birth.”

“You’re right there,” Mr. Fraser agreed.

“Nay, you’re not,” Jack argued.

Mrs. Fraser glanced sharply at him as he ate a spoonful of his oatmeal.

Jack swallowed and said, “They’d still be talking about it to this day.”

Mrs. Fraser chuckled. “I dare say you’re right, young Jack.”

“You know it,” Jack said with a wink.

“So, what now? Are they just giving up?”

Cate shook her head. “No. They’ll expand their search, but it could be quite a process.”

“Well, I hope they figure it out. That poor girl deserves better,” Molly said.

The conversation on the body wound down and they discussed their trip to Fyvie Castle. The Frasers and Jack chimed in with suggestions for other locations to add to Molly’s list.

As breakfast ended, Jack stood and said, “Lady Cate, might I have a moment of your time for some, uh, estate business?”

“Sure,” Cate said, understanding his statement to mean much more than estate business.

They made their way upstairs to the library. Jack shut the doors behind them as they entered. “I figured we’d better discuss a plan before we jump back to the 1940s,” he said.

Cate nodded. “We don’t have much to go on, I’m afraid. I’m not even certain the woman in question will be there when we hop back. But we have to start somewhere.”

“What date do you propose we go to?”

“I’m thinking mid-September. The woman, Ruth Harper, travels to Dunhaven with Amelia sometime in September. The article was dated September twenty-third, and stated she hadn’t been seen in several days. So, she had been there since September nineteenth at least, and I don’t think she disappeared on her first day in town. At least, that’s not the impression I got.”

“Okay, so we head back around maybe September sixteenth?” Jack asked. “That’s three days before her disappearance.”

“Okay, yes, they should be there.”

“And we’ll gather some information. Maybe speak with the family?”

“Yes, although...”

“What?”

“We’ll be talking to Rory and Anne again,” Cate said. “And Amelia. They should recognize us. But they’ve aged. We have not. It’s been almost twenty years and we don’t look any older.”

“Rory will understand.”

“Yes, though I’m not sure how to handle Amelia and Anne.”

“We’re going to have to do the best we can do. Perhaps we should avoid them at first. We may be able to determine what’s going on just by speaking with Rory.”

“Okay, let’s go with that plan for now,” Cate agreed with a nod. “And obviously, I’ll have to play Mrs. Jack MacKenzie again, since it would be a terrible shame if we’d gotten a divorce before 1942.”

Jack chuckled. “It would be. Especially given what a lovely husband I am.”

“Exceptional,” Cate agreed.

“All right, seems we have our plan. Should we go after lunch?”

“Sounds like a plan!”

Jack gave her a nod and spun to give the dogs a goodbye pat. His brow furrowed as he caught sight of the blue light shining from one of the bookshelves.

“What’s that?” he questioned, approaching it.

“Oh, uh, doggie cam,” Cate answered. “I can access it from my phone and check on them.”

“Ah, okay then,” Jack said with a nod. “You two had better behave yourselves. Lady Cate has eyes on you even when she leaves the county.”

Cate shook her head at him. “I’m never going to live that down, am I?”

“Never, Lady Cate.” Jack strode to the door. “Oh, one last thing,” he said, turning to face her. “Did you order the fish and chips while you were out?”

“No!” Cate answered. “I had a sandwich and a piece of cake.”

Jack’s eyebrows shot up. “Why, Lady Cate, I’m not certain I even know who you are anymore.”

Cate chuckled at him. “I’ll see you later, Jack.”

“You know it,” he called, as he disappeared down the hall.

Cate stared at the camera for a moment longer. A pang of guilt settled over her as she realized she’d just lied to Jack. She didn’t really lie, she told herself. She could use the camera to check on the pups. And she didn’t see a point in telling him about her sleepwalking. When she had something solid on the matter, then she’d tell him, she reasoned. Until then, it would remain a pet camera.

Cate spent the morning hours attempting to find more information about Ruth Harper. She located birth records for several Ruth Harpers, but could

not pinpoint which may be the correct one. With no knowledge of the woman's age, Cate could not determine which belonged to their target.

She spent another hour searching for photo albums to find any clue as to the woman's identity, but she found none. With a sigh, Cate settled in for lunch, and her mind turned to another mystery.

The blue light on the camera across the library glowed at her. Where was she disappearing to when she roamed the castle at night? Perhaps she should move the camera to a hallway or the foyer.

Her brow furrowed as she tried to discern her sleepwalking target. If not the library, which her subconscious mind had dwelled on for months, where?

After her lunch, Cate snatched the camera from the shelf and strolled down the hall to the foyer. She set the camera on an entry table, aimed at the main staircase.

"Lady Cate," Jack said as she adjusted it, monitoring its view on her phone. Startled, Cate jumped and pressed her hand to her heart.

"Oh, Jack, you startled me."

"Moving the puppy cam?"

"Huh?"

Jack pointed toward the camera cube.

"Oh, right, yeah."

Jack cocked an eyebrow.

"I just wanted to see if they come through here while we're gone."

Jack pursed his lips and nodded.

"Anyway," Cate said, "ready?"

"I just need a change of clothes," Jack said, as they mounted the stairs.

"I found some," Cate said. "I'm not sure if they're 1942, but they'll definitely pass for the 1940s. There must have been a rip to the 1940s somewhere in the castle."

"Ah, good."

"I set them out in the bedroom you normally use," Cate said.

"Okay. I'll change and await your call, m'lady," Jack said with a bow.

"All right. Go slow, I've got to tame this hair into some sort of 40s style."

"Don't forget your wedding ring and a few fake wrinkles so we look older."

"I'll skip the wrinkles, but thanks for reminding me about that ring."

Jack and Cate parted ways. Cate hurried into her suite and to the bathroom. She began with her hair, forming rolls on each side of her face. She uncapped a tube of red lipstick, popular during the era, and smeared it across her lips.

When she was finished, she pulled on a belted navy skirt suit and pair of peep-toed t-strap heels. Cate glanced in the mirror as she made her final adjustments. Satisfied, she hurried out to the jewelry armoire and found her faux wedding band, slipping it onto her finger.

She paused for a moment. Her fingers fell to the bottom drawer. Her breathing slowed and her vision narrowed to a pinpoint. Her fingers curled around the drawer pull.

A knock roused her from her trance. She shook her head, blinking her eyes as she sucked in a breath. She ripped her hand away from the knob and adjusted her skirt. "Coming!" she shouted.

With a deep breath, Cate left the jewelry armoire behind and hurried across her sitting room after she grabbed her envelope-style purse from the bed.

Cate pulled the door open to find Jack waiting in his 1940s duds complete with a boxy jacket, cuffed pants, and fedora.

"I feel like a gangster," Jack said.

"Come on," Cate said. "This has to be much better than the 1700s."

"Oh, aye," Jack admitted. "I'm much more comfortable without my short trousers and tights. And you, Lady Cate, seem to look stunning in any era."

"You're such a charmer," Cate said.

"Let's sneak down the back stairs and into the hidden passage."

"Okay," Cate said with a nod.

They wound through the halls and down the back stairs. Cate pulled the wall sconce, popping open the secret passage. A damp chill swept from within the passage as they stood in front of it. Cate shivered. The memory of hiding here from Marcus Northcott swept through her.

"You okay?" Jack inquired.

She forced a smile on her face and nodded. They stepped into the passage and pulled the panel shut behind them. Jack toggled on a pocket flashlight as Cate set the timepiece to September 16th, 1942.

"Ready?" she asked.

"I guess," Jack said.

“Second thoughts?”

Jack wiggled his eyebrows. “No, but time travel gives me the willies.”

“Easy trip, remember? Information gathering only.”

“Right,” Jack said with a nod. They both wrapped their hands around the timepiece and, with a deep inhale, rubbed it, opening the time rip and slipping back to 1942.

In the darkened passage, Cate and Jack struggled to determine if the shift had worked.

“I guess we’re back,” Cate said.

Jack clicked off the flashlight and wandered to the panel, blindly feeling for the release. After finding it, he inched the panel open and peered into the hallway. With a shrug, he closed it. “I guess,” Jack said. “Everything looks eerily similar.”

“The price we pay for only traveling back seventy-odd years.”

Jack snapped the flashlight on and shined it under his chin. “To a time with modern amenities.”

Cate chuckled at his fearsome expression. “Come on, we can head out through the crypt, and no one will be any the wiser.”

“No more sneaking around the hallways and risking getting caught!” Jack exclaimed.

“Nope. Instead, we get to sneak through a dark, creepy cave and into a crypt.”

Jack ceased his walking for a moment and grasped Cate’s hand. “Hey, are you sure you’re okay going that way? We can sneak through the halls if you’d rather.”

Cate smiled weakly at him and squeezed his hand. “Thanks, but I’m okay. Ancient history, right?”

“Yes and no,” Jack said. “It may have occurred in 1792, but it was only days ago for us when that bastard put you in a stone coffin and left you to die.”

“Technically he put me in there and then gave you the clue to find me,” Cate said, as they started down the passage.

“Bull,” Jack retorted. “I’m not falling for that excuse. He’s not forgiven on a technicality.”

“Well, either way,” Cate answered. “I didn’t die.”

“Thank heavens,” Jack said, with another squeeze to her hand. “Wow, it’s dark in here. How did you make it through in 1792 without a

flashlight?”

“Celine’s magical version of a flashlight is actually much brighter than the one you’ve got,” Cate explained, referencing the ethereal blue-white bulb Celine was able to create from thin air. “One of her many talents.”

Jack screwed up his face. “I’ll say. This is an LED!”

“She’s got that beat.”

They continued through the dank passage. “It should start sloping upward when we’re approaching the crypt,” Cate said.

Within a minute, Cate’s legs worked to walk uphill.

“Should be getting close,” Jack said.

They approached an enclosed space.

“Okay, where’s the crypt?” Jack inquired.

Cate adjusted Jack’s hand to aim the flashlight above them. A block protruded above their heads with a ring. “Pull that and we’re free.”

Jack yanked the ring down. A clank sounded followed by a screech. Fresh air rushed in, and daylight lit the chamber. Jack clicked off the flashlight and they stepped into the next chamber.

Jack side-eyed Cate as she stared at the coffin where she’d been buried alive. She swallowed hard and offered another weak smile. “I suppose Douglas is in there now.”

“Doesn’t make it any easier, Cate.”

“I’m okay. But let’s not linger here.”

Jack nodded and they exited the mausoleum onto the gravel path outside. Jack removed his hat and dusted it off. “Got dirt on my gangster hat.”

“Perhaps we should take an indirect route to the castle. We’ll just look around and see if we can determine who’s here.”

“Sounds like a plan.”

They strolled down the path. The castle rose on the horizon as they wound away from it toward the back of the property. Cate’s brow furrowed as she glanced down the hill behind the castle. “What’s that?” she inquired.

“Why, Lady Cate, don’t you recognize your own loch?”

“Not that,” Cate said with a shake of her head, and a tongue-in-cheek annoyed glance to Jack. “That!” She pointed to another structure tucked behind the castle to the right of the loch. A large, green tent-like structure stood on a flat area of land.

Jack scrunched his eyebrows together as he ceased walking. He shielded his eyes staring at it. "I'm not sure."

"It looks like a tent," Cate said.

"Aye, but a rather large one. Like for an event."

"Yes and no," Cate answered.

"What do you mean?"

"Can you imagine Mrs. Campbell putting up a green tent?"

Jack considered it. "No," he admitted, "I can imagine the sheer shock on her face when she saw that color."

Cate giggled. "And then the green-around-the-gills panicked expression when I suggest we use the red napkins anyway, despite the green walls."

"Lady Cate, if we put a green tent like that up for a party, we'd be wallpapering the inside."

"I have no doubt."

"Maybe we can get a closer look from the loch."

Cate nodded and they wandered down the path to the loch. The large tree nearby, full of foliage, provided the perfect hiding spot to spy on the temporary structure.

Cate and Jack sheltered behind it, eyeing the large green blob. After a few moments, two women emerged from inside. They strode purposefully toward the castle. A man wandered out ten minutes later.

"Who are those people?"

Jack shrugged. "I'm not certain. They certainly aren't anyone we know."

"No, that wasn't Anne or Amelia. Nor is that man Lucas or Rory."

"Could it have been Oliver or Charles?"

"I suppose the man could have been Oliver. He'd be twenty-eight by now. My grandfather, Charles, would be seventeen. He may or may not be here. But that still doesn't explain the women."

"Nor what they're doing there." Jack pressed his finger to his chin. "Could one of the women be Mary?"

"Oliver's wife?" Cate inquired. "I'm not certain when they met, but if I recall their age difference correctly, she'd only be eighteen right now. I can't recall exactly the age she married, but I'd be surprised if it was this early."

"We'll ask Pap when we go back."

"Okay," Cate said.

“Oi! What are you two doing there?” a voice from behind them called.

CHAPTER 9



Jack and Cate spun around to find a small child, about five or six, staring at them. He pointed a stick menacingly in their direction.

“I said, what are you two doing there?”

“Oh,” Jack said, approaching him slowly, “hello, there, little fellow.”

“Don’t little fellow me!” the child said with his eyes narrowed. “I asked you a question!”

“We were just enjoying the view,” Jack said.

The boy narrowed his eyes further. “You were looking at the tent, weren’t you?”

Jack squatted down as he spoke. “We were. You’re a very perceptive laddie.”

“Aye, that I am. Why are you so interested in that tent?”

“Do you know what the tent is for?”

The child eyed Jack for a moment before he answered. “Aye, I do. Why?”

“Would you like to share that information?”

“Are you Nazis?”

Jack’s eyes went wide at the question, and he glanced back at Cate. With a scrunching of his eyebrows, he returned his attention to the boy. “No,” he answered with a chuckle.

“It’s not a joke. If you’re not a Nazi, why aren’t you volunteering for your country, strapping lad like you?” The boy gazed down at Jack’s feet. “Got flat feet?”

“No, I haven’t got flat feet. You ask a lot of questions for a little boy.”

“Then why aren’t you fighting for the crown?”

“Ah, well,” Jack began.

“He’s nearsighted,” Cate interjected.

“Oh,” the boy said. “Can’t fly with the RAF then. But you could volunteer for the army. I would if I was old enough. I’d be right there on the front lines killing them Nazis right and left.” He swung the branch around to showcase his fierce skills.

“Well, I have other contributions to make,” Jack said.

“Oh, intelligence, are you? That why you’re asking about the tent? What’re your names?”

“I’m Cate and this is Jack. And yes,” Cate said. “Is that a group of codebreakers in there? That’s what we’re looking for.”

“Aye, codebreakers, they are. Working on the Enigma code.”

Cate smiled, not just at the answer, but at the idea. Dunhaven Castle was a miniature Bletchley Park. Codebreakers were given room and board along with security here while they worked to keep allied convoys safe by decoding intercepted German messages.

“Thank you,” Cate said. “You’ve been very helpful.”

“You sure you’re Allies?”

“Certain,” Cate said. “I’m an American!”

“Aye, that you are, lassie. About time your lot joined our efforts. Say, what time is it?”

Jack glanced at his wristwatch. “It’s quarter to four,” he said.

The boy winced. “Yikes. I’ve got to get back before my Da leaves! Good to meet you!”

The little boy trotted down the path. Jack rose to stand and called after him. “Before you go, what’s your name, son?”

The boy spun around. “Stanley!” he shouted, as he offered a salute. “Stanley Reid!” The boy spun back toward the castle and darted down the path.

Jack’s jaw dropped open as he stared after the boy. Cate covered her mouth which hung agape. She grasped Jack’s bicep and squeezed.

Jack whipped his head to stare at her. He blinked as he processed the statement. “My Pap just called me a Nazi and asked if I had flat feet.”

“Well, he is only five,” Cate said, barely holding in a chuckle. “But he called me lassie, just like he always does.”

"I can't believe he's always been that ornery. I thought it was old age."

"Apparently not," Cate answered. "I guess he's always been a character."

"I'll say," Jack said with a shake of his head.

"At least he told us what the tent is for," Cate said.

"I'm not quite sure I understand what he meant."

"It's an intelligence hub. Think Bletchley Park. Large properties like this offered a place for a group of codebreakers to stay and live while they worked to decipher coded messages from the Germans. Sometimes they even served as airbases. The codebreakers worked to prevent attacks on Allied convoys by the U-boat Wolfpacks. Dunhaven Castle must be assisting with the war efforts. A property this far north was probably a great area to house them for safety. Plus, in 1942, the messages became indecipherable for a period. They needed all the codebreaking help they could get."

"Oh," Jack said, with a nod of understanding. "So our girl could be one of the codebreakers."

Cate's brow crinkled. "Amelia said she worked for her, so probably not. But she could have been killed by someone in that tent. Still, it doesn't provide us with much information."

"No, it doesn't, but we've now got a new lead to follow."

Cate nodded. "Maybe we should head back."

"Okay. You follow up on this while we decide how best to explain our youthful appearances to people who aged twenty years."

Cate nodded in agreement. "I suppose we should sneak back in using the crypt, though we'll have to figure out how to open the passage from this side."

"No time like the present," Jack said, offering his arm.

"Technically, we're in the past, but sure," Cate said as she accepted it.

"Witty, Lady Cate. My humor is rubbing off on you."

They returned to the crypt. Cate's eyes roamed over the stone interior. "I've never actually entered the passage from this side," she admitted.

"I suppose now's as good a time as any to find the opening," Jack replied.

"It's a ring on the other side."

"The only ring I see in the lion's mouth there." Jack pointed up at the decorative lion.

Cate smiled and nodded. Jack reached up and tugged. His grin turned upside down into a frown when nothing happened.

"I really thought that would work."

"Me too," Cate answered. "It always works on TV."

"We live wilder lives than people on TV," Jack said, as he tugged on his collar.

"I beg to differ," Cate said. Any further comment was drowned out by a droning overhead.

"What is that?" Jack asked.

Cate stepped out through the gate and glanced upward. "Jack, look!" She pointed skyward as Jack joined her.

Four RAF fighter planes flew overhead. "Are those..." Jack asked, as he shielded his eyes against the bright sun.

Cate nodded, her skin turning to gooseflesh. "Royal Air Force."

"What are they doing here?"

"Protecting the intelligence post, perhaps," Cate suggested.

Moments later, the squadron, flying in finger-four formation, split apart. The planes darted in different directions.

"What's going on?" Jack inquired.

A new sound joined the buzzing of the RAF fighters. "There!" Cate exclaimed. Four differently configured planes sped in from the south.

"Who are they?"

"By the looks of the planes, that's the Luftwaffe!" Cate exclaimed. "Oh, Jack, we're about to see a dog fight up close and personal!"

Jack's eyes went wide as the four German planes split apart in pursuit of the RAF. Bullets strafed from the eight aircrafts. The planes darted through the sky, diving and climbing, doing barrel rolls, and chasing each other in hot pursuit.

Two RAF fighters managed to corner one of the German planes. One plane open-fired. A black line of smoke trailed from the German plane as the pilot fought to bring the plane down safely in enemy territory.

"Oh, a hit!" Jack exclaimed. "Now they've got the advantage."

Cate nodded and continued to watch the fray. Another pair of pilots battled it out on the far side of the castle. Again, the RAF pilot outmaneuvered the less-agile German fighter. Another black streak smoked through the sky, this one ending in a fiery explosion as the plane hit the ground.

The remaining Luftwaffe planes hightailed it away in the direction they'd come. As the skies quieted, Jack murmured, "Wow," in an astonished whisper, adding, "I can't believe we just saw that."

"Yeah," Cate answered. "I still have goosebumps."

"Good job by our boys!"

Cate nodded as they ducked back into the crypt. "The RAF planes were far more agile in dog fights. They had an advantage. It was still an awesome sight to see some of those maneuvers."

"I agree, Lady Cate," Jack said. "Maybe this time travel stuff isn't all that terrible after all."

Cate lifted her eyebrows and grinned at him. "I'm so glad it's growing on you."

"Now if we can only find the entrance, we can enjoy it from our own time."

"I really thought the ring in the lion's mouth would be it," Jack said with a shake of his head.

Cate pressed a finger to her lips as she surveyed the space. "Too obvious, I guess," she murmured.

"I was okay with how obvious it was," Jack said, as he poked around searching for another option.

Cate chuckled at the statement as she zeroed in on a large ring attached to the head of the middle stone coffin. "Maybe this," she said.

She wrapped her fingers around the ring and tugged. It gave way slightly. Her features scrunched as she struggled to pull the ancient mechanism further. Jack grabbed hold of the ring to assist.

It broke loose and triggered the doorway into the passage. "Success," Jack said, as they darted inside and closed the panel.

They wandered through the tunnel back to the house, resetting the watch and returning to their own time. They emerged from the secret panel and took a back stairway upstairs to change.

"Well, I suppose there's no need for our usual post-time travel trip analysis meeting," Jack said, as they traversed the halls.

"Not unless you'd like to discuss running into your grandfather when he was five."

"I'd really rather not. I found it a little disturbing. Pap was a tough little bugger."

Cate giggled. "He was. I can't believe he accused us of being Nazis."

“At least he didn’t insult your feet.”

Cate continued her chuckling. “Anyway, you’re off the hook. I’ll get started on researching the intelligence base at the castle and see if I can find any leads there.”

“Let me know what you come up with, Lady Cate,” Jack said.

“I will.”

After donning her twenty-first-century clothes, Cate wandered to the library for a brief research session before her dinner. Much of what she read she already knew. Deciphering German messages was a large focus of the war efforts. So-called Wolfpacks of German U-boats prowled the waters and attacked allied supply ships. Determining the location of these Wolfpacks on any given day could help turn the tides of the war or could sink the Allies’ efforts, quite literally.

As such, mathematicians were housed at estates such as Bletchley Park and put forth phenomenal efforts to break the German Enigma code. Submarine crews often risked their lives to overtake a U-boat and retrieve the Enigma machines for codebreakers to study.

While having Enigma machines was helpful, the machine settings were changed daily and based on secret keys distributed in advance, making messages difficult to decrypt.

On her initial search, Cate found little information specific to Dunhaven Castle. However, she became swept away with the fascinating stories of the work intelligence analysts did to aid the war efforts. She marveled at the lengths some people went to to help the war efforts.

When dinner interrupted her research, she set the laptop aside for the day and enjoyed her meal. After an evening walk with her pups, Cate settled in her sitting room with a hot chocolate and a mystery novel.

As she readied for bed, Cate bent down to remove the bow-tie collar she’d placed on Riley earlier. “Did you get up to anything interesting today, Riley? I forgot to check your camera feed. Well, tomorrow’s a new day.”

The small camera dangled from Cate’s fingertips as she crossed the room. The blue glow of her own monitoring device caught her eye. She stared at it for a moment, wondering if she’d wander around the castle again tonight.

“Where am I going?” she murmured to herself. Cate glanced down at the collar camera still clutched in her hand. An idea formed in her mind, and she narrowed her eyes at the small device.

Within twenty minutes, Cate was climbing into bed with the pet collar camera dangling from her wrist on a bracelet. As she lay back amidst her pillows, she stared down at the small item strapped to her.

“I wonder what you’ll show me tomorrow,” she asked aloud, as she relaxed into sleep.

CHAPTER 10



Cate awoke with a start. Sweat beaded on her forehead and she gasped for breath. The sun painted the morning sky a deep shade of red. Cate grasped her clock and checked the time. Fifteen minutes remained before her alarm would signal her to get up.

Cate collapsed back into the pillows as she caught her breath. She searched her mind for what disturbed her sleep. She didn't recall having a nightmare. What caused her to break into a sweat? What caused the shortness of breath?

With no answers in sight, Cate stretched and climbed from her bed. She blew out a long breath as she clutched at her neck, finding the familiar sapphire necklace hanging there. As she pulled on her robe, she caught sight of her other accessory.

Cate bit her lower lip as she stared at the camera attached to her wrist. Perhaps she'd get some answers from the video feed this morning.

Cate delayed her findings into her overnight excursions until after breakfast. After moving the camera from the foyer back to the library, she settled into her desk chair. As she slouched down, she eyed her phone. She stared at the blank screen. Her finger tapped against the power button as she attempted to muster the courage to view the video.

After a hard swallow, Cate toggled her phone on and navigated to the camera's app. A list of videos filled her screen. She clicked on one showing Dunhaven Castle's estate from a dog's perspective. The camera bobbed around as Riley frolicked through the back garden.

Cate smiled at the video as she caught sight of her legs and a bashful Bailey trotting next to them. Her brow furrowed and she stopped the video. This had been a similar angle to the video she'd swore she saw legs in while she and Molly were visiting Fyvie Castle.

She stared at it for a few more moments before she realized she was stalling from the task at hand. Cate pursed her lips as she returned to the video list and scrolled through it. She found one with today's date. The timestamp read 1:37 a.m.

Cate sucked in a breath and tapped on the video. It took her several seconds to acclimate to the video's perspective. At her hip level outside of some bobbling around of her right arm, things appeared very different.

Cate squinted at the phone as her bobbling hands settled back at her sides, following what she assumed to be clasping the sapphire necklace around her neck. She recognized the sitting room as her on-screen-self wandered through it. The camera angle became frenetic as Cate turned the door handle and pulled her suite's doors open.

Cate stared down the length of the hall as the bobbling video continued. "Where am I going?"

She covered her mouth as the video captured her threading through several hallways in a seemingly random pattern. Cate wandered down a set of back stairs. She continued her aimless wandering until she reached a set of doors to the closed-off west wing. She paused for a moment before she continued along the hall.

After a few more moments of wandering, the camera faced another set of doors. Cate recognized the entrance to the ballroom. The camera approached the large double doors. The picture bobbed again as Cate flung the doors open. The turning of her wrist spun the camera. It caught on the ring used to attach it to the bracelet. Now angled upward, Cate could see bits and pieces of her face.

The night mode toggled on as Cate stepped into the darkened ballroom. Her face lit in an eerie green, her eyes forming two piercing dots as they scanned the space.

The video moved as Cate wandered to the center of the ballroom. She spun in a slow circle, her eyes searching. After two full turns, she stopped.

"I'm here. Where are you?" her on-screen counterpart said.

Cate's brow furrowed as she pondered the meaning of her sleepwalking-self's statement. Another moment passed, before the Cate on screen

whipped her head toward something. From the odd angle of the camera, Cate detected a smile forming on her lips. She took a step toward whatever she focused on when the camera froze.

“What?” Cate asked, tapping at her phone’s screen. “No!”

Her heart sank as she attempted to find more of the video. No other footage existed, including her return trip to bed. The next video on the list was of her awakening earlier this morning.

Cate sat in stunned silence for several moments as she pondered the meaning of the latest revelations. Who was she searching for? Her mind leapt to an answer. It was one she did not like.

A knock on the library’s open door snapped her out of her ruminating. She glanced at the door to find Jack leaning in.

“Lady Cate, lost in thought?”

Cate didn’t respond for a moment. She flicked her gaze to the phone. The wrinkles in her forehead deepened as she directed her gaze back to Jack.

“Cate?” he questioned, his face quickly turning to a mask of concern as he approached her. “Are you okay?”

She shook her head as she rose from the chair.

“Did you find something on our lady?”

“No,” Cate answered. “We’ve got another problem, Jack.”

“Oh? Find another body in the garden, did you?”

Cate tried to force a smile at the terrible joke as she shook her head, but it faltered, and she glanced down at the phone still clutched in her hand.

“Cate, you’re scaring me. What’s wrong?”

Cate swallowed hard, bringing her eyes to meet Jack’s for a brief second. She licked her lips as she pondered the words.

“I’ve been sleepwalking,” she settled on.

Jack’s brow furrowed and he blinked his eyes a few times before cocking his head. “Oh,” he said, after a moment, “so you’re tired? Is that what’s got you so down?”

Cate shook her head. “No,” she admitted. “It’s not that.”

“Then what?” Jack prodded as Cate continued her reluctance.

She glanced to her phone again before returning her gaze to Jack. “It’s not normal sleepwalking,” she reported.

Jack’s eyes widened and darted around the room. “Ooookay,” he said. “Are you doing strange things? Like wandering around naked or

something?”

The comment made Cate chuckle despite her trepidation. “No,” she gasped out.

“Then what? Maybe you should sit down and explain it to me,” Jack said, leading her to one of the leather armchairs near the fireplace. He eased her into it and plopped into the chair adjacent to hers.

Cate bit her lower lip before she proceeded with more details. “I keep getting up and retrieving that necklace...” she began.

Jack let his head fall onto the chair behind him with a sigh. “Oh, Cate, you need to get rid of that damn thing.”

“Yes, I’m starting to agree with you,” Cate admitted.

“Although, it’s not that terrible. Why has it got you so disturbed?”

“Well, there’s more,” Cate said with a frown. “It started with me simply wandering in my sleep to the jewelry armoire, retrieving the sapphire necklace and returning to bed. I’d wake up with it clutched in my hand. But then...” Her voice trailed off.

“Then?” Jack prodded.

“Well, then things took a turn for the stranger. And after I pick up the necklace from the jewelry box, I wander around the castle for a while.”

Jack sat for a moment, processing the information before he shook his head. “If you’re sleepwalking, how do you know what you’re doing? Do you wake up somewhere else?”

Cate shook her head and waved her phone in the air. “No. Those doggie cams aren’t really for the dogs. I’ve been using them to track my movements around the castle. And last night I strapped the collar cam to my wrist, so I had a record of where I went.”

Jack leaned forward, placing his elbows on his knees. “How long has this been going on, Cate?”

“Since our last trip to 1792.”

Jack scrubbed his face with his hands.

Cate continued her explanation. “I started out with a camera in my bedroom.” She toggled it on to show Jack the videos. “At first, I just wander to the jewelry armoire and remove the necklace and go back to bed.” She toggled into a video showing her zombie-like self wandering around her bedroom.

“But then,” Cate continued, “I saw this one.” She tapped the screen to display the video where she wandered into the sitting room.

“So I bought another camera.” Another video played on the screen, showing her wandering through the sitting room and out into the hall.

“Which led me to move the camera here because I assumed this phenomenon was tied to my nightmares about the bookcase. Or rather, I assumed this replaced those nightmares since I haven’t suffered from them since this began.”

Jack gazed over at the camera cube now across the room. “So, did you come in here?”

Cate shook her head. “No. No video of me coming to the library. I wasn’t sure where to put the camera next, so I tried the foyer, but nothing there, and then last night when I was removing the collar cam from Riley, the idea struck me to attach it to myself. Then I could essentially follow myself around at night.”

Jack gave her a sideways glance. “It disturbs me how scientific you are about this, Cate.”

Cate shrugged. “It seemed the best way to collect evidence. Anyway, this is the video from last night.”

“And this is the collar cam?” Jack inquired.

Cate nodded as she pressed play on the video. Jack accepted the proffered cell phone and watched the video play. Cate leaned over his shoulder as she offered commentary.

“Okay, likely I’m fastening the necklace,” she said, as the camera bobbed around, covered by her hair at times. “And now, here we go into the sitting room and down the hall.” The camera bobbed around as Cate plodded down the hall past Molly’s room and turned into another hallway.

“Where are you going?” Jack inquired.

“Same question I had,” Cate said. She speeded the video until she arrived at the ballroom doors.

“Ah,” Jack exclaimed, as Cate allowed it to play at normal speed. “You want to have a party.”

The video continued as Cate entered the ballroom and began to spin in a slow circle. “What are you doing?”

“Just keep watching,” Cate said.

Jack returned his attention to the screen and watched as Cate stopped. “I’m here. Where are you?” her voice questioned from the phone.

Jack’s face became a mask of confusion. “Where’s who?” he asked. A moment later, the corners of Cate’s mouth turned up and she stared at

something. Or someone. As she took another step, the video froze.

“Why did it stop?”

“I’m not sure. But there are no other videos after that. Not even of me returning to bed.”

“Did you?”

“Yes,” Cate said with a nod, as she plopped into her armchair. “I woke up in my bed this morning, so I got back somehow.”

Jack pursed his lips and stared at the image frozen on the screen. “Who are you looking for, I wonder?”

Cate stared blankly ahead as he spoke. “Him,” she murmured.

“Huh?”

Cate blinked slowly as she focused on nothing in front of her. Her senses dulled and her world slid away.

Suddenly, her body jolted. She blinked a few times as she focused on what was in front of her. Jack knelt in front of the chair. His hands gripped her upper arms tightly. The wrinkles on his forehead and the pained expression on his lips hinted at his worry.

“Cate?” he said.

“What?” she answered. “What’s wrong?”

Jack’s eyes widened. “What’s wrong? I asked who you may be looking for, and you murmured some response and then you just turned into a zombie! I couldn’t get a response from you.”

CHAPTER 11



Cate drew in a deep breath. “I don’t remember any of that.”

Jack crept back to his armchair and perched on the edge of it. He shook his head. “Cate, I think we need to get rid of that necklace.”

Cate nodded. “I’m inclined to agree with you. It obviously has some strange effect on me.” Cate pondered for a moment before adding, “I guess I could call...”

“Cate, no,” Jack interrupted. “Get rid of it. Stop putting it off, or letting someone else handle it.”

“I’m not putting it off but... what am I going to do with it?”

“Chuck the damn thing into the loch.”

Cate winced. “I hope I don’t try a midnight diving excursion to get it back.”

“That settles it,” Jack said, pounding his palms on the chair’s arms. “I’m going to stay here until we’re sure you’re back to normal. We’ll make sure all the doors are locked so you can’t get away and harm yourself. And we’re tossing that necklace right now.”

Jack stood and held his hand out to Cate. “What, now? Like now, now?”

“Yes, like now, now, Lady Cate. Hop to it and get that cursed thing out of your jewelry box.” Jack shook his head. “No, scratch that. I’ll go with you. Before you put it on and start wandering around again.”

Cate grasped his hand, and he pulled her up to standing. She offered a defeated nod and led the way from the room. They traversed the halls to Cate’s suite.

“How will you explain staying here?” Cate inquired.

“I suppose I’ll invent another problem to deal with,” Jack answered.

“Another leak, huh?” Cate said.

“Something like that,” Jack answered.

“Darn leaky roofs on these old places,” Cate said with a chuckle.

“At least it works in our favor,” Jack replied, as they reached Cate’s sitting room. Jack hovered at the door to her bedroom as she stalked across the room and pulled open the drawer. Her eyes fell onto the extravagant necklace. Her fingers reached out to caress the gems. She arched an eyebrow as the world around her seemed to fall away.

After a moment, she blinked several times. Only black velvet stared back at her.

“We’ll have none of that,” Jack said, as he swiped the necklace from the drawer. “I can’t wait until this thing is gone.” He dangled it in the air before shoving it into his pocket. “Let’s go.”

Cate nodded and they snaked through the halls and onto the grounds after collecting the dogs. Cate took a deep breath as they began their walk to the loch. When they arrived, her stomach filled with butterflies. She bit her lower lip as Jack removed the jewelry piece from his pocket.

He closed his fist around it and raised his hand high.

“Wait!” Cate exclaimed.

“What?” he asked, lowering his hand to his side.

Cate grasped hold of it and pulled his fingers back. “Maybe we shouldn’t throw it into the loch. It really is beautiful. Perhaps...”

Jack yanked his hand away. “No more, Cate. It’s going to the bottom of that loch today. It’s a cursed thing, no matter how pretty it is.”

Jack pulled his hand back and threw it overhand. Cate’s heart somersaulted with the necklace as she watched it arc in the air before descending toward the water. It plopped into the still surface. Concentric circles radiated from where it bobbed for a second before slipping below the water.

Jack nodded his head as the waters calmed again. “Done.”

Cate stared at the spot where the necklace had disappeared. Jack glanced at her. “How do you feel?”

Cate raised her eyebrows and drew in a deep breath. “Better,” she said. “I think.”

Jack smiled at her. “Good. And I’ll stay the night just in case. But let’s hope that puts an end to your troubles.”

Cate returned his smile and nodded. “Yes. Let’s hope my sleepwalking days are over. Maybe now I can make some progress on our girl.”

“Nothing yet?” Jack asked, as they began their walk back to the castle.

Cate shook her head. “No. Though, I’m afraid I got caught up in reading some of the history of the time. World War II is one of my favorite periods to study.”

“A war buff? I’d never have guessed.”

Cate nodded with a coy grin. “Maybe you’d like to borrow my Battle 360 DVDs,” she said.

Jack chuckled at Cate’s comments as they reached the castle.

“All right, Lady Cate,” Jack said, as they stepped into the foyer. “As long as you feel okay, I’ll leave you to your work. I expect a full report on Ruth Harper later today.”

“Aye, aye, sir!” Cate said with a salute. “And yes, I feel fine. I only seem to have an odd reaction when I see that necklace. Now that it’s gone, let’s hope that’s all behind me.”

“Fingers crossed, Lady Cate,” he answered as he backed down the hall.

Cate ushered the dogs into the library. With a short amount of time before lunch, Cate opted for busy work rather than diving into any research on Ruth Harper. Instead, she grabbed her cell phone.

She frowned at the picture on the screen. Her frozen image standing in the ballroom faced her. She quickly tapped her home button to remove the image and navigated to her text app. After selecting the appropriate message thread, Cate typed: *You’ll be happy to hear we’ve gotten rid of the necklace.*

She tapped the arrow button to send the message. Within a few moments, a bubble appeared with three dots, indicating a response being typed. Cate smiled as Damien’s answer appeared: *Way to go, Cate!*

The two conversed through Cate’s lunch. She avoided telling him about her sleepwalking drama, feeling a bit guilty keeping it from him, particularly after he asked about her nightmares.

She reported she had no trouble with them after her return from 1792.

Celine says hers never stopped. She thought I should warn you, just in case you experience a similar thing.

Cate responded: *Really? I had one nightmare about being trapped in the coffin, but nothing since.*

Damien's answer confirmed his earlier message. *Yeah. Celine said she's had the nightmares for over two centuries. I hope you don't. Not have them for two centuries, that would be impossible for you as a human. I mean I hope you don't have them anymore. Celine's are on and off, though, so if you start having nightmares again, it may be normal.*

Cate's forehead crinkled as she processed the message. What about Duke Northcott affected both her and Celine? Perhaps she should say something to Damien about the sleepwalking. Maybe he could tell her how to stop it.

Cate began to type a message but then erased it. She'd sleep on it and decide about sharing the information with him later. She toggled off her phone after sending a simple "Thanks!" and finished her lunch.

She settled in at her desk after a hearty meal, prepared to work. She spent the better part of the afternoon attempting to track down information about the intelligence base on Dunhaven Castle's grounds or anyone named Ruth Harper.

Cate found a number of references to women named Ruth Harper. She sorted through the hundreds of results, removing those who did not fit the time frame first. She trimmed her list down by removing anyone who could not have been at Dunhaven Castle in 1942. When she finished, she had a handful of women left.

Cate stared at her list of four women. She'd dive deeper into researching each of them tomorrow to determine if any could be the Ruth Harper buried on Dunhaven's grounds.

Cate closed her laptop as Molly delivered her last meal of the day. She spent the meal and her evening pondering if she'd wander the castle again tonight. Jack followed Molly into the library when she arrived to remove Cate's tray.

He waited for Molly to disappear down the hall before he spoke. "How you feeling?" he asked.

"Fine," Cate said. "No ill-effects. Jack, you really don't have to stay if you don't want to. I can put the camera on myself again and..."

"I'm not going to argue with you, Cate. I want to stay. I've already told everybody about our leak."

Cate smiled at him. "Okay. Thanks, Jack. Hopefully, we'll have a quiet night."

"My fingers are crossed. I'd still put the camera on. Just in case."

They spoke for a few more moments before Cate retreated to her suite with her book, hoping to relax before she went to bed.

As she crawled between the sheets, her camera accessory hanging around her wrist, she hoped for a good night's sleep.

* * *

Cate awoke the next morning before her alarm. After a stretch, she reached to caress her neck. The memory of Jack tossing the necklace into the loch flooded into her mind. She must have had a peaceful night's rest, she thought with a smile.

She rose from her bed, humming as she went about her morning routine. As she pulled on her boots, she pondered the song she'd been humming. It occurred to her that she couldn't recall the name of the tune, nor where she'd heard it.

With a shrug, she finished dressing and took the dogs out. As they romped in the yard, Cate checked her cell phone. A few videos existed on both cameras. Cate swallowed hard as she saw the list. Had she climbed from her bed despite the absence of the necklace?

She toggled off the phone, putting the discovery off until after breakfast. Following the meal, she settled in the library. Rain pelted the windows outside and thunder rumbled in the distance. Cate sighed as she toggled on her cell phone.

She jumped in her seat as a knock sounded at the door.

"Sorry," Jack said, holding his hand out. "You okay?"

"Yeah, you just startled me."

"How did you sleep?"

"I'm about to find out," Cate said, wiggling her cell phone at him.

"Want me to leave?" Jack inquired.

Cate shook her head. "No. In fact, I'd prefer you to stay. I'm interested but more than a little nervous to find out what happened last night."

"So, there are videos?"

“Yes. Though they could be as mundane as me turning over in bed or Riley stretching.”

“Let’s find out.”

Cate accessed the cube camera first. The few videos from overnight showed Cate rolling over, fluffing her pillow, and adjusting her covers. One video showed Bailey climbing to his feet and stretching before curling in a ball to continue sleeping.

Cate smiled as they played the last video. She had not climbed from her bed. She had not roamed the castle. She hadn’t tried to dive into the loch to retrieve the necklace. She breathed a sigh of relief. “Thank goodness,” she said, as she tossed her phone onto the desk.

“Looks like our leak is fixed!” Jack exclaimed. “Now we can focus on our 1942 problem.”

“On that note, I’ve got some research to do! I narrowed down the Ruth Harpers from the United Kingdom to four possibilities. I plan to flesh out the details on each today to see if they could be our girl. Of course, Ruth could be from another country, so if none of these pan out, I suppose I should expand my search.” Cate pressed her finger to her lips as she vetted her thoughts.

“Well, I’ll leave you to your work, Lady Cate,” Jack said with a smile.

Cate smiled. “Wish me luck!”

“Good luck, Lady Cate.” He offered her a wave as he backed through the door. Cate took a deep breath as another clap of thunder boomed. Riley climbed to his feet, his tail between his legs instead of arched high above his back in its usual position. He scampered across the room to Cate with a whine.

“Aww,” Cate said, as she scooped him up. “It’s just a little thunder, buddy. Nothing to worry about.” He licked her cheek. She smiled at him and kissed the fur on top of his head.

A loud bang sounded. Cate jumped again, before realizing it was her door knocker. “I’m getting as jumpy as you, Riley,” she said, as she carried the small dog with her to the front door.

“Who could that be?” she asked him as the knocker sounded again, echoing in the foyer. “Coming!”

Cate pulled the door open to find the mail carrier.

“Top o’ the morning to you, Lady Cate,” Otto said. “And hello. Riley, right?”

“Hi!” Cate greeted him. “Yep, this is Riley. For once he’s not barking at you.”

Otto chuckled. “Oh, I dinnae mind. Little fellow’s doing his job and protecting his castle, aren’t you, little fellow?”

“I’m certain he’d agree.”

“I’ve got a package for you. Special delivery. Marked ‘Handle with Care,’ so I dinnae want to leave it out in the rain. I suppose I could have run it around back to Mrs. F but...” His voice trailed off as he glanced to the skies.

“I’ll save you the steps and keep you dry,” Cate said.

“I much appreciate that, Lady Cate.” He handed the package over to her.

“Thank you,” Cate said with a smile. “Stay dry!”

He nodded and hurried back to his car as Cate closed the front door. She stared down at the wrapped box. Brown paper covered it. Her name was scrawled on top. No return address was written.

Cate turned it over, searching for the sender. She found no other marks outside of her address and the postage.

“Wonder what this is?” she asked Riley, as she juggled both him and the box on their way back to the library.

With the small dog balanced on her lap, she settled at her desk. She rummaged through the desk drawer for a pair of scissors and flipped the box over to begin removing the brown paper.

Riley became restless as Cate jostled him around working to remove the wrapping and leapt down. With no hints of thunder in the past few minutes, he decided to brave it and settle in for a nap near the roaring fire.

Cate freed the box from the paper and studied it. The nondescript brown cardboard container gave no clues as to the contents. Cate sliced open the packing tape sealing the top. A few packing peanuts spilled over the top as she pulled it open to find a cream-colored box wrapped in a blue satin ribbon inside.

“What is this?” Cate inquired aloud, as she lifted the fancy packaging from within the plain cardboard box. A few more peanuts spilled to the floor. Cate scooped them up before continuing, afraid the dogs may find them an interesting snack.

She pushed the box to the side and stared at the ribbon-adorned cube. Cate grasped one of the tails from the bow and pulled, unfurling the ribbon. She shimmied the thick box top off of the package and peeked inside.

Blue tissue paper obscured whatever object lay there. As Cate pulled it back, the crease between her eyebrows deepened. A miniature wooden piano sat inside.

“Where did this come from?” Cate asked herself. Riley popped his head up and sniffed. The object didn’t seem to faze Bailey. “I didn’t order this.”

Cate checked the brown paper to verify her name and address before she removed the item to examine it further.

A winding key protruded from the underside of the piano. Cate wound it. No music played.

“Hmm,” Cate murmured. “Oh, maybe the lid has to be open.”

Cate traced the outline of the lid, finding a finger notch to open it. As she lifted the lid, tinkling music began to play. The tune seemed familiar, but Cate couldn’t place it.

She lifted the lid a bit further when something inside caught her eye. Cate’s jaw dropped open and her heart pounded. She gasped, leaping onto wobbly legs as she backed away from the desk. Her sudden movement brought both dogs to their feet and knocked the piano-shaped music box off its perch on the desk.

It clattered to the floor, landing on its side. The lid popped open, and the contents of the interior spilled out, skittering across the hardwood floor and landing next to Cate’s feet.

Tinkling music filled the air again as Cate stared in horror at the item below.

“No,” she whispered. “It can’t be.”

Cate squatted down and scooped up the object. With trembling hands, she brought it closer to her face. Her breathing turned ragged as her mind confirmed what she suspected.

In her shaking hands, she held the sapphire necklace she and Jack discarded less than twenty-four hours ago.

CHAPTER 12



Cate's lower lip trembled, and she pressed a palm against her forehead. She stood motionless, the latest turn of events rendering her speechless. Her brain failed to process what she stared at or comprehend how it could happen.

Cate collapsed into the desk chair as Riley and Bailey joined her. She dropped the necklace on the desk in favor of cuddling the two dogs. A tear fell onto her cheek and Riley offered her a kiss, sensing her upset.

"I'm okay," she said with a sniffle. "Thanks, buddy."

Bailey stared at her, his ears wiggling up and down as he attempted to determine the source of Cate's distress.

She stared over at the music box, still playing its tune. She leapt from her seat and snapped the lid shut as she realized why she recognized the tune. The little music box played the same tune she'd been humming this morning.

Cate bit her lower lip hard as tears filled her eyes. Emotions overcame her and a sob escaped her lips. Tears flowed down her cheeks as she clutched the piano against her chest.

Warm arms embraced her, and she glanced up to find Jack. The concern on his face was obvious. "Cate?" he whispered.

Cate gave in to another moment of weakness, squeezing her eyes shut, causing more tears to fall to her cheeks as she let her head rest against Jack's shoulder.

“Oh, now, it can’t be as bad as all that, can it?” Jack inquired as he rubbed her shoulder.

Cate swiped at the tears glistening on her cheeks. “Sorry,” she choked out. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay, Cate,” Jack said as she pushed away from him. He gave her back a gentle rub. “What happened?”

Cate swallowed hard and blew out a long breath. She retrieved a tissue and composed herself. “I’m sorry,” she said again. “I don’t know what came over me. I just panicked.” She held up the piano with both hands. Jack studied the item.

“A package arrived this morning. Addressed to me. This was inside,” Cate explained.

“And it brought you to tears? Is it from one of your parents?”

Cate shook her head. “I’ve never seen it before in my life. But that’s not what brought me to tears. It was what was inside of it.”

Jack grabbed the piano from Cate and glanced at it. He lifted the lid and music filled the air again. “Close it, please,” Cate said. “Something about that song bothers me.”

Jack snapped the lid closed. “I don’t see anything inside.”

Cate pulled the item off the desk. “It fell out when I had my moment. This was inside.”

Cate raised her arm, letting the sapphire necklace dangle from her fingers. Jack’s eyes went wide and his face blanched three shades lighter than normal. “No,” he said with a shake of his head, his jaw gaping open.

“That’s about the reaction I had. And then some,” Cate said, still sniffling.

Jack set the music box down on the desk and grasped the necklace. His head shook as he studied it. After a moment, his eyes met Cate’s. “No, this can’t be.”

“And now you know why I was so upset,” Cate said. “I watched you throw that into the loch yesterday. And today, it arrives in a music box. A music box playing a song that I happened to be humming this morning *before* I received it.”

“I need to sit down,” Jack said. Jack wandered to the leather armchair and plopped into it. He stared straight ahead, the necklace still threaded through his fingers. His brow wrinkled. “I threw it away. I know I did. I watched it sink.”

"I was a witness," Cate said, as she eased into the armchair next to him, tucking her feet under her.

Jack stared wide-eyed at the necklace again. "How could this happen?"

Cate shrugged.

"There couldn't possibly be two of these, could there?" Jack inquired. "It's identical. And worth a fortune. Who would have *two* made?"

"What are the chances even if there are two that the second one arrives the day after we discard the first? This can't be a coincidence."

"I'm afraid it's not," Jack said. "But I have no idea what to do about it."

Cate pursed her lips as she sorted through options for tackling the problem. No solutions came. "If we throw it away again..."

"I'm afraid it'll come right back like a boomerang," Jack said, as he grimaced at the necklace. "There's no guarantee that will work. In fact, I'd say we're inviting more trouble by doing it."

"Inviting more trouble?"

"Cate, *someone* sent you that package. And you've been roaming the halls looking for someone. Who? Him! Northcott! Who else can do this?"

Cate sucked in a shaky breath as she shook her head. "So, what do we do?"

"Call Damien," Jack said. "Maybe he knows how to handle something like this."

Cate hurried across the room to grab her phone. Jack tossed the necklace onto the coffee table in front of him. "You're right. He's the best resource we have for anything Duke-related. Although I did tell him we got rid of the necklace yesterday and he didn't warn me about this. He did warn me my nightmares may continue." Cate tapped around on her phone.

Jack screwed up his face. "He warned you your nightmares may continue?"

Cate nodded as her thumbs flew across her virtual keyboard. "Yes. He said Celine's have never stopped and she wanted me to know now that I've had a... negative experience with Duke Northcott, I may be haunted forever by it."

Jack sighed as Cate toggled off her phone. Seconds later, it rang. "Wow, that's service," Cate said, as she swiped to answer the call.

"Hello," she said.

"Hey, Cate. Got your message. What's up?"

“Hey, Damien. Thanks for calling. Is it okay if I put you on speakerphone? Jack’s with me.”

“Sure, Cate,” Damien answered. “Everything okay?”

Cate toggled on the speakerphone and Jack offered a hello. After Jack and Damien exchanged pleasantries, Cate launched into her story.

“Everything’s okay, sort of. We’ve just had an... incident and I wondered if you may be able to offer us any insight on this.”

“Incident?” Damien questioned. “That sounds ominous.”

“Well, I told you yesterday that we got rid of the necklace.”

“Yep,” Damien answered. “Best thing you could have done.”

“Well,” Cate said with a sigh, as she considered which details to reveal first. “Yes and no.”

“What do you mean?”

“The necklace was having an odd effect on me, which is what prompted us to take rather extreme measures to rid ourselves of it.” Cate recounted the tale of her sleepwalking, increasing from retrieving the necklace and returning to bed and ending with her search for someone in the castle’s main ballroom.

“Like I said,” Damien responded, “best thing you could have done is get rid of it.”

“There’s more,” Cate said. “And this is actually what prompted the call.”

“Okay?”

Cate took another deep breath. “Jack threw the necklace into the loch yesterday. I watched him do it.”

“Way to go, buddy,” Damien cheered him.

“Thanks. Unfortunately, it failed to solve the problem,” Jack answered.

“Are you still sleepwalking, Cate? Oh, no,” Damien said. “You didn’t sleepwalk into the loch, did you?”

“No,” Cate answered. “But this morning a package was delivered. It contained a piano-shaped music box. And inside the music box, I found the necklace.”

“What?” Damien exclaimed. “Are you sure?”

“Positive. Same necklace. Same design, same sapphires. If it’s not the same necklace, it’s a carbon copy of it.”

Cate heard rustling on Damien’s end of the line. “Can you hang on the line for a sec? I’m going to run this past Celine.”

“Sure. And thanks.”

“No problem, Cate.”

Cate heard a knock and then Damien and a woman conversing. “Okay, I’ve got you on speakerphone with Celine and Alexander. Can you tell them everything you just told me? Sorry to make you go through it again but, it’s best if the details come from you.”

Cate relayed the odd tale of the reappearing necklace to the newcomers on the line. At the conclusion of her tale, the line went quiet for a moment before Celine spoke.

“I’m really not surprised. This fits pretty well with Marcus’s standard operating procedures. What puzzles me is why he’s pursuing this, though.”

“Has the necklace had any odd effects on you since its reappearance?” Alexander inquired.

“Other than my fleeting moment of panic when I saw it again, no. But I’ve had it less than an hour.”

Another pause before Celine spoke again. “I can speak with Marcus about it. I’m certain he won’t admit to anything, but perhaps if he’s warned that we’re aware of the situation, he won’t pursue it further.”

Cate’s brow crinkled at the comment. “I really don’t want you to have to deal with him, Celine.”

“It’s fine,” she answered. “He won’t hurt me. Though, as I said, I doubt he’ll admit anything to me.”

“Anything you’d suggest in the meantime?” Jack asked. “I’d throw this bugger in the loch again, but I’m not certain it would do any good.”

“You have a safe, right?” Damien asked.

“Yes,” Cate answered.

“Lock it in there for the time being? You can’t get to it then, so if it’s causing your issues, maybe not being able to retrieve it will help.”

“Excellent idea, Damien,” Alexander said. “And we’ll work on things on our end. I’ll search for a way to destroy an enchanted item.”

Cate’s shoulders slumped at the conversation, both in exasperation at the words “enchanted item” and with relief for the help. “Thank you,” she murmured.

“You’re welcome, Cate,” Damien said. “And try not to let it bother you. I know that’s a weird thing to say, but we’ll figure it out. And remember, not every enchanted object is bad. You’re wearing one of the good ones around your neck right now.” There was a brief pause, before Damien

added, “Oh, not to creep you out. I can’t see you. I’m just assuming you’re wearing the timepiece Celine enchanted.”

The extra explanatory comment gave Cate a chuckle. “Thanks, Damien. I needed that laugh.”

“Hang in there, Cate. We’ll get back to you soon.”

They said their goodbyes and Cate ended the call. She sat with her brow crinkled as she held the phone in her lap.

“You okay, Cate?”

She nodded. “Yeah, I’m just again blown away by how odd their lives are.”

“Yet they act like it’s totally normal,” Jack voiced in response.

“Yes!” Cate exclaimed, pointing a finger at Jack to punctuate her statement. “I don’t understand Celine talking to Duke Northcott. They seemed to be extremely acrid toward each other when we saw them last. Then again, I don’t understand any of this.”

Cate popped up from her seat and paced the floor behind the chairs. “The natural assumption is I’m seeking Duke Northcott, right?”

“I can’t figure out who else it would be,” Jack admitted.

“But why would I seek him out? Why am I seeking a man who almost killed me?” Cate asked.

Jack rose from his chair and stopped her pacing. “I don’t know, Cate. But I think we should do what Damien suggested and lock this necklace up in the safe. It seems to have some strange effect on you. And I also think I’d better plan on staying another night or two.”

Cate nodded in agreement. “Why did we ever think it would be as easy as tossing that thing in the loch?” Cate asked.

“Well, I must admit, I never expected this turn of events,” Jack said, motioning toward the necklace laying on the table.

“Neither did I. Let’s hope locking it up produces a better result.”

Jack swiped the large necklace off the table. “What about that?” he asked, pointing to the music box still on the desk.

“Maybe we should take it, too,” Cate said.

Jack nodded as Cate grabbed it from the desk. Leaving the pups behind, they ambled down the hall to the first-floor office. Cate unlocked the password- and thumbprint-protected safe and they stowed the items inside.

As Jack closed and locked the door, he shot Cate a sideways glance. “You okay?”

“Better now, actually,” Cate said. “At least they’re locked away where hopefully they can do no harm.”

Jack nodded at her.

“Time to do some work on our mystery!” Cate exclaimed, forcing a grin onto her face.

“If you need anything, Cate, and I mean anything – even if something just feels slightly off to you – call me, okay?”

“I will,” Cate promised.

Jack gave her a closed-mouth smile and a nod. He stepped toward the door. Cate remained still, staring at the safe. “You coming?”

“Yep,” she said, as she spun around. She smiled at him as they made their way into the hall and parted ways.

Cate arrived at the library and plopped onto the desk chair with a sigh. The packaging from her surprise gift still sat on top of the desk. With a frown, Cate gathered it and delivered it to the kitchen trash bin. She collected a cup of tea and returned to her work.

With her laptop open, Cate shuffled through the notes she’d compiled yesterday on Ruth Harper. She began with the first woman on her list. Born in 1920 in Edinburgh, this Ruth Harper lived with her parents, Elizabeth and William Harper, until her marriage in 1941, when she became Ruth MacArther.

Cate frowned at the marriage certificate information. After an hour of seeking reports, she’d been led to a dead-end. To be thorough, Cate checked that the woman remained married in subsequent years. She managed to follow her through the 1970s, when Ruth Harper MacArther passed away.

Cate scratched the woman off her list. If she married in 1941, she almost certainly wasn’t at Dunhaven Castle as a traveling companion in 1942 using her maiden name, particularly if her spouse remained alive.

“On to the next,” Cate said aloud.

She spent the rest of her morning tracking down information on her next potential suspect. She found nothing definitive before her staff lunch in the downstairs kitchen, and left the project in favor of her meal and a walk before returning in the mid-afternoon.

Cate stretched and settled in at her laptop. She found her eyelids growing heavy and a yawn escaped her lips. As the afternoon hours waned, she managed to find a death certificate for her current person of interest.

The second Ruth Harper had died in 1962. Given this information, she couldn't have been killed and buried at Dunhaven Castle in the 1940s. And since they clearly had this Ruth's body with a cause of death listed as "Stroke," she had not gone missing and been declared dead.

Cate put a thick strike through this woman's name and stretched before moving on to the next. As she pulled up the third Ruth Harper's birth records, a chill passed through her.

Cate shivered and wrapped her cardigan around her. She glanced to the fire, expecting to find it dying. Instead, a healthy orange glow emanated from inside the hearth.

Perhaps the steady rain that now fell from the gray skies added an extra chill to the air. Cate tossed another log onto the fire before returning to her work.

After several minutes of pawing through census records, Cate shivered again. She wrapped her sweater around herself again and moved closer to the fire, pulling a blanket over her lap.

Before she could settle in again, both Riley and Bailey leapt to their feet. "What is it, guys?" Cate inquired.

Both dogs stared at the closed library doors. Cate set her laptop down and flung her blanket to the side. She crossed to the door and peeked into the hall.

"Nothing's there!" she said.

Riley cocked his head at her before he stared into the hall again. Bailey sidestepped to get a better look into the hall. An icy blast of air washed over Cate, originating from the hall. As Cate peered through the doors again, both dogs bolted into the hall.

"Where are you two going?" Cate inquired, as they darted past her and fled down the hall.

"Riley! Bailey!" she shouted after them. The two pups turned the corner and continued to run headlong toward some unknown target.

Cate's shoulders slumped and she followed them into the hall. "Riley! Bailey!" she called again.

She turned the corner, finding them nowhere in sight. "Where did they run off to?" she asked herself, as she continued down the hall's length in search of them.

As she passed the office containing the safe, her footsteps slowed. She stared through the open door at the large black object.

Her head lolled to the side as she focused on the dark vault. The world melted around her. Her vision outside of her focal point blurred. Noises faded away, replaced by a light tinkling. She hummed along with the tune as she took a step toward the safe.

Her senses dulled as the music filled her mind.

CHAPTER 13



The corners of her mouth turned up as she lost herself in the tinkling tune that played in her mind. She closed her eyes and reached her hand out. An image formed in her mind. A room. Soft light glowed from above her.

“I’m here,” she mumbled.

“Lady Cate?” Jack’s voice called.

Cate’s smile faltered and her brow furrowed as the image splintered. In an instant, everything faded away. She jolted back to reality with a start.

The fog cleared from her mind, and she twirled to find Jack standing a few paces down the hall from her.

She sucked in a few breaths, her eyes darting around as her mind recovered.

Jack approached her. “Cate? You okay?”

“Yeah,” Cate assured him.

“What are you doing here?” Jack asked, his gaze flicking toward the safe.

Cate swallowed hard, following his eyes before she returned her gaze to Jack. “I was looking for the dogs.”

Jack’s eyebrow arched. “In the office?”

Cate offered a chuckle. “Ah, no. Well, yes. They darted around the corner, and I haven’t seen them since. I’m not sure where they are.”

“Well, they’re not in here,” Jack said, pulling the office door closed. “Want me to help find them?”

Cate pursed her lips and shook her head. “No, I’m sure they’ll turn up. I’m happy to wander the halls for a bit in search of them, though. I’m not making it very far with my Ruth Harper research.”

“No progress?” Jack inquired as they strode down the hall.

“Yeah, I crossed two of my four off the list so far. I guess that’s progress. Of the negative kind.”

“Progress is progress, I guess,” Jack said, as they rounded the corner into another hall.

“Well, two down, two to go. I think I’ll take a break for the night though and try again tomorrow.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Jack said.

The sound of skittering paws reached their ears. Riley and Bailey bounded around a corner and down the hall.

“There you are!” Cate exclaimed, as they raced toward them.

“Hey, Sir Riley, just where did you and your brother get off to?” Jack inquired, lifting the small dog into his arms. “You had poor Lady Cate worried!”

“Not worried, just curious!” she said as she scooped up Bailey.

“It’s almost time for dinner. Heading back to the library?” Jack asked.

“Do you think anyone would mind if I joined you for dinner?”

“No, not at all, Lady Cate,” Jack said. “Are you sure you’re all right?”

“I guess I’m just a little spooked by the events earlier today, to be honest. I’d love a distraction. *Not* that dining with everyone is just a distraction but...”

“I understand, Lady Cate. You don’t need to explain.”

They snaked through the halls and down to the kitchen.

“Hi, everyone,” Cate said, as she set Bailey on the floor near the warm stove.

“Lady Cate! To what do we owe the pleasure?” Mrs. Fraser inquired. “I hope you haven’t come down here in hopes of wrangling your own tray from Molly and carrying it upstairs.”

“No. I’ve actually come down in the hopes of saving everyone a trip and eating here.” Cate paused for a moment. “That is if no one minds.”

“Not at all,” Molly said with a smile.

Mrs. Fraser flicked her gaze to Cate and arched an eyebrow. “I dinnae mind. Are you sure you’re feeling all right, Lady Cate? You look a bit pale.”

Cate planted herself at the table. "Mrs. Fraser, I always look a bit pale."

"Paler than normal," Mrs. Fraser corrected, shooting her another look.

"Too much work and no play," Jack said as he settled across from Cate and rubbed Riley's belly.

"Probably," Cate said.

"Well," Mrs. Fraser said. "Young Jack told me about the leak. I'm concerned your worry over this old place is going to have you down with something, Lady Cate."

"Oh, I'm sure it'll clear up. I trust Jack."

"Mmm, I'm not saying you don't, but it is a lot to carry."

"Oh, Mrs. Fraser, just tell her," Molly said.

Mrs. Fraser harrumphed at Molly.

"Tell me what?" Cate asked, a concerned expression on her face.

"Miss Molly and I were discussing the leak. And I was concerned about something happening in the middle of the night. Young Jack would have his hands full. And..." Her voice trailed off.

"Oh, Mrs. Fraser," Molly said with a chuckle, as she set a salad in the center of the table. "Lady Cate, she wants to stay in the castle with Mr. Fraser in case the leak springs up."

"Oh," Cate said, "why didn't you just say so! Of course, you can. You know you're always welcome here."

"Well, I dinnae want to invite myself into your home," Mrs. Fraser said.

"Don't be ridiculous," Cate said, with a wave of her hand. "You don't need to ask. You can stay anytime you'd like! Bad weather, good weather, leak, no leak. I'm happy to have people here!"

Mrs. Fraser smiled at her as she settled in at the table.

"And I'm busy making sure Cate's not all work and no play," Molly said. "I'm almost done with our itinerary for the next few months!"

"What's on it?" Mr. Fraser inquired.

Molly rattled off several places. "And there's tons more. That's just what I remember off the top of my head. If anyone is interested in going with us to any of these, just let me know!"

"When do you have Loch Ness scheduled?" Jack inquired.

Molly responded, "September. Is that good for everyone? I figured after both parties would be a good time for a rest."

"Aye, perfect," Jack agreed.

“Yes, a nice respite after the Presidents’ Ball and before the second annual Halloween Ball,” Cate said.

“Oh, no, please don’t tell me she’s already brought that up,” Jack said.

“She has,” Cate said with a laugh. “Her words were ‘bigger and better.’”

“Oh, I’ll bet they were,” Jack said with a groan.

The conversation centered around the upcoming events and how Dunhaven Castle was quickly becoming the party capital of the area.

“Soon, you’ll be renting out for weddings,” Jack said.

“No,” Cate answered, with her eyebrows hiked high. “That’s where I draw the line.”

“Aw, come on, Lady Cate,” Jack teased. “Every little girl dreams of a fairy tale wedding at a castle. Are you going to crush their dreams?”

“I just might,” Cate said with a chuckle. “I’m not certain that’s something any of us want to get into.”

“Not me,” Mrs. Fraser said. “I would want no parts of people traipsing everywhere here for their wedding.”

“Aye, I agree with Emily,” Mr. Fraser said. “These grounds are unspoiled. And I like them that way.”

“Me too,” Cate said with a smile. “While I don’t mind the parties, I’m not sure I want those interruptions on a regular basis.”

“Well, you have our support on that decision, Lady Cate,” Jack said with a nod.

With the matter settled, they steered the conversation to other topics. The shared dinner allowed Cate to push both mysteries from her mind. She hoped the meal provided her with enough relaxation to fall asleep quickly. She’d even avoided asking Mrs. Fraser about the intelligence base so as not to stir up her mind.

She spent the rest of the evening helping Mrs. Fraser settle in while Mr. Fraser retrieved their things.

As she climbed into her bed and slipped between the sheets, she worked to push any remnants of the two dilemmas away.

The moon hung low in the night sky as Cate stared out over the moors, bathed in an ethereal white light. She turned onto her side, squeezing her eyes shut. Within moments, she was spinning the other way. She spent the first hour tossing and turning in search of a comfortable sleeping position, but found none.

As she flopped onto her back, Cate's mind centered on one thing. The piano-shaped music box currently housed in the downstairs safe. The little tinkling tune ricocheted in her mind. It was a lovely little tune, Cate thought. Perhaps it could help her sleep. Yes, she mused, the little tune may help her fall asleep.

Cate rose from her bed and wrapped her robe around her, shoving her feet into her fluffy slippers. She shuffled across her room and threaded through the halls toward the back stairs. After padding down them and to the office, Cate flicked on the light, her attention focused on the safe across the room.

Movement caught her eye, and she leapt back a step, her eyes wide with fear and her heart pounding. After a moment, she breathed a sigh of relief with her hand pressed against her chest.

"Lady Cate," Jack said, as he rose from the desk chair. "Fancy meeting you here."

"Oh, Jack, you scared me. What are you doing here?"

"What are you doing here?" Jack shot back.

"Uh," Cate said, giving a hard swallow. "I was just going to double-check that the music box and necklace were still in the safe."

"They are," Jack assured her, stepping between her and the safe.

Cate smiled at him. "Good. That's good."

"You can sleep soundly knowing they are still locked up tight."

Cate licked her lips and nodded but didn't budge. Jack raised his eyebrows at her, crossing his arms over his chest. "Did you need something else?"

"No," Cate said, with a slight shake of her head. After a moment, she added, "I couldn't sleep."

Jack's expression softened. "Care for a cuppa and a biscuit?"

"Umm," Cate hedged. "No, thanks."

"Okay, though I can't believe you're turning down one of Mrs. Fraser's shortbreads. But okay. How about if I walk you back to your room?"

"That's not necessary," Cate said with a chuckle.

Jack narrowed his eyes at her. "Cate, did you come down here for the necklace?" he asked.

"No," Cate said with a shake of her head. "You know what, I think I will take you up on that offer."

Jack nodded his head and led Cate from the room to the kitchen. Cate gave one wistful glance at the safe as Jack flicked off the room's lights.

"You sure you're okay, Cate?" he asked, as they traversed the halls.

"I'm sure. Just couldn't sleep," Cate admitted.

Jack bustled about the kitchen making Cate a late-night cup of tea. As they cleaned up, Jack inquired, "Do you think you can sleep now?"

Cate stretched and faked a yawn. "I think so. Thanks, Jack." She took a few steps toward the door.

"Wait just a moment, lassie," Jack said. "I'll walk up with you."

Cate shoulders slumped, but she twisted to face Jack, plastered a smile on her face and nodded. Jack accompanied her on the walk upstairs, eyeing her as she waved goodnight and closed the door to her suite.

The smile quickly faded from her face as the door shut. She puckered her lips and narrowed her eyes. She inched sideways away from the door but remained with her ear pressed against the wall leading to the hall. After a few moments, she heard the click of a door closing.

A grin formed on her lips. She waited an extra few seconds before she crept back to her door and eased it open. She peered into the hall. Jack's door was closed.

Cate swung her door open further and tiptoed into the hallway. She crept past the bedrooms used by Jack, Mr. and Mrs. Fraser and Molly. As she slipped past the last doorway, she picked up her pace, hastening down the remainder of the hall and around the corner.

She skidded to a halt, her arms held up in defense, as a large dark figure approached her. Hands clamped down around her shoulders and she was driven back several steps. She let out a yip as she fought to free herself.

"Going somewhere, Lady Cate?" Jack inquired.

She gasped in a breath before she explained. "Yes, I thought we may have left the stove on..."

"No, you didn't," Jack interrupted.

"Yes, I..."

"You know very well I turned the stove off. And the water. And put everything away."

"I didn't..."

"Cate," Jack said, his hands still firmly clasping her shoulders, "you're not telling the truth. You're after that necklace, aren't you?"

"No, I'm not!" Cate exclaimed, wrenching herself free from his grasp.

“No? Then what? Why are you sneaking around the halls at this hour?”

“I’m hardly sneaking,” she said, crossing her arms. “I couldn’t sleep, and I often walk the halls. I’m usually not policed though.”

“I’m sorry,” Jack said. “I don’t mean to police you. I’m just worried, that’s all.”

“There’s nothing to worry about,” Cate answered. “I’m just restless.”

“That necklace is having a terrible effect on you. I think we should remove it from the house. I’m not sure Damien’s suggestion is helping.”

“No!” Cate shouted. She lowered her panicked voice before continuing. “I mean, it’s not that. It is, but not in the way you think. And even if it was, is it really hurting me? All I do is put it on and wander around.”

Jack cocked his head and narrowed his eyes. “Cate, you have no memory of anything you do while you’re wearing it. You’re wandering could get you harmed. And who are you looking for? What happens if you find him? I don’t want you lost for days again. Cate...” His voice trailed off.

Cate bit her lower lip as tears formed in her eyes. “I don’t want that either.”

Jack put his hands around her shoulders again. “Oh, Cate. If the necklace is bothering you, just tell me.”

“It’s not,” she admitted. “I’m being honest. I just...” Cate’s voice trailed off as she considered admitting her desire to hear the music box. “I guess in a way, it is. I just want it dealt with and off our minds.”

Jack nodded and sighed. “Me too, Lady Cate, me too. And until then, I don’t want anything to happen to you.”

Cate stared up at him for a moment. “Well, I guess roaming the halls isn’t helping to solve anything. I’m going to go back to bed and try to get some sleep.”

“Okay.”

“You should, too. Really, I’m fine. I feel terrible keeping you awake.”

Jack smiled at her. “I’m okay, but I am going to bed. I hope you sleep, Lady Cate.”

Cate smiled at him before she strode down the hall and entered her bedroom for the third time that night. She leaned against the door as she sighed and stared up at the ceiling.

A thudding pounded at her temples. She hated lying to Jack, but she couldn’t tell him the truth. He’d never let her near the music box even if she

was honest.

Cate stalked to her chaise and sank onto it. She cupped her chin in her palm and steadied her elbow on her knee. She checked the timepiece before she returned to staring at the door.

Cate waited an hour before she crept to the door again. With a quick peek into the hall, she stepped out and eased the door shut behind her. Her eyes studied each door. Satisfied no one lurked behind one waiting to spring out at her, she tiptoed down the hall.

She approached the corner slowly and peered around it. No one stood in the hallway this time. The corners of her mouth turned up again as she hurried down the hall, back stairs and to the office.

Devoid of anyone, she flipped the lights on and hurried to the safe. She tapped in the five-digit code and pressed her thumb against the scanner. A beep sounded and the light changed from red to green. Cate's heart skipped a beat as she anticipated collecting the music box. Her breathing increased and she grinned as she pulled the safe door open.

CHAPTER 14



Her smile faded, concern creeping into her features as the interior of the safe came into view. Her lower lip trembled as her brow furrowed. Her breath caught in her throat and her stomach turned over.

“No!” she exclaimed, reaching into the safe and shoving items around. “Where is it?”

She stared in at the nearly empty interior. Her old timepiece sat on the top shelf, a few folders of important paperwork lay below. But the music box and necklace were gone.

“Looking for something, Lady Cate?” Jack inquired from behind her.

Cate spun to face him, a frown on her lips. “Where is it?” she demanded.

“Somewhere safe.”

Cate pressed her lips together into a thin line. Her hands balled into fists. “Where?” she asked again, her voice quavering.

“Cate...” he began.

“No!” she interrupted. “I want it.”

Jack approached her, holding his hands in front of him. He shook his head. “Cate...” he tried again, keeping his tone as even and soothing as he could. He placed his hands on her shoulders. “Leave it alone.”

Tears formed in Cate’s eyes. “I want it. I need to see it!” she said, as a sob formed.

“No, Cate,” Jack answered. “It’s not safe for you to see it.”

“I just want the music box, that’s all,” Cate said.

“I realize you’re going to hate me for this, Cate, but I don’t think I should.”

Cate bit her lower lip as she sucked in a shaky breath. “I know,” she said, her face a mask of pain. After a moment, she grasped Jack’s arm. “What’s wrong with me?”

“Nothing,” he assured her, as he pulled her into an embrace. Cate laid her head on his chest as she fought back tears. “Let’s get you another cup of tea.”

She pulled back and shook her head. “No, I’ve kept you up half the night already. I’ll just go back to my room.”

“It’s fine, Cate,” he assured her, grasping her hand and tugging her from the room.

“Wait,” she said, stepping back to close the safe.

After making a cup of tea, Jack and Cate settled in the generous leather armchairs in the library. Jack built a fire. They attempted to sort through some of their mystery from decades ago. With the conversation, Cate eventually dozed off in her armchair.

* * *

Cate’s eyes opened slowly as dull light streamed in through the large library windows. She blinked several times as she oriented herself. After peeling her face from the leather chair, she stretched and yawned.

She peered around in the dim light. Jack’s sleeping form huddled in the armchair next to her. With another stretch, Cate pulled back the blanket Jack must have draped over her at some point and rose to stand, her arms reaching high overhead.

After another yawn, she rubbed at her face before folding the blanket and giving Jack a soft shake.

“Huh? What?” he asked.

“Jack,” she whispered. “It’s morning.”

Jack’s eyes opened and he blinked a few times, searching the space. He offered a sleepy sniff before he stretched and yawned. “Good morning, m’lady,” he said as he stood.

“Good morning,” she said, as she folded his blanket. “Thanks for covering me last night.”

“You’re welcome. You finally fell asleep around one.”

Cate heaved a sigh. “I’m sorry,” she said. “I just couldn’t get my mind off that music box.”

“It’s okay, Cate. It’s not your fault. With any luck, we’ll get some information from Damien today, and maybe we can put this thing behind us.”

Cate yawned again. “Gosh, I hope so. I don’t want to keep you up for another night.”

“Don’t worry about that Lady Cate,” Jack said with a half-smile. “I just don’t want to see you so upset.”

“It’s odd,” Cate admitted. “At times it doesn’t bother me, but then it will pervade my thoughts. I can’t stop thinking about that music or hearing it in my head. It’s like a craving where I need to hear the music box.”

Jack narrowed his eyes. “What about the necklace?”

Cate shook her head. “That didn’t seem to be on my mind. Just the music box.”

“That’s odd,” Jack said. “Are both enchanted?”

Cate shrugged. “Maybe once I had the music box I would also want the necklace. I’m not sure.”

“I’m not sure I want to find out,” Jack admitted.

“Me either.”

“Will you be all right for now?”

“So far, so good,” Cate said. “I feel fine. No overwhelming urges to claw through the walls to find the music box.”

“Well, given the rain today,” Jack said, eyeing the dark clouds, “I can keep an eye on you.”

Cate sighed and rolled her eyes. “I never thought at this age I’d need a babysitter.”

“You also never thought you’d time travel or meet a warlock, but here we are.”

The last statement earned a chuckle from Cate. “Very true,” Cate said. “Anyway, I’m fine for now, but I’ll see you later for whatever it is you’re doing inside today.”

“Maybe I’ll build a puzzle,” Jack quipped.

Cate raised her eyebrows. “Oh, taking a vacation day, huh?”

“Sick day. Someone kept me up half the night.”

Cate offered him a wry glance and a head shake. “See you later, Jack.”

Cate wandered up to her bedroom, finding her two furry friends still sprawled on her bed. Bailey lay stretched on his side, and Riley, in true Snoopy style, lay on his back, his front legs stuck in the air, his floppy ears flung out across the duvet.

“Glad to see you two had no trouble sleeping without me,” she said, as she stalked into the room.

At the sound of her voice, Bailey’s tail gave a weak wag. Riley spun onto his belly and glanced up at Cate. “I’ll be ready soon,” she announced, as she sauntered around the room for her morning routine.

When she was finished, she ushered the dogs outside before her breakfast. The warm smell of cinnamon greeted her the moment she stepped back inside through the kitchen door.

“Mmmm, that smells amazing, whatever it is,” Cate said.

“Snickerdoodles,” Molly reported, as she peered in through the oven’s window.

“That’s what happens when I stay at the castle,” Mrs. Fraser said with a nod. “I’m up early baking.”

Cate crinkled her forehead. “You’re up early baking even when you don’t stay,” she said.

“Aye, but I’m baking more. Snickerdoodles *and* shortbreads. Seems someone’s been robbing my tin! I’d wager it’s young Jack.”

Cate winced. “And me,” she admitted. “I had a sleepless night, and Jack and I may have hit up the cookies once or twice.”

Mrs. Fraser’s eyes went wide in mock surprise. “Lady Cate! I’m shocked!”

Cate chuckled.

“More problems with the leak last night?”

“No,” Cate admitted. “But both of us found ourselves roaming the halls just in case.”

“Well, I hope my shortbreads helped put you back to sleep.”

“They did,” Cate assured her, as she collected her tray before ascending to the library to eat.

Cate stared out over the gray skies as she ate. Thunder rumbled in the distance, giving Riley a start. When the grumble died down, he flopped

back down for a morning nap next to Bailey, who remained unbothered by the noise.

Cate popped her laptop open as she ate to check her emails. She fought to keep her mind off of her evening escapades the previous night. Where had Jack hidden the necklace and the music box, she wondered? And how had he anticipated that she'd search for it?

She supposed her recent obsession with the necklace, coupled with its mysterious reappearance was enough to warrant his actions. She hoped it didn't make the situation worse. Cate leaned back in her chair, studying the clouds zipping past the window. Images of her roaming the castle, pawing through every imaginable hidden area bounced around in her mind. She pictured herself returning to her bedroom with cobwebs in her hair and dirt smudges on her cheeks.

She shook the images from her mind as a knock sounded at the door.

"Still feeling okay?" Jack asked as he strode in.

"Yes," Cate answered with a nod.

"Molly'll be up soon to get your tray. She's taking cookies out of the oven. I didn't wait in case..." He didn't finish the statement.

"It's fine," she said, with a wave of her hand. "I was just pondering my behavior last night and wondering if it will worsen."

"How so?" Jack asked, as he opened a cabinet in the library and removed a box.

"Obviously I was intent on finding that music box last night. How far will I go? Will I begin roaming the halls and secret passages? Clawing at the walls?"

"Hmm, good question. I hope not, but now that you know it's hidden, will you go to extreme measures to find it?"

Molly flitted into the room as Jack finished his statement. "Good morning, again," she said in her cheery voice. "Looks like you won't be able to take your morning walk of the property."

"No," Cate said, with a dejected shake of her head. "Oh well, maybe I can make a killing on my research."

"What are you on to now?" Molly asked.

"World War Two era Dunhaven," Cate reported. "I think there may have been an intelligence base here."

"Really?" Molly asked, her eyebrows shooting upward. "That's interesting."

“Yes, I’m only just scratching the surface, so I have plenty more to learn.”

“Well, I’ll leave you to it. That is if Jack doesn’t take up all your time discussing estate business.”

“Estate business is just as important. Perhaps more so!”

“Uh-huh,” Molly said, with a wry glance at him. “Better you than me, Lady Cate.” She winked at Cate before disappearing through the door with the tray.

Cate closed the doors behind her as Jack settled into his favorite armchair.

“I sometimes feel bad about how good we are at lying to people,” Cate said with a sigh.

“I’m not lying. I’m working on Dunhaven Castle.”

Cate scrunched up her face at the statement. Jack pulled the lid off his puzzle box and flashed it at Cate. A large picture of Dunhaven Castle graced the front. A printed yellow puzzle piece announced the one thousand pieces to be found inside the box.

“Where did you get that?” Cate inquired.

“Mr. Smythe gave it to me for Christmas,” Jack answered. “Him and his puzzles. I think he was rather regretful to give it away and not complete it himself.”

“When you’re finished, you can break it apart and put it back in the box for him to complete the next time he’s here,” Cate said.

“*If* I finish, Lady Cate, if.”

Cate chuckled at his statement as she settled in at her desk. Jack twisted to eye her. “I thought you’d help me,” Jack said.

“Maybe later,” Cate said. “I hope to figure out if one of these Ruth Harpers is the one we found in the garden first.”

“Oh,” Jack groaned, heaving a large sigh. “I’m on my own. I hate puzzles.”

Cate glanced over her shoulder. “Get all the edge pieces out first and build that. Maybe by then I’ll be finished.”

Jack offered another sigh as he sorted through pieces. “You know, I feel perfectly fine. You don’t have to stay and build that puzzle.”

“Sure, sure,” Jack said. “And then I’ll be changing a light bulb and see you wandering past in search of the music box.”

“Just hop off the ladder and grab me then.”

“Very funny, Lady Cate,” Jack said. “No chance. I’m not taking a chance I don’t see you in time and you get hurt. Plus, I’d like to gather as much information about what’s happening from the moment it happens.”

“What do you mean?” Cate asked.

“I mean, is there some trigger that causes you to turn from Lady Cate to Zombie Cate? A noise, a scent, something you see.”

“Oh,” Cate said, nodding in understanding.

“I hope Damien and his friends come up with something for us, but if they don’t, I want to have as much information as possible to create a backup plan.”

Cate nodded again. “Thanks, Jack.”

“Well, I’m tasked with protecting you and I’m not about to fall down on the job.”

“I think when that pact was made, they didn’t anticipate enchanted music boxes and warlocks.”

“Doesn’t matter,” Jack said, as he dug through pieces in the box. “Time travel, warlocks, enchanted music boxes, white water rafting, rock climbing...”

“Whoa,” Cate said, waving her hands in the air. “I’m drawing the line at enchanted music boxes. No white water rafting or rock climbing for me.”

“Fair enough,” Jack said. “To be honest, I’d rather not rock climb either. I don’t even like flying, let alone dangling from a rock.”

Cate chuckled. “Okay, I’ll leave you to your edges.” She spun to face her laptop, tapping around to open her notes and several websites.

Cate spent several of the morning hours tracking down information on her last two leads. The first woman married in 1947, had three children, and passed away in the 1970s. Cate scratched her name off the list and moved on to her last Ruth Harper.

Born on 1 February, 1919, Ruth Harper disappeared shortly after. Cate’s pulse quickened as she searched for records and found none. Perhaps this was her Ruth Harper. No marriage records existed for the woman, so her name had not changed. No death records existed in the UK. Could this Ruth Harper have come to Dunhaven and disappeared, therefore never having a death certificate recorded?

CHAPTER 15



Cate bit her lower lip as she searched for more information on the promising lead. A sigh emanated from the other side of the room.

Cate glanced at Jack, who frowned down at the pieces spread across the table in front of him. Riley lounged on his lap.

“I hope you’re having more luck than me,” Jack said.

“I may be!” Cate answered. “I have a Ruth Harper who has disappeared.”

“That sounds promising!”

“I have a few more places to check for her, but I think so. No luck with the puzzle?”

“The edge pieces all look alike. I can’t even tell the corners apart. And Riley isn’t much help.”

“Sorry,” Cate said. “I think Bailey is more of the puzzle solver.”

“Do you want to help, Bailey?” Jack prodded. The dog lifted his gray and white head and glanced sideways at Jack before he lowered his head to the floor. “I’ll take that as a no.”

“I’ll help you as soon as I’ve finished here.”

“Thank goodness,” Jack said. “Otherwise, I’m fairly certain I’ll fail miserably.”

“If I’ve found our lady, I will happily help!”

Cate returned her attention to her laptop. With no marriage records or death records in the UK for her latest Ruth, she double-checked the census reports. Born in 1919, her first census report following Ruth’s birth was

dated 1921. Nearly two-year-old Ruth was reported as living with her parents, Theodore and Elizabeth Harper. Other children listed within the home included Ruth's six older siblings: Stephen, Lois, Henry, Harriet, Evelyn, and Eleanor.

No mention of the Harpers was made in the subsequent census of 1931. Cate expanded her search to several other venues. A frown crossed her face as she came across Ruth Harper's name in another database.

She pulled up the record and compared it to the 1921 census. One Ruth Harper was listed arriving at Ellis Island in October of 1925. She traveled with her mother, Elizabeth, and six siblings. They were to join their father, Theodore, already stateside since 1922.

Cate's shoulders slumped. No marriage or death records existed in the UK for this Ruth Harper because she had emigrated to the United States at the age of six.

Cate followed up on US records, finding that Ruth did not return to her home country, but remained in the United States for the duration of her life.

With a groan, she closed her laptop and scratched the last name off the list.

"That sounded terrible," Jack said, as he studied the table, his chin resting in his palm.

"There goes my last Ruth Harper," Cate said, as she stood and stretched.

"What happened to her?"

"She went to the United States at the age of six."

"Darn her," Jack said, sliding puzzle pieces aimlessly around.

"She was my best lead," Cate said as she flopped into the other armchair, pulling her legs underneath her.

"None of the others are any good?"

"Nope," Cate answered. "They've all got solid death records and marriages that rule them out." She shook her head. "And now this one had to go and move on us."

"Traitor," Jack said, with a shake of his head.

"So, as usual, we'll be exploring in the past with little to no clue as to what may have happened."

"No different from usual. Hey," Jack said, snapping his fingers, "you don't think she's..."

"She's what?" Cate inquired, screwing up her face as she picked up the puzzle's box top.

Jack pursed his lips before continuing. “Maybe I’m way off-base but... the last time you couldn’t find anything about the people from the past, it was because half of them were immortals, and the other half were time travelers.”

Cate furrowed her brow. “But...” She shrugged as she parsed through it. “Okay, she couldn’t be an immortal, otherwise...”

“She wouldn’t be dead,” Jack said.

“Right,” Cate answered. She connected two edge pieces together and slid them to attach to a corner piece.

Jack wrinkled his nose at Cate’s progress.

“But...” Cate continued, the crease between her eyebrows deepening as she stared at the pieces. “I suppose Ruth Harper could be a time traveler.”

“Which means Ruth Harper could be a fake name and you could be looking for the woman in the wrong century.”

Cate snapped another three pieces together and slid them across the table. “How common do you think time traveling is?” she questioned, pulling several puzzle pieces toward her and studying them.

“I’m not sure,” Jack answered. “Maybe this is a question for Damien. Do you think he’d have any insight?”

“Maybe,” Cate said, adding more pieces to her three-piece chain.

Jack’s jaw unhinged. “How are you doing this?”

“Doing what?” Cate asked, as she shoved a lock of hair behind her ear and crossed the room to retrieve her phone from the desk.

“Building this puzzle? It’s impossible.”

“It’s definitely difficult,” Cate admitted, as she swiped into her phone, “but not impossible.”

“All the pieces look the same!”

“No they don’t,” Cate replied with a chuckle. “See, these two fit – see how the shapes are the same?”

“No,” Jack said, with a shake of his head.

Cate shrugged as her thumbs flew across her virtual keyboard. “I’m good at puzzles.”

Jack continued to try his hand at fitting edge pieces together while Cate fired a message across the pond. “I sent a message to Damien about your theory.”

Cate managed to finish one entire edge before her phone chimed.

“I’m really starting to detest your puzzle-building skills, Lady Cate,” Jack said as she fiddled with her phone. “You make it look way too easy.”

Cate shook her head at him and studied her phone. “Okay, Damien says it’s not very common, though given the history surrounding Dunhaven, he wouldn’t be surprised.” Cate frowned. “Which means we’ll be doing most of our work back in the past.”

“No change from normal then,” Jack said with a sigh.

“It’s amazing how much history is lost over the years,” Cate said in agreement, when her phone chimed again. “It’s another message from Damien. He says that reminded him of another solution to our problem. Getting rid of an enchanted object is no small feat, but lessening the effects may be possible if we simply go back to another time period.”

“What?” Jack said, his expression incredulous.

Cate lifted a shoulder and offered him a confused glance. “He’s typing again. But yes, his first message says they haven’t made any progress so far because enchanted objects are difficult to destroy. He’s assuming the duke’s enchantment would be fairly powerful given what they know about him. He also says Celine’s inquiry fell flat.”

Jack pursed his lips as they waited for the next message to come through. A new bubble popped onto the screen and Cate studied it. Her posture stiffened and her jaw dropped open.

“What is it?” Jack inquired.

Cate shook her head and blinked her eyes at the message as if to confirm what she was reading. She stammered around for a moment, before she explained her shocked expression to Jack.

“He says…” Cate paused and gave another shake of her head. “I can’t believe I’m about to read this statement to you. He says, and I’m quoting here, ‘It worked for Michael when he was bitten by a vampire. We went back to the 1790s and he had no ill-effects like he did in our current time.’”

“What?” Jack exclaimed. “Bitten by a vampire? Is he joking?”

“I don’t think he is,” Cate said, with a shake of her head.

Jack took a deep inhale, his eyebrows raised high. “Well, I suppose that’s a solution then,” he said, after a few moments of silence. “We can hope our time travel keeps the enchantment at bay.”

Cate nodded in silent response. Another moment passed before Jack spoke again. “Why do they say those things like it’s completely normal?”

Cate chuckled. "I'm not sure, but they must lead fantastically interesting lives. I cannot even imagine."

"I don't want to imagine. The revelation of time travel was enough for me. I nearly lost my marbles when we added the existence of supernatural creatures. And now this?"

Cate shrugged again. "I suppose vampires are not much of a stretch when you consider we've met supernatural creatures in the form of witches and warlocks."

"I hope they keep them on that side of the pond," Jack said with a shiver.

Cate returned to working on the puzzle after sending a brief reply text to Damien.

"I suppose given your lack of progress on research and Damien's latest message, we should discuss returning to 1942," Jack said.

"Yes," Cate agreed. "And it seems like we'll have to take our chances with showing our too-young faces to the family."

"Aye. Information is in short supply," Jack agreed.

"Should we go today?" Cate asked. "Or are you calling in sick for that, too?"

Jack sucked in air before he replied. "Well, I usually like twenty-four hours' notice so I can fret for a full day before a trip, but I suppose there's no time like the present. Particularly if it prevents you from going haywire over that music box and necklace."

"After lunch then," Cate proposed.

Riley lifted his head from Jack's knee and glanced at the closed library door. His nose wiggled as he sniffed the air. "What is it, Sir Riley? Lunch on its way already?" Jack asked as he stroked his back.

Bailey rose to his feet, stretched, and stared at the door. Riley leapt from Jack's lap and circled around the chairs to stare at the door again. His feather-like tail gave a slow wag as he continued to sniff.

"What's with you two?" Cate asked.

"They must smell something fantastic from the kitchen," Jack suggested.

"This is the first time they've ever acted like this," Cate said.

Riley raced to the closed doors and scratched his paw against it. He stuck his nose in the small crack between the doors and sniffed. Bailey hurried toward the doors, sticking his nose underneath to sniff.

Cate crinkled her brow before she glanced at Jack and shrugged. She shuffled to the doors and pulled them open. The dogs raced from the library and disappeared down the hall.

“Headed for the kitchen?” Jack inquired, as he snapped two puzzle pieces together.

“No, the opposite way, actually,” Cate said as she stared after them.

Jack glanced at her and raised his eyebrows. “Why?”

“I have no idea,” Cate answered.

Jack stood with a huff. “And just as I was making progress on this puzzle.”

“You can stay and keep working,” Cate said.

“No thanks, Lady Cate. I’d rather find out why your dogs are racing around the castle.”

“Maybe you don’t,” Cate said, as she stepped into the hall. “Last time they were interested in something, they found a body.”

“Very true, Lady Cate, very true. Let’s hope they haven’t found another.”

“Though I suppose it’s best to know if they have,” Cate said, as they rounded the corner into the hallway containing the office she’d raided last night.

They continued through the hallways as Cate called to the two pups. They turned the corner and passed through another hall. The dogs raced toward them. Riley leapt onto his hind legs, dancing in front of them with excitement.

“What’s got you all riled up, buddy?” Cate inquired.

Bailey pranced around at their feet, before letting out a long howl and jumping to his hind legs to wave his front paws.

“My goodness, Bailey! Why are you singing?” Cate inquired of him.

His curly tail wagged excitedly.

“What’s got them so wound up?” Jack inquired.

“I’m not sure,” Cate admitted. She continued a few paces down the hall toward where they’d come from. Her footsteps slowed as she approached the end.

“What is it?” Jack asked, noting her hesitance.

“The door to the west wing is open again!”

“What?” Jack exclaimed, hurrying down the hall to catch up with Cate as she approached the open west wing doors. The dogs trotted behind.

They approached the double doors. One stood partially ajar.

"I locked this!" Jack said, his brow furrowing.

"I watched you," Cate responded. The two dogs stared into the large hallway beyond the door. Bailey's tail gave another wag and the two of them barreled through the open doorway and down the hall, disappearing around a corner. "This must be where they're going. How long has it been open again, I wonder?"

"I've no idea, but I don't like this. I locked this door. And this is the second time we've found it open. And what are the dogs after in there?"

"Should we follow them in to find out?"

"Yes, I think so," Jack answered with a nod of his head.

Cate ventured in through the door with Jack behind her, still studying the unlocked and open door. He swung the door shut behind them and jiggled it. "Seems to latch properly."

"Perhaps the lock isn't working," Cate suggested.

"Even if that were the case," Jack answered, "how are the dogs opening it? It's latched." He jiggled the door again. "It's not opening even with me pushing on it. So a gust of wind blowing it open doesn't make sense. And besides, where would there be a gust of wind here? This wing is closed off."

Cate tried the door handle herself. It held firm. "It makes no sense. How is the door getting opened then?"

"I don't know. But I don't like it."

"Well, I suppose we won't solve that mystery at the moment. Perhaps we'll determine the source of the dogs' interest, though."

Jack gave the door another leery glance as he swung it open again and continued down the long hall with Cate. Large windows allowed light to filter into the massive hallway. The chandeliers hanging from above remained dark as they continued to the corner they'd seen the dogs disappear around moments ago.

As they rounded it, the two furry animals raced toward them.

"Where were you?" Cate asked. While still excited, they were not as exuberant as they had been moments ago. Riley leapt onto his hind legs, placing his paws on Cate's thigh in a request to be picked up.

"Show me where you were first," Cate tried.

Riley pawed at her again. "Come on, buddy, what's so interesting over here?"

Bailey stood firm, glancing around but appearing uninterested in anything at the moment. Cate gave in and lifted Riley into her arms. "I suppose we'll have to explore on our own since neither of you are talking," Cate said.

Jack scooped up Bailey and patted him on the head. The little dog bared his bottom teeth in what Cate termed a "smile." "It looks like Bailey isn't going to help either."

Cate shook her head. "No, we're on our own. If we're lucky, maybe we'll stumble across whatever caught their interest and they'll perk up."

They wandered down the length of the hall. Cate peered into a few darkened rooms, but nothing stirred Riley, who lounged in her arms on his back like a baby. While Bailey curiously peered around from Jack's arms, he remained indifferent to their surroundings.

They continued around the hall, peeking into a music hall along the way. A large white sheet covered a grand piano near an ornate white and gold-trimmed fireplace. White walls, decorated with gold filigree and gold chandeliers graced the space.

Cate strode into the ornate room, gazing up at its tray ceiling decorated with gold trim, and the polished parquet floors, still gleaming despite the age.

"Wow," she murmured as she exited the space.

"Don't let Mrs. Campbell see this," Jack said, as he pulled the door shut behind them.

"No kidding," Cate said.

"She'll have ten concerts scheduled before the year is out."

"I'm surprised she hasn't mentioned exploring these wings for the Presidents' Ball," Cate mentioned, as they meandered further down the hall.

"Give her time. She's probably working on that right now. You haven't met with her for over a week, so I'm afraid to find out what she has in store for your next meeting."

"I'm surprised she hasn't scheduled it already," Cate said, as they approached a set of ornate gold doors.

"She's probably texting you as we speak," Jack said.

Cate chuckled at the statement, mostly because it was likely true. She couldn't imagine making it through the week without hearing from Mrs. Campbell.

“Actually, I wouldn’t be upset about hearing from her. I’d like to ask her about wartime Dunhaven. Sometimes she’ll have a tidbit or two that will help us in our investigation.”

“Aye, that she may,” Jack said.

“And honestly, I’m not sure I would object to opening this wing for the party.”

“Now you’re talking crazy, Lady Cate,” Jack objected.

“I’m not. That room is beautiful. It should be used!”

“So it was,” Jack admitted. “Though I’m not certain I want strangers traipsing all over the castle.”

“I think it’s worth a mention to Mrs. Campbell,” Cate said, as Jack swung open the curved gold door and they entered the large space. “Though I’m certain I’ll regret it later.”

Cate scanned the new space. Riley fidgeted in her arms as she stepped inside. “Wow,” Cate said, her voice echoing off the golden walls. Accented in red and teal, large columns rose from the mirrored floor to hold the gold-paneled ceiling at bay.

In Jack’s arms, Bailey also wriggled around. They each set the dogs down. Riley and Bailey pressed their noses to the floor and raced around the room.

“Is this the source of their curiosity?” Jack asked.

Cate’s eyes still studied the room. Riley crossed the room and pawed at something, but left it within seconds in favor of pummeling Bailey, who offered a playful growl from his play-bow stance.

The two dogs frolicked around the room as Cate’s brow furrowed. A scent wafted to her nostrils: musky, warm and sweet. Cate’s mind scrambled to place the scent. Images flitted around on the edge of her brain, just out of reach.

CHAPTER 16



The golden room sparkled in front of her. Her senses dulled and a tinkling sound replaced the noise of dog claws scraping against the slick surface. Jack's voice echoed, sounding distant and static-filled.

Cate's body jolted. "Cate!" Jack said again. Cate blinked and sucked in a breath as the other world shattered to pieces around her.

The confused expression on her face deepened as she stared up at Jack. With his hands on her shoulders, his face was filled with concern. Riley and Bailey stood at her feet, peering up at her.

"What?" she inquired.

"What? What happened?"

Cate lifted a shoulder and dropped it in response. "I'm not sure what you mean."

"I asked you a question and you didn't answer. You were standing there like a zombie. I had to shake you to get any response."

"I don't remember any of that. Just..."

"Just what?" Jack asked as her voice trailed off, leaving the statement unfinished.

Cate's gaze fell to the shiny floor. She caught a reflection of herself in it. A flash of blue caught her eye. She tilted her head further, searching for the color.

"Cate!" Jack shouted at her again, grasping hold of her before she pitched forward, headfirst, toward the floor below.

"Huh?" Cate said.

“That’s it. I think we should leave.”

Cate swallowed hard. “I’m sorry,” she said. “I thought I saw something in the floor.”

“Saw something?”

“In the reflection. Blue.”

“Blue?” Jack asked as he searched around the space. “Like the color there, near the ceiling?”

Cate shook her head. “No, blue. Like sapphire blue. It floated past in the reflection like fabric fluttering in a breeze.”

Jack’s eyebrows twitched as he shook his head. Neither of them wore blue, and no blue items existed within the space.

“I don’t see anything blue, but like I said, I think we should leave. You nearly took a header into the floor, Cate. You were like a zombie again.”

Cate scrunched up her face. “But why?”

“Maybe it’s another attack from the music box?” Jack suggested. “Either way, I’d like to get you back to the main castle.”

Cate shook her head as Jack stepped toward the exit.

“No. It’s something about this room,” she insisted. She spun to search it again. “But what?”

Jack approached her, eyeing her then the space. “Something about this room?”

“Yes,” Cate said. “I...” Her voice cut off again.

“You what? What is it, Cate? Tell me whatever you’re thinking so we can figure this out.”

She sucked in a few breaths before shaking her head again. “It’s gone.” With a glance at Jack and a sigh, she added, “I can’t remember anything now.”

Jack rubbed the back of his neck as he considered the latest twist. “Come on,” he said after a moment. “Let’s get you back to the library. It’s nearly time for lunch. We can discuss this while we eat.”

He gently grabbed hold of her arm and tugged her away from the space. The two small dogs followed them as they closed the room again and threaded through the halls of the unused wing.

As they re-entered the main structure, Jack ushered the dogs through the doors and closed them. He tested the latch, ensuring it held as he pulled against the door. With another shake of his head, he said, “No sense in locking it, I suppose.”

“No,” Cate said with a sigh. “And maybe no sense in closing it. Someone keeps opening it and unless Riley and Bailey have discovered a way to open doors, it’s not them.”

Cate wrapped her arms around her midriff as she bit her lower lip and stared at the mysterious doors to the west wing. Jack wrapped his arm around her shoulders and led her away from the space. “Come on,” he prodded.

Cate shook her head. “What is going on here?” she asked, her voice filled with worry. “Doors opening unexpectedly, a room that makes me a zombie...”

“I’m not sure, Cate. I hope our mysterious friends across the pond have some answers. Perhaps we should update them.”

“Well, I guess we don’t know for sure it’s the room. Maybe it was the music box.” Cate ceased walking and stared up at Jack. “Did you hide it there?”

“I’m not telling.”

“I’m not trying to wheedle its location out of you. But if it’s hidden near there, perhaps it’s a proximity thing. And it could explain the door being open. If you accessed the west wing recently, perhaps the latch didn’t work, or the lock stuck?”

Jack shook his head. “Sorry, Lady Cate. I wish that could explain it but no, I did not put the music box anywhere near that spot, and I did not go into the west wing since the last time we locked those doors.”

Jack’s admission dashed Cate’s theory.

“And don’t you go feeling proud of yourself for ruling out an entire wing to search for your music box. I could always move it,” Jack said, wagging his finger at her.

The comment elicited a chuckle from Cate. “Duly noted. I just can’t figure out what that room would have to do with anything. I’ve barely ever been in it. I think once when I went through the castle after I first moved here. I have no reason to be drawn to it. I can’t make sense of any of this.”

“We’ll figure it out, Cate. Together. Just take solace in the fact that this time, no one is disappearing into other time periods.” He grabbed her hand and led her further down the hall.

“That’s some consolation. Though this time, I’m disappearing. Into some kind of trance.”

“There you are!” Molly exclaimed as they rounded the corner, heading toward the library. “I brought your lunch and found the place empty!”

“Sorry,” Cate said. “The dogs have been running around all over the place and we followed them.”

“Oh? What were they after? I hope not another body.”

“No,” Cate said, with a wave of her hand and a chuckle. “No bodies. Though we never did figure out what gave them the zoomies.”

“Hopefully they’ll be ready for a nap so you can enjoy your lunch.”

Cate ushered them in through the double doors with a nod in agreement at Molly’s statement.

“Oh,” Molly said to Jack as he passed her, “Mrs. Fraser said don’t get used to this treatment. You’re not lord of the manor.”

Jack chuckled at her. “I would never,” he promised. “Only when Lady Cate and I have pressing business.”

Molly gave him an amused glance and nod before she disappeared down the hall, leaving them to their lunch.

“You know,” Jack said, as he pushed a crouton around in his tomato basil soup, “I never thought I’d look forward to time travel, but I am!”

“Really?” Cate asked.

“Aye, if it solves your zombie problem, I am.”

Cate scrunched up her face in thought. Jack reached over and patted her arm. “It’ll be okay, Cate. I was only joking. Well, half-joking. If time travel works the way Damien seems to think it will, I won’t mind. It’s killing two birds with one stone.”

Cate gave him a weak smile. “I don’t know what to think,” Cate said. “I can’t believe time travel is a solution to whatever is happening to me. But Damien seemed certain.”

“I suppose we’ll find out.”

“At least it will take my mind off of whatever is going on with me. I wish we had more clues.”

“We’ll find them, Cate,” Jack assured her.

They finished their lunch and parted ways after delivering their trays to the kitchen. The task ahead rumbled through Cate’s mind as she pulled on her 1940s style dress. What would they find when they arrived at the castle? And would they pull off their subterfuge with those they had met twenty years earlier?

Cate hoped to avoid the family as much as possible. Much to her chagrin, however, it appeared that would be impossible. With no information about Ruth Harper, they would be forced to speak with at least Rory to learn anything about the woman.

Cate slicked on her bold red lipstick and pressed her lips together to distribute the color. Perhaps they could claim fantastic genetics for why they remained youthful in their appearance. She hoped the changed hairstyle and makeup provided enough difference that they weren't questioned.

Perhaps her recent brush with death even added a few gray hairs and wrinkles. Cate's mind flitted to the encounter. She swallowed hard as she recalled the cold stone of the tomb closing around her. She sensed the weight of the necklace on her neck and the icy cold touch of Duke Northcott's fingers against her skin. His voice echoed in her mind.

She fought to steady herself as her mind began to slip toward the necklace and then the music box. Cate pressed her hands against her ears as tinkling music filled the air around her.

"No!" she shouted, with a shake of her head. She stared at herself in the mirror. Movement caught her eye. She spun to search behind her. As she broke eye contact with the mirror, her mind cleared.

The tinkling music died down and the sensation of the necklace pressed against her collarbones passed. Cate sucked in a long breath as a shudder passed through her body.

"What's happening to me?" she whispered aloud.

Tears stung her eyes, and Cate bit her lower lip as she fluttered her eyelashes. After blowing out a shaky breath, she risked a quick glance into the mirror for a make-up check. Finding nothing amiss, she heaved another sigh, smoothed the skirt of her dress, and pushed her shoulders back.

She and Jack had a murder to investigate. That should be her focus. She stepped into her bedroom and grabbed her vintage purse before meeting Jack outside her suite.

"Ready?"

Cate gave a tight-lipped smile and a nod.

"You sure?" Jack asked.

"Yes," Cate said. "I can't wait, actually."

"Did something happen?" Jack inquired, as they traversed the halls to the secret passage outside of the library.

Cate swallowed hard and offered a sheepish grin. “Another incident where I really wanted to find the music box. It’s almost all-consuming and I can barely think of anything else.”

Jack arched an eyebrow. “Let’s hope Damien is correct about the effects of time travel on enchantments.” Jack ceased walking for a moment as they entered the hall containing the library. “Wow, I can’t believe that statement even came out of my mouth.”

Cate giggled at him. “You mean about hoping time travel solves our problems?”

“No, I mean about how easily I just mentioned time travel solving problems with enchanted objects. Lady Cate, before I met you I would have told anyone else all that was a bunch of hogwash. Now, I deal with it on a regular basis. And even more frightening, it’s becoming normal!”

“Anyway, let’s hope Damien’s correct.” She reached to the sconce and tugged on it.

They slipped into the secret passage, pushing the panel closed behind them. Jack toggled on a small flashlight and Cate held out the timepiece.

She set the date to September 17th, 1942. Jack closed his hand around hers and they activated the timepiece. As the secondhand slowed and 1942 settled around them, Jack blew out a breath.

“Well,” Jack said, as he pointed his flashlight’s beam toward the passage leading to the crypt, “here we go.”

Cate drew in a sharp breath.

“You okay?” Jack asked.

“Yes,” Cate said. “It’s amazing.”

“What is?”

“Always feel so clear-headed! Even if I think about the necklace and the music box, I don’t experience that fuzzy headed feeling or the overwhelming urgency to seek it out.”

Jack stared at her for a moment before he shook his head. “I can’t believe that worked.”

“Me either,” Cate admitted. “But it’s like night and day.”

“Well, I suppose in addition to solving a murder, we also have found a temporary solution to your troubles.”

Cate nodded as they reached the crypt. “Yes. I hope it buys us enough time to sort that situation out entirely. I really hate what it’s doing to me.”

“I can imagine.” Jack reached above his head and tugged on the metal ring. The secret panel in the crypt swung toward them. They exited into the bright sunshine beyond. “Whew! I always forget we’re going to fall, not spring.”

“Yes, the new ability to travel to any date we want may become confusing.”

“I was just getting used to the idea of traveling to the same date in another year, but a different day of the week...”

“And now you’re faced with different day, date and season!” Cate said, lifting her eyebrows and offering him a coy grin.

“At least I’m faced with the old Cate Kensie! You’re right, the difference is night and day!”

Cate sighed as they stepped onto the pathway outside the crypt. “I’m not sure if I find it encouraging or frightening that even you notice the difference.”

“Let’s take it as encouraging and leave it at that.”

Jack gazed around as they made their way up the path. “Gee, I hope I don’t run into Pap again.”

Cate couldn’t help but laugh. “I don’t think it’s funny, Lady Cate. He’s likely to have me arrested. My own grandfather, turning me in as a Nazi.”

“I’m sorry, but when you refer to that child as Pap it really makes me laugh.”

“I’m glad it makes someone laugh. I, personally, am not amused that at five years old, Pap can still get over on me.”

“He’s probably already a better dancer, too,” Cate said, with a coy glance at him.

Jack shook his head at her attempted humor. “What a comedian. I’m beginning to regret my statement about being faced with the old Cate Kensie.”

They wound their way around the loch. Cate gazed at the large tent, shaded by Dunhaven Castle. “I hope Rory can provide us with some preliminary information,” she said, as she watched several individuals bustle to and from the temporary canvas structure.

“Me too. I suppose the best course of action is to ask to speak with him first.”

“Yes,” Cate agreed, as they rounded the castle and approached the front door. “Let’s hope we learn something.”

Jack used the brass lion's head door knocker. "Here's the first test. If Benson looks strange at us, we're sunk."

Jack plastered a grin on his face as the door swung open before Cate could respond. A middle-aged man in a butler's uniform stood at the door. "Yes?" he inquired.

"Hello. Jack and Cate MacKenzie to see Rory MacKenzie."

The man's eyebrows raised. "Is Lord MacKenzie expecting you, sir?"

"No," Jack answered, "though I'm certain he'll recognize our name as we've met on several occasions before."

"Perhaps if you could check with Mr. Benson, he could verify that my husband is Lord MacKenzie's cousin," Cate chimed in.

The man shifted his glance to Cate. "Mr. Benson has retired. I am the new butler, Smithers. You must have visited Lord MacKenzie quite a while ago."

Cate nodded. "Yes," she answered. "Nearly twenty years, actually."

"I see," the man said. "Please come in and I shall discuss the matter with Lord MacKenzie."

"Thank you," Jack said, as he ushered Cate into the foyer in front of him and followed her through the large front doors.

The man showed them into the sitting room, closing the doors behind them.

"I guess Benson won't be a problem," Cate said.

"Apparently not," Jack agreed as he sank onto the updated couch. He wiped at a bead of sweat forming on his brow.

"Take it easy, Jack," Cate said, as she plopped next to him and patted his knee. "Rory should remember us. And we don't need to explain our rather youthful appearances to him."

Jack nodded and they waited for several more tension-filled moments before the doors to the foyer popped open.

CHAPTER 17



As the doors to the sitting room opened, Cate stood, recognizing Rory immediately. His tall form, slightly more sturdy than lithe now, was hidden under a new style of suit. His once dark hair now had streaks of gray, though it remained unruly. And his piercing blue eyes were unmistakable.

He stood in the doorway, his face a mask of surprise and glee. A grin formed on his lips, spreading wider as he stepped toward them. “Jack and Cate MacKenzie!” he exclaimed.

Jack stood next to Cate, returning the man’s smile. “Hello,” he said.

“I’m amazed!” He studied them up and down. “When Smithers told me, I couldn’t believe it was true! Yet here you stand! Oh, what a lovely surprise.”

Cate smiled at Rory’s enthusiasm. The picture of politeness and always the optimist, Rory’s welcome gave her the boost she needed.

“I hope you don’t mind us dropping in unannounced,” Jack said.

“Not at all,” Rory answered, still staring at them with a silly grin. “After that spot of trouble you got us out of, I hoped to see you again. After years passed, I figured I wouldn’t. But here you are again. One of life’s little surprises!”

Cate smiled at him. “We’re sorry it took so long but...” Her voice faded as she glanced to the open doors leading to the foyer.

Rory understood her silent signal and pushed the doors closed.

“Thank you,” she said. “For us, it’s only been a few months,” Cate explained.

“How interesting,” Rory said. “I’m not much of a traveler myself, but it’s entirely fascinating to me that you’re visiting me nearly twenty years later for me, though only a few months for you.”

“We hope that doesn’t cause any problems,” Jack said with a wince. “Though it is rather unavoidable.”

“Well, certainly no problems with me,” Rory said. “And Anne is away at the moment visiting her parents in the countryside and will be for the next several weeks.”

“Oh,” Cate said, relief coursing through her, “that will make things easier.”

“The only other person in the house with me is Oliver, and I doubt he’d remember you clearly enough to question your ages. Why the last time you saw him he must have been only a small boy.”

“About ten, yes,” Cate answered.

“And now he’s approaching thirty!” Rory said, his eyebrows raised high. “Nearly an old man like me.” He chuckled at his joke. Cate also offered a giggle, more so at the different views of age in a different era.

The conversation lulled for a moment and Rory took the opportunity to bring up the subject on everyone’s mind.

“I assume you’re here for a purpose?”

“We are,” Cate said, with an apologetic glance.

“Please, you do not need to explain it to me, though I’ll do all I can to help.”

“Thank you. On that note, you mentioned Anne being away, but is Amelia here?”

“Funny you should mention that,” Rory said, waving a finger in the air. “I received correspondence very recently from her. She is traveling to Dunhaven and plans to arrive tomorrow. What a coincidence you should mention her.”

Cate held in another giggle at Rory’s naïveté.

“Of course,” Rory continued, “if you prefer to avoid her, I shall make no mention of your arrival to her.”

“No, quite the opposite, actually,” Cate said. “I hoped to speak with her.”

“Oh!” Rory said with a nod. “Well, it seems you shall be in luck tomorrow then.”

“Good,” Cate said. “And if you wouldn’t mind us ‘staying’ at the castle again...” Her voice trailed off as Rory waved his hand in the air at her.

“Oh, of course, of course. You needn’t ask. I shall have the room prepared at once. I can arrange the one you used before, though will that pose a problem with returning to and from this time period? I’m not certain of the location of the time rip leading to this year.”

“It won’t pose a problem at all, thank you,” Cate said, omitting the information about the latest developments with the time rips.

“Wonderful,” Rory said. “I shall see to it then. And how I look forward to spending more time with you. Oh, I’m afraid dinners are a rather bleak affair these days what with the war effort, but we shall scrounge up something lovely, I promise.”

“I’m sure it will be fine and of course, the draw is spending time with you and your family,” Cate said. “And on that note, I spotted a tent outside. I understand it has something to do with the war effort.”

“Oh, yes,” Rory confirmed. “Yes, we’re hosting several ladies and gentlemen who are working on those codes. Enigma machines I believe they’re called. A terrible business, this war. It was the least we could do to provide them with a place to stay and work. They’re a smaller branch of those working at Bletchley Park. My contribution, however small, to the war efforts.” He shoved his hands into his pockets and offered a weak smile.

“It’s more than small,” Cate assured him.

“Would you like to see it? I could show you.”

A smile brightened Cate’s features. “If you have a moment and wouldn’t mind.”

“Of course!” Rory said. “Just allow me to retrieve my hat.”

The man disappeared from the room, leaving Cate and Jack alone.

“Nice to see time hasn’t jaded him at all,” Cate said.

“Still the same old Rory, that’s for certain,” Jack agreed.

“I hope you don’t mind the tour of the intelligence tent, but I thought it would be fascinating to see.”

“Not at all, Cate,” Jack said. “We can spend as much time as you like here.”

Cate gave him a tight-lipped smile, understanding his meaning. He preferred not to return to the present where she suffered from some unknown ailment. She appreciated his sacrifice.

Rory returned a few moments later and led them from the castle and to the hut.

They entered the space. Temporary lighting hung overhead. A large board held a tacked-up map and several other pieces of information. Multiple tables were set up around the space. Paperwork covered most of the wooden surfaces. Men and women bent over the papers, pencils in hand, working to uncover patterns in the messages that could be used to crack the Enigma code.

Large baskets sat in the middle of the table with information waiting to be processed. A blonde woman, her hair styled in two large rolls and pulled back into a low bun, smiled at them as they entered.

“Hello, Miss Haverford,” Rory said with a wave.

“Hello, Lord MacKenzie,” she said, with a nod in a crisp British accent. “And again, please, Rita is just fine.”

“Miss Haverford was one of our earliest transplants with the intelligence unit.”

“How fascinating,” Cate said to the woman. “How did you become involved with the work?”

Her red lips formed another curt smile. “I’ve always been good with mathematics. And with my knowledge of the German language, it was a good fit.”

“Oh, you speak German,” Cate remarked.

“I do,” the woman answered. “My mother was German.”

Cate gave her a nod.

“Fascinating work, really,” Rory said to them. “I can’t make heads or tails out of it, but they seem to be making some headway. Sadly, not enough to cease all the attacks on our allied shipments.”

“No and the code has become rather tricky of late, but we’ll keep at it,” Miss Haverford added to Rory’s statements.

“Thank you for letting us drop by,” Cate said, as Rory led them from the tent.

“Well, it wasn’t much of a tour, but I don’t like to interrupt their work.”

“Very important, yes,” Jack said. “Thank you for showing us.”

“Oh, of course. And I’ll see you back tomorrow?” Rory inquired as they pushed into the castle’s entryway.

“Yes,” Jack assured him.

“Wonderful. I’ll see to your room and look forward to visiting with you again tomorrow. Maybe then you can meet Oliver.”

“We’ll look forward to it,” Cate said.

They said their goodbyes promising to return tomorrow. As Rory disappeared up the steps, Cate and Jack slipped into the secret passage to return to their time.

After changing into their normal clothes, they met in the library. Jack studied the puzzle as Cate meandered into the room. “I hate this puzzle,” he announced.

“Maybe it’ll grow on you, like time travel,” Cate quipped, as she settled into the armchair and slid a few pieces around.

“How do you feel?”

“Fine,” Cate admitted. “The time travel did remove the odd haze in my brain while we were there. When we got back, it’s better than it was, but I feel it slightly.”

“At least it relieved it somewhat,” Jack said with a shrug. “Maybe the more you do it, the better it will be.”

“I hope so,” Cate said. “Although, I’ll be on pins and needles until tomorrow.”

“Oh? Over the idea that the haze may return?”

“No, over seeing Amelia again, and hopefully, meeting Ruth.”

“I see.”

“We’re days before her supposed disappearance. And we have no information.”

“I hope to find some soon,” Jack said.

“So do I. Without it, we may never uncover the truth.”

“No, but at least we’ll have hopefully helped your issue.”

“I’d like to do both,” Cate said, as she finished one edge from corner to corner.

“I understand. Let’s hope tomorrow’s meeting is enlightening.”

“If it isn’t...” Cate paused and sighed. “We could be barking up the wrong tree. We could be in the wrong year with the wrong woman entirely!”

Jack nodded. “Aye, that could be true. Though I hope it isn’t. But you’re correct. We have no real proof that this woman actually disappeared.”

Cate gave him another sigh before returning her attention to the puzzle.

They spent the remainder of their rainy afternoon filling in the puzzle with Cate building toward the middle while Jack continued to frown over his edges, before finally fitting them together and finishing the outline. A celebration ensued over the small amount of progress.

With the rain turning to drizzle and finally ending as the afternoon hours waned, Cate took the opportunity to allow the dogs to stretch their legs before she returned to the library for dinner. With her current state of mind improved, Jack opted for dinner with the staff rather than eating upstairs with Cate.

Cate found her mind wandering more to the mystery in 1942 than anything else. Though it was a welcome change from her cloudy mind, her frustration over the lack of information bubbled inside her. They could be spending their time working an angle that had nothing to do with the body.

Cate frowned as she considered starting the process over again. But where, her mind pondered? Or when? With no reports of missing people fitting the description, they’d have no leads.

The mystery of their uninvited garden guest may go unsolved entirely.

A knock at the door returned her attention to her current surroundings. Jack poked his head in. “Everything okay in here?”

Cate smiled at him. “Yep,” she said with a nod. “Just contemplating our mystery and hoping we solve it.”

“Any haze? Overwhelming urges to roam around the castle? Music playing in your mind?”

“None of that! Damien was correct about the time travel helping.”

“Have you heard from him?” Jack asked, as he eased the doors shut behind him.

Cate checked her phone. “No, nothing. And I hate to keep asking him about progress.”

“Well, with the current upturn in your mental capacity, we probably can wait until tomorrow to see what they’ve come up with.”

Cate nodded her agreement, and spent the rest of her evening in the library swapping her attention between a mystery novel and the puzzle. The combination seemed to keep any mental fog at bay.

She gathered both dogs as evening turned to night and headed to her suite with the hopes her garden guest mystery didn't keep her awake.

After saying good night to Jack, she continued to her sitting room, pressing the doors shut behind her. Riley and Bailey raced ahead of her to the bedroom. An excited yip sounded, and she heard the sounds of both dogs climbing onto the bed.

"You guys must be really tired!" Cate called, as she approached the double doors leading to her bedroom. As her large bed came into view, Cate ceased walking. Her heart skipped a beat and her stomach dropped. Her breath caught in her throat as her eyes widened at the sight.

With a furrowed brow, she took a slow step forward, her head shaking. "No," she whispered.

Riley and Bailey stood in the middle of the bed, staring at a collection of objects sprawled across the foot of it. Their attention flicked to Cate as she stepped inside. Riley's feather-like tail waved in the air and Bailey gave two clipped swats of his curly tail.

Cate's lower lip trembled as she approached the foot of the bed. Riley stretched out on his belly, his tail still waving. With a trembling hand, Cate reached out toward the objects. As her fingers caressed one, she pulled her hand back as though she'd been burned by it.

They weren't figments of her imagination. They were real.

On the bottom of her bed lay a red rose, the sapphire necklace, and the piano-shaped music box.

CHAPTER 18



A grimace formed on Cate's lips as she stared at the array of items spread on her bed. Her pulse raced and her breathing turned ragged as her mind shot in a thousand directions pondering the situation.

She spun toward her sitting room, intent on reporting the incident to Jack. As she took a step toward the other room, an icy cold breeze tickled her skin. The hair on the back of her neck stood up and her flesh puckered into goosebumps.

She ceased walking, her head slowly swiveling to glance over her shoulder. Her clenched lips parted slightly as she stared at the objects. She inhaled a deep breath and stepped toward the bed. Her fingers caressed the sapphires before she snatched them off the bed, clutching the necklace to her chest.

She twisted the winding mechanism and propped open the lid of the miniature grand piano. Soft tinkling music filled the air, causing the edges of her lips to curl upward in a slight smile.

She pulled the small music box onto her lap as she sank onto the edge of the bed. A thought pervaded her mind. She had to find it. The blue dress. She had to find it.

Her mind made a mental inventory of the castle. Where had she put the dress? She had to find it. She rose from the bed and stalked across the room.

The music box tinkled away as she crossed her sitting room and flung open the door. She shambled down the hall as she considered the best place to begin her search.

A noise buzzed at the back of her brain. She wrinkled her forehead, attempting to concentrate on the music. The noise sounded again. Her footsteps slowed as she struggled to identify the sound. The tinkling music began to slow.

Cate's body shook. She blinked several times as her hand searched for the winding key.

"Cate!"

She recognized her name being called. It sounded like the speaker was far away and underwater. She shook her head and again searched for the winding key.

Her body jolted again. "Cate!"

She glanced up, finding a face in front of her. "Jack!" Her eyebrows shot up and she grinned at him. "You're back!"

Jack's brow furrowed. Cate flung her arms around him in a hug. She pulled back still smiling.

"Back? Cate?" Jack stared down at the objects clutched in her hands. "What's going on? How did you get those?"

"Now you can help me," Cate continued to babble. "I have to find it. I can't remember where I put it."

Jack grasped hold of Cate's shoulders. "Cate! Get hold of yourself! What are you talking about?"

"The dress. I have to find it. I have to find it before he comes."

The last few notes of music floated from the dying music box.

Jack shook his head at her as she turned the key again. He attempted to wrestle the box from her grip.

"No!" she shouted, yanking it back. "I need it! I've always loved it."

"Cate, what are you talking about? You just got this."

"No, I've had it since..." Her forehead wrinkled as she searched her mind for the detail. "Since..."

She shook her head, becoming perturbed by her memory loss.

"Cate," Jack said, squatting down to stare into her eyes. "Listen to me. There is some enchantment on this thing, and it's making you crazy."

"No," Cate argued. "No, it helps me. It relaxes me."

Jack swallowed hard and bit his lower lip.

"Will you help me?" Cate asked.

Jack narrowed his eyes at her. "Okay, sure. What do you need help with?"

“I have to find the dress.”

“What dress?”

“My blue dress. For the ball. I can’t remember where I put it.” Cate continued down the hall.

“Where did you see it last?”

Cate’s forehead crinkled. “I’m not sure.” A pained expression crossed her face, and she stared up at Jack.

“Okay, it’s okay, Cate. We’ll find it.” Jack held his hands out in front of him as though surrendering. “How about if we leave these things here, though? You can’t look for anything when you’re carrying so many things.”

Cate glanced down at the music box and necklace. “But...”

“They’ll be here when you come back. But it’ll be easier to find the dress.”

Cate’s eyes slid sideways as she considered the proposition. Jack eased the music box from her hands and set it down on the floor. He carefully unfurled her fingers from around the necklace and laid it on the music box.

He breathed a partial sigh of relief as he wrapped an arm around Cate’s shoulders and guided her away from the objects. He led her downstairs and into the library. Embers still glowed in the fireplace, casting the room in a dim, orangish light.

Jack guided her to the armchair near the fireplace and eased her into it. He perched on the edge of the table, keeping his hands firmly grasping her upper arms.

He studied her face.

“I don’t think the dress is here,” Cate said.

“No, but we need a break to think about where we should look.”

Cate nodded.

“While we think, can you tell me what the dress looks like?”

“It’s satin. Sapphire blue.” Cate paused. Her forehead wrinkled again as she searched her memory for more details. After a moment, her breathing turned ragged, and a pained expression wrinkled her nose. Her face blanched. And she glanced to Jack with fear in her eyes. “I can’t... the music box... I should get it.”

“No, it’s okay, stay here,” Jack insisted, keeping his grip firm on her.

“Ugh,” she moaned as she bent forward, rubbing her temples.

“It’s okay, Cate. It’s okay,” Jack said, rubbing her arm.

After a few moments, Cate sucked in a deep breath and straightened. Her brow furrowed again as she glanced around the room then focused on Jack. She tilted her head at him, a worried expression replacing her pained one. "Was I roaming again?" she inquired.

"Cate?" Jack said, sitting up straighter. "Is it you?"

Cate pressed back against the chair behind her as she processed his statement. "Yes. Who else would it be?" Her eyes grew wide. "Jack, what's going on?"

Jack blew out a relieved sigh. "I'll explain everything in a second, just let me take a minute to be grateful you're back to normal you."

"You're scaring me," Cate said.

Jack blew out another breath. "Somehow you got a hold of the music box and necklace."

"What?" Cate asked, her voice incredulous.

Jack nodded. "I have no idea how. I hid it in the locked east wing. I won't say where beyond that. But there's no way you could have gotten it from there. But you definitely had it. You were wandering around the halls babbling about finding a dress."

"A dress?" Cate pursed her lips in thought. "That seems vaguely familiar. But beyond that, I can't remember anything. How did I get the music box?"

"What's the last thing you remember?"

"Going into my sitting room. The dogs ran into the bedroom and when I went in, I saw everything on the bed. The necklace, the music box, and a rose. That's the last thing I remember."

Jack swung from the table into the armchair next to her, still perched on the edge.

"Where is the music box now?" Cate inquired.

"I managed to wrestle it off you. It's in a hallway upstairs."

Cate shook her head. "Jack, if this music box keeps appearing, there's going to be no keeping me from it."

"I agree. No matter what we do, you end up with it. We're going to have to mitigate your symptoms as best we can while we figure this out, because there's no keeping it away."

Cate nodded.

"There's something else," Jack said, wringing his hands.

"What?"

“In addition to the strange comments about searching for your ball gown, you made a few other bizarre comments.”

“Such as?”

“You said you needed the music box because you’ve always loved it.”

“Always? I just got it.”

“That’s what I thought, too.”

“Is there something else?”

Jack remained silent for a moment, staring at his feet.

“Jack?”

He shrugged. “Maybe it’s nothing, but you seemed surprised to see me. You said I was back. I didn’t know what that meant, but it was very odd.”

“Perhaps because I was in a trance, I was surprised to see you, since it seems I’m almost closed into my own mind.”

Jack shrugged again. “Maybe,” he said. “And maybe I’m reading into things too much, but it seemed very, very odd to me. Though you may be correct. It took me a few minutes to get a response from you.”

“Really?” Cate inquired.

Jack nodded. “Aye. I kept calling to you and finally you acknowledged me. But it took a few tries.”

Cate shivered, more from the unknown than the cold. “What’s happening to me?”

“I don’t know, Cate, but we’ll figure it out.”

“How?” Cate cried.

Jack considered it for a moment. “As much as I hate to say this, we may need to let you slip into one of these trances and see what it is you’re trying to do.”

The worried expression returned to Cate’s face as she considered the theory. “I’m not sure that’s a good idea. What if you can’t get through to me next time?”

“Perhaps we can use the time travel solution as our backup,” Jack proposed. “If you don’t snap out of it, I’ll drag you into one of the time rip locations and we’ll go back in time.”

Cate remained silent for a few minutes. “This sounds like the worst plan ever.”

Jack leapt from his seat and paced the floor behind them. “I know, Cate, I know. But I’m not sure what other choices we have!”

“Okay, okay, let’s just calm down a minute,” Cate said, noticing Jack’s obvious agitation.

Jack continued his anxious pacing, biting his thumbnail as he marched back and forth across the room.

Cate rose and stopped him from his pacing. “Jack,” she said, pausing to sigh before continuing, “we’ll figure this out. I’m not sure how, but I know we will. Maybe it’s best if we let things take a more natural course.”

Jack tilted his head at the statement, setting his mouth in a firm line. “I really don’t like to leave things to chance.”

“I don’t either, but I’m afraid if we force things…” Her voice trailed off and tears shined in her eyes. “Jack, what if I disappear entirely? End up locked in my own mind?”

“I won’t let that happen, Cate.”

“You may not have a choice.”

Jack shook his head and pulled Cate into his arms. “I’m not going to lose you, Cate.”

Cate sniffled as a tear fell to her cheek. She wrapped her arms around Jack’s waist. “Thanks,” she squeaked.

She spent a few moments with her head resting against his chest before she pulled back, wiping the wayward tear from her cheek. She blew out a shaky breath.

“How are you feeling now?”

“Okay,” she admitted.

“Do you think you’ll be able to get any sleep?”

“Maybe,” she said. “I’ll try.”

“If you prefer to stay here, I’ll wait up with you.”

Cate shook her head. “No. But don’t tell me which hall we left the music box in. And maybe you should lock the doors to my sitting room.”

“Lock you in?”

Cate shrugged her shoulders. “I’d feel better if you did.”

“Okay,” Jack said. “Sounds like a plan.”

They returned to the upstairs hallway and parted ways at Cate’s suite, with Jack locking the door after she entered the room. She squeezed her eyes shut as she heard the lock engage behind her.

“Good night, Lady Cate,” Jack’s muffled voice called, before she heard him retreat down the hall and enter his own bedroom.

With a deep, steadying breath, Cate returned to her bedroom. The two dogs tossed the rose around on the bed. “Hey!” Cate exclaimed. “Stop that!”

She snatched the rose from them and collected the wilted petals that had fallen from the flower. She tossed them into her trashcan before changing clothes and climbing into bed. Her mind replayed the earlier events of the evening. She tossed and turned as worry consumed her.

Her mind focused on the music box after a while. She found herself calmed as she continued to concentrate on the item. She closed her eyes and pictured it in her mind. The tinkling music echoed in her brain.

Cate drifted off to sleep as the music soothed her frayed nerves.

* * *

Cate awoke the next morning feeling relaxed. She lounged in bed as the first hints of sunlight brightened the room. Cate rolled onto her back and closed her eyes, focusing on the tinkling music filling the room.

After a few moments, she rolled to her side, glancing at the piano-shaped music box perched on the edge of her nightstand. The music was beautiful. She reached out to caress the raised lid of the tiny piano as it played away.

A knock sounded at her sitting room door. Cate lifted her head to glance out of the bedroom door. She pushed herself up to sit and pulled her robe around her. As she slipped into her slippers, she hummed along with the music box.

She stepped into her sitting room as she heard the lock of her door disengage. The door popped open an inch. “Cate?” Jack called in.

“Come in,” Cate said, waving him into the room.

“Good morning,” Jack said. “How are you feeling?”

Cate shrugged, scrunching up her mouth into a pucker. “Another feel perfectly fine,” Cate answered, “but there’s been another new development.”

Jack’s lips formed an “o”, and he paused for a moment before speaking. “I’m not certain I want to find out, but I suppose I have to.”

Cate motioned for him to follow her. She stopped in the doorway leading into her bedroom. Both dogs leapt up at the sight of Jack, Riley’s

tail waving in the air at him.

Cate motioned toward the nightstand.

Jack's face whitened and he approached the tinkling object, staring down at it.

CHAPTER 19



With wide eyes, he shifted his gaze to Cate. “I would say this can’t be, but I’m starting to learn it can with this thing.”

Cate crossed her arms over her chest and nodded. “I found it there this morning when I woke up.”

Jack stared at her. “You’re not a zombie.”

“No, I feel okay, actually. Well-rested and very content.”

“And your door was still locked this morning,” Jack noted as he rubbed his chin.

“Yep. I have no recollection of getting out of bed. And even if I did, I couldn’t have gotten out of this room, unless my zombie-fied self knows of a secret passage.”

“Anything on your cube camera?” Jack inquired.

“Let me check,” Cate said. She stalked across the room and grabbed her cell phone. “No videos beyond the ones triggered this morning.”

“Hmm, not even when the music box appeared?”

“Apparently not,” Cate said. She flashed the phone’s screen toward Jack. “Nothing listed overnight at all. Not even me rolling over in bed.”

“I suppose we can view this as progress. You’ve got the music box here and you’ve not gone crazy.”

“I don’t see the necklace. Perhaps it’s the necklace that causes my odd behavior.”

“But it was the music box you were after a few times.”

Cate leaned against the door jamb and shrugged. “I can’t figure it out.”

“Well, I hope you stay this way. It’ll be one less thing to worry about,” Jack said.

“Me too. I guess I’ll get dressed. Hopefully, you don’t find me wandering the halls soon.”

Jack nodded. “Perhaps the time travel did do you some good. Hopefully, today’s trip will help, too.”

“Fingers crossed,” Cate said, before Jack left her alone to finish her morning routine.

The little music box seemed to play on an endless loop without Cate winding it. She left it still playing its tune, ushering the dogs out of the room and down the stairs for a quick walk before breakfast.

Cate found herself surprisingly alert during the morning hours. Her phone jingled shortly after 9 a.m. Cate recognized Mrs. Campbell’s number and accepted the call.

“Lady Cate!” the woman exclaimed through the phone’s speaker after Cate picked up. “Why, I feel almost odd not having met with you in over a week!”

Cate chuckled at the comment, feeling as though she’d escaped an obligation. “With the way you streamline the process, Mrs. Campbell, we are well ahead of schedule for both parties.”

“About those,” Mrs. Campbell began, “I have several things we should discuss.”

“Of course, Mrs. Campbell,” Cate said, twirling her pen in her hands. “When would you like to meet?”

“Would Monday work? It’s not our usual day but...”

“Yes, that will work fine. 9 a.m.?” Cate queried.

“Perfect!”

“Oh, Mrs. Campbell,” Cate said, before the woman could end the call. “Could I ask you a quick question while I have you on the line?”

“Of course!” Mrs. Campbell answered.

“I’ve come across some information about World War II-era Dunhaven. Did you know there was an intelligence base here?”

Mrs. Campbell paused for a moment. “Oh, well,” she stammered around. “Well, no! I most certainly was not aware of that!”

“Hmm,” Cate murmured at the development.

“This is... well...” After a few moments of hemming and hawing, Mrs. Campbell exclaimed, “Quite frankly, I’m in shock! Where did you come

across this information?”

“Oh, uh, a personal source from Rory MacKenzie, the estate’s proprietor during the war.”

“I can’t believe this! I’m going to go through the information I’ve amassed. Surely there *must* be *some* trace of this somewhere!”

“I’d appreciate you sharing any information you find. I must admit I was surprised when I found out, too.”

“Leave it to me, Lady Cate. I shall get to the bottom of it!”

They said their goodbyes and Cate ended the call as a knock sounded on the door. Jack peeked inside. “Still okay?”

Cate smiled and nodded. “Yep. I’m not sure you will be, though.”

“What now?” he asked, slipping inside the door.

“That was Mrs. Campbell.”

“Oh no,” Jack said, his shoulders slouching. “Now what? A waterslide? Move a beach grain by grain for a luau? Shift the west wing out of the way for another garden?”

“None of those things, though she’s requested another meeting. She probably heard you telling me not to tell her about the west wing’s music room, and now she wants to use it.”

“Tell her it’s gone missing.”

“I’m not sure she’ll buy that story, but listen to this. I asked her about the intelligence base here, and she’d never heard of it.”

“Is it that surprising?”

“Mrs. Campbell not knowing something major about the castle? The poor woman was flabbergasted.”

“You make a good point. Mrs. Campbell prides herself on being the end-all, be-all on information about Dunhaven Castle.”

Cate nodded in agreement. “She had the scoop on Douglas, Randolph, and Rory’s theft – but she didn’t know there was an intelligence base here during the Second World War?”

“Well, she had most of her information wrong on all of those fronts.”

“But,” Cate countered. “She had information. Wrong or not. It seems odd that she has no information at all. Not even an odd rumor about it.”

“Perhaps she’ll find some,” Jack said.

“I guess we’ll find out. I meet with her on Monday.”

“I’ll prepare myself for the outrageous to-do list I’m certain she’ll have.”

“See you later this afternoon for our daily time travel trip?”

“I don’t like when you say it that way, but yes, see you after lunch. If you need anything before then, I’ll be in the back garden. The one without the body.”

Cate nodded as Jack slipped through the door, easing it shut behind him. Cate spun to face her laptop. She hoped to track down some information on the intelligence base at the castle, finding it odd that even locally, it did not have a reputation.

After several internet searches, though, Cate began to wonder if her eyes had deceived her. Perhaps they’d entered some kind of alternate universe when they’d visited 1942 Dunhaven. No mention was made of the intelligence base. Outside of the famous Bletchley Park, the majority of the discussion about intelligence efforts in 1942 centered around the unreadability of the German code.

With a sigh, Cate closed her laptop and glanced at the two dogs lounging on the rug near the fireplace. “Want to head out for a walk?” she inquired.

At the special word, Riley and Bailey leapt to their feet, ready to go. Cate spent an hour outside with them enjoying the cool, but sunny, spring morning.

As they settled by the loch, Cate pulled her phone from her pocket. Accessing her messaging app, Cate typed a message to Damien: *Good morning, hope everything’s okay on your side of the pond. A few updates here: that music box is persistent. It shows up in my bedroom no matter what we’ve tried. We’ve locked it in a safe, Jack’s hidden it and we even left it in a hallway at one point. Every time it winds up back in my bedroom.*

She clicked off her phone’s display after sending the message and wrapped her arms around her bent knees. White clouds floated by in the azure sky. Cate followed their journey across the sky in the reflective surface of the loch.

She turned her mind to another question. What was it about that room that excited both her and the dogs?

“Think, Cate, think,” she murmured to herself, as she forced her mind to search for anything that happened during her zombie episodes.

“What about you two?” Cate asked the dogs. “What draws you to the west wing?”

Bailey climbed onto her lap and sat down, staring at her. Riley settled next to her, laying on his belly and watching the loch.

“Not talking, huh?” Cate asked as her cell phone chimed.

She swiped at it and read the message from Damien. *Seriously? A persistent bugger, isn't it? Not much progress on our end. Enchantments can be really tricky, especially when we don't know what we're dealing with... well, we know WHO we're dealing with no matter what he says, but his knowledge is pretty extensive. I don't mean to sound so dire, we'll figure it out. At least nothing terrible has happened yet. I mean... I don't mean like this is trivial, but a reappearing music box doesn't seem too dangerous.*

Cate smiled at the babbling message. It brought a smile to her face. She could imagine nervous, introverted Damien attempting to get his thoughts across and be supportive, while also trying to stop her from worrying.

Cate sent a return text to him. *Yeah, nothing terrible so far. Is there something I should be watching for though? I've been wandering around the castle. When I wander around, Jack said I'm almost unresponsive like a zombie. He said I keep saying strange things.* She perused Damien's message again before adding: *And what did you mean by "no matter what he says"?*

She sent the text and laid back on her elbows. Her mind searched for answers as she detailed the situation to Damien and planned future texts to explain her meaning.

Two return texts followed in rapid succession. *Celine talked to the Duke again about the situation and he said it wasn't him... riiiiight like I believe that.*

His second text said: *What types of strange things? Do you remember anything from your roaming?*

Cate answered both his questions, informing him of her lack of memory and her obsession with finding a dress and being ready for some unknown event, along with her surprise to see Jack.

As she waited for a response, she continued to ponder his other admission. Celine had discussed the matter with Duke Northcott. Cate couldn't even begin to fathom how that conversation unfolded. To begin with, Celine could barely stomach the sight of the man when she'd last seen them together. Now, Damien acted as though they spoke regularly. And his denial of involvement floored her. How did people lie so easily? Then again, she and Jack were becoming pros at it, too.

Damien answered, seeming unsurprised by anything she told him. *Any idea what dress you're looking for or why? I'm not shocked you were surprised to see Jack. That's pretty common in what you're suffering from.*

Cate screwed up her face at his words. She responded: *Pretty common? I can't even begin to imagine the lives you and your friends lead, Damien. I'm worried about disappearing into my own mind. And I'm still stuck on the conversation with Duke Northcott. Did Celine just ask him straight out and he denied it?*

The web grew more complex at every turn and Cate's head began to ache as she strove to find meaning in what was happening to her or Damien's odd explanations. She began to long for her trip to the past to give her mind a chance to relax.

Damien's response further confounded her. His first message tackled her symptoms. *Celine went through a few episodes like this (she's fine, fully recovered). It usually means something or someone is drawing you to something. With Celine, it's usually the Duke, though we have seen a few other things. Can you do me a favor and give Jack my number in case he finds you unresponsive and can't pull you out of your trance? I know he has Michael's but I'd feel better if he texted me too.*

Cate's stomach turned at the message. She noticed his deliberate avoidance to address her worry about disappearing inside her mind. In fact, if anything, his message alluded to the fact that she could.

A second message appeared as she fretted over the first message's meaning. *Yeah, Celine asked him outright. He said "Whatever Catherine is experiencing is a result of her own doing" ... yeah, I'm sure you cursed yourself*

An eye-roll emoji followed the message.

Cate stared at the screen, her jaw hanging open. She read the words over and over again. *"Whatever Catherine is experiencing is a result of her own doing."* What did that mean? Cate had no hand in this. She did not enchant the necklace and she did not send herself the music box. She'd never seen it before it arrived earlier this week.

Tension pooled at Cate's temples as she struggled to make sense of the conversation. Perhaps she should return to the castle. She could run the conversation past Jack and see if he could offer any suggestions.

Gathering the dogs, Cate returned to the castle an hour before lunch. She wandered past the closed door to the west wing. Riley stopped at the

doors to give them a sniff. Cate's hand hovered on the handle. With a flick of her wrist, she twisted the knob and pulled the door open.

The two dogs raced down the wide hall, disappearing around the corner. Cate followed them, hurrying down the hall. By the time she rounded the corner, the dogs had already scurried out of the second hallway.

Cate raced down the length of it, pausing at the end to listen for any sounds of the dogs. She gulped in a breath of air, holding it while she strained for any trace of a sound. A small yip drew her attention.

Cate swung a left and rounded another corner. Both dogs stood at the gold doors she and Jack had entered yesterday. Riley pawed at them and whimpered.

"Is this where you're always off to?" Cate inquired. The little dog glanced up at her before he pawed at the door again, offering another groan.

Cate pushed open one gold door. Both dogs dashed into the oversized space. Cate followed behind them. She scanned the room's decorative elements with a suspicious eye. She'd drifted away from reality yesterday when they'd been in this room. Had that been coincidence or not?

Cate pulled her sweater tighter around her as she watched the dogs frolic in the space. Riley zoomed around the room in large circles, his lips pulled back in an opened-mouthed grin. Bailey studied the floor with interest, pawing at it occasionally when he caught sight of himself in the shiny reflection.

Suddenly, both dogs ceased what they were doing and stood at attention. They stared at one wall, their eyes fixed on the same spot. Both of them raced toward it, standing and waiting while they stared at what seemed to be nothing. Riley whined at the wall, tilting his head as though expecting something to happen.

Cate's breath caught in her throat. The tinkling music played in her mind. She inhaled a sweet, musky scent. The world around her seemed to fade. Colors melted together as a new image formed. A windowless space. Warm light glowed overhead.

Cate glanced up as her eyes tried to focus. Stars twinkled over her head. Was she outside? Her fingers found her collarbone then glided across the large gemstones of a necklace. Cate glanced down as she clutched at a heavy jewelry piece.

She blinked a few times as she tried to make sense of what she saw. Sapphire blue material covered the length of her body. She could have

sworn she'd put on a pink sweater earlier.

Cate shifted her gaze forward as she attempted to determine her location. Images swept past in a dizzying array. She worked to focus on what was in front of her. A blur of blue met her gaze.

Stepping toward it, Cate blinked hard and focused on what was in front of her. As the room's details filled in, she found a mirror facing her.

Clad in a sapphire blue ballgown, Cate stared into her own blue eyes. With her hair in an upswept style, she looked ready for an evening event. The large sapphires sparkled around her neck.

Another whiff of the musky smell passed under her nostrils. A shadow crossed behind her in the mirror. "I'm here," she murmured.

A muffled voice responded. She fought to understand the words. She spun to search behind her. The motion made her dizzy and the world began to go dark. "No!" she exclaimed. "I'm here!"

She experienced the sensation of falling, before her body jolted.

CHAPTER 20



Cate blinked her eyes a few times, finding one of the room's ornate columns filled her vision.

"Cate!" Jack's voice called. Her body shook again.

Cate twisted her head to face him. "I have to find my dress," she murmured.

"What? Cate! Snap out of it!"

"I have to be ready."

"Cate!" Jack shouted, giving her another firm shake.

Cate reached out to the pillar to steady herself. She fluttered her eyelashes as the room came back into focus. Nausea made her stomach somersault, and she gulped in air. With a deep breath, she glanced around. Jack stood in front of her, concern etched into his features.

"Cate?"

Cate grasped his forearm to steady herself. "I'm okay," she said, still gulping in breaths. "What happened?"

"I think I should be asking you that."

"After my walk with the dogs, I came here to explore. I don't know what happened after I got into this room." She furrowed her brow in concentration. "The dogs were playing, then suddenly, something caught their attention. And after that, everything went black."

"You don't remember anything else?"

"No, nothing."

"When I came in, I found you staring at this column."

Cate glanced at the pillar next to her. "This wasn't where I was when the dogs reacted to whatever they heard or saw."

"Where were you?"

Cate pointed to a spot several steps away. "Over there."

"Okay, so you were wandering again."

"But why here? Does this pillar have any meaning, or did I run into it or what?"

"I'm not sure," Jack said, studying it. He ran his hand along it in several places before he shrugged. "We should get back for lunch before Molly wonders where we are. We can discuss this over our meal."

Cate nodded and called the dogs to follow them. With a last wistful glance at the wall, Riley and Bailey followed them from the room.

Cate remained silent for most of the walk back to the library. Molly delivered lunch for her, and Jack and she settled into her armchair with the warm soup.

"Still feeling wonky?" Jack inquired.

"No, just wondering what is happening to me."

Jack pulled his lips to the side in a half-frown. "I'm not sure, but it doesn't seem we can prevent it, outside of time traveling." He twisted to face the camera that still sat on the library shelf. "But we can monitor it."

Cate followed his gaze, understanding dawning on her. "We can put the camera cube in the new location I seem to be so fascinated with."

"Aye, *and* I'll put the app on my phone so I will be alerted if you wander there. We can also use the collar cam. You probably should wear it at all times, and I should have access to the feed."

Cate rolled her eyes and slumped her shoulders at the suggestion. "Reduced to wearing a collar cam. What has my life become?"

"Well, if there's no stopping you from prowling around the castle, at least we'll try to learn something from it."

Cate sighed. "I don't disagree. I just... feel odd wearing the doggy cam so you can keep an eye on me like a wayward child."

"Maybe we'll solve the case and be done with this, and you can return to being an adult," Jack said with a wink.

They sat for another moment in silence before Cate spoke again. "What I can't understand is what is drawing the dogs there?"

"Maybe there's a can of Alpo hidden behind the wall," Jack said.

“That would explain it, but fails to explain my obsession with the same space.”

“Do you like Alpo?”

“Not particularly,” Cate answered. “Though in a pinch...”

Jack grimaced and Cate chuckled. “I’m only kidding,” she said.

“Good thing. I thought you were serious. Given your proclivities toward cereal and peanut butter sandwiches, I worried you may have tried it for a quick meal.”

“Going back to the subject at hand, Riley’s extremely excited by whatever is there. Same with Bailey.”

“Scent of another dog? Animal?”

Cate shook her head. “No, he acts like...”

“Like what?” Jack prodded as her voice trailed off.

“Like he does when he sees me or you after we’ve been gone. Whatever is there, Riley’s extremely happy about it.”

“I hope we find out soon.”

“I updated Damien on the situation earlier.”

“Oh? Did he have any insight?”

“Nothing that I could make heads or tails out of. His comments bordered on bizarre.”

“No surprise there,” Jack said with a chuckle. “Their lives are bizarre.”

“Same thing I said. Wait, let me read you a few of his statements. Maybe you’ll be able to decipher some meaning.”

Jack nodded as Cate tapped around on her phone to pull up the messages. “Did he manage to make you feel any less anxious about what’s happening to you?”

“If anything I feel more anxious,” Cate said.

Jack winced. “Now, I can’t wait to hear what he had to say.”

“First, he says Duke Northcott denied any involvement, which blew my mind to begin with, because I’m still trying to figure out how they’re having casual conversations with this man when Celine couldn’t stand the sight of him last time we saw them together.”

“They asked him?”

Cate shrugged. “He said Celine did and his response was... wait, let me find it. Here. *‘Whatever Catherine is experiencing is a result of her own doing’.*”

Jack's eyes went wide, and his jaw dropped open. "What? What the heck does that mean?"

Cate shrugged again. "First of all, how is this your own doing? Second, why are they discussing it with him? And how..." Jack massaged his temples. "Never mind. I'm not sure I'll ever figure those people out."

"That's only the first cryptic thing. Not only is this my own doing, but when I mentioned what happens to me, specifically the zombie walking and the strange statements I've made, he answered that it was pretty common."

Jack's shocked expression failed to fade with the latest revelation. Instead, his eyes darted around the room as though he searched for the meaning of the words.

"Okay, well, I suppose we could take that as a good thing."

"While I understand what you're saying, he then went on to ask that I pass along his number to you, and if you can't pull me out of one of my trances to text him and Michael right away."

"That sounds scary."

"Same thing I thought. That was after I asked him if I could disappear into my own mind. He didn't say yes, but he didn't say no either."

"You've really done it this time, Cate," Jack said, with a shake of his head. "And to think less than a year ago I thought my biggest issues were going to be time travel."

"I haven't done anything! Contrary to Duke Northcott's accusation, I did not do this to myself!"

"That guy has some nerve, huh? What an odd thing to say. Then again, I'm still shocked they went and asked him about it. Perhaps he was, too, and just lied to cover his tracks."

"I'm having a hard time imagining a man like Duke Northcott shocked about anything. He seems like the type of guy who always has the upper hand. What I can't figure out is why he'd do this to me? I have no importance in the grand scheme of things. Why?"

"Perhaps you're more important than you think, Lady Cate. You do own a castle that allows for time travel."

"True."

"Or perhaps he enjoyed tormenting humans. Maybe it's a favorite pastime."

Cate grimaced at the words.

“Sorry,” Jack said. “Maybe once we get to the bottom of what’s happening to you, we’ll know the why.”

They finished the last scraps of their lunch. “Well, what do you want to do first? Set up my child monitoring system or go to 1942?”

“Decisions, decisions. Let’s get the time travel out of the way and set it up when we get back. I don’t want to take a chance on you disappearing into your mind again when we go back to that room.”

Cate nodded. “Sounds like a plan.” She shook her head as she stood from the chair.

“What?”

“I feel like I’m on the verge of remembering something and I just can’t get there. My mind won’t make the last connection. I remember nothing that happens to me during those blackouts, but I feel like I’m so close to remembering something.”

“Maybe it’ll come to you when you least expect it.”

“Maybe. Well, I’ll meet you in the hall as soon as I’m ready.”

“See you then!”

They parted ways to change for their trip. As Cate entered her bedroom, her gaze fell upon the music box. It stood silent despite its little lid being open. Cate approached the small item and studied it. She lifted it in her hands and turned the winding key. Music filled the air.

The tinkling sound eased the tension from her temples. She smiled down at the little item as she set it down on her nightstand.

She slipped off her shoes and padded into her bathroom to ready for the trip. Her mind relaxed as the music floated through the air. She considered the task ahead of her. Would they learn anything today about the woman they suspected had been buried in the side garden?

They had a slim window in which to gather information. Cate hoped they could determine what happened. A piece of her wondered if they could prevent it. Would it change history? Would solving the murder be enough? If faced with the opportunity, could Cate let a woman be murdered and secretly buried without attempting to help her?

Questions blazed through Cate’s mind as she pulled on her dark-colored dress. She stepped into her bedroom and pulled on her retro-style shoes. Cate stood and her gaze fell to the jewelry box. She crossed to it and pulled open the bottom drawer.

Cate pursed her lips as she stared down. Limned against the black velvet, the stunning sapphire necklace sparkled in the light.

“So, that’s where you’ve been,” Cate murmured as she caressed the item. Something in the large center stone caught her eye, and she leaned closer to study it.

Her mind sorted through images until it settled on one: a room with soft, twinkling stars casting a warm glow overhead. Mirrored panels were set between tall decorative pillars. A colorful floor painted the space with warm-colored images of unicorns sailing with the clouds. The music played behind her, and she experienced the sensation of twirling.

Cate blinked rapidly as the image faded away. The sapphire settled back to its dazzling blue color. She swallowed hard as she straightened and slid the drawer closed.

“Where is that room?” she whispered to herself.

A knock sounded at the doors to her suite. Cate grabbed her purse and hurried from the bedroom. Another mystery awaited.

She pulled the doors open to find Jack waiting in his 1940s-style suit. Two suitcases, packed earlier by Cate, sat just inside the door. Jack grabbed hold of them both. The grin on his face faltered as he glanced over her and into her bedroom. “Is that thing still playing?”

Cate gave him a sheepish glance. “I wound it.”

Jack closed his eyes for a moment before responding.

“Before you say anything,” Cate rushed to say, “I just...”

“Couldn’t help it,” Jack finished for her. “I know, Lady Cate. I know. If that little bugger can find its way back to you no matter where we put it, I can imagine we’re fighting a losing battle.”

“That’s not all,” Cate said, as she stepped into the hall with him, grabbing one suitcase. “The necklace is back, too.”

Jack’s shoulders slumped at the admission as Cate continued. “Safely tucked in the jewelry armoire where I’ve always kept it.”

“I suppose at least you’re still normal. Thank heavens for small mercies.”

“There’s still more,” Cate said with a wrinkled nose.

CHAPTER 21



Jack side-eyed her with wide eyes.
“On an impulse, I opened the drawer and found the necklace. I thought I saw something in the large sapphire in the center. When I inspected it, an image of a room formed in my mind.” Cate did her best to describe it. “Do you know of anywhere in the castle like that?”

Jack shook his head as he rubbed his chin with his free hand. “No, it doesn’t ring any bells.”

Cate sighed as they descended the stairs. “I thought if we could find it, maybe we could discover more about what’s going on.”

“I hate to say this, Lady Cate,” Jack said, as Cate pulled on the sconce to open the secret passage. “But what if...”

“Yeah?” Cate asked, stepping into the darkened passage.

“What if it’s a room only in your mind?”

Cate sighed as the darkness closed in around them when Jack pushed the panel shut. “I suppose if that’s the case, you’d better keep Damien’s number handy.”

Jack flicked on his flashlight and reached out to squeeze Cate’s arm. “Let’s hope it’s not,” he said. “And now, let’s get to 1942 and solve our other mystery.”

Cate and Jack activated the timepiece and slipped back to another era. Cate smiled at Jack, happy to leave the problems of the present time behind.

“Feel better?” Jack asked, as the timepiece finished its cycle, indicated by the second-hand crawling around the face.

“I didn’t feel that bad before, honestly,” Cate admitted. “Just a little... off.” They followed the passageway toward the crypt at the other end.

“Maybe the curse you hexed yourself with is wearing off.”

Cate rolled her eyes. “How ridiculous,” she said. “How could I be the source of this?”

“You spent a good amount of time with Duke Northcott,” Jack began.

“Don’t remind me,” Cate groaned.

“Were there any clues about this? Anything he said that could help us?”

“No,” Cate said, flinging her arms out then letting them slap her thighs. “I’ve been over and over the conversations we had. I can’t imagine why he’d waste time on me, to be honest.”

“He seemed awfully interested in you in the 1700s.”

“According to everyone else involved, he merely wanted to create a ruckus to draw Celine’s attention to him.”

“Perhaps he’s trying that angle again?”

“Why use me an ocean away? Why not Damien or Michael?” Cate shook her head. “It doesn’t make any sense.”

“None of this does, I agree.”

“The only thing that sticks in my head is when he told me to keep the necklace to remember him. It’s so odd. But it really doesn’t help.”

They reached the end of the passage and Jack opened the panel leading to the crypt. “The entire situation is odd. He’s a warlock. That’s more than odd. He kidnapped you for some unknown reason. Odd. He gave you a necklace likely worth thousands of pounds to remember what must have been the worst experience of your life. Only one word for it, Lady Cate: odd.”

“You know what else is odd,” Cate said as they exited the crypt into the sunny September day. “The fact that I can’t find any information about this intelligence post.”

“Maybe all these people are time traveling warlocks,” Jack suggested as they walked the path toward the castle. “And that’s why there’s no information on them.”

“I can’t believe I’m about to say this, but you make a point.”

“Cate, I was only joking.”

“I know, but that’s a fantastic way to check this out from another angle. I can ask for some names of those who work there and track them back

through the records. Thanks, Jack! I'll work on that when we get back. Gosh, I hope I find something! This could be the key we're looking for!"

"Gosh, I hope we don't run into Pap. I've been sweating bullets about traveling to this time period ever since that first day."

"We avoided him once already, let's hope our luck holds out. And speaking of, maybe we should ask him about the intelligence base. He obviously knew about it."

"He was only five. He couldn't have known much."

"He knew enough to frighten you into not wanting to run into him again."

"Good point. I'll ask him when we get back. That'll be my contribution to the research."

"Invite him to dinner tonight," Cate said. "We can ask the whole group."

"Aye, that sounds like a good plan."

"Okay, one thing settled. Now, let's work on finding out who ended up in the side garden."

They approached the castle. Cate handed her bag off to Jack and used the door knocker. Smithers opened the door within moments.

"Mr. and Mrs. MacKenzie," he said with a smile. "Come in. Lord MacKenzie told me to expect you. Oh, please, sir, allow me to take the bags."

"I can..." Jack began as the man wrestled the bags from his grip.

"No trouble at all, sir. I shall inform Lord MacKenzie of your arrival and then place these in your suite. Lord MacKenzie informs me you stayed there in the past. I trust you can find your way there when the time is appropriate?" He phrased the last statement as a question.

"We can, thank you," Cate said, as she strolled into the sitting room.

"At least he was friendlier today," Jack said as he paced around the room.

"I thought you were going to fight him on the bags."

Jack offered a chuckle as their conversation was interrupted by Rory's arrival. "There you are!" the man said with a grin. "I wondered all night if I'd dreamt you. I'm so pleased you have returned. Has Smithers handled your things?"

"Yes, he took the bags up. Thank you," Cate said.

“I told him to inform Amelia of your arrival. I’m certain she’ll want to see you. She arrived just before lunch.”

“I’m looking forward to seeing her again, too,” Cate said, her stomach flip-flopping at the prospect. Her great-grandmother would now be almost twenty years older, while Cate remained almost the same age. “It’s a shame we won’t be able to see Anne.”

“Oh, yes, she’ll be so sore when she finds she’s missed you. I’m quite surprised, actually, Amelia asked to visit and didn’t elect to travel to Anne’s parents’ country home.”

“Oh?” Jack inquired, prodding for more information

“Mmm, something about being in the area and wanting to show the property to her traveling companion.” Rory waved his hands in the air. “In any case, I’m pleased to have her here. The castle is far too quiet with just Oliver and me.”

A woman arrived in the open doorway to the foyer. Cate recognized her great-grandmother immediately. Streaks of gray at her temples and a few added wrinkles changed her appearance slightly from the last time Cate had seen her.

“Cate! Jack!” Amelia said, a smile lighting up her face.

“Amelia!” Cate said as the woman rushed toward her and pulled her into an embrace. She pushed away, holding out Cate’s arms and giving her a once over.

“My goodness, you look splendid. I’d swear you haven’t aged a day, Cate,” Amelia said before pulling Jack into a hug.

“Oh, it’s been more than a day,” Cate said with a nervous chuckle.

“And you, you handsome devil,” Amelia said to Jack. “You two must be living the right kind of lives!”

Smithers appeared at the doorway.

“Tea,” Rory requested, before motioning for everyone to take their seats.

Jack issued a nervous glance toward Cate. They’d pulled off their subterfuge for now. Amelia chalked up their youthful appearances to a trick of time.

“How lovely for us all to be together again,” Amelia said. “Such a shame Anne couldn’t be here.”

“Mmm, I said the same,” Cate said, as she sat across from the woman. “Rory tells us you’re here to show someone the estate?” She hoped the

question wasn't too obvious, but she desperately needed information quickly.

"Oh, yes, Ruth Harper. She's a traveling companion of mine. Lucas insisted I have one, what with the war going on. He works in the Ministry of Defense now, you know. And he absolutely detested the idea of me traveling alone, though I had to get out of London."

"Oh, I hadn't realized Lucas did that type of work. And I agree, a smart move to leave London," Cate said.

"Whereabouts are you now, Jack? Still in land?" Rory questioned.

"Oh yes," Jack answered. "Though I suppose in a bit of a lull given the current state of affairs." Cate offered him a smile and a nod as he gave her a sideways glance to check his story.

"Oh, I can imagine. How dreadful this all is," Rory said, wringing his hands.

Smithers arrived with the tea and Rory busied himself playing host. Cate attempted to steer the conversation back to Amelia's traveling companion.

"Has Ruth been with you long?" Cate inquired.

"No, only a few months," Amelia said. "She's quite a smart girl, very personable. I'm very much enjoying working with her."

"Working with her?" Cate questioned.

"You know, traveling and such. We get on well and so on. You'd quite like her, Cate."

"I'm certain I would. I'd love to meet her."

"We'll have to arrange it."

"Ask her to join us for dinner tonight, Amelia," Rory said. Cate's pulse quickened as she awaited Amelia's answer.

"Oh, shouldn't we keep it family?"

Rory shook his head as he responded. "Some of the wonderful folks from the base will be joining us. The more the merrier."

"Oh! How lovely. I shall definitely invite her then."

Conversation turned to their activities over the years. Cate's grandfather, Amelia's son, Charles, returned to a boarding school in the English countryside for the term. He'd finish his final year there before going on to university.

Cate and Jack made up a few interesting tidbits about travel to fill in gaps in the conversation. The party broke up in the mid-afternoon with

promises to continue their discussions over dinner.

Cate and Jack retreated to their bedroom suite. Jack tossed himself onto the chaise and scrubbed his face.

“Thank heavens Amelia thinks we’ve just got good genes,” he said.

Cate paced the length of the room, lost in her thoughts.

Jack propped himself up on his elbows. “Cate? You haven’t gone funny on me, have you?”

“No,” she said as she twirled around to amble in the opposite direction.

Jack raised his eyebrows as she spun to face him again. “Anything you’d like to share?”

Cate puckered her lips. “Amelia said she enjoyed working with Ruth.”

“So?”

“Why phrase it that way? That was odd.”

“You’re reading into things. I mean, the girl is literally an employee. She just accompanies Amelia wherever she goes for pay. So it’s not that odd of a phrase.”

Cate’s mind continued to churn. “Even if you don’t think the phrase is odd, think about the timing. Amelia loves working with her. And in two days she’ll leave for another position. Something doesn’t add up here.”

“Amelia likes working with Ruth. We don’t know Ruth likes working for Amelia.”

Cate sighed. “I guess. I can’t wait to meet her. I’m going to try to pry some information from her so I can track her down.”

“Go get ‘em, tiger,” Jack said with a grin.

Cate glanced out of the window. “Want to take a walk?”

“I was comfy where I was,” Jack protested.

“Okay, I’ll leave you lounging. I’m going to poke around the intelligence tent.” Cate strode to the door with a determined step.

“Are you serious?” Jack asked, bouncing up from lounging to sitting.

“Yes. Maybe I can find something out that will further my research.”

“Wait, wait,” Jack said, groaning as he pulled himself up to standing. “I’ll come with you.”

“You don’t have to. I’ll be perfectly fine.”

“Famous last words. The last time I let you out of my sight on one of these trips a warlock kidnapped you.”

“Let’s hope that doesn’t happen again,” Cate groaned, as she pulled the door open.

“I’m going to hedge my bet,” Jack answered her.

Cate and Jack strolled through the halls and wandered into the bright sunshine outside. As they rounded a corner of the castle, a small boy leapt from a tree across the property.

“Oh, no,” Jack groaned. “Hurry up before he spots us.”

Cate couldn’t help but chuckle. “Too late,” she said, as the little boy’s face scrunched up as he shielded his eyes and glared at the pair of them. He raced up the hill toward them.

“Great! I should have stayed behind.”

Cate patted Jack’s arm. “Let me do the talking.”

The little boy skidded to a stop in front of them and poked a finger toward them. “You two again, eh?”

CHAPTER 22



Cate winced at the little boy in front of them, holding up her hands. “Guilty.”

Stanley raised his eyebrows. “Have you come to join the others at the base?”

“That’s where we’re headed right now.”

“Oh, lollygagging, huh?”

“What?” Cate inquired with a small laugh.

“You don’t seem to be in a hurry. Haven’t you got work to do? My Da says they’re having a terrible time with the codes. And another convoy was attacked as a result.”

“That’s terrible. I’m not certain we’ll be of much assistance. We’re actually visiting Jack’s cousin, Lord MacKenzie.”

“Oh. I didn’t realize you were MacKenzies.”

Cate smiled and nodded. “Yes, we are.”

Stanley eyed Jack head to toe. “You don’t look like one,” he said. “In fact, you remind me of my Da.”

Jack chuckled nervously. “You don’t say, laddie.”

Stanley stood firm in his words. He crossed his arms and stared at Jack again. Suddenly, his expression changed. “Got to go!” he shouted. With a twirl, he was gone, racing down to the tree and scampering up into its limbs.

“I saw that!” a Scottish accent said behind them.

Cate and Jack spun to find Lachlan Reid, Stanley's father, and Jack's great-grandfather, striding down the path toward them.

"Jack and Cate," he said, recognizing them. "Rory told me you were here. Wonderful to see you again."

"Thanks," Cate said with a grin as Jack shook Lachlan's hand.

"I see you've met Stanley." He pointed to the tree.

"Aye, we did."

"I hope he hasn't been too much of a bother. He can be a little prickly."

"I'm used to it," Jack said.

"Still irascible in your time, is he?"

"Oh, you know it," Jack said with a chuckle.

"Well, I won't interrupt your walk. Hope to see you again, though."

With a wave, Lachlan strode toward the tree, leaving Jack and Cate to continue their walk to the tent.

They overheard him demanding Stanley come down from the branch he perched on and that he hoped he hadn't been bothering the MacKenzies.

"I was not!" they heard the little boy shout as he shimmied down the tree.

Cate couldn't hold in a giggle. "He really is a character," she noted as they approached the canvas hut.

"You'd almost suspect he's a MacKenzie with that cheek," Jack said, with a shake of his head.

"Very funny, Jack. We're not that cheeky of a bunch."

"Oh, really?" Jack questioned playfully. "Tell me that again when we're in our own century. It's thanks to you cheeky buggers that we're able to do this, after all. Jamie was thoroughly against it if you recall."

"And it's a good thing we can," Cate said. "Look at all the good we've done!"

"Yeah, I'm just waiting for the moment something terrible happens."

"Don't be a negative Nellie," Cate warned, as they closed the gap and arrived at the tent. Cate pushed through into the interior, blinking as her eyes adjusted from the bright sunshine to the dim light inside.

A few people worked away at the tables; others bustled around the make-shift room. A blonde man passed them, slowing his step and staring at them.

"Can I help you?" he asked in a British accent.

“Hi,” Cate said. “Maybe. I’m Cate MacKenzie and this is my husband, Jack.” Jack waved and nodded. “We’re cousins of Lord MacKenzie. He showed us the base yesterday. And I was wondering if anyone could provide us with more information.”

“Oh,” the man said, his brow wrinkling as he scratched his head, “well, I’m afraid there isn’t much information I can share. It’s all classified, you see.”

“I don’t mean the messages, but just some information about how you came to be here.”

“Oh, right. Well, I suppose I can share that much. Actually, we come from all over. I’m from Kent. My parents emigrated from Germany when I was six. So, I grew up speaking German. And I’m very good at pattern detection. At least I’d like to think so.” The man gave an awkward laugh.

“How interesting,” Cate said. “So, are you a mathematician?”

“Yes, I was recruited out of a college by the Defense Ministry at the start of the war. Initially, I was based in London, however, with the blitz, several of us were moved.”

“So, all of you came from London originally?”

“No, just Victor and me. I’m Hans, by the way. Hans Schmidt.”

“Nice to meet you, Hans,” Cate said. “It must be difficult moving here and working with a new group.”

“It can be, though everyone here is quite professional. A large portion of our group went to Bletchley Park. We were split in the event that something should happen. A sort of a ‘don’t put all of your eggs in one basket’ approach.”

“I see. Very smart.”

Hans smiled and nodded. “Well, we won’t keep you from your work any longer,” Cate said. “Thank you so much for explaining everything.”

“You’re very welcome,” Hans said with a nod of his head. He strode away, taking a seat at the table and shuffling through several papers.

Jack and Cate exited into the bright sunshine. “Well, did you learn what you wanted to?” Jack inquired.

“Hans didn’t give me much to go on, but he did say some of them came from London.”

“How does that help?”

Cate shrugged. “Maybe it doesn’t, though we do have one name and half of another. Perhaps I can track information on Hans and use it to link to

Ruth in some way.”

“Do you believe they’re connected?”

“It’s a long shot, but we have to start somewhere. And if Ruth disappeared and ended up murdered and buried in the garden, someone here killed her. So, someone is connected to her.”

“Could have been a crime of opportunity,” Jack suggested.

“As in a random person here is a killer and kills Ruth for no reason?”

“Sure. She’s in the wrong place at the wrong time, maybe.”

Cate considered it, then shook her head. “It doesn’t add up. There has to be a motive beyond it.”

“Maybe she saw or heard something she shouldn’t.”

“Okay, so the killer has no prior connection to Ruth, but she overhears or sees something she shouldn’t and he…”

“Or she,” Jack added.

“Right, he or she strikes, kills Ruth and buries her in the garden.”

“The garden burial suggests it wasn’t pre-planned.”

“I agree. It suggests the killer acted in haste and dumped the body in the most readily available space. It wouldn’t be questioned because there’s planting being done there.”

“So now that I’ve blown your tenuous chance at tracking down information to bits, what would you like to do?”

“You haven’t blown it to bits,” Cate said with a chuckle. “I can still use the information Hans gave me to try to ferret out a clue as to what Ruth may or may not have heard.”

They slipped back inside the castle. “And let’s hope we gather even more information at dinner tonight. Then, I can track down all the leads when we get back.”

“Wait for dinner, then,” Jack concluded from Cate’s statements.

“Right,” she said with a nod, as they threaded through the halls and back to their suite.

Cate spent the short time before the meal pacing the floor. “It’s amazing how reliant we’ve become on the internet,” she lamented as she made her twelfth trek across the floor. “I feel practically helpless here.”

“What did they do in a time before Google?” Jack asked.

“It was called a library, I think,” Cate joked.

“I suppose we could have gone into town to the library. I wonder if there’s a 1942 version of Mrs. Campbell there, waiting to spring a random

party on an unsuspecting castle owner.” Jack rubbed his chin in faux thought.

“There may be, in which case we’d draw too much attention. Plus, we don’t have enough time before dinner.” Cate checked the clock on the mantle. “I suppose we should be getting ready, in fact.”

After a change of clothes, Jack and Cate made their way to the sitting room, finding Amelia there with a woman. Her dirty blonde hair was pulled back in a neat bun. Large eyes and red lips were set in a round face. Cate pegged her to be in her mid-thirties.

“Jack, Cate! I hope the rest of your afternoon went well,” Amelia said.

“It did,” Cate answered, hoping she wasn’t too obvious when eyeing Ruth.

“This is my traveling companion, Ruth Harper. Ruth, this is Jack and Cate MacKenzie, distant cousins of Rory’s.”

“How lovely to meet you both,” Ruth said.

Rory entered the room moments later, followed by Rita Haverford, Hans, and a tall, well-muscled, dark-haired man. Rory introduced the unknown man as Victor Richard. Cate assumed he was the Victor mentioned earlier by Hans when they’d visited the intelligence hut.

As Rory introduced Hans, Cate said, “Nice to see you again.”

“Oh, I hadn’t realized you two knew each other,” Rory said.

“We met earlier this afternoon,” Cate explained. “Hans was kind enough to tell us more about the formation of the base.”

Hans smiled broadly at her. “Well, I’m afraid I wasn’t very much help, but I’m glad to know I provided you with some information.”

After a few more minutes of small talk, they shuffled into the dining room. “We’re evenly split between genders, so seating should be simple,” Rory said. “Anne would be so proud of me.”

“I shall be sure to inform her of your balanced dinner prowess when I see her next,” Amelia said as they sat down.

Cate found herself sandwiched between Hans and Victor. Jack, across the table from her, sat between Amelia and Rita. Cate flashed Jack an “oh well” look as they both found themselves separated from Ruth.

Cate began her pre-meal discussion with Hans. “Hello, again, Mrs. MacKenzie,” he said with a shy smile. “I do hope you are enjoying your stay at the castle.”

“Yes, I am. And what about you. You said you’re from London originally?”

“Oh, no, Kent.”

“Oh, right. Yes, your initial base was in London.”

“Yes, that’s right.”

“This must be quite a change for you then.”

“Oh, quite. None of the conveniences of the modern city, though also none of the drawbacks.”

“So, you’re enjoying the quiet countryside?”

“Well, it’s quieter. We still have the occasional flyovers. In fact, there was a dog fight nearby recently.” The man pulled his lips into a thin line. “I’m sorry,” he said, after a moment, “bad memories from London.”

Cate offered him a consoling glance. “Forgive me for bringing it up. We don’t have to discuss it further.”

He twisted the corners of his mouth into a tight smile, though a pained expression still shined through his features. Amelia turned toward Jack for a conversation, and Cate took the opportunity to end her awkward discussion with Hans and turn her attention to Victor.

“Hello, I’m Cate.”

“Lovely to meet one of Lord MacKenzie’s relatives. The poor man has been overrun by us of late, I’m afraid.”

“I’m sure he doesn’t mind,” Cate said. “The work you’re doing is so vital. I know Lord MacKenzie is very pleased to do anything to help the war effort. So, where are you from originally? Hans said you came from the London office. Was London also your home?”

“No, I’m originally from Leeds. Born and bred.”

“Oh!” Cate furrowed her brow in mock confusion. “So, no German connection?”

“Heavens no!” Victor exclaimed with a chuckle.

“So, how is it that you can decipher the German missives. Or am I being short-sighted in terms of how the intelligence works?”

“Not at all. I took three years of German in my uni days.”

“I see. Well, that explains it. And are you also a mathematician?”

“Yes, with a concentration in the study of codes.”

“And Hans said you worked together in London?”

“Yes, we did. We were both in the London office since the start of the war until we moved here. Our building was destroyed in a blast.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry to hear that.”

Another awkward end of the conversation as Smithers entered with a footman and the first course. Cate glanced across the table, her eyes widening at the scene. Rita leaned indecently close to Jack. With her elbow propped on the table, she rested her chin in her hand, her head cocked flirtatiously. She batted her eyelashes at him as she lifted a shoulder and offered him a pout, letting her free hand fall onto his forearm.

Cate narrowed her eyes at the woman. Jack glanced at Cate. She offered him an unimpressed glance. Jack offered her a “what?” expression and a shrug. Cate puckered her lips and shook her head.

“Oh, please tell Mrs. Bakewell the soup smells divine,” Rory said.

Cate softened her expression and smiled at Rory. Perhaps now the conversation could include the whole table and she’d learn more about Ruth. She was certain Jack didn’t learn much from Rita beyond how quickly the woman could flutter her eyelashes.

At the first break in the conversation, Cate interjected a question for Amelia. “Have you been traveling very much, Amelia?”

“Mmm, quite a bit, yes.”

Cate found it odd given the current state of affairs. Usually, in wartime, activities were quelled. “And do you enjoy the traveling, Ruth?” Cate inquired.

“I do, yes. I’ve always been a bit of a rolling stone, I suppose. So the travel suits me.”

Cate smiled at her. “And where are you from originally?”

“Manchester,” Ruth said, without skipping a beat.

“Are your parents still there?”

“No. They both passed away when I was nineteen.”

“Oh, what a shame. Both my parents passed when I was young as well.”

Ruth offered her a polite smile. Cate narrowed her eyes at the reaction. Given that information, she thought there would have been a reaction of kindredness between them.

“No other family?” Cate pressed.

“One brother. His plane went down over Germany last year, though.”

“Oh, how tragic. I’m so sorry,” Cate said. She returned to sipping at her soup. Her conversations were winding up awkward at every turn. At this rate, she’d never discover any information.

She allowed the rest of the dinner conversation to be led by Rory and Amelia. Cate detected no awkwardness between Amelia and Ruth that would suggest the woman would suddenly leave her position. Amelia had told the reporter she left for a better job. What position would be “better,” particularly when she’d indicated her love for travel?

Cate mulled it over as the conversation continued around her. The party broke up early, with the codebreakers turning in for a long day of work the following day. Cate and Jack chatted with Amelia and Rory for another few moments before excusing themselves for an evening walk.

They returned to the crypt, entered the secret passage, and in short order were back in their own time period.

“Meet in the library as usual?” Jack asked, as they took the back stairs up to the bedrooms to change.

“Sure,” Cate said.

Jack narrowed his eyes at her curt response as they wound through the halls. “You feeling okay?”

“I’m fine,” Cate said, attempting to keep her annoyance in check. “See you soon.”

Cate slipped into her bedroom, making her way straight to the music box. She wound it and set it on the nightstand to play as she changed back into normal clothes. The music soothed her frayed nerves.

Her conversations had been a bust. She hoped whatever small details she’d gleaned could lead them to a breakthrough, though she didn’t hold out much hope. She wondered if Jack had learned anything. Her eyes narrowed, and she frowned as she recalled buxom blonde Rita gushing over him at the dinner table. The nerve of the woman to openly flirt with someone else’s husband. She reminded herself she and Jack weren’t married, though Rita wasn’t aware of that fact.

Perhaps they could solicit some information this evening at the staff dinner. As she finished dressing, Cate closed her eyes and let the music melt away any tension. Her odd statement to Jack was proving true. She did love the music box.

Reluctantly, she left the tinkling object behind and made her way to the library. She found Jack wrestling with Riley over a toy, while Bailey gnawed on the ear of a stuffed moose.

Cate collected a notebook and pen before collapsing into her armchair. She began jotting notes.

“This looks promising,” Jack said.

“I’m just jotting down names and the few bits of information I got from them to help me find information.” She finished her list and glanced at Jack. “Did you happen to get any information from Rita, or was it all batting eyelashes and rubbing your forearm?”

An amused expression crossed Jack’s features. “Why, Lady Cate, whatever are you talking about?”

“I’m talking about Rita Haverford shamelessly flirting with a married man.”

“I wouldn’t call it flirting.”

Cate screwed up her face. “What would you call it?”

“She seems very friendly.”

“I’ll say.”

“I’m starting to believe you’re jealous, Lady Cate.”

“I just don’t like the type of woman who would flirt with another woman’s husband. Especially when the woman is right there!”

“Oh, right.”

“Look who’s talking. I still haven’t heard the end of calling Grayson Buckley handsome.”

“Nor of your budding relationship with a certain shipbuilder of yore turned modern-day computer scientist.”

“Anyway,” Cate said, getting the conversation back on track, “did you learn anything from blonde and buxom?”

“Yes. She told me how much she enjoys long walks on the beach and roses.”

“You’re kidding?”

Jack chuckled. “Yes, I am. She wasn’t that obvious.”

“I should hope not!”

“And to answer your question, no. I did not find out much from Ms. Rita Haverford. She had a way of steering the conversation back to me at every turn.”

“And neither of us were sitting near Ruth, so we couldn’t grill her.”

“I’ll try tomorrow if she’s at dinner. And I’ll keep away from Rita before she ruins our marriage.” Jack made a frightened face.

“I’m certain Anne would feel the same way if she saw the looks Rita gives Rory.”

“Really?” Jack questioned.

“You didn’t notice her perk up yesterday when we went to the tent? That demure smile she gave him? And with her behavior earlier, I’d say she does this a lot.”

“Maybe she’s just a flirt.”

Cate tapped her pencil against the notepad. “Well, this isn’t much to go on, but I suppose it’s a start. I’ll have to work fast, though, we don’t have much time.”

“Maybe we’ll learn more tonight at dinner.”

“That’s my sincere hope.”

“Until then, let’s set up the cameras for later.”

“Good idea.”

They spent the remaining time before dinner adding the camera apps to Jack’s phone and testing them. Jack also placed the camera from the library in the large room the dogs and Cate continued to frequent, suggesting Cate stay away from the space for the time being.

With the collar cam attached to a bracelet, they were set to monitor any of Cate’s movements overnight.

As they finished the tasks, a knock sounded at the door. Cate ushered a waiting Stanley Reid into the foyer.

“Hello there, lassie,” he said, as he removed his hat.

“Hi, Mr. Reid. I’m so glad you could make it.”

“I’ll never turn down Emily’s cooking,” Stanley said. “And I hear the whippersnapper from across the pond isn’t so bad at it either.”

“Molly is a fantastic cook and baker,” Cate agreed.

“We should head down,” Jack said.

“Oh? I thought I was early,” Stanley said.

“I’m hungry, though,” Jack answered.

“Okay, okay. Though I doubt you’ll hurry Emily along if she’s not ready.”

“I can try,” Jack said.

“And how are you feeling, lassie?” Stanley inquired of Cate. “Jackie said you were having some issues?”

“Oh, I’m okay. Just experiencing a few strange incidents stemming from the necklace I returned with from 1792.”

“From that odd Duke fellow?”

“Yes,” Cate said, as they descended the stairs.

“Well, I hope you sort it out soon. And keep me in the loop, especially if I can be of any help in figuring things out. I love a good mystery.”

“What’s a mystery?” Emily said as they entered.

Stanley winced and shot Cate an apologetic glance.

“An intelligence base at Dunhaven Castle in World War II,” Cate answered, covering their conversation.

Mrs. Fraser stopped in her tracks, her brow furrowing. “Well, that was before my time, but I cannae say I’ve ever heard of it.”

Mr. Fraser concurred. “Aye, me neither.”

“I’ve come across a reference to one,” Cate mentioned. “It would have been during Rory’s time. But Mrs. Campbell hadn’t heard of it either.”

“Well, there’s your answer, Lady Cate. If the busybody herself doesn’t have the scoop, no one does,” Mrs. Fraser said with a nod, setting a salad on the table and greeting Stanley.

“How about you, Pap?” Jack said. “You go back that far. You remember an intelligence base here at the castle?”

Stanley wrinkled his face in thought. “You know, for the longest time as a child, I thought there was. But my Da said no.”

Cate and Jack shared a glance. Young Stanley Reid had most certainly been aware of the intelligence base. They’d discussed it.

Stanley chuckled for a moment before he continued. “I must have made up a fantastical story about that. Years later, well after the war, I asked my father about it. ‘There was no intelligence base here, you daft bugger,’ he said to me.

“And I said, ‘Yes, of course, there was. In a big tent behind the castle.’” Stanley chuckled again. “He said my little mind was making up stories. For the longest time, I really believed Dunhaven was the center of intelligence for the Crown. Ah, the stories a young laddie will make up to entertain himself.”

Cate’s mind processed the information. She smiled at Stanley as the conversation turned to another subject. Why had Lachlan lied to Stanley? As a child of only five, his memory may be hazy enough to pull it off, but Cate was well aware of its existence. And of Lachlan’s knowledge of it. What were they trying to cover up by denying it existed? Was it murder?

CHAPTER 23



Cate and Jack walked Stanley upstairs after their dinner. “Where’s your car, Pap?”

“I walked,” the man said, raising his chin with pride.

“Why?” Jack said. “Now you’ve got to walk back.

“Aye,” the man said. “Good exercise for me.”

“And good exercise for me worrying something will happen to you on the way back.”

Stanley gave Jack a roll of his eyes. “I’m not a wee child, Jackie. A little walk won’t hurt.”

“I’ll drive you.”

The man waved away the offer. “I’ll send you a text when I get there.”

“No,” Jack said. “I’ve got enough worries without adding to the pile. Come on, you can get your exercise walking to get the car with me.”

“If you don’t mind, I’ll tag along,” Cate said. “There’s something I’d like to discuss with you.”

They stepped out into the cool spring air. “What is it, lassie? Your troubles with that madman?”

“No,” Cate said as the gravel crunched beneath their feet.

“I know what it is,” Jack said, with a glance at both of them.

“Oh, do you, smart guy? Do you mind sharing it?”

“It’s about the intelligence base,” Cate said.

“I already told you. There was no intelligence base on the property. Sorry, lassie.”

“But there was,” Cate said. “We’ve seen it.”

“And even better, Pap, so have you,” Jack said.

Stanley ceased his walking and shifted his gaze between them. “What?”

“As a matter of fact, we talked to you about it,” Jack said.

Stanley’s face turned into a mask of confusion.

“You probably don’t remember,” Cate said. “You were only five. But we’ve spoken to you about the tent in 1942. You told us it was an intelligence base.”

“Right after you asked me if I had flat feet or if I was a Nazi,” Jack added.

“And Rory MacKenzie confirmed the tent was an intelligence base. We’ve been inside it. We’ve spoken to the people who worked there.”

Stanley took a moment to process the information. He stared into space as he started to slowly shake his head. “But Da said...”

“I know what Lachlan told you, Pap, but there was an intelligence base there. One he was very much aware of.”

“Why would he lie?”

Cate shared a glance with Jack before she turned her gaze back to Stanley. “I’m not sure. But there was most certainly a base on these grounds in 1942.”

“Can I ask what you two are doing in 1942?”

“Investigating a murder,” Jack said, as they reached the garage.

“We think the body from the garden was buried in that time frame. We started with that year since a woman went missing from Dunhaven Castle. It was explained away, but we didn’t have any other leads. When we arrived, we found an intelligence base. What I can’t figure out is why there is no record of it. And now I’m further baffled by the fact that your father told you it didn’t exist.”

“I don’t know what to say,” Stanley said, as they slid into the car and Jack pulled down the driveway. “I just can’t believe Da would have lied to me.”

“Perhaps he didn’t have a choice. But the question is why did they have to keep it secret? It couldn’t have been confidential information,” Cate said. “People would have been aware of its existence. Why deny it?”

“I wish I could tell you, lassie, though if you learn anything, I’d appreciate hearing about it. So, all that time I thought there was a base, I was right. Oh, why did you lie, Da?”

Cate flicked her eyes to Jack. “Don’t get too upset over it, Pap. It could be for any reason.”

“Perhaps a similar reason to why you couldn’t share the information about the time travel secret with us when I first came. There must be a reason. As soon as we find out, we’ll let you know.”

“Thank you. I appreciate that, lassie.”

They dropped the older man off at his cottage and started their return trip to the castle. “Gosh, I feel terrible about bringing this up to your grandfather,” Cate said as they pulled away from the small house.

“Why?”

“Well, his father lied to him. I shouldn’t have pushed it. He thought he’d just made it up in his mind, and now he is wondering why Lachlan lied to him.”

“There’s a reason, you can be sure of it. And I’d like to know what it was. We need to get to the bottom of this.”

“I agree. Do you think the covering up of the base could be connected to the murder?”

“As in, they shut down the base and didn’t speak of it again after the murder?”

“Yes,” Cate said with a nod.

“That seems a stretch, even if they were related. Surely, they would just remove the person responsible and keep the base operational.”

Cate pursed her lips as she considered it. “Yeah, you’re probably right. So, we may have two mysteries on our hands here.”

“Looks that way,” Jack said, as he eased the car into the garage.

“Well, I hope we can solve one or the other soon,” Cate said, as they wandered back to the castle in the waning light.

“I’d also like to solve our present-day mystery,” Jack said.

Cate sighed as she considered heading to bed for the night. She wondered if the camera app would awaken Jack as she wandered around the castle babbling nonsense.

She rubbed the back of her neck. “I just hope we like the ending.”

Jack wrapped his arm around her shoulders. “It’ll be okay, Cate. I won’t let anything happen to you.”

Cate gave him a nervous smile and a nod. Though she worried they may not have a say in the final outcome.

* * *

Cate heard the tinkling music emanating from the music box even before she opened her eyes. Despite the trepidation it caused, she found herself enjoying the music and feeling comforted by it. She rolled over and stared at the music box on her nightstand.

The music began to slow. Cate pulled herself up to sit and grabbed the small object, turning the winding key again. Odd that it played all night long but sometimes needed wound to continue. She set the musical item on her nightstand and rose from the bed. As she lifted her hand from the piano, her fingers brushed against the tiny keys.

The small keyboard lifted up before clapping back into place with a small thud. Cate cocked her head at the piano and squatted down to study it at eye level. She reached her thumb toward the keyboard and gently pushed it upward. The keys swung upward revealing a small cubby.

A yellowed piece of paper lay within the well. Cate carefully lifted the scrap of paper from within the piano's hiding spot with her thumb and forefinger.

She unfolded the small paper fragment. Her eyes bulged at what her brain registered on the page. She dropped it, scrambling back a few steps and clutching her abdomen. The small sliver fluttered to the floor, landing face up.

Cate continued to stare at the black ink on the page. "You've always loved this," it read. Cate recognized the statement as something she'd imparted to Jack in one of her trances. She also recognized something else about the note. It was written in her own handwriting.

Damien's text flashed through her mind. She recalled his quote from Duke Northcott. "Whatever Catherine is experiencing is a result of her own doing."

She sank onto the bed and allowed her mind to dwell on the only question she could come up with: what was going on here?

A knock sounded at her door, and she hurried to open it. "Good morning, Jack. Did I wake you last night?"

"No," Jack said. "You were surprisingly quiet. I'm shocked, actually."

"Perhaps it was because of the time travel," Cate said.

"I almost hoped you had woken me last night."

"Why?"

“We’re no closer to a solution.”

“That’s not exactly true,” Cate said.

“Oh? Something happen that I don’t know about?”

Cate nodded and motioned for him to follow her. “This morning, I woke up to the music box playing. Surprise, surprise. Anyway, I touched it, and the keys moved. Upon further inspection, I found a hidden compartment.” Cate snatched the paper from the floor where it had fallen moments ago while the dogs raced to Jack’s side.

“Good morning, boys,” he said, ruffling their fur.

“This was inside.” She passed the note to Jack.

He read it aloud: “You’ve always loved this.” He screwed up his face. “That’s almost exactly what you told me while you were in your trance.”

Cate nodded. “I know. And here’s an even creepier part.”

Jack studied the note for another moment before flicking his gaze to Cate. “Which is?”

“That’s my handwriting.”

Jack’s eyes shifted back to the note. “Are you sure?”

“Positive. I recognize my own writing. Which makes the statement Damien passed along from Duke Northcott even more disturbing.”

“Cate,” Jack said with a tilt of his head. “You can’t be serious. You aren’t doing this to yourself.”

“How do you explain this then? The same statement I made to you, written by my own hand.”

“Impossible. This looks old. Look at the paper.”

“I know that, but...”

“But what? You wrote that note to yourself a hundred years ago?”

“It’s not like we don’t have that capability, Jack.”

Jack pursed his lips. “But you haven’t done it. You don’t remember it. You couldn’t have done this.”

“Then how do you explain it?”

“That warlock probably can pull this off with the snap of his fingers. It’s a trick. To play with your mind.”

“Why?” Cate asked.

“That I don’t know. But I know you didn’t do this.” He handed the note back to her. “And I’m glad the effect of this thing seems to be waning. I’d venture to say this little note is a desperate attempt to try to revive the effect this thing has on you.”

Cate rubbed her fingers along the text. "I hope you're right."

"Well, think about it. You didn't sleepwalk last night. You didn't even get up to get the necklace from the jewelry armoire. Let's hope this thing has run its course."

Cate nodded. "Fingers crossed."

Jack squeezed her shoulder. "I'll let you get dressed for breakfast. See you downstairs?"

"Yep," Cate said with a smile.

She dressed to the strains of the music box. Her conversation with Jack played over in her mind. Perhaps he had a point. Her wandering through the castle at night had become less frequent.

Still, something nagged at her. Could it be that easy? Could the enchantment have simply "run its course?"

This may be a question for Damien. After Cate let the dogs out, she sent a quick text to Damien. Still the middle of the night in Maine, she doubted she'd receive an answer for several hours.

Just as an update, no weird sleepwalking last night. Jack suggested the effect could be waning. Is that possible? Thanks!

Cate shoved the phone into her pocket and shooed the dogs into the castle. She planned to take her breakfast to the library and begin work on tracking down any leads from those she'd met in 1942.

Cate pulled her laptop open the moment she got to the library. She began a search for Ruth Harper using the little bit of information she'd listed on her notepad. She found no record of a Ruth Harper with a brother, older or younger, from Manchester between the ages of twenty-five to forty.

Cate expanded her search to find a male and female with the last name Harper who passed away between the years of 1921 and 1936. She found no deaths matching the description.

With a sigh, she moved on to the next name on this list. She searched for Victor Richard from Leeds. It quickly led to a dead end.

She began to wonder if Jack's theory, however fantastic it sounded, was true. Perhaps these people were time travelers or immortals.

Halfway through her search, her phone chimed. Damien must also be an early riser, she thought, as she spotted his name on her phone's display.

I'm glad to hear things have settled down. Umm... I'd keep an eye out still, don't let your guard down.

Cate typed back: *That sounds ominous. Do these things not wane?*

She received a quick response. *I've never seen that happen. There's usually some culmination. That being said, I'm still a newbie to this world, too. It very well could happen!*

Cate bit her lower lip as she typed her response. *You say Celine suffered from a few similar incidents. What was the culmination of those?*

Three dots appeared as Damien typed. They disappeared with no message replacing them. They appeared again. The dots toggled on and off three more times before a message finally came through.

Ummm, well her situation was sort of different, so I'm not sure we can directly compare the two. In fact, it may be best not to. Do you happen to have a doctor there who can hypnotize you and see if you can tell them anything while you're under?

Cate stared at the odd message. "Hypnosis?" she questioned aloud. "Is he serious?"

With a shake of her head, she typed back: *No, I don't have a doctor like that.*

She tapped the phone against her chin as she considered his message. She typed another message and sent it. *It seems like you're avoiding telling me what happened with Celine.*

Damien responded: *No, just hard to explain over text.*

Moments later, she got another message: *I can call if you have a minute?*

Cate blew out a long breath as she typed an affirmative and waited for her phone to ring. She answered it on the first jangle.

"Hey, Damien," she said. "Thanks for calling, and sorry if that message sounded rude or pushy."

"Hey, Cate," Damien's voice answered her. "No, it's no problem at all. You're almost as good as Celine at catching me when I'm not being completely upfront."

"I just wanted to know if there's anything I should look out for. You said Celine has experienced this. How did it end for her?"

"Well, I mean, she is completely different from you. And she's experienced things similar to this, but not exactly identical."

"What were the similarities and differences?"

A knock sounded and Cate peeked at the door. Jack waved. She motioned for him to enter. "Hey Damien, before you start, can I put you on speakerphone? Jack's here."

“Sure, Cate.” Cate toggled on her speakerphone.

“Hi, Damien.”

“Hey, Jack. Uh, so similarities and differences between your situation and Celine’s. Well, in one instance when she had these sort of trancelike blackouts, she was poisoned, and you haven’t been, so that’s not similar.”

“Wait,” Jack said. “Are we sure she hasn’t been poisoned? How can we be sure?”

“Um, well,” Damien stammered, “pretty sure because you’d be dead already.”

“But Celine didn’t die,” Jack said.

“Celine’s not human. Anyway, um, the other time she didn’t really have trances, but she kept having these attacks. Physical symptoms where she’d get headaches or nausea. Again, not similar to yours in symptoms.”

“Well, I have had some of that, but I’m not certain it’s related to my trances. I think it’s related to stress. Mostly I’ve just been wandering around in a trance. What happened to her in that instance?”

Silence met her question.

CHAPTER 24



“Damien? Are you there?” Cate questioned when he didn’t respond.

“Yeah,” his voice squeaked. “Uh, that time she was kidnapped by the Duke.”

“What?” Cate said, her eyes going wide.

“Yeah, umm, it was proximity to him causing her attacks, until he finally just nabbed her.”

Cate shot Jack a glance.

“Okay, so could that be what’s going on here?” Jack inquired.

“No. I mean, the Duke’s not there. He’s here, so it’s not proximity.”

“If he disappears, can you let us know? He’s kidnapped Cate once already. I don’t want him to do it again.”

“Sure thing, no problem. It’s too bad you can’t get a better handle on this through hypnosis.”

“Is that a typical approach you use?” Jack said.

“Yep. Millie – she’s a doctor, she lives with us, she does it all the time. You try to induce the trance in a controlled setting and see what happens.”

“We’ll keep that in mind. I was hoping this was blowing over,” Jack said.

“Yeah, that’s what Cate said. Though these things tend to come in waves, so I’d stay vigilant for now. But like I said, the Duke was completely unhelpful, which isn’t surprising. But if he suddenly disappears, you’ll be the first to know.”

“Thanks, Damien,” Cate said. “By the way, time travel did alleviate some of the symptoms.”

“Oh, really? That’s great! Well, you can always do that until we can figure this thing out! Oh, the other thing you can try is asking Cate leading questions when she’s in a trance.”

“Leading questions?”

“Yeah, like why she thinks you wouldn’t be there or what year it is. That kind of stuff. It’s sometimes helpful in determining what you’re dealing with. Not like crazy helpful, but it may give you some ideas as to what’s going on.”

Jack nodded. “Okay, I’ll try that, though I’m hoping I don’t find her in any trances.”

“Fingers crossed, but if you do, you have some strategies.”

“Okay, yeah. Well, thanks for the call, Damien. I’ll keep you informed,” Cate said.

“Sounds good. Hang in there, Cate. We’ll figure this out.”

They said their goodbyes and Cate ended the call.

“Great, time travel is our solution to this!” Jack exclaimed, as she shoved the phone in her pocket.

“Or hypnosis.”

Jack shook his head. “So, he thought there was no chance it was just running its course?”

“He didn’t seem to think so. That’s what I texted him about. Your theory. I figured if anyone knew if that could happen, it would be Damien. And once again, after speaking with Damien, I feel worse.”

Jack put his hands on his hips and drew his lips into a thin line. “Could we try the hypnosis thing?”

“What?” Cate inquired. “Are you serious?”

“How hard could it be?” Jack asked. “Look at the sparkly thing and relax, I’ll count backward. You’re hypnotized.”

“I’m not certain it’s quite that easy.”

“Let’s try it.”

“Are you serious?”

“Why not? What’s the worst that can happen? I fail miserably.”

“Fine. I’m not getting anywhere with the research anyway,” Cate said with a huff.

Jack pulled out his phone and performed an internet search on hypnosis. "Okay, I'm ready. Ah, give me your timepiece."

"This is ridiculous," Cate said.

"Just give it to me." He wiggled his fingers at her, signaling her to hand it over.

Cate removed the chain from her neck and passed it to Jack. "Okay, now you sit here in your chair. Get comfy. Just relax. And now look at the pocket watch. Focus on the pocket watch." Jack set the timepiece into motion, swinging it back and forth like a pendulum. "You're getting sleepy. You're feeling very relaxed. Close your eyes."

Cate's eyes drifted closed.

"You're feeling more and more relaxed. I'm going to count backward from ten. And when I reach one, you'll be completely relaxed." Jack began his countdown. When he reached one, he asked, "Are you relaxed, Cate?"

Cate sat motionless in her chair. After a moment, one eyelid popped open. She shook her head.

"Damn it," Jack said with a sigh. "Okay, it's not as easy as it looks."

Cate opened both eyes and chuckled, as Jack collapsed into his chair and passed the timepiece back to her. She looped it over her head. "Don't feel bad. When I first came, I considered holding a seance."

"That does make me feel better, actually."

"Damien makes a few compelling points about the differences in what I'm experiencing. So, there's a chance you're still correct. We have no idea what's going on here."

Jack sighed. "Well, on to another subject. You haven't found anything in your search?"

"Nothing but dead ends. No Ruth Harpers matching anything she told us. No Victor Richard either. I was about to move on to Hans and ravishing Rita."

Jack chuckled at Cate's nickname for the blonde looker. "I'll check back with you later. As long as you're feeling okay."

"I feel fine. The time travel really does seem to have helped," Cate said.

"See you before lunch for a progress report."

Cate nodded and sank into the desk chair as Jack disappeared from the room. She began her search with Rita, finding no one matching her description in any records. With a deep sigh, she tried Hans's name. Much to her surprise, several records popped up. She found a birth record for

Hans Schmidt in Germany along with immigration paperwork in 1920 showing their move to the United Kingdom, settling in the Kent area.

Cate tracked the man through the 1921 and 1931 censuses. The next census would not take place until 1951 due to the war. After another hour of searching, Cate managed to find him alive and married and living in post-war Kent with his wife and two children. She traced him through history until he died in 2005.

Cate noted all the information, pleased to have found something. At least they could verify one person was a normal human who lived a normal life. But where were the others?

Cate let her pen tap her lips as she considered the latest development. Why could she find Hans and no others? Was there some credence to Jack's theory that they were not humans? Was that possible? Just how many supernatural creatures were lurking around the globe, Cate pondered?

She picked up her phone to text the question to Damien, feeling slightly guilty about bombarding the poor man with questions. She stared out the window for a moment, contemplating her next move. She hated to bother him, yet he had encouraged her to use him as a resource. And he seemed eager to help. And he was far more knowledgeable than either she or Jack in these matters.

She decided to text him and pulled the phone toward her. As she toggled on her display, she caught movement in the reflective surface. Cate twisted to glance behind her. She found nothing.

She clicked off the display and stared into it, searching for the source of the movement. As she was about to give up, she caught sight of a dark figure behind her.

Her heart stopped and she spun to search behind her. With ragged breathing, she scanned the room. Nothing. Her brows knit tightly together, and she glanced into her phone's dark display again. The room appeared normal.

A chill passed through her as she settled back in her seat to text Damien. She wiggled her shoulders as she clicked on her display. She bit her lower lip and rubbed the back of her neck. Her skin turned to gooseflesh.

She shook her head and tossed the phone onto the desk. She rose from her chair and wandered from the library. She made her way upstairs via the main staircase and took the most direct route to her bedroom.

When she entered, she twisted the winding key on the piano music box before she stalked across the room and retrieved the sapphire necklace. She clutched it in her fingers and held it to her chest as she closed her eyes.

The tinkling music filled her mind and she swayed to the music. Snippets of images flitted through her mind. A glimpse of a sapphire blue dress swinging in the air. The sapphire necklace sparkling under warm lights that glowed from above her. A hand reached for hers. Fingers stretched toward her.

Her lips curled in a smile at the memories. She opened her eyes and stared down at the sapphires in her hand. They sparkled in the light. She spun and eyed the music box. After she clasped the necklace around her neck, she collected the music box from her night table and wandered from the room.

* * *

Cate awoke in the west wing. Jack hovered over her. "Cate!" he shouted, worry creasing his face.

"Jack?" she inquired in a hoarse voice, as she lifted her head.

"Yeah," Jack said, "it's okay. You're okay."

Cate pushed up to sit.

"Easy," Jack said, his arms outstretched in the event that she collapsed.

"What happened?" she asked, glancing around. The dogs crowded around her. She stroked their fur as she attempted to recall anything that happened. Her fingers found the sapphires around her neck after a moment. The music box sat in the middle of the room. It wound down, tinkling out its last few notes.

Jack collapsed to the floor next to her and blew out a long breath.

"Jack?" Cate prompted.

"What's the last thing you remember?"

Cate pursed her lips, considering it. "Uh, I thought I saw something reflected in my phone's screen in the library. Then after that, I couldn't settle. I went upstairs, wound up the music box and picked up the necklace. That's the last thing I remember." She looked around again. "How did I get here?"

Jack pursed his lips and hesitated before he responded. "Perhaps it's best I show you."

He tapped around on his phone for a few seconds before he brought up one video. "I got an alert on my phone that you were moving." He swung the display toward her and showed her the collar cam feed. The camera bobbed around before falling to her side. She approached the music box, at the camera's level, and picked it up.

She crossed her bedroom and walked through the suite. The door swung open as she approached the hall.

"Cate?" Jack's on-screen counterpart inquired. "What are you doing?"

"I have to go," Cate said.

"Go where?" Jack inquired.

"I have to go," Cate repeated.

"Why are you wearing that necklace?"

That question did not garner a response. "Can you tell me the year?"

The question stopped Cate in her tracks. Her brow crinkled before she took another step forward. Jack grasped her arm. "Cate, what year is it?"

Cate considered it again. Her eyes searched around her as though she wasn't sure.

"I have to go," she said again.

Jack shook his head but allowed her to continue. She wound through the halls as the music box continued its tune. Jack followed her, reaching into his back pocket for his cell phone. He toggled into his camera and hit record.

"Okay, this video may show a better view," he said. He swapped the video for the one he'd recorded himself.

On-screen, Cate continued her wandering down the hall. "It's 11 April," he narrated. "It's about eleven in the morning. I found Cate nearly unresponsive. As you can see, she has the music box and the sapphire necklace. The only thing she'll tell me is she has to go. She hasn't said where she's going. I asked her the year; the question seemed to give her pause, but she didn't answer it."

Jack followed her down a set of stairs. She aimed toward the west wing's doors. Both dogs sat at attention at the entrance. She pawed at the door and pulled it open. The dogs raced ahead of her as she continued her slow shamble.

After a few moments, they wound around to the large room they'd entered on many occasions before. The dogs already stood inside. They sat staring at the far wall as though it held a secret.

"Okay," Jack continued his narration, "we're at a room in the west wing. She's come to this room several times. I found her in one of these trances here once before."

Jack kept the camera trained on Cate as she shuffled across the large space. She stopped in the room's center.

"I'm here," she said. "Where are you?"

"Cate, who are you looking for?" Jack tried.

Cate spun in a slow circle, searching the space. After two and a half full rotations, she stopped. Her eyelids slid open and closed in slow motion. After she set the music box down, she stalked to one pillar and circled it.

She stopped on the side facing where Jack stood. She stood for several moments staring at the pillar. After a moment, she reached out and touched it. She stood frozen with her hand pressed against the pillar. Unblinking and unmoving, she appeared statuesque.

Jack paused the video. "Cate..." he began.

"What?" Cate asked.

"It gets a little weird after this."

CHAPTER 25



Cate flicked her gaze from the screen to Jack's face. "*This* is where it gets weird? What, the weird slow blinking as I spin in circles and my best impression of a statue isn't weird enough?"

Jack licked his lips as he offered an amused scoff. He cocked his head and nodded. "It gets weirder. I'm just warning you."

Cate inhaled deeply and bit her lower lip. "Okay, warned." She turned her attention back to Jack's phone. He tapped the play button and the video continued.

The camera angle shifted as Jack circled around Cate. She remained still, her hand pressed against the pillar and a blank expression on her features.

After a moment, she lowered her arm and turned slightly toward Jack. Her expression softened and her lips curled into a smile. Her gaze lifted slightly above her. She raised her arms, her right floating in the air near her face and her left cupping an unknown object with her palm facing her belly.

Her feet moved as she held her arms in position. She circled around the room in a waltz with some unknown partner.

Cate covered her mouth with her hand as she watched herself float around the room in time with the tinkling music. The video followed her as she made wide arcs around the large space, twirling a few times between box steps.

She continued the waltz for two minutes before she began to slow.

Jack clicked the video off. "And that's about it."

“Jack,” Cate said. “How did I end up on the floor?”

“Doesn’t matter,” he said.

“It does,” she answered. “I can take it. Please, I need to see it.”

Jack huffed but gave in and played the video.

On-screen, Cate continued to spin for a few more seconds, slowing her motion. Her smile was replaced by a worried expression. She stopped spinning and her brow furrowed.

“No,” she said.

“What’s wrong, Cate?” Jack inquired.

“No, I’m not ready.” She glanced down at her clothes. “I need the dress.” She puffed out a breath. “I need the dress. I need the dress. The dress. I... need...” Her words slowed before slurring. Her eyelids grew heavy, and her eyes rolled back as she began to slump to the floor.

The camera bobbed and pointed at a blurred floor as Jack raced toward Cate. He caught her before she hit the floor and eased her to the floor. “Oh, Cate,” she heard him say, as the video shut off.

“That’s it,” Jack said. “You woke up a few moments later.”

Cate sighed and shook her head. “What is happening to me?”

Jack clutched his phone and climbed to standing. He pulled Cate to her feet. “I’m not sure, but I’m going to send this video to Damien. But first, I think we should get you back to the library.”

Cate nodded. They began the walk back with the dogs trotting behind them. “I don’t know how I feel about sending that to Damien,” Cate admitted on the walk.

“It sounds like he’s seen stranger,” Jack said.

“Still,” Cate said, “it’s sort of embarrassing.”

“It’s not. And it’s proof of what’s happening that they may be able to use to research more.”

“I know,” Cate said. “It’s just odd.”

They returned to the library and Cate collapsed into her armchair. Her fingers found the sapphire necklace. With a frown, she unclasped the necklace and tossed it onto the coffee table.

“So much for this waning,” she lamented.

Jack tapped around on his phone. “One thing’s certain. For once, I can’t wait to time travel.”

Cate offered a sharp laugh at the statement.

“You okay?” Jack inquired.

Cate nodded. "Yeah, I'm fine. No residual effects from the strange experience."

"Okay, video sent," Jack reported.

"Thanks, Jack," Cate said. She reached for his hand. He grasped hers and squeezed.

"We'll get through this, Cate. I promise."

"Thanks for your help," Cate said with a smile.

"Hey, we're a team," Jack confirmed. "Reids and MacKenzies. Centuries-worth of problem-solving is on our side."

Jack's phone chimed. He pulled his hand from Cate's and swiped at his phone. "It's Damien."

"Anything?"

Jack's thumbs tapped a response. "He asked if either of us have any idea what dress you're looking for. I said no."

"A blue dress," Cate murmured. "Sapphire." Cate stared ahead at the necklace as snippets of the dress floating in the air flashed through her mind.

Jack wiggled his eyebrows. "How do you know? I thought you didn't remember anything."

"I catch visions of it now and again. There's more just beyond that, I know it, but my brain can't access it."

Jack stared at her. "When did you see the dress?"

"I think I've been seeing it on and off. I think in addition to the dress, there's a room I'm searching for. I just get snippets of it."

"It's not the room you've been going to?" Jack inquired.

"Not to my knowledge, but it has to be connected."

Jack sent another text to Damien, recapping the latest from Cate. He received a reply immediately. Jack reported the message to her. "*I'm showing this to Celine and Alexander and passing along the other details. Will let you know what we come up with.*"

Jack settled back into his chair, a pensive expression on his face. After a while, he said, "Well, I suppose there's one good thing to come out of this."

Cate shot him an incredulous glance. "And that is?"

"You're waltzing skills are coming along nicely, Lady Cate."

"Too bad the same can't be said for your comedy skills," Cate retorted, an amused grin on her face.

“Well, I suppose we should have our lunch and then do our duty and head back to solve our other mystery.” Jack rose to his feet with a groan. “I never thought murder would be the more innocuous of the two issues we’re facing.”

“I’m not certain it’s the more innocuous, but it may be the one with the lower stakes. At least for me, personally. I’d love to know who is in the grave, but I’d also love to stop losing my mind.”

“You’re not losing your mind, Cate,” Jack said, with a squeeze of her shoulder.

With a faint smile, she grasped his hand and squeezed. “Thanks, Jack. Enjoy your lunch.”

“You want me to stay?”

She shook her head. “No, I’ll be okay. And you can monitor me in spirit with my doggy cam.” She offered him a wink.

“Aye, so I can. Okay, enjoy your lunch, then,” Jack said. He strode from the room as Molly slipped inside.

“Perfect timing, I see,” she said. “Jack’s leaving to let you enjoy your lunch.”

“Thanks, Molly,” Cate said.

“WHOA!” Molly exclaimed. Her eyes widened as she stared down at the coffee table, her mouth forming a wide “o.” “Where’d *that* come from?”

“Oh,” Cate said, swiping the necklace from the table. “Ah, it’s a really old piece given to a MacKenzie in the 1700s. I considered giving it away for an auction item.”

Molly’s jaw dropped. “Are you serious? I can’t even begin to imagine what it’s worth.”

“Well, it’s worth some sentimental value, too, and I decided I couldn’t part with it.”

“I don’t blame you,” Molly said. “I’d *never* give that up. It’s absolutely stunning.”

“Thanks, Molly,” Cate said. “It really is a beautiful piece. And don’t worry, I’m not giving it up.”

Molly smiled and nodded at her. “Hey, how about a road trip tomorrow?” she questioned as she set the tray down. “I’ve got the next place on our list all ready.”

“Oh, uh,” Cate stammered.

“You should go, Cate,” Jack called from the doorway where he still hovered.

“See, even Jack agrees,” Molly said with a smile.

“Well,” Cate hedged. “I should...”

“Oh, come on, Lady Cate,” Jack heckled her. “Live a little.”

Cate glanced at him, and he gave her an encouraging nod.

“Okay, then. I just didn’t want to hone in on your day off.”

“Nonsense!” Molly exclaimed, with a wave of her hand. “I can’t wait for a nice girls’ trip.”

“And leave the dogs with us,” Jack said. “We’ll watch ‘em. Both of the Frasers and I will be here, so we’ve got it handled.”

Cate smiled and nodded. “Well, looks like it’s all set, then!”

“Great!” Molly said with a wide smile. She spun on her heel and pointed out the door to Jack. “Out, you. Let Lady Cate enjoy her lunch!”

Jack raised his hands in defeat. “Okay, okay. Just remember who was instrumental in convincing Lady Cate...” she heard him reply as they made their way down the hall.

Cate pulled the lunch tray onto her lap. Her eyes fell onto the sapphire necklace. What was happening to her? Why did the music box and necklace seem to affect her so strangely sometimes, but in others she remained completely normal, even soothed by the items?

The Duke’s words rang in her mind. “Whatever Catherine is experiencing is a result of her own doing.” What did it mean? Was it him she searched for? Was it him she called out to when in her trances? But why?

* * *

Cate stared out of the library’s window at the garden beyond. Her mind struggled to find the meaning in any of the muck she waded through concerning any of her mysteries. The chiming of her phone pulled her mind from its wandering. A text from Damien showed on her preview screen.

Hey Cate, how you feeling?

Cate smiled at the simple message. He’d gotten the video of her and thought enough to check in with her after to see how she felt. She sent a

return message: *I'm okay. I feel fine right now. Thank you for checking. How embarrassing to have to send that video over.*

Cate added a face-palm emoji to the end of her message.

A quick response answered her: *Not at all! Don't feel that way. Also, you're an awesome dancer!*

The comment gave her a chuckle. *Jack said the same thing. I guess there's my silver lining!*

Damien answered: *Seriously, Cate, don't feel bad. This helps a lot because we can see exactly what's happening and research it. We'll get some answers soon. In the meantime, maybe plan a time travel trip to ease your nerves!*

Cate responded: *Way ahead of you... Jack and I are doing a little traveling this afternoon!*

That's awesome! Get your mind off all this and enjoy!

Cate replied with a "will do!" before returning to her lunch. After a few bites, her phone jangled next to her. Assuming it was Damien, she grabbed it. "Wow, did he find something already?" she murmured, as she swiped to answer the call without glancing at the display.

"Hello," she said.

"Lady Cate!" Mrs. Campbell greeted her.

"Oh, hello, Mrs. Campbell," Cate said, surprised to hear the woman's voice when she expected Damien's.

"I hope I'm not catching you at a bad time," the woman said, noting the confusion in her voice.

"No, not at all. I'm just having lunch."

"Oh, well, I'm sorry to interrupt your meal, but I did want to pass along a smidge of news I found after digging into the intelligence base rumor."

"No interruption at all. What did you find?"

"Well, straight after our discussion, I delved into any records I could find. None of them had any references to an intelligence base."

"Hmm," Cate murmured, as her mind pondered why all references were squelched from the records.

"But I am not a quitter! I called a friend with access to the Ministry's records."

"No mention there either?" Cate inquired, questioning her own sanity in the matter.

"Yes and no," Mrs. Campbell said.

Cate's brow furrowed at the statement. "That sounds intriguing."

"Very. And what I found out from my friend is even more so."

"Oh?" Cate inquired.

"It seems an intelligence base did reside on the grounds of Dunhaven Castle for a short time in 1942."

Cate's heart skipped a beat. So there had been a record of it somewhere. She wondered why the references were so obscure.

Mrs. Campbell continued, "It was dissolved in September of 1942 after it was discovered to have been infiltrated by a German spy!"

"What?" Cate cried, shock apparent in her voice.

"Yes," Mrs. Campbell said. "Quite an affair apparently, and very quickly disbanded and forgotten about. No one mentions it as it was considered quite a black eye on the intelligence community, and Dunhaven, too. A spy living at Dunhaven Castle! Can you imagine!"

"I can't. I'm quite surprised," Cate said. "Did they identify the person?"

"Not to my knowledge. That's all the information my contact could dig up. But anyway, I wanted to pass it along because I thought perhaps you'd want to leave it out of your book. For the reputation of the castle."

"Yes, thank you, Mrs. Campbell, that's quite interesting and very helpful."

"Oh, you're very welcome. And rest assured, Lady Cate, I will not breathe a word of this to anyone," Mrs. Campbell said.

Cate held in a chuckle at the statement, realizing by this time next week, everyone in the Highlands should know about the botched intelligence base at Dunhaven Castle.

The two women spoke for a few more moments about their upcoming meeting before Cate ended the call. As she took the last few bites of her lunch, Cate mulled the latest information. German spies at Dunhaven Castle during the war? This could explain several things, including the lack of records on some of her targets.

Someone, or more than one someone, was a German spy. Someone wasn't who they said they were. The question was: who?

CHAPTER 26



Cate pondered the question as she slid her tray onto the coffee table in front of her. The necklace caught her eye again. She pocketed it as Molly strolled into the room to retrieve her tray. Moments later, Jack slipped in.

“You okay?” he asked as she sat with her chin in her palm.

“Yeah,” she responded. “Damien checked on me while you were out.”

“Oh? Did they find anything?”

“No, but he wanted to make sure I was okay after what he saw on the video. And he assured me they’d get to the bottom of it.”

“Well, so far they’ve got a good track record. They fixed Douglas’s problem and ours, too.”

Cate nodded. “I got some other information, though, that you’d be interested to hear.”

“Really? Did you find something on one of our forties friends?”

“Yes, I did,” Cate said. “But there’s even more than that.”

She rose and retrieved her notes from the desk. “I wasn’t able to find anything about Ruth, Rita, or Victor, but I did manage to track Hans from birth to death.”

“Okay, Hans is human. Now, what about the other three?”

“Well, I may have an explanation for that, and it doesn’t involve immortality.”

“I’m all ears.”

“Mrs. Campbell just called me. I asked her to look into the intelligence base.”

“And?”

“She has a friend...”

“Of course she does,” Jack groaned.

“Her friend looked into some records and found there was an intelligence base on the grounds in 1942 for a very short time. It was disbanded in September 1942.”

“Why?”

“Because it had been infiltrated by German spies.”

Jack’s eyes went wide. “Spies?”

Cate nodded, a grin on her face. “Which explains why at least one of these people has no records!”

“Because they’re lying about who they are,” Jack said.

Cate bobbed her head up and down.

“So, are all three of them spies?”

Cate lifted a shoulder in response. “Mrs. Campbell had no information on the individual accused. It could be one of them, or all three of them. I’m not sure. But it marks progress and explains a number of things.”

“Aye, it does. And it explains why Lachlan lied to Pap. They likely did not want that news out, especially during the war. It really makes the intelligence effort look bad.”

Cate nodded. “Perhaps we should let Stanley know what we think then head back and see if we can crack this spy ring!”

“Okay,” Jack said, pulling out his phone. “Though I have to point out that we should be extra cautious. We’re not equipped to be in the middle of a spy ring, Cate. And this murder very well could be related to it.”

“I agree,” Cate said. “Though I’d still like to go back. As Damien pointed out, it may help with my mania.”

Jack chuckled. “Don’t call it that. You’re not a madwoman.”

“Yet,” Cate said.

“We’ll call it mania when I have to lock you in the tower.”

“Let’s hope it doesn’t come to that.”

“Okay, I sent Pap a text and explained the spy situation. Ready to go?”

“I am,” Cate said.

“Oh, where’s the necklace.”

Cate patted her pocket. “Here. I swiped it before Molly spots it again.”

“Good thinking. The last thing we need is her innocently trying it on and beginning to suffer from the same fascination as you have.”

Cate nodded in agreement as her fingers caressed the necklace in her pocket. “I trust Molly wouldn’t do that, but she may pick it up to take a closer look. I don’t want to take the chance that something happens to her.”

Jack nodded at her assessment.

“I’ll dump it back in my jewelry armoire.”

“Okay. Well, I’ll go change and knock when I’m ready.”

They made their way upstairs and Cate entered her suite. The piano-shaped music box, last left on the floor in the west wing, sat in its usual spot on her nightstand.

Cate sighed at it as she slipped the necklace into the bottom drawer of the jewelry armoire. The little music box was quite persistent in returning to her, magically showing up on its own like an obedient boomerang. The idea she had the ability to enchant an object to continuously return to her bedroom almost made her chuckle. How ridiculous, she thought as she styled her hair.

She pulled on a pink dress and peep-toe mules. Music began to float from her bedroom. The music box had engaged itself and began to play. Cate stepped into her bedroom as she readied her purse and stared at it. Why did it only affect her at certain times?

A knock sounded at her door. With another mystery to resolve, she hurried across the room to meet Jack. They made their way down to the secret passage and set the timepiece to September 19, 1942. Within moments, they stood hidden inside World War II-era Dunhaven Castle.

After sneaking through the passage to the crypt, they stepped into the gray day. Angry storm clouds rolled across the sky. “Looks like a storm’s blowing in,” Jack noted. “We’d better hurry.”

Cate agreed and they hurried across the property in search of the safety of the castle. Wind whipped wildly as they pushed through the doors into the foyer.

Large raindrops pelted the roof and windows as thunder rumbled. “Just made it!” Cate said, as Jack pushed the doors closed.

“Aye, good thing, too. This looks to be a bad one.”

“Indeed,” a male voice said behind them. Cate spun to face the speaker, finding a man near thirty behind her. With medium brown curly hair and

dark eyes set in a round face, his resemblance to Rory made Cate certain he was Oliver MacKenzie. "You must be Mrs. and Mrs. Jack MacKenzie."

"We are," Cate answered with a smile.

"Oliver MacKenzie," the man said, extending his hand to Jack.

"Jack MacKenzie, your very distant cousin, and my wife, Cate. Please, call us Cate and Jack."

"Lovely to meet you. My father has nothing but good things to say about you."

"We met you once before," Cate said, "when you were about ten."

"I have very little recollection of it, I'm afraid."

"I wouldn't imagine you would have much memory of us," Cate said, as they strode to the sitting room. "I believe we only spoke for a few moments."

"Ah, memory of you specifically, no, but knowledge of you, yes. My father still discusses how you saved the day with the missing jewelry."

Cate smiled. "I was so pleased we could help."

"Well," Oliver said, "can I offer you anything before I depart? I'm off on some business. Too bad the weather had to turn nasty. It will make the driving treacherous."

"No," Jack said. "We're perfectly fine, thank you. We may spend some time in the library to pass the hours before dinner this evening. Will you attend?"

"No," Oliver said with a shake of his head. "I shan't return until day after tomorrow. But I am so pleased to have caught you before I left."

"We're glad to have had the chance to say hello again, too," Cate assured him.

The man said his goodbyes and left them in the sitting room.

"Okay, what do you really want to do?" Jack asked.

Cate shrugged. "I'd like to gather some information on our three suspects, but short of visiting the intelligence tent, I'm not sure where we'd find them."

Jack glanced out the window as rain poured from the skies and winced.

"I, too, would prefer to wait until the rain stops."

"Library it is, I suppose," Jack said.

Cate considered it, staring at the pattern on the area rug below her feet as she contemplated it. After a moment, she raised her eyes to Jack's. "Wait!" she exclaimed.

“What?”

“I have an idea. It doesn’t help us with solving the murder, but it may help with our other problem.”

Jack furrowed his brow. “You mean your mania, as you call it?”

“Yes! I’m always drawn to a room in the west wing, and whenever I go there in our time, I have strange attacks, visions, trances...”

“Waltzing,” Jack added.

“Right. And as a result, we’ve avoided the space as much as possible. But I may not be affected in this time period. Perhaps we should try to explore it here rather than in the present.”

Jack pursed his lips as he rubbed the back of his neck while considering the prospect.

“Okay,” he agreed. “We can try. But at the first sign of you going haywire, we leave. The last thing we need is a trance during a time travel trip.”

“Deal,” Cate said.

She looped her arm through Jack’s, and they wandered through the castle halls and to the doors leading to the west wing.

“I wonder if it’s locked,” Jack said, as they approached the large, thick wooden doors.

“I don’t suppose you brought your keys in case it is?” Cate questioned.

Jack reached in his pocket and flashed a set of keys. “Ask and you shall receive, Lady Cate.”

“Oh! Prepared! Nice!”

“Did you expect anything less?”

Cate shrugged.

“Your lack of faith in me is a little disturbing, Lady Cate,” Jack said, as he grasped the door handle and tugged. To their surprise, the door opened.

“Hmm, not locked in this era,” Cate noted.

“I’m surprised. I didn’t think the west wing was used much after Ethan’s time.”

“Still, maybe they didn’t lock it until a later period,” Cate said, stepping into the wide hall.

Jack side-eyed her. “Any weirdness?”

“Nope,” Cate said. “I feel pretty good when I time travel. No haziness, no odd thoughts. But here’s something interesting. When I went to my room to change, the music box was back, sitting on the night table as usual.”

“After we left it in the west wing,” Jack noted.

“Right. It appeared back in my bedroom. And it started to play on its own. But I had no issues with it. Nothing. In fact, it seems to be soothing to me. It helps me sleep, it eases my headaches, it oddly seems like I do love it. Like my note said.”

“I’m not convinced that note is from you, Cate.”

“It was in my handwriting.”

“I’m certain a man who has the ability to throw lightning bolts from his hands can fake someone’s handwriting.”

“Good point,” Cate said, as they turned the corner into another hall.

Jack ceased walking, cocking his head to the side as he scrunched his brows together. He pressed a finger to his lips. Cate inched closer to him, and her eyebrows shot up.

“Do you hear that?” Jack whispered.

Cate nodded. “Voices,” she breathed.

They listened for another moment before Cate pointed a finger toward the music hall. Jack agreed with a nod, and they crept toward the double doors.

Cate motioned for Jack to inch the door open, but he refused with an emphatic shake of his head. Garbled voices floated on the air as they pressed against the doors.

Cate mimed for them to round the corner and listen at the second set of doors. Jack nodded and they crept down the hall and approached the other double doors.

The heated voices became clearer as they pressed their ears to the door.

“NO!” a male voice shouted. “This is wrong!”

A female voice shot back, “It isn’t.”

“You are mistaken,” the man answered.

“Am I? Prove it.”

After a moment, the man answered, “I can’t.”

“Just as I thought.”

“No, it isn’t at all what you thought. These people have become my friends. Though there isn’t much to be done about it now.”

“There is too much at stake for this second-guessing,” the woman said.

Cate’s eyebrows shot skyward, and she glanced to Jack. She mouthed the word, “spies,” to him.

He nodded.

“I won’t do it. I can’t!”

“You must.”

Another pause before the man said, “All right.”

“Then we proceed as planned.”

Footsteps punctuated the last statement and Cate and Jack scurried to the corner to peek around it. The doors burst open as the woman exited first. Cate’s jaw unhinged as she saw Ruth stalk from the room. Several moments later, Hans strode out of the doors and down the hall.

Cate glanced at Jack. Had they just witnessed two German spies at Dunhaven Castle?

CHAPTER 27



“Let’s head to our suite,” Jack suggested as the supposed spies left the west wing behind.

Cate nodded, abandoning her plan to study the room to which she was drawn. They waited a few moments before they wound their way from the west wing into the main castle and up to their bedroom.

“Wow!” Cate exclaimed as Jack closed the doors behind them.

“My sentiments exactly, did we just witness a meeting of spies?”

“That’s what I’m thinking!” Cate played the conversation over in her mind.

“So, what happened?” Jack inquired as he stalked around the room, rubbing his chin.

“Ruth and Hans are in on it together,” Cate surmised. “He has admitted connections to Germany. He was born there. Perhaps he has family there, still.”

“But Hans seems to be having second thoughts.”

Cate nodded. “He talked about his time in London with Victor briefly at dinner. Perhaps the time he spent with them made him rethink his allegiances.”

“But Ruth is insistent on forcing his hand.”

“It would explain why the code is indecipherable in this time. It’s actively being destroyed by Ruth and Hans,” Cate said.

“It also explains her position with Amelia.”

Cate bit her lower lip. Jack added, "I'm certain Amelia had no knowledge of this." Cate nodded at his statement. "Ruth likely saw her position as useful to her cause."

"And perhaps even Lucas's ties to the Ministry of Defense," Cate said.

"Right."

Cate furrowed her brow again. "What I find odd is Ruth tying herself to Amelia, though. Surely she has less freedom because of it."

"But a great cover. And perhaps she is adept at manipulating Amelia without Amelia realizing."

Cate nodded. "Yes. Maybe I can get some information from Amelia at dinner. Or you if you sit by her. Ask where she's traveled and see if you can ferret out who suggested the places or how their trips came about."

"On it," Jack said with a salute.

"Hopefully you'll get a seat near Amelia. And ravishing Rita can keep her hands to herself."

"You know," Jack said, "when you had a male interest, I told you to use your female charms to gain information."

Cate offered an unimpressed glance. "Damien was not a male interest nor was he as licentious as Rita."

"Oh, right," Jack said. "He was a male. And he was interested. Plus, he still texts you! Talk about rakish!"

"Damien is far from rakish. He is a wonderful friend."

"I'm only teasing you, Lady Cate. Though I am starting to think you may be a wee bit jealous. And I must say, it really is quite a boost to my ego."

Cate offered him a half-smile. "I'm so glad to be of service. Just be careful around her, I don't think she's as innocent as Damien."

"Don't worry, Lady Cate. I'd never ruin our marriage over the likes of her." Jack winked at her.

"I'd better change for dinner," Cate said, checking the time.

After they both changed clothes, Cate and Jack threaded through the halls and down to the sitting room. Rory, Ruth, and Amelia waited there for the others.

After greetings around the room, Cate and Jack sank onto the loveseat across from Ruth and Amelia.

"What frightful weather," Rory commented, as he poured drinks for Cate and Jack.

“Oh, yes, just terrible,” Amelia commented. “What a shame Oliver had to travel in it.”

“Mmm, yes,” Rory agreed.

Cate used the comment as an in to discuss more with Amelia. “And will you be traveling again soon?” she inquired.

“Perhaps,” Amelia said. “I’m waiting on word now from Lucas. If he’s able to make a trip up, we’ll stay. Otherwise, we may be off again!”

“And have you done much traveling before coming to Dunhaven?”

“Oh, yes,” Amelia said. “We’ve done a great deal.”

“You must be worn out!” Cate said.

“Not really, I find it invigorating. It’s so easy to be down given all the events surrounding the war. It takes my mind off things.”

“How do you decide where to go?” Jack inquired, picking up on Cate’s line of questioning.

“Oh, wherever the wind takes us,” Amelia said with a chuckle as Rita and Victor entered the room.

The conversation ended with the new arrivals. Rory suggested they head into the dining room.

“Oh, shouldn’t we wait for Hans?” Cate inquired, hoping to have the opportunity to converse with him.

“He sent word he isn’t feeling well and won’t attend,” Rory answered.

Cate knit her eyebrows at the development. She glanced at Jack then flitted her gaze to Ruth. The woman offered no reaction to the announcement.

They shuffled into the dining room and took their seats. Cate noted the way Rita slid into a seat next to Jack, nearly tripping Ruth to claim the seat. Ruth stepped two seats over, sitting on Jack’s other side. At least one thing went right, Cate thought. She hoped Jack could learn something from the woman.

With the unbalanced party, Cate found herself seated between Victor and Amelia. She’d use the conversation to try to pry any information she could from Amelia.

Amelia began her conversation with Cate, including Rory in the mix. The addition of Rory slightly dampened any chance Cate had to inquire about Amelia’s travel plans.

“What a shame the weather is so dreary,” Rory said. “I hope it hasn’t ruined anyone’s plans.”

“Not at all,” Cate assured him. “Amelia, what about you?”

“No, I spent the day reading.”

“Does Ruth enjoy days such as this or does she prefer to be on the move?”

“Oh, I’m certain she didn’t mind. I believe she spent some time exploring the castle.”

“You should have told me,” Rory said, “I would have given her a tour.”

“I’m quite sure she did not mind wandering about on her own.”

Amelia glanced down the table, noticing Victor lacked a conversation partner. “Oh, dear, it seems Mr. Richard has been left alone!” Amelia noted to Cate.

Cate switched her direction to speak to Victor. She glanced across the table, noting Rita playing up to Jack, inserting herself into Jack’s conversation with Ruth.

“Oh!” Cate exclaimed, loud enough to be heard across the table. “Had I realized Rita turned the wrong way, I would have included you in our conversation.”

Rita gave Cate a cold glance before offering her an equally frigid smile and retorted, “Victor and I spend all day together. There’s really nothing else to talk about.”

“My mistake,” Cate said, “I thought you’d be far too busy with code-breaking to talk.”

“Perfectly fine, Mrs. MacKenzie,” Victor said, ending the polite bickering between the two women. “After all, I’m certain you’d like to spend some time conversing with your family.”

Cate smiled at him. “Do you miss yours very much being stationed here?” she inquired of him.

“Yes, though we must all make sacrifices in the face of adversity such as what we suffer.”

Cate smiled and nodded at him. Throughout her degree work, she’d only read about the adversity faced during this time. It was another matter entirely to stare at it straight in the face. How much more difficult that adversity would be when someone sabotaged your efforts for the opposite side, Cate reflected.

Cate gazed at the empty chair, now dragged away from the table and the place setting removed by Smithers. Had Hans avoided the meal because of his confrontation with Ruth? Would that confrontation lead to murder?

If so, it was a murder never avenged, as Hans had lived his entire life normally, as evidenced by the records. Cate's eyes slid sideways to the man on her right. Why had she not found him in the records? Or Rita? Were their names changed to protect their identities after the base was shut down?

Dinner continued with little other discussion that would shed any light on the circumstances surrounding the upcoming murder. After a brief nightcap, Cate and Jack returned to their own time via the universal time portal in the secret passage.

"See you in the library," Jack said, as they parted ways to change.

"You bet!" Cate answered, darting into her suite.

The moment Cate set foot into her bedroom, the music box across the room began to tinkle. Cate shot the object a glance. "You're persistent, I'll give you that. But I've been time traveling, so your effects are diminished!" she shouted triumphantly, as she pulled off her dress and slipped back into her normal clothes.

After a moment redoing her hair in the bathroom, she reentered the bedroom with her eyebrows raised at the little device. "No time for a trance now; we're on to something!" she called, darting across the room and making her way down to the library.

The dogs stood on each side of Jack's armchair as he petted them both. "Well, that was quite a trip!" Cate exclaimed.

"Aye. And it's very nice to see you so chipper because of it."

"I can't believe Ruth is a spy. Poor Amelia. I'll bet she told the paper Ruth left for a better position just to keep everything hush-hush and save face."

"Aye, same reason they nixed any mention of the intelligence base overall."

"Do you think we can't find any information on Victor and Rita because their names were changed to protect them after Ruth's murder?"

Jack pursed his lips as he considered it. "Could be. Though was anyone aware of Ruth's murder?"

"Maybe not, though her disappearance could have led to the outing of the spy ring. Did you learn anything at dinner?"

"Not much. Ruth is extremely good at hiding what's going on."

"I'd imagine she would be. Also, I'm sure your conversation was squelched by Rita." Cate pursed her lips in a half frown.

Jack rolled his eyes. "You may have a point about our cheeky friend. She seems to have a real affinity for pushing herself in."

Cate considered it. While annoyed, she still found the situation odd. The woman went overboard to insert herself into a conversation with a married man. She exhibited extremely poor behavior. It seemed unusual. Perhaps subtly wasn't her strong suit.

"I wonder if there's another reason for her overly keen interest."

"Outside of my roguish good looks, wit, and charm? You may be reaching, Lady Cate."

"Well, she seems rather obvious. Even for a flirt."

Jack shrugged. "What would it be?"

"Do you think she's on to Ruth?"

"Oh, I wonder," Jack said as he considered it. "Perhaps she's the one who outs the discovery."

"I wonder what causes Hans to kill Ruth."

"Assuming that's what happens."

"Yes," Cate agreed, "assuming. He seemed exceptionally upset with her today. Does he just snap? He seemed too gentle."

"I suppose that's why he's a good spy. He seems banal, innocent, safe. People confide in him, and he uses it to his advantage."

Cate shook her head. "I spent most of my dinner wondering how people could do that. I'm not sure I have it in me."

"I suppose they believe they're doing it for the right cause and their country."

Cate remained silent for a moment before Jack spoke again. "Cate, are you sure you want to pursue this?"

"We need to know what happened. Ruth didn't deserve to be killed and buried with no one knowing."

"She likely has no family looking for her and the man we suspected murdered her is dead, too. And she was a spy."

"I know. But she still didn't deserve to die. Plus the time travel is a great diversion from our other problem."

"Good point. Okay, well, I suppose we're off the hook tomorrow with your girls' day out. We can head back on Monday."

"That sounds good."

"You know, speaking of our other problem, I think your day out will do you good. That's why I encouraged you to go."

“I figured,” Cate said. “I caught on when you insisted. At first, I didn’t think it was a good idea, but maybe getting away from the castle will help.”

“It can’t hurt,” Jack said. “I assume you won’t drift into any trances and wander around someone else’s castle.”

“Let’s hope not. That would be even more embarrassing than my waltz.”

“Well, either way, I think you should enjoy your day off.”

“I’ll try,” Cate said with a nod.

Jack climbed from his chair with a groan, leaving her alone for the remaining afternoon and evening hours. After a quick check-in before bed, Cate, Riley and Bailey headed to her suite. The now-familiar music already played in greeting. The dogs settled in as Cate readied herself for the night.

With a pause at the jewelry armoire, Cate pulled the necklace from the drawer and continued across the room to climb into bed, still clutching the ostentatious item. As the little music box filled the air with its music, Cate drifted off to sleep, exhausted from the extra hours added to her day.

Cate awoke the following morning to the tinkling sounds of the music box. The little musical item had played throughout the night, though Cate had slept soundly. Her hand contained an indentation in the shape of the large central sapphire of the necklace.

Cate sat up, wiggling her fingers to loosen them. She reflected on her peaceful night as she eyed the small piano. There seemed to be no rhyme or reason to when the item affected her.

Though whatever triggered her odd affliction seemed to be worsening. She’d risen from retrieving the necklace and returning to bed, to roaming the halls, to full-blown delusions.

As Cate climbed from bed and padded to the bathroom, she tried to recall any details from her trances. Cate glanced into the mirror as she pulled her clothes on. Visions of the blue dress had pressed into her mind yesterday. Where had they come from?

And a room. She vaguely recalled a room. What room? She forced herself to recall details from the episodes. After a moment, another thought danced across her mind. She hurried to her bedroom and retrieved the sapphire necklace. She clasped it around her neck and returned to the mirror, staring at it.

“Think, Cate, think,” she willed herself. She crinkled her brow as she focused on the necklace, her fingertips finding the central blue stone. She

blinked slowly as her mind regressed to another memory. She swept her hair up behind her, holding it in place with one hand. Her head tilted as her mind's eye found what she sought.

A room. With mirrored walls and pillars between them. She wore a satin sapphire blue ball gown. Warm lights shaped as stars hung overhead. Music played and the room seemed to spin.

A cold, wet nose snapped Cate back into reality. Riley stood with his paws planted on her thigh, nudging her free hand.

Cate fought to keep the image in her mind as her focus returned to the present.

"Just a second, buddy," Cate said, as she raced to her bedside. She dug into the drawer of her nightstand and retrieved her journal and a pen. Shuffling through to the first empty page, Cate wrote the details she remembered in the journal that had been used to write about her nightmares of Duke Northcott.

A knock sounded at her door as she scribbled the last piece of information across the page. "Coming!" she shouted, a grin on her face as she perused her efforts to remember something. She hurried to the door in her sitting room and flung it open. "Come in!" she said to a waiting Jack. The dogs scampered over to offer Jack a hearty hello.

"Well, what a greeting! Lady Cate is chipper this morning. I suppose this is directly related to the excellent night's sleep you got last night?"

"I did have an excellent night's sleep, but it's more than that."

Jack's gaze fell to the sapphire necklace around her neck.

"Oh," Cate said, realizing she still wore it. She unclasped it and placed it on the side table near her chaise. "Not that. But related to that. I remembered something."

"Remembered something?"

"Yes, the vision or memory of the room I'm searching for. Remember yesterday I couldn't recall any details of it? But I did remember the dress was blue. Well, this morning, I managed to remember what the room looks like. I wrote it down in my journal."

She handed it to Jack, and he perused the description, his lips curling into a confused expression. "Mirrored walls with stars for lights?" he questioned.

"Yes."

"I don't know of any room like that in the castle," he answered.

“Neither do I, but it must be what I’m searching for. It was very clear this morning.”

“Are you certain it wasn’t a figment of your imagination? Something your mind created to fill in the gap?”

Cate shook her head. “I don’t think so. I’m not that creative,” she said with a coy grin. “I’ll admit the vision of it I had was fleeting, but still I got enough to get a description.”

“I’m not sure how it helps,” Jack said.

“Me either,” Cate admitted. “But I feel like it’s a breakthrough all the same. At least I’m remembering something. What it means, I don’t know.”

“That’s a curious statement,” Jack said after a moment.

“What is?”

“You’re remembering something,” Jack said. “But, to your knowledge, you’ve never had this dress or been to this room.”

Cate pondered it for a moment, her eyebrows shooting upward at his assessment. “You’re right. I’ve never been in this room. Just as I have no knowledge of ever writing that note to myself or of the music box, yet I seem to think I’ve had it in the past. In my trances, I act like I have seen it before.”

“Aye, and other details are distorted. Like you act like you’re surprised to see me.”

“But the vision I had this morning felt like a memory. It’s as though I was remembering something that happened in my past. Like my graduation or a major life event.”

Jack puckered his lips as he processed the information. “Are these false memories somehow planted in your mind?”

Cate’s features fell into a frown. “From the time I spent with Duke Northcott.”

“Did he do anything to you then?”

“No,” Cate answered. “Well, not to my knowledge. But I was gone for sixty hours. And several times, I fell asleep after drinking tea.”

Jack breathed out a deep sigh. “I wonder if he drugged it.”

“And then used my unconscious state to slip false memories into my mind?”

Jack shrugged. “Could be.”

Cate stalked around the room as she pondered it. “I suppose your theory could be correct. Though again, why?”

“That I cannot answer.”

They spent a few moments in silence before Cate shrugged. “Well, I don’t suppose we’ll get any further with this. But at least we’ve made some progress. Very little, but some.”

“More than we’ve made before,” Jack agreed. “And now, we’d better get the pups outside and you to your breakfast. You’ve got a big day today!”

“Right. Maybe I should cancel. Spend more time...”

“Now, Lady Cate, I won’t hear of it. This will be a nice break for you.”

“Oh, well since you insist, then okay!” Cate said with an amused smile.

“I do. And you should listen!”

Cate saluted. “Aye, aye, sir!” she said, before calling the dogs and ushering them through the halls and outside.

After her breakfast, she piled into the car with Molly and waved goodbye to the dogs and Jack as Molly pulled down the drive. “Where are we headed today?” Cate asked.

“Ellon Castle Gardens,” Molly informed her. “It looked pretty in the guidebook. I hope it’s nice.”

“I’m sure it will be.”

“Though no match for Mr. Fraser’s gardens, surely.”

“He’ll be happy to hear you say that,” Cate said.

“You know, I’m not going to other places because I don’t love Dunhaven,” Molly mentioned.

“I know that, Molly,” Cate answered. “You just love to explore. And the country is certainly beautiful enough to do that.”

“I just wanted to make sure you know that.”

Cate squeezed Molly’s arm. “I know that. You love Dunhaven. Bodies in the garden and all.”

“It’s such a shame they never found anything else about that poor person.”

Cate nodded. “Yeah, it is.”

They continued along their journey, arriving in the late morning at the castle gardens. After their stroll through, Molly suggested they grab lunch. They settled on their choices and gave their order to the waitress. As she left, Molly tapped around on her phone.

“Looking for another attraction?”

“No,” Molly said, as she slid the phone away. “Just checking the time.”

They made conversation about Molly's upcoming plans, Cate's first-year anniversary party, and more as they ate. Molly checked her phone several times during the meal. Cate found it odd. Molly usually never fiddled with her phone, preferring the human contact, and not needing the crutch of technology to achieve it.

"How about dessert?" Molly asked, as they finished up their meals.

"Sure," Cate said, assuming Molly had her eye on something scrumptious.

Molly checked her phone several more times as they ate the dessert. She pushed the pie slice around on her plate, dragging out the experience rather than digging in.

"Coffee?" she asked afterward.

"No, thanks. I'm about to burst. But if you'd like some, I'm happy to wait. I don't have any plans today!"

Molly gave her a nervous chuckle. "Uh, no, it's fine."

As the waitress returned to their table, Molly reversed her decision, requesting coffee. She meandered through the cup, sipping at it as if she hoped to make it last as long as possible. As she finished the last of it, the waitress returned with their check.

Cate paid the bill, despite Molly's protests, and they left the restaurant. After a quick consultation of her phone, Molly slid behind the wheel. "Mind if we take a bit of a drive? I'd like to see more of the country out this way. Unless you're in a hurry to get back."

"No, no hurry here."

They spent the early part of the afternoon driving around the eastern coast near Aberdeen. Molly pulled over several times to snap pictures. It didn't escape Cate that she also checked her phone outside of her camera app, too.

After an hour and a half of seemingly aimless driving, Molly said, "Well, I guess we should head back."

"Okay, sounds good to me."

Cate settled into the passenger's seat and let Molly program in Dunhaven Castle as their next destination. They pulled into the driveway in the late afternoon.

Cate made her way to the library, finding Jack, Mr. and Mrs. Fraser, and both dogs waiting there.

"Hi," she said as she entered. "Helping Jack with that puzzle?"

“What puzzle?” Mrs. Fraser inquired as Molly appeared at the door. She glanced at Jack and raised her eyebrows. Jack gave her a slight nod.

“Lady Cate,” Molly began, laying a hand on her shoulder.

“Yes?” Cate asked. A sinking feeling welled in the pit of her stomach. Why did this seem strangely like an intervention? Perhaps Jack was more concerned about her behavior of late than he let on. Did he tell the others?

CHAPTER 28



She glanced around at the others who had risen to stand. A nervous smile crossed her face and she swallowed hard. “Your one-year anniversary as Countess of Dunhavenshire is coming up. And we know it’s not until June, but...” Molly continued.

“We couldn’t wait any longer,” Mrs. Fraser jumped in. An excited grin filled her face. “And we didn’t think you should have to wait all the way until June.”

“Wait for what?” Cate asked.

“We got you a gift,” Jack said.

“A gift? You didn’t have to do that.” Cate’s shoulders slumped in relief.

“We did,” Mrs. Fraser insisted with a curt nod.

“That’s the weird vibe you’ve been getting from us the past few months,” Molly said.

Cate lifted her chin and pressed her lips together as understanding dawned on her. Memories of odd, interrupted conversations floated into her mind.

“Aye, we were picking out the perfect one, discussing it and deciding on everything and so on,” Mrs. Fraser said. “Then young Jack had to order it.”

“It arrived a few days ago and we hid it. Then we had to get it ready. Hence the long drive around the Scottish countryside today,” Molly said with a laugh.

“That’s why you kept checking your phone.”

“Yes,” Molly answered. “A certain two someone’s took longer than I bargained for.”

“It had to be perfect,” Mr. Fraser said.

“And I had to drive practically back to the States to give you time to get it there,” Molly teased with a tongue-in-cheek grin.

“Anyway,” Mrs. Fraser said. “It’s ready. But you’ll have to go outside to see it.”

“Okay,” Cate agreed.

The group gathered in front of the castle.

“Close your eyes,” Jack instructed.

“Really?” Cate inquired.

“Yes!” Molly insisted.

“All right,” Cate said, with a roll of her eyes. She squeezed her eyes closed.

“It’s a bit of a walk,” Jack said as he scooped her up.

“Whoa!” Cate exclaimed.

“And no opening your eyes.”

“I voted for a blindfold,” Mrs. Fraser said.

“I’m keeping them closed!” Cate exclaimed, as she hung onto Jack.

They walked for a bit before Jack carefully set her on the ground. Molly’s hands covered her eyes as her feet touched the ground. “I’m not peeking!” she insisted.

“Just in case,” Molly said. “Ready?”

“I’ve been ready since you made me close my eyes at the front of the castle,” Cate said with a chuckle.

Molly removed her hands and Cate blinked her eyes open. They stood at the loch. Under the large tree nearby sat a beige two-seater bench.

Cate’s jaw dropped open and her eyes lit up at the sight. “You got me a bench to sit on!”

“Aye, no more sitting on the ground,” Jack said with a grin.

“And,” Mrs. Fraser added, giving it a push, “it rocks.”

A smile beamed from Cate’s face. “It does!” She ran her hand along it.

“And it’s made from Polywood, making it impervious to weather,” Mr. Fraser chimed in.

“Give it a try, Lady Cate!” Molly exclaimed.

Cate rounded it, noting the final touch. “It has my name on it!” she said as tears pricked her eyes. Engraved in one of the Plywood planks was the

message: *Lady Cate's thinking spot.*

She slid into the seat and set the glider in motion.

"Thank you, everyone," she said with a smile. "Though you didn't have to do this. And you didn't have to keep it a secret. Poor Molly had to drink cold coffee just to drag out our day."

Molly chuckled. "It was terrible. But all in the name of the secret!"

"We did so have to keep it secret," Mrs. Fraser said. "Though I was the one who suggested we give it to you early. Not only because you could use it, but because I doubted some of us could keep quiet long enough." She eyed Molly and Jack.

Molly shrugged. "I can't help it!"

"Well," Cate answered, as she set both dogs on the bench next to her, "I certainly can use it, so thank you. And I love it!"

She rose from the bench and gave each of them a warm hug and another thank you.

"Well, I suppose we should go and allow Lady Cate to enjoy her new gift in peace," Mrs. Fraser suggested.

"No," Cate said. "As excited as I am to sit and look over the loch, I'm coming back with you."

"You still have some time before the sun sets," Molly said.

"I know. And I'm very excited to use my gift. But I'd rather spend the time with the people who got it for me. Who's up for a little ice cream to celebrate?"

Cate spent the rest of her day enjoying time with her friends. After insisting on a pizza order for dinner and following up with ice cream, they spent the time talking, laughing, and even making some progress on Mr. Smythe's puzzle of Dunhaven Castle.

The smile hadn't faded from Cate's face even as she climbed into bed. The little music box added to her jovial mood, providing lovely background music as she slid between the sheets.

She turned onto her side to stare at the outline of the piano, limned in the moonlight streaming from the window. With the sapphire necklace clutched in her hand, she closed her eyes and drifted off to sleep.

* * *

Cate startled awake. She gulped in air as she glanced around the room, trying to orient herself. She was curled in her armchair in the library, a blanket draped across her. A fire glowed in the fireplace. Jack snored softly in the armchair next to her.

Cate struggled to recall how she came to be here. As she fidgeted in her seat, Jack shifted, his eyes opening. He blinked a few times, then straightened in his seat. "Cate?" he said, rubbing his eyes, sleep still lacing his voice.

"What happened?" Cate inquired. Her hand found the sapphire necklace clasped around her neck.

"You were in another trance," he answered, as he rubbed his eyes and stretched.

"What did I do this time?"

Jack grabbed his phone and pulled up his camera app. "The app notified me of your movements. I found you in the hall." He tapped the play button.

Cate, clad in her robe and slippers, wandered down the hall. The necklace was already clasped around her neck, its sparkling sapphires and diamonds peeking from under her robe's collar. She held the music box in her hands. "At least I had the good sense to put on my robe and slippers," Cate said with a sigh.

On-screen, Jack asked Cate where she was going. "I have to find it," she murmured.

"What are you looking for, Cate?"

Cate rounded a corner. "Cate? What are you searching for? I'd like to help."

"I have to find the dress," on-screen Cate answered.

"That dress again," Cate said, as she watched herself on the video.

"Keep watching," Jack said.

Cate wandered around the castle, stopping at a few doors before she shook her head and continued. After a few stops, she ducked inside a room and rustled through a trunk.

"Where did I put it?" she lamented.

"Do you remember where you saw it last?"

Cate stood still for a moment, unresponsive. "Cate? Do you know what year it is? Can you hear me?"

Cate approached a mirror and stared into it. Jack crossed behind her. Cate caught sight of him, spinning to face him. "Jack! You're here!"

“Yes. I’m here, Cate. Do you know where here is?”

“Of course, I do.” The smile faded from her face. “I have to find my dress.”

“I’d like to help you.”

Cate held up a finger. “I have an idea!”

The video bobbed as Cate spun on her heel and hurried from the room. Jack raced behind her. She threaded through the halls, arriving at the stairs leading to one of the turrets. Cate stared up the stairs before she hurried up them.

Jack followed her. Cate flung the door at the top open and scanned the room. The large wardrobe stood against the opposite wall, as it had for centuries. Trunks and boxes littered the rest of the space.

Cate scanned the room before she hurried to the wardrobe. She pulled it open. Inside, a neatly folded sapphire blue dress sat. Setting the music box down in the wardrobe, Cate grasped it and pulled it from the wardrobe. A smile lit her face.

“I found it!” she said as she spun to face Jack. She held up the dress in front of her with a wide grin. Red roses embroidered with chenille thread trimmed the silk sapphire dress. With short sleeves and a silk ribbon under the bust, the skirt flowed down into a flowy, trumpet bottom.

“It’s lovely, isn’t it?” Cate asked.

“It’s very pretty, Lady Cate,” Jack answered.

“I looked pretty in it when I wore it last,” Cate said.

“When did you wear it last?” Jack inquired.

“To the ball,” she answered.

“What ball, Cate? When?”

Cate’s brow furrowed as she considered the question. “It was...” The crinkle in her brow deepened. Her breathing turned ragged, and a pained expression crossed her face. She shook her head before she clutched at it. “I can’t...” she croaked.

She slid to the floor, still clutching the gown. The video cut off.

“You passed out and I carried you here. I didn’t know what state you’d wake up in, so I didn’t want to leave you alone.”

Cate sighed. “Thank you. I’m so sorry to have ruined your night’s sleep.”

“It’s no bother, Cate,” Jack said.

“So, I found the dress.” She pulled the phone from Jack’s hand and rewound the video. She paused it as she held the dress against her and stared at the image frozen on the screen.

“Appears so. Have you ever seen it before? I haven’t, you didn’t wear it to any of the balls you’ve hosted.”

“No,” Cate answered as she studied it. “It looks like its early 1800s, maybe a decade or so after the turn of the century.”

“Could it be before the turn of the century? Maybe the 1790s?”

“It’s hard to say without a better look, but I’d say this looks later than that. The puffed sleeves and length suggest that. Though I can’t be sure. Even so, I never wore this dress when we traveled to 1792.”

“No, you didn’t. The color is similar to... never mind.” Jack waved his comment away.

“It’s okay, you can say it. It’s similar to the dress Duke Northcott gave me.”

Jack nodded. “Aye.”

“A fact that hasn’t escaped me,” Cate said. “Is it still in the tower?”

“Aye,” Jack said. “Should I move it?”

“No,” Cate said. “No, I don’t want to spend more nights roaming the castle in search of it.”

“But perhaps giving it to you will make this worse.”

“And perhaps it will bring us more information.”

“Or maybe a trance you don’t come out of.”

“Either way, hiding it or moving it doesn’t seem to work. If it’s anything like the other items involved, it’ll just show up in my bedroom.”

“Good point. We’re fighting a losing battle.”

“Did you send the video to Damien?” Cate inquired, changing the subject.

Jack shook his head. “No, I didn’t think it shed any additional light, but I can if you’d like.”

“It may not matter.” Cate glanced to the clock on the mantle. It read 5:47 a.m. “It’s the middle of the night there now. We can wait.”

Jack nodded.

“I suppose it’s time to get up for our day, though,” Cate said after a moment.

With a yawn and another stretch, Jack agreed with a nod.

“You feel okay to go back to your bedroom?”

“Yep. Other than a mild haze, I’m fine. It’s so odd.”

“Okay, see you at breakfast, then.”

Cate climbed the stairs to her bedroom. Both dogs still lounged in bed, barely moving when she crept into the room. The music box sat on her nightstand again. “Made your way home, huh?”

Riley lifted his head and gave her a sleepy glance before he collapsed back onto the bed. Cate removed the necklace and stowed it in the jewelry armoire. It appeared the dress hadn’t wandered to her bed mysteriously. She supposed she should retrieve it and put it somewhere closer to avoid roaming around the castle in a trance.

She’d do it later in the morning, she decided. First, she planned to have breakfast with her staff, followed by a long walk and a relaxing rock on her new gliding bench by the loch.

After her leisurely breakfast and stroll, Cate climbed the tower stairs. The door at the top still stood open from her escapade last night. With some trepidation, she climbed the final few stairs and glanced into the tower room.

Across the room, a silk dress lay sprawled on the floor. Cate drew in a deep breath as she stared at it, before crossing to pick it up. The fabric, soft and silky, was of a high quality. The dress must have been expensive in its time. Cate studied it again, pulling her cell phone from her pocket and comparing the features of the dress to photos of dresses from various eras. She narrowed it down to the 1810s, as she suspected.

She shoved her phone back into her pocket and swept the dress into her arms, carrying it down to her suite. She pushed into her sitting room and wandered to the bedroom. Standing in front of the full-length mirror, she held the dress in front of her.

The blue brought out the blue in her eyes. The neckline seemed to be tailored to perfectly outline the sapphire necklace. Cate wandered to the jewelry armoire and pulled the necklace from the drawer. Returning to the mirror, she held it up with the dress. It matched perfectly in shape and color.

She stared into the mirror. The image of the room entered her mind again. The world around her began to transform. A musky scent filled her nostrils. Candlelight lit her face. She wore the dress and the necklace. Her hair was pulled up with curled tendrils framing her face. A blue silk ribbon and strand of pearls decorated the elaborate curls arranged on her crown.

A garbled voice spoke to her. “Ready, my dear?” it said.

Cate turned to the side and stretched out her arm, reaching for whoever spoke to her.

“Cate,” Jack said.

Cate’s eyebrows squished together as lightheadedness swept over her. She shook her head, making the dizziness worse. Her knees began to wobble, and her legs turned to jelly. She stumbled forward a step before her world went black.

CHAPTER 29



Cate awoke on her bed with Jack's concerned face hovering over her. "Cate?" he questioned as her eyelids fluttered open.

"Jack?" she questioned, her voice hoarse. "What happened?"

"You were staring in the mirror holding up the dress and the necklace. And then you collapsed."

Cate attempted to sit up, but a wave of dizziness passed over her. She collapsed back to the pillows.

"Easy, Cate." Jack palmed his phone and tapped around.

"What are you doing?"

"Calling Damien."

"No," Cate said, placing her hand on his. "I'm fine, just a little lightheaded."

"Cate, this is getting more and more serious by the minute. Now you're passing out every time you experience one of these trances."

Cate eased herself up to sit. "The dizziness is passing," she reported as her mind churned.

"What is it?" Jack asked as she sat pensively.

"Can I see the video from last night?"

Jack opened his camera app and handed it to her. She replayed the video three times. She swiped back to the previous video, speeding through her waltz around the west wing's massive space. She grabbed her phone, opened the camera cube's app, and found the video from her bedroom camera today. She played it twice.

“What is it, Cate?”

“Every time I collapse, it seems to be when I’m trying to recall details or physically trying to reach something in the trance.”

Jack considered the statement, rubbing his finger along his chin. “What are you saying?”

“That my passing out is related to a break in continuity in my trance. When a question is asked that I can’t answer or there is an object that I can’t reach, it must cause some issue with my mind and I just implode, for lack of a better word. Fainting is the body’s way of ‘resetting,’ like rebooting a computer.”

“So, your brain is resetting because it can’t access whatever it needs to.”

“Right, that’s my theory.”

“I think we should pass that along to Damien.”

“Okay,” Cate said. “I’ll text him.”

Jack blew out a long breath as Cate typed out the message.

“I can’t believe I’m saying this, but I can’t wait until we time travel after lunch. At least then you’re normal and I don’t have to worry about you passing out.”

“No, we only have to worry about figuring out if Hans killed Ruth and why,” Cate said.

“Never thought I’d see the day where murder was the least of our problems.”

“Things sure have taken an odd turn since we met the Buckleys,” Cate said, as she slid off the bed and stood.

“You okay?” Jack inquired.

“Yeah, no dizziness or weak legs.” Cate crossed the room and snatched the dress and necklace off the floor where they’d landed when she’s taken her nosedive. With them both put away, Jack walked her down to the library for her meal.

As she ate, her cell phone chimed with a message from Damien. *Seems to be getting worse but the good news is we may be getting closer to a solution. Will let you know more when we have it. In the meantime, any chance you can stay in the past for a bit?*

Cate chuckled at his message. The idea of asking Jack to stay in the past for longer than a few hours at a time was almost comical. Cate answered by thanking him and telling him she’d be spending at least a few hours there today.

They continued with a brief conversation as she finished her meal. Jack met her immediately following lunch and they headed upstairs for the normal routine of changing clothes and meeting outside her door, before traversing into the secret passage and slipping back to September 20th, 1942.

“At least the weather’s better,” Jack said, as they stepped into a cloudy, but dry day.

“Yes,” Cate said. “One day before the disappearance.”

“I suppose we should keep our eyes on Ruth. See if there are any additional clues to why Hans murders her.”

“Perhaps he decided not to go through with the spying. He didn’t seem keen on it yesterday.”

“No, but that’s what makes it even more curious.”

“How so?”

“If he’s opposed to spying because he feels these people are his friends, you’d think he’d object to murder.”

“Perhaps she forced his hand. Or it was an accident and he panicked.”

“We’ll do our best to find out.”

Cate nodded as they reached the castle and entered.

“Hey, we never got the chance to check out the room in the west wing yesterday,” Cate said.

“Want to try it now? We’ve got some time to kill.”

“Sure,” Cate said.

They threaded through the halls on their way to the west wing and entered through the large double doors. “Didn’t need my keys again,” Jack noted.

“Rory seems like he wouldn’t lock up unused wings.”

“You’re right. He has a rosy view of the world. He probably doesn’t see the need.”

They wound toward the room Cate seemed drawn to in the present. As they passed the music hall, Cate inched to the doors and pressed her ear against them.

“Just checking,” she said, as she flicked her gaze to Jack. After a quick peek inside, they continued down the hall.

Voices floated through the air as they rounded the corner. The door to the large hall stood open a crack. Cate stopped walking, her eyes widening as she glanced at Jack.

He held a finger to his lips, and they crept forward. Cate peeked through the crack in the door. Ruth stood inside, her arms crossed as she stared up at a man. To Cate's surprise, the man was not Hans. Victor Richard stood inside the room, his hands clasped behind his back as he stared at Ruth with a sour expression.

Cate's jaw unhinged as she glanced at Jack. Jack returned the surprised expression, and they returned their attention to the conversation in the room.

"How did this happen?" Ruth inquired.

"I don't know," Victor answered.

"You were supposed to prevent this from happening!" Ruth exclaimed. "Hans never should have had access to those communiques."

"I've done my best. I can only do so much before people begin to suspect."

Cate furrowed her brow at the conversation. Was Victor also a part of the spy ring?

"Tell that to der Fuhrer when he demands to know why the code, which has gone indecipherable for months, has now suddenly become readable to the British."

Victor wrinkled his nose at Ruth's statement. "I'll handle it," he growled.

"You'd better. Because if that message ever reaches Bletchley Park, it will ruin our chances for victory."

"It won't," Victor spat.

"We'll see. If it does, it'll be you whom I hang this noose around. Your days with the Reich are finished!"

Ruth took a step toward the door before Victor grabbed her arm. "Careful who you threaten, Brigitta. I worked hard for my place in the party. I'm not going to let it all go for naught because of you."

Cate began to fall backward as Jack tugged her away. They hurried as silently as possible down the hall and Jack pushed her through the doors into the music room before easing them shut behind them.

"OMG," Cate mouthed to Jack.

He nodded but held his finger to his lips again. High-heeled shoes clicked off the tile floor as Ruth, or Brigitta, stormed past the room. More footsteps followed, signaling Victor's return to the main castle.

They waited several more moments in silence before Jack inched open the door and peered into the hall.

“Looks clear,” he said.

Cate nodded and they navigated through the halls to their suite in silence. “OH MY GOODNESS,” Cate burst, as Jack closed the doors behind them.

Jack shook his head in disbelief.

“What is going on here?” Cate inquired, as she sank onto the chaise.

“Victor is a spy, obviously,” Jack said.

“Yes, and so is Ruth. Or Brigitta, or whatever her name really is; that much is clear. But what is Hans?”

“Also a spy?” Jack inquired.

“He can’t be. He’s the one who discovered whatever the Reich didn’t want him to.”

Cate pondered the latest information. “Yesterday, we assumed Hans and Ruth were the German spies. But today it seems like it’s Ruth and Victor.”

“Oh! I’ve got it!” Jack exclaimed. “Ruth is a double agent!”

“Possibly, yes. But which side is her true affiliation with? And what did she want Hans to do that he seemed to refuse so vehemently?”

“Maybe they’re both spies – Hans and Victor – and she’s playing them against each other for her own gain,” Jack suggested.

Cate bit her lower lip. “This is becoming very tangled. And now it is much less clear who killed her.”

“After the conversation we just heard, it very well could be Victor.”

Cate nodded in agreement. “Yes, in fact, I’d say he may be the more likely culprit. And it would explain why there’s no information on him. Victor Richard is not his real name.”

“Neither is Ruth Harper,” Jack noted. “I wonder if you’d get anywhere with Brigitta.”

Cate fell silent as the facts bounced around in her head. “There’s one other person whose name I couldn’t find anywhere either. Rita. Could she be connected?”

Jack threw his arms in the air as he paced the floor. “How many bloody spies are there here?”

“I’m not sure, but I think we should speak with Amelia.”

“And tell her what? Your traveling companion is a Nazi spy and so are a few other people, we’re just not sure who yet?”

“Something like that,” Cate said.

“Cate! We can’t!”

Cate’s shoulders slumped. “Jack, if they succeed, this could ruin the war efforts.”

“They don’t succeed, though, right? We know this.”

Cate considered it. “Yes, eventually Bletchley Park managed to work through whatever stymied their efforts in the early parts of this year and decipher the Enigma code, but...”

“But?”

“But what if that was only because whatever message Ruth said couldn’t get to Bletchley did get to Bletchley?”

“Because Ruth was killed,” Jack said.

“By Hans!” Cate exclaimed. “Hans kills her to make sure the message gets through.”

“A likely scenario. And one we shouldn’t disturb by talking to Amelia. In fact, I’m leery about disturbing things more than we have already.”

“Do you want to go home?”

Jack considered it. “I don’t want to go if it’ll mean you’ll suffer from another trance.”

“Okay,” Cate said. “Then let’s stay for dinner as we planned and head back after.”

Jack nodded. “Okay.”

They bided their time, pacing the floor of their suite as they waited for the dinner hour to approach. As Jack escorted her down to the sitting room for cocktails, Cate felt unease creep into her shoulders. They were immersed in a web of spies, secrecy, and deep state secrets big enough to commit murder over. She offered a nervous glance and fleeting smile at Jack before they stepped into the sitting room.

They were the last to arrive at the party. Cate swore a pall hung over the room. She sipped at her sherry as she eyed the four suspects in the room. Which of them were allies? Which were foes? And which would turn out to be a murderer?

Cate found herself distracted through most of the dinner. Conversation was stilted on her part by her general unease. With Rory on one side of her and Hans on the other, Cate struggled to make polite conversation as her mind churned through the latest developments.

Across the table, Cate noted Rita managed to wrangle the seat on Jack's left again, while Amelia sat on his right. That left Ruth sandwiched between Hans and Victor. The irony did not escape Cate as she watched the woman converse with both men. Which was she betraying? Which would murder her?

Cate and Jack retired shortly after dinner and returned to their own time.

"Whew," Jack exclaimed, as the second hand returned to normal speed, indicating their arrival in the present. "What a day."

"I agree. I'm exhausted just thinking through the possibilities."

"Should we talk through them and then a plan for tomorrow?"

"Okay," Cate said.

They parted ways, reconvening in the library after they returned to their normal duds.

"My mind is racing in a thousand directions," Cate admitted, as she plopped into the armchair.

Jack sighed. "Yep. We thought we had this all figured out and then Victor decided to be a spy."

"I couldn't help but notice the irony of Ruth sitting between Victor and Hans," Cate said.

"And here I figured all you noticed was Rita finagling a seat next to me for the third night in a row."

"That didn't escape me, either," Cate said with an unimpressed glance. "And speaking of Rita, what is her deal? How is she involved?"

"Maybe she isn't," Jack suggested.

Cate narrowed her eyes at the statement. "Doubt it," she retorted. "I couldn't find her in any records, either."

"Working off that theory, perhaps Hans is British intelligence and isn't our murderer."

"Because we found him under his real name?"

"Aye. The others are using assumed names, obviously."

"Which you think makes them the more likely suspects for the murder," Cate surmised.

Jack nodded.

"So, what's our next move?" Cate asked.

"Well, I suppose we should go back and at least ensure whatever message must get to Bletchley from Dunhaven makes it there via Hans, or whoever."

“And hopefully discover a murderer, too.”

“We’ll head back tomorrow, same time as today?”

“It seems to be the most active time.”

“Okay, sounds like a plan,” Jack said.

* * *

Cate spent the remaining afternoon hours searching for any information on German spies in the World War II era. In particular, she searched for any names that may be familiar, such as Brigitta. She found little information and gave up in favor of dinner and an evening walk.

She stared up at the castle on her return trip. Would they solve the mystery in 1942? And would she experience another trance tonight?

What if she became stuck in it this time? With the dress, music box and necklace, did she have all the components she needed to be sucked into her own mind? Worry grew in her and her shoulders tensed as she approached the castle’s facade.

With a deep breath, she pushed inside. Whatever she was dealing with, she’d have to face it one way or another. She just hoped she liked the outcome.

CHAPTER 30



Cate's eyelids fluttered. She blinked slowly as her senses began to return. With bleary eyes, her gaze darted around as her pulse quickened and she gasped in breaths.

"Easy, Cate," Jack said.

She clutched his arm, her head in his lap. "What happened?" she whispered.

Cate recognized her surroundings. She laid on the floor in the large hall in the west wing. Jack sat with her cradled in his arms.

"You had another episode," Jack said.

Cate glanced down at her attire. No longer clad in her pajamas, she now wore the sapphire blue dress. The necklace hung around her neck. Her hair had been pulled up into an upswept style.

"Looks like it was a doozy," she said, as she surveyed her attire.

"Outside of your rather formal attire, it was much the same as it was before. I caught up to you in the hall. You wandered here and started pawing at the pillar. You kept saying you had to find it."

"I must be searching for the room," Cate said, pushing herself up to sit.

"Easy."

"I'm okay. And I feel ridiculous laying on the floor. Why do I think the room is here?"

"I'm not certain. I've checked that pillar and I don't see anything odd on it."

Cate reached her hand out. "Help me up," she asked.

Jack climbed to his feet and pulled Cate up to stand. She approached the pillar and studied it, reaching out and touching or pushing various pieces.

"I don't see anything either," she admitted. "What snapped me out of it this time?"

"You got exceptionally upset about 'finding it' – or rather not finding whatever it was you were searching for. You were near tears and then you collapsed."

Cate inhaled deeply. "I wish I would have found it. This is getting old."

"Cate, I'm not sure I want you to find this room or whatever you're looking for. I'm afraid of what's going to happen when you do."

"Maybe I'll finally snap out of this nonsense."

Jack approached her and took her hands in his. He shook his head, worry creasing his forehead. "Cate, I'm afraid of what may happen to you," he said, his voice just above a whisper.

Cate squeezed his hands. "That's not going to happen."

"Isn't it? How do we know that?"

"Damien never mentioned it as an outcome."

"That doesn't mean it won't happen," Jack said.

Cate sighed as Jack pulled her into an embrace. "I'll always fight to come back," she said.

She glanced up at him. He stared down at her. He cupped her face in his hands. After a moment, he said, "We probably should go."

Cate nodded as she reached up to squeeze his hand. "With any luck, we can get a few more hours of sleep."

"Again, I find myself looking forward to going back to the past. It's the one place you're safe."

They strode from the room. "I'm safe here, too, Jack," Cate reassured him. "I'll always be safe with you here. Reids and MacKenzies, remember?"

"I appreciate the vote of confidence, Cate. But I feel like I'm failing miserably at protecting you."

"You're not. We'll be okay. As long as we're together." Cate gave his hand another squeeze before they parted ways.

As Cate closed the door to her suite, she collapsed against it with a heavy sigh. Her mind spun to the future. She squeezed her eyes shut as Jack's statement rang in her mind. What would happen once she found that room? Was Jack correct? Would she disappear into her own mind?

* * *

Cate arose early the next morning. She hadn't had much luck sleeping after the incident with the dress. She spent most of the remaining wee hours of the morning pacing the floor of her suite. She'd removed the collar cam from around her wrist so the camera would not alert Jack to her restlessness.

She dozed off on her chaise for a few moments before the sun rose over the moors. The moment the light began to paint the morning sky brilliant shades of pink and red, she rose and dressed for her day. Anxiousness filled her, not only about her current issues with the west wing and sapphire dress and necklace, but also concerning their trip to 1942.

What would they find? Could they ferret out the murderer? Questions surged in Cate's mind as she took the dogs for an early morning stroll, settling on her new bench to watch the sun rise higher into the sky.

Jack strolled to her location by the loch before she'd returned to the castle.

"Morning," he said as he approached her.

She offered him a weak smile. "Good morning." She patted the bench next to her.

Jack eased onto it, searching her face for any clues about her well-being. "I'm fine," she said before he could ask.

"Did you get any sleep?"

"Not really. You?"

"I stared at my phone all night in case you needed me."

Cate drew her lips into a thin line. "I'm sorry."

"It's not your fault, Cate," Jack said, as he settled back onto the bench and stared at the sunrise.

Cate blew out a long breath. "I can't wait to go back to 1942, though I'm afraid of what we'll find there, too."

"Like I said, at least in 1942 I know you're safe. Now, we better be getting back for breakfast before Mrs. Fraser starts to worry."

"We do not need that," Cate said with a chuckle. "Come on, boys."

She and Jack returned to the castle and Cate collected her breakfast and headed to the library. She toyed with the puzzle pieces as she attempted to focus on something other than the two major issues looming in her life. As mid-morning approached, her phone chimed.

Cate found a message from Damien. *Hey Cate, how are things?*

Cate smiled at the message, though her smile quickly faded as she considered her answer. *Thanks for checking. Things have been better. I had another episode last night.*

Damien responded quickly. *Sorry to hear that. What happened?*

Cate typed up the gory details, sending a message containing as much information as she could. *I put the dress on, pulled my hair up, put on the necklace and headed for that room in the west wing. Jack said I kept insisting on finding something and became really upset when I couldn't find whatever I was searching for. Then I passed out. I have no memory of this at all. I woke up on the floor.*

Damien responded a few moments later. *I'm sorry this is happening to you, Cate. Can I ask you a few questions about it? We may be on to something here. If you're not up to it, that's fine.*

Cate answered: *I'll answer anything you want, ask away! And THANK YOU for all this help.*

A message came back a moment later: *Of course, Cate! We're happy to help. Alexander and I have been pouring over his reference library and we found a few leads. I just need more information to narrow it down.*

Another text came shortly after the first. *Any headaches?*

Cate searched her memory. *Not consistently. In a few of the trances, I seem to have experienced some pain but nothing before or after the episodes or in general, no.*

Damien answered a few moments later. *Okay, next question. Dizziness?*

Cate nodded as she typed into her phone. *Yes. I did experience that after collapsing the other day. I had to lay down for a few moments after the episode. This last time Jack wouldn't let me sit up until I had fully recovered so I'm not sure.*

Damien responded: *Okay, noted. Nausea?*

Cate shook her head and typed: *No (thankfully!).*

Damien returned her message with a smiley emoticon followed by another question. *Lack of focus or clouded mind?*

Cate answered: *Yes, definitely. It does clear with time travel but sometimes I can't focus, and it seems like those are the times when I've slipped into a trance while awake. Much of the time, I slip into them when I'm asleep.*

Damien answered: *Okay, so most instances are nocturnal.*

Cate typed: *Yes, though I have slipped into them while awake a few times.*

Damien sent another message to clarify. *And you've lost time in every instance, right?*

Cate confirmed the lack of memory or "time losses" in every instance. She also included the details of what she recalled in terms of what the room she sought, and the other odd comments she'd uttered during her trances.

She followed up with a final message stating: *I don't understand why I seem to have "memories" that aren't mine?! These feel like memories, but I've never had a dress like this, never had this music box, never went to the 1810s. Why am I acting like I have?*

After a few moments, Damien responded: *It may be connected to what's happening to you. I don't have any more questions right now, but this will help us sort through the possibilities. We have a few leads. I'll get back to you as soon as we search them all out INCLUDING solutions!*

Cate sent a "thank you" back in all capitals before returning to her puzzle. She found herself unable to focus, though she wasn't certain that it was a side effect from whatever she was suffering from or the general tension of the two mysteries.

Cate rubbed at the back of her neck as her mind shot in several different directions. She considered returning to the west wing to seek answers while she was more awake and cognizant. The concept of disappearing into herself before she ever determined what happened in 1942 stopped her.

Instead, she frittered away her hours with another walk outside and a long contemplation near the loch. She forced her lunch down and sat drumming her fingers on the desk as she awaited Jack.

He appeared in the doorway moments after Molly collected her tray and she leapt from her seat. "Ready?"

"Uh, I guess," Jack said. "I hoped to find out how you were feeling and how your morning went first."

"It was okay. I talked to Damien. He asked me a bunch of questions about my symptoms. He said they had a few leads and would be back to me soon with an answer and a few solutions. Here's to hoping!"

Jack nodded. "Let's hope. Okay, I guess we can get going then."

Cate led the way and they separated to change clothes, meeting in the hall and heading to the secret passage and 1942.

Cate blew out a long breath as the timepiece slowed. "Moment of truth today," she said.

"Aye. Should we head to the west wing again?"

"Maybe third time's the charm," Cate said. They reached the end of the passage, and exited the crypt into the bright sunshine beyond.

Jack nodded and they started up the path to the castle. After a moment he puckered his lips and flicked his glance to Cate. "Wait, did you mean third time's the charm for exploring that room, or getting information about our spies?"

"Either? Both. Doesn't matter, it'd just be nice to move forward on some front."

"I agree. Boy, I hope we don't find Rita and Ruth engaged in an argument there."

"Why?"

"Because then we'll have another suspect, and we may never know who did it. There'll be too many to keep an eye on."

"Who's our first priority to track?"

"I'd say Victor," Jack said. "He's definitely on the German side."

"Which may also be Ruth's side."

"Good point," Jack said. "So maybe it should be Hans."

Cate nodded. "Though he really doesn't seem the murderous type."

"So, Victor?"

Cate opened her mouth, flicking her gaze to Jack. "No," he answered.

"I didn't say anything yet."

"We're *not* splitting up!"

Cate grimaced. "I didn't suggest that."

"No, but you were about to. And that's not happening. Every time we have ever split up it's been a disaster."

"All right. It's just like you said, there are too many people to keep an eye on."

"So, we'll have to go with the most likely suspect. Which I still say is Victor."

"I'd agree," Cate said, as they pushed into the castle.

"Oh golly, I've won a debate with Lady Cate. I'm in shock."

"That's very funny, Jack. Come on," she said, leading him through the halls toward the west wing.

“You know, I have to say, this is the first time I’m enjoying time travel with you.”

“Oh really? Is it because there’re bathrooms and electricity?”

“No, it’s because I’ve won a debate *and* you are normal in this time.”

“Sorry I’m abnormal in the present,” Cate lamented, as they strolled down the wide entrance to the west wing.

Jack put his arm around Cate’s shoulders and gave her a squeeze. “I like you either way. I just like not having to worry about you here.”

They slowed as they approached the first entrance to the music hall. Cate pressed her ear to the door before easing it open. They stepped into the empty room, their footsteps echoing off the large space.

“On to the famous grand hall!” Jack said.

They left through the second entrance in the music hall and snuck down the hall. They stopped several feet from the golden doors and strained for any sounds. None came so they continued toward the doors, still moving as noiselessly as possible.

Cate pressed her ear against the door then shook her head at Jack. She eased one door open, peering inside. After shifting her gaze around as much as the crack allowed, she eased the door back further. They found the room empty.

“I’m not sure if I’m pleased or not about finding no one here,” Cate said, her voice echoing in the large space as they stepped inside.

“Feel okay?” Jack inquired, shooting her a sideways glance.

“Yep. This room doesn’t seem to have any weird effects on me here.” Cate shrugged as she approached the pillar she seemed to be drawn to in her time.

She studied it again. Nothing new jumped out at her. Jack joined her, feeling around on the pillar for any secret triggers or compartments.

“I don’t see anything, Lady Cate.”

“Neither do I,” Cate admitted. She sighed and glanced around the space, searching for anything to clue them in to what she sought in this room.

“The dogs were at this wall,” Cate said, stalking across the room.

She ran her hand over it, hoping to find some clue as to what was behind it. Jack approached and pounded against it. “This is an interior wall,” he said. “There could be something behind it.”

“I don’t see a trigger,” Cate said.

“How could you with all this gold covering the walls?”

Cate shrugged as she tugged at a wall fixture. After a moment, she frowned and spun around, leaning her back against the wall as she crossed her arms and huffed.

“Maybe the trigger is somewhere else in the room?” Jack said, phrasing it as a question.

Cate lifted her eyebrows. “Maybe,” she murmured. “Though why am I drawn to that pillar?”

“Cate, you’re in a trance. Who knows if you’re thinking straight?”

“I’m thinking straight enough to come here!” she countered. “To put on a necklace, and to get dressed!” Cate shook her head in frustration.

“I know you’re frustrated, Cate, but we’ll figure something out.”

She nodded, her arms still folded tightly over her chest and flicked her gaze across the room. Her brow crinkled and she cocked her head. “What is that?” she questioned.

Across the room, a dull spot broke up the otherwise shiny, reflective flooring. “What’s what?” Jack inquired, following her gaze.

“That spot on the floor,” Cate answered as she stepped toward it.

As she approached, she discovered it to be a small scrap of newspaper. Cate snatched it from the floor. The side facing her contained a partial date: *ber, 21, 1942*. An imprint indicated a message had been scrawled on the back. She flipped it over to read.

Meet me at 10 p.m. in the folly. Urgent. Mission-critical.

CHAPTER 31



Cate's eyes went wide, and her eyebrows shot toward her hairline. "Jack!" she exclaimed as he joined her, peering over her shoulder at the note.

"Do you think this was from today?" Jack inquired.

"Yes," Cate said, flipping the paper over. "It's from the paper printed today."

"Aye, so it is. Who do you think it's from?"

"I'm not sure," Cate said. "But this is our first solid clue as to where we may learn just what happened to Ruth Harper."

"Guess we'll head to the folly tonight and unmask a killer."

Cate nodded her agreement. She glanced at Jack's watch. "It's almost half-past three. We've got a few hours to kill."

"Aye, I suppose we'll do that in the comfort of our suite. Unless you'd like to continue poking around in here."

"I don't see the point. And I don't want to be in here if a pair of spies attempt to use it for a meeting spot."

"Good point. Let's go."

They threaded back through the halls and slipped into the privacy of their bedroom suite. A note from Rory awaited them.

"Oh, no," Jack groaned as he read the note.

"What is it?" Cate asked, her stomach somersaulting. She leapt from her seat on the chaise. "Is it Ruth? Have we missed it?"

"No, he's canceled dinner."

Cate puckered her lips in an unimpressed expression.

“He says we can request a tray be brought up, but Amelia’s plans are up in the air, and she may be leaving tonight or tomorrow morning.”

Cate furrowed her brow. “Leaving? Do you think this sudden change in plans is due to whatever is going on with Ruth?”

“I’d say it’s tied together. She must be a master manipulator to get Amelia to do her bidding.”

Cate sighed. “And we won’t have a chance to discuss this at dinner.” She bit her lower lip as she stared into space, her mind churning. “Perhaps we should seek out Amelia. Maybe she’ll give us some information.”

Jack considered it for a moment. “We may gain some information as to why Amelia is leaving and what prompted it, but I’m not sure it helps us.”

“I’d like to try,” Cate said.

“I don’t want you going alone. Though I suppose it would look odd for us both to go.”

“Well, in the interest of saying goodbye, you could tag along.”

“You may get more information out of her if I wasn’t there. How about this, I’ll walk you to her suite and leave you there. Only if you agree to come straight back here when you’re finished.”

“I promise,” Cate said.

“No racing after clues on your own,” Jack warned.

“I said I promise!” Cate exclaimed.

“Yes, I know. But I also know if you get a whiff of a clue, you’ll go darting off after it and I’ll be left out of all the fun.”

“I won’t dart after anything. But I would like to say goodbye to Amelia, even if I don’t get any information from her.”

“I understand,” Jack said with a nod. “Well, come on, then.”

Cate slipped her hand into the crook of his arm, and they proceeded to the suite Amelia usually occupied when they stayed at the estate. The door opened a few moments after Cate knocked on it. Ruth stood inside.

“Oh, hello, Ruth,” Cate said. “Is Amelia here? Rory left a note saying you may be leaving soon, and I hoped to speak with her.”

“Oh, yes, she’s here.” Ruth stepped aside to allow Cate to enter.

“I’ll see you later, dear,” Jack said, as he waved to her and departed down the hall.

Cate swallowed hard as she stood face to face with the woman who so easily lied to those around her.

“Amelia!” Ruth called into the bedroom. “Cate is here to see you.”

Amelia emerged carrying a dress a few moments later. “Cate! How lovely to see you.”

“Sorry to interrupt, I realize you must be quite busy, but Rory said you’re leaving?” Cate phrased the remark as a question, hoping to solicit some information.

“Oh, it’s no bother. I would have asked to have a tea since we’ll miss dinner this evening, though, you’re usually out in the afternoons. Ruth, would you be so kind as to ring for tea?”

“I’ll request it straight from the kitchen. I have a few things I need to take care of.”

Amelia nodded at the girl as she slipped from the room. “Come in, I’m just throwing a few things into the suitcase. Then we’ll sit down and have a nice cuppa when the tea arrives.”

Cate followed her into the bedroom. “Can I help with anything?”

“Oh, no, I’ve got it all under control. I am so used to traveling, this is becoming second nature to me.”

“What prompted the sudden change in plans, if you don’t mind my asking?”

Amelia offered her a shrug as she continued to fill her suitcase. “We had no definite plans when we came. An opportunity came up to meet with Lucas on some travel he’ll be doing, and we decided to take it.”

“Oh, how nice. It’s too bad Lucas’s business couldn’t bring him here. We would have loved to see him again.”

Amelia gave her a brief smile. “I’ll pass along your regards. I’m certain he’ll be sore he missed your visit.”

A maid arrived with tea and Amelia gave her packing a break as she settled onto the settee in the sitting room with a warm cup of tea. Cate sat next to her, considering ways to tease more information from Amelia.

“So, where are you off to now?”

“We’ll meet Lucas in Northampton.”

“Oh, you’ve got quite a ways to go then,” Cate said.

“Yes, hence our rather dubious plans about the time at which we’ll depart. We’ll only have a short window to catch Lucas, so we must plan accordingly.”

Cate furrowed her brow at the statement. “Oh, my, it sounds almost as rigid as a train schedule.”

Amelia gave her a hearty laugh. "Close," she said, still chuckling. "Such are the times. What about you and Jack? How long will you remain at Dunhaven?"

"We'll be going in short order, as well. I'm so pleased we had the opportunity to see each other again."

"As am I. Lucas will be so jealous when I tell him who I've seen!"

Cate smiled at her, wishing she had the opportunity to see her great-grandfather again, too. Amelia used Cate's silence to transition into other topics as they finished their tea.

"Well," Amelia said as they finished their tea, "I suppose I should get back at it. I'm just waiting on word from Lucas, so I'd like to be ready."

"I understand," Cate said, setting down her empty teacup and standing. Amelia pulled her into an embrace.

"Oh, it was lovely to see you again, Cate. And I do hope we'll be able to get together after this terrible business is over with and truly enjoy each other's company."

"I do, too," Cate said. She gave Amelia's arm a squeeze, before she offered her a final smile and backed away. With a last wave, she disappeared into the hall.

With a tear-filled sigh, Cate navigated through the halls back to her suite. She found Jack napping on the chaise. Cate took the opportunity to pace the floor in the bedroom, not wanting to wake Jack from his slumber.

After forty-five minutes, Cate heard movement from the sitting room. As she approached the doorway, Jack sat up and stretched. He yawned before he smiled sleepily at her. "Oh good, you're back."

"I've been back for almost an hour. I didn't want to wake you since I've been doing a wonderful job of keeping you awake at night."

"I'm just pleased you came straight back! Did you learn anything?"

Cate shrugged. "Not much. According to Amelia, they're leaving because they have a chance to meet with Lucas in Northampton."

"So Amelia is the one who made the decision?"

"Seems to be."

"Hmmm, that wasn't what we suspected."

"No, but now that I think about it, perhaps that's what precipitated this note," Cate said, unfurling the paper she had stuffed in her pocket. "Maybe Ruth sent a message to one of the men to up the timeline of their mission given her imminent departure."

“Could be. Wonder what causes whoever to kill her then?”

“I’m not sure, but her death must be the reason Amelia is still here in a few days.”

“Aye, her plans must change after Ruth disappears.”

Cate sighed. “Well, I suppose we’ll find out tonight. But for now, should I ring for dinner?”

“Best idea I’ve heard all day.”

* * *

Cate and Jack spent the early evening hours eating sandwiches sent up from the kitchen, taking turns staring out the window and pacing the floor as the sun lowered in the sky.

At promptly 8:30 p.m., Jack suggested they make their way to the folly. “We’ll have a long wait, but I’d rather be there and hidden away in case anyone arrives early.”

“I agree,” Cate said. “Plus I couldn’t stand being cooped up in that room anymore. I just want to get going.”

“It’s not going to make time go any faster, Lady Cate.”

“I know, but at least I feel like we’re moving now!”

“And now we’re going to stop moving,” Jack said, as they approached the folly. He glanced around the surrounding area to check for any watchful eyes before they ducked inside. As they entered the darkened enclosure, Jack flicked on his flashlight.

“We can hide here,” he said, motioning to a partial wall separating the interior.

Cate grimaced at it. “Shine the light behind there before I go in.”

“Why?”

“I’m afraid of critters.”

Jack swept the beam behind the wall. “Just a few wayward leaves and dirt.”

Cate, still frowning, kicked around the leaves before she squatted behind the wall. “Don’t trust me?”

“I don’t trust rodents,” Cate said. “Can you see me?”

“No, totally hidden,” Jack said, before clicking off his flashlight and settling onto the floor.

After twenty minutes, Cate fidgeted.

“Stop squirming around,” Jack whispered.

“I can’t help it! My legs are giving out.”

In the dim light, Jack screwed up his face, glancing at her.

“Sit down!” he breathed. “Are you going for the world’s record for squatting?”

“I was...”

“Afraid of critters, right,” Jack noted. “Do you want to sit on my lap?”

“No,” Cate said with a groan. “I’ll brave it.” She sank to the floor. Latticework at her eye level allowed her to see through into the main chamber of the folly.

They waited another twenty minutes before footsteps on the stone steps outside sounded. In the waning light, Cate grasped Jack’s forearm and squeezed. She hoped she could hear over the loud thudding of her heart in her ears.

In the dim light, the form of Ruth appeared limned in dying twilight. It couldn’t be that close to ten. Why had Ruth come so much earlier?

As she entered, she flicked on a lantern, holding it high as she glanced around the space. Cate held her breath as Ruth spun in a slow circle. She focused on the half-wall, studying it for a moment before stepping forward. Jack slid his arm up and squeezed Cate’s hand in his.

Shoes sounded on the stone outside. Ruth spun to face the incoming party. Cate pursed her lips to stop herself from gasping as the bright lantern shone on Hans’s face. He held one hand up to block the bright light, his other hand clutched something.

“Did you bring it?” Ruth asked.

He nodded, still holding his hand up to the light. Ruth held her hand out. “You’re doing the right thing,” she assured him.

He shook his head as he lowered his hand. “I can’t believe it,” he choked. “He saved my life when our apartment building was hit.”

“Of course he did. He needed you,” Ruth said, a coldness in her voice.

“Anyway, I put everything in there you requested.”

Ruth nodded. “And Victor?” she inquired.

“I gave him the fake report as you requested.”

“Good,” she said.

He pursed his lips, staring at the ground. “You’ve done your country a great service,” Ruth added. “I’ll certainly pass that along.”

He gave her a slight nod. “Dismissed,” she said with finality.

Hans turned on a heel and disappeared through the opening. Ruth set the lantern on the half wall directly above Cate and Jack. Cate winced at Jack as they tried to stay out of sight.

She shuffled through the papers. After a moment, she pulled her blouse from within her skirt. Stretching behind her back, she wiggled an identical folder from under her chemise. She set it on the stone bench and slid the folder received from Hans under her camisole. She quickly tucked her blouse into her skirt and adjusted the sweater she wore.

After the swap, Ruth perched on the edge of the stone bench and checked her watch. Cate glanced at Jack and shrugged. She pointed to her bare wrist in a silent question. Jack motioned the time to be ten to ten.

Cate nodded. Her mind screamed with the details of the incident. So, Hans did not kill her. The killer must be the person she was meeting at ten. The killer must be Victor.

Time seemed to stand still, but at long last footsteps sounded again on the steps outside. Cate’s heart pounded in her chest. If they were correct, they would soon witness a murder. Jack must have sensed her apprehension. He reached out and grasped her hand. She clung to him, suddenly unsure she wanted to be here. She fought to keep her breath shallow and steady.

Ruth stood as the figure appeared in the doorway. Victor wandered inside.

“You summoned me, Brigitta?”

“I have intercepted the report from Hans.” She waved the folder in the air. “I will destroy it and pass along a fake, thus meaning the code will remain indecipherable.”

Victor wiggled his eyebrows at her. “So you managed to pull it off.”

“I did. And now your cover can remain intact. I expect you to do a far better job in the future with making sure the code remains unreadable.”

Victor narrowed his eyes at her. “I don’t imagine I’ll be here long.”

Ruth raised her eyebrows at the statement. “Oh?”

“No. Not when I deliver the information you were supposed to retrieve. Give me the folder.”

Ruth offered him a harsh cackle. “I am capable of doing my job.”

Victor removed a gun hidden in his jacket. “That may be, but I prefer to see the job through myself.”

Ruth remained calm despite the pistol being aimed at her. She flicked her gaze from the gun's barrel to Victor's face. "Put that away."

"Give me the folder."

"Fine," Ruth said. She passed the folder over to Victor. He glanced through it then tucked it under his arm, training the gun on Ruth again.

"You got what you wanted. Though don't think I won't report this little incident to our superiors."

"That's where you're wrong, Brigitta."

Ruth cocked her head, and Victor smirked at her.

"I have high aspirations. And I won't have them ruined by a little tufthunter like you. I don't trust you, you see. So, I think I'll up my chances of success."

Without another word, Victor fired his weapon. An expression of shock covered Ruth's face as she glanced down at her blouse. A wet red spot bled through the cloth. Ruth pressed a hand to her stomach. Blood glistened on her fingers as she pulled it away. A moan escaped her lips and she collapsed to the ground, slumping to the floor.

CHAPTER 32



Cate's muscles stiffened and Jack cupped a hand over her mouth. "Shhh," he whispered in her ear, as he pulled her closer to him.

"Goodbye, Brigitta, or whoever you are," Victor said with a sneer, as he stowed his gun in his jacket. "Now, I'll be the hero."

A voice sounded behind Victor. "I'm sorry, Victor. But I can't let that happen."

With furrowed brows, Victor spun to face the newest addition to the party. Rita stepped into the light from the lantern, gun drawn and pointed at Victor.

"Rita," he said.

"Oh, come now, Victor. I'm certain you've already deduced Rita Haverford is not my real name."

Cate's eyes went wide, and she squeezed Jack's arm.

Victor raised his eyebrows. "I've never suspected you of anything disingenuous."

"Well, then I'm very disappointed in you. I thought you were smarter than that."

Victor glanced back to Ruth. "I suppose you were in league with her."

Rita shook her head. "No."

"Well, then maybe you'll be interested in discussing a partnership. I'm certain we can come to some arrangement that will be mutually beneficial for both of us."

Rita pressed her lips into a thin line and shook her head. "Sorry, Victor, but there are larger things in motion here. And unfortunately, you're collateral damage."

With that Rita squeezed the trigger of the gun. The muzzle flashed as the bullet discharged. Victor grunted as the bullet struck him square in the chest. Rita aimed a second time and fired again as Victor dropped to his knees.

This one hit him square between the eyes. He flopped forward, his eyes still staring blankly ahead. Cate squeezed her eyes shut as a tear rolled down her cheek. With Jack's hand still clasped firmly over her mouth, she managed to keep her shocked squeal inside.

Two men appeared as Rita pulled the folder from the floor. "Bury him in the side garden."

"What about her?" one man asked.

"Leave her. Let her partner find her. They'll assume Victor killed her and fled, leaving us undetected."

The man nodded as he grabbed Victor under one arm. The other man grabbed him under the other and together, they dragged him from the folly, his feet making a sickening smacking sound as they slapped off the stone steps outside.

Rita spun on her heel and departed from the folly, leaving the lit lantern still shining inside.

Cate's chest heaved as she tried to gasp in breaths. Jack kept a firm hold on her for several more moments until he was certain no one would return.

"Stay quiet," Jack cautioned as he released his grip on her.

"What just happened?" Cate whispered, as she wiped at her tear-stained cheeks.

A groan interrupted any response Jack could offer. With wide eyes, Cate shuffled on her hands and knees around the half wall and over to Ruth.

Cate rolled her onto her back and stared down at the blood spot as her hands searched for her carotid artery. "Oh my God, Jack," Cate exclaimed. "She's alive! We have to help her!"

Jack pulled off his jacket and shoved it against Ruth's wound. "We've got to keep pressure on the wound."

"One of us has to go for help," Cate said.

"No, we can't split up, Cate," Jack insisted.

"Jack..." Cate began when a shout interrupted her statement.

Both Jack and Cate spun to face the entrance. Amelia stood in the doorway, her hand covering her gaping jaw. She rushed forward. "What happened? Is she alive?"

"Yes," Cate exclaimed. "Yes, she's alive. She's been shot. By Victor Richard. He's a German spy! And he was shot and killed by Rita. We have no idea who or what she is!"

"I know about Victor," Amelia answered, as she pulled Jack's hands away and ripped open Ruth's blouse. She shoved up the chemise to assess the wound.

"She'll need surgery," she said matter-of-factly. "We'll need to get her to a hospital as quickly and quietly as possible. Jack, I'll need your help."

Jack nodded, prepared to carry the woman. Before he could lift her, Ruth's eyelids fluttered open. She moaned in pain.

"Sarah? Sarah," Amelia said, leaning forward to stroke her hair. "Easy. You've been shot."

"F-F-Folder," Ruth stuttered.

"Shhh, don't try to speak," Amelia said.

Ruth gave a hard shake to her head. "Hans, folder. Must deliver."

"I'll handle it, Sarah."

"She had a folder from Hans. She hid it behind her back under the camisole," Cate explained.

"What?" Amelia said, as Ruth's eyes fluttered open and closed. She rocked, attempting to move. "Help me. Gently roll her."

Jack eased her over and Amelia reached to her back. She pulled a folder from a small wrap around her midriff. Amelia paged through it as Jack eased Ruth back to the floor.

"Oh my God," Amelia said with a gasp. She flicked her gaze to Cate. "And you say this is from Hans?"

Cate gave her a shaky nod. "Yes," Cate said. "Hans gave that to Ruth or Sarah or whatever her name is. Then she took another folder identical to this one from under her blouse and replaced it with this one. She gave the other folder to Victor. That's who shot her."

"Jack, Cate, I need you to do something for me."

"Anything," Cate said.

"Name it," Jack added.

"I need you to take this folder and deliver it."

“What?” Cate answered, her eyes wide and her eyebrows squashed together.

“This contains the information needed to decipher the Enigma code. This must get to Bletchley Park. Sarah and I were supposed to deliver it, that’s where we were going. Obviously, we can’t go now. You must take it. Please, it could decide the outcome of the war.”

Cate flicked her gaze to Jack then back to Amelia. Was she hearing correctly? Was her great-grandmother a spy?

Cate’s lower lip bobbed up and down as she tried to formulate a response. Amelia continued in the absence of her response. “I’ll contact Lucas, let him know the change of plans.”

“Lucas?” Cate finally managed to squeak out.

“Yes,” Amelia confirmed. “Lucas, Sarah, and I work for the intelligence effort. We suspected a German spy ring operating here at Dunhaven. Victor Richard, aka Victor Richter, works for the enemy. He attempted to keep this information from ever being discovered. Please. You must deliver it.”

Cate’s head slowly nodded. “Okay,” she said.

Amelia nodded. “Come along. I’ll get you along your way.”

“What about her?” Jack inquired.

The question was answered by the appearance of Rory and Hans.

“Oh, Rory, Hans, thank goodness. Please help me with Ruth. Cate and Jack found her here. She’s been shot. She needs immediate medical attention, but we must keep the matter private. I must attend to something else immediately.”

“I understand,” Rory said, as he took over for Jack.

“Cate, Jack, come with me,” Amelia said.

They followed Amelia from the folly. She led them to the garage, grabbing the keys to one of the vehicles. She led them to it before she spun and held the folder out to Cate. She pressed it into her hands and squeezed.

“Take this to Bletchley Park. Ask for Alan Turing. Give it to no one but Alan. Stop for no one. Watch your backs. There are many people who want to ensure this never reaches Mr. Turing and his fantastic machine.”

Cate nodded as she stared down at the folder, speechless.

Amelia set her foot on the running board of the vehicle and hiked her skirt. Cate’s eyes bulged as her great-grandmother pulled a weapon from her garter. She passed it off to Jack. “Take this. Stay safe.”

Jack nodded as he accepted the weapon, sticking it in the waistband of his pants.

“Be safe, Cate and Jack.” Amelia pulled open the door and loaded Cate into the passenger’s side, as Jack slid in behind the wheel. Amelia hurried from the garage, returning toward the folly as Jack eased the car onto the gravel drive and aimed for Dunhaven.

Cate sat silent and stunned as Jack drove. After a moment, she gasped out, “What just happened?”

“I’m not one hundred percent sure,” Jack answered, “though I am certain driving this is not going to be as easy as I hoped.”

Cate glanced at him. “No power steering,” Jack commented.

“Right,” Cate said. She glanced at the folder in her lap. “Jack, Amelia... my great-grandmother is a spy.”

“Aye. I did not see that one coming,” Jack answered as the gears ground. Jack winced. “Haven’t driven a manual in a while.”

Cate continued to parse through the details of what they’d just witnessed. “So, Amelia and Lucas are spies. And Ruth or Sarah worked with them.”

“And Victor was a German spy.”

“Right. Ruth must have been a double agent, ferreting out the German spy embedded at Dunhaven.”

“Aye, that seems right.”

Cate paused a moment. “So, who is Rita?”

“That I’m not sure. She didn’t seem to have a side. She didn’t care what happened to Ruth or Victor.”

Cate’s brow furrowed. “She killed Victor and Ruth is still alive.”

“Right,” Jack confirmed.

“But...” Cate paused as she put together the pieces. “But the person in the grave we found was a woman. Ruth’s height. Victor is a man and much taller. Yet he’s the one buried in that grave now.”

Cate’s eyes bulged and she sucked in a gasp as she glanced sharply at Jack. “Jack,” she said, breathlessly, “did we just change history?”

Jack considered Cate’s question. With a sigh and a shake of his head, he responded, “I don’t know if we did, but Rita definitely did.”

“Why? What happened? Who is Rita?”

“I’m not certain,” Jack answered, his eyes never leaving the road. “What did she say to Victor about suspecting Rita wasn’t her real name?”

Cate bit her lip, trying to recall the details. The conversation happened less than an hour ago, yet it felt as it had happened ages ago. “She said there were larger things in motion. What does that mean?”

“I’m not certain, but for now, we need to focus on getting that folder to Bletchley Park.”

Cate glanced down at the folder in her lap and nodded. “Yes. I can’t believe this. We’re delivering a piece of intelligence to Alan Turing. This is...”

“Frightening.”

“I was going to say amazing, but that word works, too.”

“So, this Turing guy...” Jack began, his hands wiggling the wheel to keep the car steady.

“Is well known for his work in deciphering the Enigma code,” Cate answered. “His work led to the development of modern computer science.”

“I see,” Jack said, glancing in the car’s mirror.

“To meet him will be...” Cate struggled to find the words. “I’m speechless.”

Jack didn’t respond.

“Sorry, history geek stuff,” Cate added, glancing at him. “Is the driving really difficult?”

Jack shook his head, glancing in the mirror again. “No, but I swear this car has been following us since we left Dunhaven.”

Cate glanced back behind them, finding a pair of headlights shining toward them. “Maybe it’s a fluke.”

“Maybe,” Jack said.

Cate tried to keep her pulse in check as Jack veered off onto another street and the headlights followed. She flicked her gaze to Jack who studied the lights, too, and winced.

“I don’t like this,” Jack said.

Cate stared down at the folder in her lap. “Neither do I,” she said. “Not when we’re carrying information that could affect the outcome of the war.”

“Aye, that’s my thoughts exactly.”

They continued along their route, making their way south toward London. As they reached a lonely stretch of road, the car behind them inched closer. Jack pressed the accelerator, speeding up as much as the car would allow. The tail car kept pace with them.

“Great,” Jack muttered.

Cate removed the papers inside the folder and stuffed them into the blouse of her dress as the car veered around them and fought to gain on them.

“Cate, hang on to something, he’s going to hit us.”

Cate clutched for anything to brace herself. In a car with no seatbelt restraints, a wreck could be devastating.

The other car pulled level with them. Jack tried to drop back but the car swerved, crunching their front bumper on the driver’s side. Jack swerved to maintain control from the hit.

“Hang on,” he said through clenched teeth.

“What are you going to do?”

“I’m going to hit him back,” Jack announced, as he mashed the accelerator to the floor and swerved toward the other car.

The sickening scrape of metal-on-metal tore through the air, causing Cate to wince as her body jarred from the impact. A moan escaped her, and Jack flicked his eyes to her before returning them to the road.

“You okay?”

“I’m fine,” she gasped.

“This guy isn’t going to stop.”

Cate shook her head. “No,” she cried, and swallowed hard. “I’m not sure what to do.”

“How good are you at jumping from a moving vehicle?” Jack inquired as they continued to drive neck-in-neck with the other car.

“Are you serious?” Cate asked incredulously.

“Yes,” Jack said. “We need to get out of this car. He’s not going to quit until we’re...”

Jack’s statement was interrupted as a bullet smacked into their hood. Jack cursed under his breath.

“Yes, I can jump from a moving car,” Cate said, her eyes wide as she stared at the bullet hole.

Jack nodded. “There’s water coming up. I want you to jump out now. I’m going to drive the car into the lake. I’ll meet you back here as soon as it’s clear. Stay off the road and out of sight.”

“Jack!” Cate exclaimed.

“No, Cate. We can’t risk those papers getting wet. You go now.”

Cate nodded and swallowed hard. “Okay. Good luck,” she said, squeezing his arm.

She spun and cracked her door open. The ground passed underneath her at a dizzying clip. She bit her lower lip hard and flung herself out, rolling across the ground and knocking the air from her lungs. Jack continued on as though she'd never budged. Her door swung shut as the car continued to barrel down the road.

As soon as she was able, Cate scrambled off the roadway and into the field beyond. She hurried across the darkened landscape, running low to the ground until she found a large tree. With some difficulty from her t-strap pumps, she managed to scurry up into the cover of the full leaves.

The two cars careened down the road. Jack took another hit as the car smacked into him again. The car flailed as though he couldn't maintain control. It swayed dangerously close to going off the road. The other driver took advantage as they entered a curve and swerved toward Jack. The other car hit Jack's car hard. He failed to recover from the hit, and his car rode roughly up over a small embankment, crashing through a wooden fence, before it sailed airborne over the edge of the hillside and smacked into a small loch.

Cate winced at the sight as she clutched the tree branch under her. The other car ground to a halt, then reversed. A man hopped from the passenger side and scurried up the embankment. Cate's heart dropped. She heard the crack of a pistol as it fired four shots.

CHAPTER 33



Cate covered her mouth as a horrified squeal emerged. “Jack,” she breathed, as she watched the other man wait a few moments before he returned to the waiting vehicle. The car sped off into the night.

Cate trembled as she sat in the tree, waiting to be sure the car did not return. When it seemed safe, she scrambled down, falling the last few feet onto her rear. She clambered to her feet and hurried to the loch, staying off the road.

“Jack!” she called in a hushed tone as she reached it. The car still bobbed in the water with only its rear end visible. Bubbles escaped around it as it continued to sink into the waters.

Cate hurried around the water’s edge as she searched for signs of life.

“Jack!” she tried again. She searched the water in the dim moonlight. Her breathing ragged, she picked her way to stand on a rock nearby and search the area.

A dark figure approached from her left. Cate scurried off the rock and began to retreat, when she heard a familiar voice. “Lady Cate!” Jack whispered.

Cate’s heart soared as the sound of her heartbeat filled her ears. A tear escaped to her cheek, and she hurried toward the figure, colliding into him as she flung her arms around his neck.

“Jack!” she exclaimed. “Oh, thank heavens. When he fired that gun...” Cate cried, pulling away from him.

“It’s okay. He shot randomly. I stayed hidden for as long as I could to make him think I was dead. And two shots he fired on your side of the car.”

Cate nodded as she pulled him into another embrace. She leaned back as the icy water from his soaked clothes began to penetrate her dress. “You’re soaked.”

“Aye. Thank goodness it’s warm.” Jack glanced around. “We need to find a place to hide while we regroup.”

“There’s a barn over there,” Cate said, pointing behind Jack. “I saw it when I climbed into the tree to hide.”

Jack nodded as they set off toward the barn. “Climbed a tree? Lady Cate, I can’t believe it.”

“I’ll admit it was better than taking a dip in the loch,” Cate said.

They reached the barn and slipped in through the partially open barn door. Jack pulled Cate toward a stack of hay bales and plopped onto the hay-strewn floor. Cate joined him.

“Now what?” Cate inquired.

“I’m not sure,” Jack said with a sigh, as he wrung out the bottom of his shirt.

“We can’t walk all the way to Bletchley Park.”

“No,” Jack admitted with a sigh. “But we’ll have to figure something out.”

Cate shook her head as her heart sank. “Should we walk back to Dunhaven?”

“We’re too far for that, too,” Jack admitted.

“Do you know how to steal a car?”

“No! Why would I know how to steal a car?”

“I don’t know!” Cate said. “I’m just throwing out suggestions.”

Jack sucked in air. “It’s not a terrible one. I suppose if we find a car, I can try to steal it.”

“In the name of national security,” Cate said.

“For now, I think we should get some rest.”

“Don’t you think we should keep moving?”

“No, I think we should get some rest and move on in a few hours. We’re in a safe spot at the moment, let’s take advantage. We don’t know the next time we’ll be able to rest.”

Cate nodded as they settled back against the hay bales. She bit her lower lip as Jack’s hand found hers in the darkness and squeezed. “Lady Cate?”

Jack whispered.

“Yeah?” Cate answered.

“Time to hit the hay,” he said. She heard the small snicker from him.

“Oh, Jack,” Cate said. “Your humor hasn’t improved.”

“I couldn’t resist,” he said.

Exhaustion crept over her, but every noise startled her. Eventually, her eyelids became heavy, and she drifted off to sleep, her head lolling onto Jack’s shoulder.

* * *

Cate awoke with a start. It took her a moment to recall where she was. Dim light from the early morning sky filtered in through the small opening in the barn doors. She glanced down at Jack’s sleeping form. Cate stretched and considered trying to go back to sleep, but nervousness prevented her from doing that. Instead, she gave Jack a gentle shake until his eyes opened. They darted around for a moment before they settled on Cate.

“Good morning,” Cate said.

“Good morning, Lady Cate,” Jack said with a sleepy smile.

“We should go,” Cate said.

Jack pulled himself up to sit. “You’re right. I don’t want to get caught by an angry farmer.”

Cate grimaced at him. “Yikes! You’re covered in hay!”

“I wouldn’t point fingers, Lady Cate,” Jack said, as he pulled a piece of straw from her hair.

They rose and removed as much debris as possible from their clothes before they slipped into the brightening day and set off on foot.

“We should stay away from the road,” Jack said. “In case they come back in the daylight to search for our bodies.”

Cate nodded and shivered at the events of the night before. “Did your clothes dry?” she asked, as the sun rose in the east.

“Mostly,” Jack answered.

“Looks like it’ll be a nice day. I hope it doesn’t rain.”

“You and me both,” Jack said. “I’d like to stay dry today.”

They continued over the rolling hills as the sun crept up higher in the sky. As the hour approached 8 a.m. a droning noise filled the air.

“Do you hear that?” Cate scanned the skies as they crested a hill, shielding her eyes.

“Aye. Planes.”

“There!” she exclaimed. “An entire squadron.”

“Friendlies or no?” Jack inquired.

“RAF,” Cate said as they came closer.

“Wonder where they’re going?”

Cate stared at the several sets of planes in Finger-four squadron formation. “There’s so many. They must be heading out on early morning patrols.” She paused as a thought formed in her mind. “Which means…” She flicked her gaze to Jack, her eyebrows raised, and the corners of her mouth turned up in a slight smile.

“There’s a base nearby,” Jack said with her.

“Yes!” she exclaimed.

“And what better place to hitch a ride to Bletchley Park than at a Royal Airforce Base?”

“Come on,” Cate said, pointing southeast. “They came from that direction.”

They quickened their pace and hurried in the direction they’d spotted the planes coming from. The walk took the better part of the morning. The planes returned as the sun rose overhead and the lunchtime hour approached, flying low over their heads as they approached their base.

“Whew, this took way longer than I hoped,” Jack said.

“Tell me about it. These are the worst shoes in the world,” Cate complained.

“Do you need a break?”

“No, I just want to get there.”

“Want me to carry you? You can hop on my back.”

“I’ll save that in case I can’t make the last leg. We should be getting close. Did you see how low they were flying?”

“Aye,” Jack said.

They crested another hill, spotting a large structure in the distance. “There,” Cate said. “That must be it.”

“Looks like a large estate.”

Cate nodded. “They’re probably using it as a base.”

“Not too much further at least.”

They continued, aiming for the large home on the opposite hill. They circled around the walled estate, finding two uniformed servicemen patrolling the entrance.

“Hey!” Cate exclaimed as she spotted them. “Excuse me! We need your help!”

Both men stiffened their postures as Cate and Jack hurried toward them. One held up his hand, signaling them to stop. “Ma’am, I’m going to ask you to stop right there. This is a RAF military base. We do not allow civilians.”

“We’re not civilians,” Cate explained. “We’re completing an assignment from the Ministry of Defense. We have information that must get to Alan Turing at Bletchley Park from the intelligence outpost at Dunhaven Castle.”

The man narrowed his eyes, flicking his gaze to his partner before returning it to Cate.

“We were followed last night,” Jack explained. “The base there has been infiltrated by a German spy. We lost our vehicle. But we need to get the information there immediately.”

“What’s the name of your superior?”

“Lucas MacKenzie,” Cate reported.

The soldiers shared another glance, before one spun and faced the interior of the estate’s grounds. He called to someone and waved them over.

“These two say they are carrying sensitive information to Bletchley Park. Say they’re on orders from Lucas MacKenzie.”

The new man nodded and sprinted back toward the manor home. After a few moments, he returned. “Commodore said to bring them in.”

The patrolling servicemen nodded and waved Cate and Jack over. One held up his hand to stop them before they entered. “We have to search you.”

“Okay,” Cate said. The soldier paused as he reached the papers under her dress. “That’s the papers we’re delivering.” The man raised his eyebrows at her. “If I may,” Cate said, reaching into her dress and producing them.

The man nodded at her, and she stuffed them back into their hiding spot. “Go ahead in.”

The third man led them up the long driveway and into the large home. A few airmen lounged in a sitting room off the foyer. The soldier they followed marched them down the hall to a small office. A uniformed man stood behind a desk, bent over a map with several other officers.

“Here they are, sir,” the man reported with a salute.

“That you, Corporal,” the man said with a nod, dismissing him. He eyed Cate and Jack. “Have a seat.”

“With all due respect, sir, we don’t have time to have a seat. We must get these papers to Bletchley Park. We’re already behind thanks to an incident last night with German intelligence,” Cate said.

The man narrowed his eyes at her.

“She’s right,” Jack chimed in. “There was an incident at the Dunhaven outpost. The woman originally set to deliver this information was shot by a German spy. When we received our instructions and left Dunhaven, we were followed, ran off the road and then shot at.”

“That’s quite a story.”

“And you can confirm it all with Lucas MacKenzie. He is our contact in the Ministry of Defense. Please, sir, we must get this information to Alan Turing.”

The phone rang as the man considered their story. He snatched the receiver from the cradle. “Yes?” He paused, his eyebrows flicked upward. “I understand. Yes.” His gaze settled on Cate and Jack. “Right away. Thank you.” He replaced the receiver and stared at Cate and Jack again. “It seems your story checks out.”

Cate breathed a sigh of relief.

“Can you spare a vehicle then, sir,” Jack asked,” so we can continue on our way?”

“I don’t think so, Mr. MacKenzie,” the man said. “It seems the papers you carry could change the outcome of the war. It is imperative Bletchley receive them as soon as possible. We’ll fly you there.”

Cate swallowed hard. “Uh,” she began, as the Commadore shouted to someone outside. The man hurried to receive the orders rattled off by his commander.

Wide-eyed, Cate glanced at Jack who shrugged. “I don’t think we have a choice,” he said.

Before she could say anything else, Cate and Jack were ushered from the room, outfitted in a parachute – which caused Cate’s stomach to somersault as the airman fastened it to her – and hurried out the door to a frenzy of activity. Men raced around the yard, prepping planes, and scrambling to start them.

The airman led them to two turret fighters sitting side by side. A man in a flight suit offered Cate a wide grin and stuck his hand out. “Cate, I

presume?”

Cate nodded, unable to get out any words. “You’ll be flying with me. I’m Flight Sergeant Roberts. This is my gunner, Flight Sergeant Wilson. He’ll be sitting this one out while you take his seat. I understand we’re carrying quite a sensitive piece of intelligence.”

Cate stared up at the aircraft in front of her. She crooked a finger toward the craft. “In that?”

Flight Sergeant Roberts patted the plane’s side. “She’s a good plane.”

“Isn’t there one where we could sit in the back?” she questioned as another pilot introduced himself to Jack.

“You are going to sit in the back, my dear.”

“With the gun?” Cate yelled over the drone of engines springing to life.

“Don’t worry, Cate. They’re sending plenty of fighters with us. They can handle the Jerrys if we encounter them.”

Cate stared up at the plane, unblinking before she flicked her gaze to Jack. He offered her a wide-eyed and frightened shrug.

“Let’s get you in, Cate. Step right up here on the wing and scramble up in there.”

Cate fought to steady her legs as she clambered up onto the wing and slid into the tight space of the gunner’s seat. Claustrophobia set in, and the plane wobbled as Sergeant Roberts scrambled into his seat. Cate’s stomach flip-flopped as the plane rumbled to life. She glanced to Jack in the plane next to her, her face filled with the dread of leaving the ground.

Cate heard the radio spring to life as planes began to enter the air. “Section leaders, we are a go. Repeat we are a go.”

“All right boys, we are escorting an important package to Bletchley. We cannot fail. Protect Yellow three and Blue three at all times.”

Cate grasped hold of anything she could find, squeezing her eyes shut as the plane lurched forward.

The drone of the engines was deafening. Cate swallowed hard and squeezed her eyes shut for a moment.

“This is Yellow three, package is loaded. Ready to roll,” Cate’s pilot muttered into the radio.

“Yellow leader, ready to roll.”

“Blue three with secondary package loaded. Ready.”

“Blue leader ready.”

From the conversation, Cate surmised she was in the plane referred to as Yellow three while Jack rode in the plane using the call sign Blue three.

“This is Red leader; we are ready to escort.”

“Green leader, ready to escort.”

Planes rumbled down the makeshift airstrip. Four planes took off, keeping to a Finger-four squadron formation. Cate’s plane lumbered behind two others and in minutes, they were airborne, trailing on the right side of their squadron leader with a plane flanking them as a wingman.

A report of quiet skies came over the radio as the other planes joined them, forming a wall of aircrafts across the skies. An incessant buzzing filled the air.

“Let’s hope it holds.”

After five minutes, Cate began to relax, releasing her white-knuckled hold on her seat.

“How you doing back there, Cate?” the pilot called.

“As good as can be expected,” she shouted back.

“That’s a girl.”

They sailed along through the skies for thirty additional minutes before a loud call came across the radio.

“This is Red leader, we got Jerrys coming in at our nine o’clock.”

CHAPTER 34



Cate's muscles stiffened at the news, and she searched the skies in the indicated area. In the distance, a contingent of planes approached.

"Green leader, engaging." Four of the sixteen planes veered off their formation, taking off toward the Luftwaffe fighters.

"Red leader, engaging." Four more planes broke off.

The remaining eight planes stayed the course as fighting broke out to Cate's right. Guns blazed and planes rolled and dove as they tried to shoot each other down. Chatter came across the radio as pilots warned each other or congratulated each other on avoiding or shooting down a German plane.

Four planes approached them steadily. Cate sat up straighter as she noticed they were German, not RAF.

"We got incoming, look alive, boys."

The German planes buzzed past them. Muzzle flashes burst as they strafed the RAF fighters while passing over.

"Yellow two, let's get 'em," the squadron leader said, as the two planes broke off. "Yellow four stay with the assets."

"Blue two and blue leader engaging."

Planes shot around the sky, diving and rolling as Cate attempted to keep track of them.

"This is yellow four, I've got one on my tail."

Cate checked the skies to her left, noting the Luftwaffe plane tailing their wingman.

“I got ‘em, in my sights. Hammer down,” someone answered. Shots burst from a plane lined up behind the German fighter. “Hit!”

“Nice one!”

Black smoke poured from the German plane as it dropped from the sky. Cate swallowed hard, and let her head rest against the plane’s side as she blew out a breath. Minutes later an explosion rocked their plane. Her eyes snapped open, and she saw flames off their wing.

Sergeant Roberts said, “We lost Yellow four.”

“Blue four, get over there and watch Yellow’s tail.”

The plane, formerly flying as wingman to Jack’s plane, zipped over behind them.

Three more German planes still zoomed through the skies. Enemy fire strafed past them again.

“Blue four, tailing one of these guys. Got him in my sights. Hammer down.” Cate saw one of the RAF planes on the tail of a German 109. He fired, but failed to hit his target. The German plane seemed to slow before it shot skyward, flipping over in a wide arc, and ending up behind the RAF fighter. Guns blazed from the German fighter.

“This is Blue four, I’m hit! I’m hit! Going down!”

Cate glanced out of her window, spotting the black smoke trailing behind the plane.

“Blue four, ditching. Godspeed, gentlemen.”

The plane dropped from Cate’s sight.

“Blue three, you with me?” Sergeant Roberts inquired.

“Blue three, with you.”

“Cate, you with me?”

“I’m here,” Cate answered.

“I’m going to need you to transfer the guns to me,” Sergeant Roberts began, before panicked chatter interrupted.

“Blue three, watch your tail. You’ve got a Jerry on your six. He’s real close, boy, real close.”

The plane carrying Jack shimmied, rolled, climbed, and dove. “I can’t shake him.”

“I’m coming for you,” Sergeant Roberts said.

“You won’t make it,” the man answered. “Blue leader, can you assist?”

“Blue leader, I’m in the middle of it with two of them.”

“Blue three’s in trouble, can anyone assist?”

Cate spotted the plane on her left. It tailed Jack's plane closely. Gunfire blasted from the German craft. "I'm hit! I'm hit! He got my tail!"

"Blue three is hit. He's still got the Jerry on his tail."

The plane carrying Jack weaved in an arc, trying to avoid additional gunfire.

Cate stared at the thick bullets feeding into the turret gun.

"How do I use this?" she asked Sergeant Roberts.

"Cate..."

"We have no choice. Blue Three isn't going to make it much longer. Now, how do I use it?" she demanded.

"There's a release on your right, grab it, palm up and pull it back toward you." Cate found it and pulled it back. The heavy weapon swung free. "Aim using the crosshairs and fire. You'll want to lead him a bit. Shoot where he's going to be, not where he is. And for God's sake, don't hit Blue three."

Cate lined up the shot, trying to avoid anywhere near the allied plane, and squeezed. Her bullets went wide, peppering the sky behind the German plane.

"That's okay, Cate," Sergeant Roberts said in an even voice. "Line it up again and fire. Remember to lead him a little."

Cate nodded, mentally noting the advice. She felt the plane slow. The other two aircrafts approached them.

"Take your time, don't panic."

Cate fought to control her trembling body and latched onto the trigger. She swung the heavy gun into place again. She aimed carefully, lining her shot up with the German plane's engine as it weaved behind the RAF fighter, then inching it to slightly lead the aircraft.

"Cate, have you got the shot lined up?"

"Yes," Cate said, "but I can't get a window to fire with Blue three's weaving."

"All right, team effort," Sergeant Roberts said. "On the count of three, Blue three break left, Cate fire."

"Roger," Blue three's pilot acknowledged.

"Got it," Cate said. She blew out a steadying breath.

"Three, two, one," Sergeant Roberts counted, "BREAK!"

The fighter broke left in a quick move and Cate squeezed the trigger, swinging the gun to match the movement of the German fighter. A flame

burst from the enemy aircraft's engine and black smoke poured in a stream behind the plane. It swung off, diving sharply to the ground.

"She got 'em! By golly, she got 'em! Ho-ho! Great shooting, Cate!" Sergeant Roberts sped ahead and into a barrel roll in celebration. Cate's already shaky stomach somersaulted as they swirled through the sky, but she chuckled nonetheless.

"He's down, Jerry's down," someone reported.

"Whoa! Unbelievable! She gets a hit on her first time out!" another said.

"Boy, he's never going to live down being shot down by a woman."

"You can't count this one, Roberts, she's not your gunner."

"Like fun, I won't count it. Too bad for Wilson his tally will lag mine."

"Wilson may be replaced by Annie Oakley."

Cate bit her lower lip and smiled as Blue three pulled level with them. Jack's pilot saluted her. "Thank you, dearie," the man said. Jack gave her a wave. She returned the gesture to both.

The blue squadron leader shot down a third German plane.

"Last Jerry's bugging out," he reported, as he pulled back into formation.

The dogfight continued between the others until the report came through that the Luftwaffe pilots were either downed or fleeing. The remaining planes returned to the squadron.

"Squadron report."

"Yellow leader, asset intact. We lost Yellow four."

"Blue leader reporting, asset intact, Blue two and blue four down. Blue three sustained damage."

"Green two reporting, Green leader is down, Green three and four remain."

"Red leader, Red squadron intact."

"I'm behind Green three, he's trailing oil pretty bad."

"Green three will you make it to Bletchley?"

"This is Green three. I'm sure as hell going to try."

"Negative, Green three, return to base."

"I can make it."

"Green three, return to base, that's an order."

"Red four, requesting permission to disengage and go with Green three."

"Granted, Red four. Return to base with Green three."

The planes shuffled as two veered off, heading north. "Good luck, gentlemen."

"Let's press on, boys, and get these folks to Bletchley."

The squadron continued their flight uninterrupted. After forty more minutes of flying, the planes began to slow. "Breathe easy, Ace. We're almost there," Sergeant Roberts said to Cate.

"Hardly an ace," Cate answered with a chuckle. "But I'm glad I could help, and also glad we're nearly there."

Within twenty minutes, Cate felt the ground rumble underneath her as the plane's wheels bounced off the ground then rolled to a stop. Sergeant Roberts hopped from his perch in the pilot's seat and offered Cate a hand to climb from the gunner's nest.

"Here we are, my dear," he said, as he grabbed her around the waist and set her on the ground.

"Thank you," she said.

"I think the thanks goes to you, dearie," Jack's pilot said as he stalked toward her, his hand extended. "Let me shake the hand of the woman who shot a Jerry out of the sky to save my neck."

He grasped Cate's hand, nearly shaking her entire arm off. Jack followed behind him, still looking green around the gills. Cate hurried toward him and tossed her arms around his neck. He wrapped his arms around her waist, lifting her off the ground. "Thank you, Cate," he said, as he squeezed her.

"You'll never hear the end of this one from the missus," Sergeant Roberts said with a coy grin.

"You know it," Jack said.

"Jack! Cate!" A familiar voice called to them.

"Lucas!" Cate exclaimed.

The man hurried toward them, limping a bit, a sign of his older age. "You made it. Thank God."

Cate smiled and nodded as he reached them.

"Come along, we've got to get the information to Alan."

Cate nodded. "Just a minute." She stepped back to the pilots as they milled around. "Thank you."

"You can fly with me anytime, Cate," Sergeant Roberts answered.

"Not just for getting us here and in one piece. But for everything you do. Thank you. You're very, very brave."

“You’re welcome. And I hope our paths will cross again once this is all over. I’d like to buy you a drink, assuming your husband doesn’t mind.”

“Sir, I believe we owe you one first,” Jack said.

“Then we’ll buy each other drinks,” the man answered.

Cate nodded and waved as Lucas led them away. She glanced back at the pilots as they discussed their latest experiences. She’d look them up when she got back. She hoped they made it through the war unscathed. She couldn’t imagine living through what they did on a daily basis. One flight proved enough for her.

“What’s this I hear about you taking out a German plane, Cate?” Lucas inquired, as they made their way to Hut 8, where Alan Turing spent much of his time leading a team of cryptographers.

“Hit his engine,” Jack said. “And likely saved my life.”

“My goodness, Cate! Amelia will be so thrilled to hear she sent the right woman for the job.”

“Speaking of, I am absolutely astounded by Amelia’s work!” Cate said to Lucas.

“Ah, yes. She makes quite a good spy, don’t you agree? She has easy access to much of the country, most don’t question her travel. And she’s quite smart and capable. I suppose the war has made fighters out of us all in one way or another.”

Cate nodded at the sentiment as they reached the small green hut. Lucas led them inside. “Alan?” he questioned of another man.

“With the Bombe.”

“Thanks. Come on,” Lucas said, leading them to another hut. They stepped inside. A massive, wheeled box stood against the wall. At just under seven feet wide and six and a half feet tall and two feet deep, the machine was filled with 108 cylinders, called drums, in three sections.

A dark-haired man with deep-set eyes fiddled with the machine.

“Alan,” Lucas said. “I have something for you.”

He straightened and stared at Lucas before eyeing Cate and Jack. Cate removed the papers from under her dress and smoothed them. “Mr. Turing, I have these for you from the intelligence outpost in Dunhaven. Hans Schmidt is convinced...”

Alan snatched the papers from her hand and shuffled through them, biting his thumbnail. “Oh, yes, yes, of course.” He grabbed a pencil and began scratching on the paper.

Lucas nodded and motioned for Cate and Jack to step outside.

“Oh, thank you,” Alan said as they stepped out. “Very helpful.”

They stepped into the late afternoon air. “He’ll be working all night now,” Lucas said. “He doesn’t mean to be...”

“I know,” Cate said. “He’s brilliant. His mind doesn’t operate the way ours does.”

Lucas smiled and nodded. “Yes, others complain he lacks social graces, but I maintain he simply does not have time to process them.”

He began a walk across the property with them. “I’m convinced we’ll soon be able to decipher the Enigma code again thanks to your efforts.”

“We’re happy to help,” Cate said.

Lucas offered her a smile, the corners of his eyes crinkling in wrinkles that didn’t exist in 1925. “And now I’m betting you’d both like to return to Dunhaven posthaste.”

“Oh,” Cate said, realizing she hadn’t even thought of how they would get home in the rush of the events. She flicked her gaze to Jack before returning it to Lucas. “I hadn’t even thought...”. Her eyes wandered toward the landing strip they’d used earlier.

“Oh, don’t worry. We won’t send you up in the planes again,” Lucas said with a chuckle. “Though perhaps we ought to with your shooting skills.” He offered Cate an amused grin. “I have a car. I’ll take you.”

Cate returned Lucas’s smile at the announcement of their ride back, pleased she would not have a second flight in the fighter. Jack wiped at his brow. “I’m certainly glad for that offer.”

Lucas gave him a tight-lipped smile. “Yes, I heard your journey was rather rough. Took a bit damage to the tail.”

“Aye,” Jack said. “And I’m not too proud to admit I was terrified we’d crash or worse.”

“Thank goodness for Cate’s bravery. Though that tends to be the trend among the Americans.”

“I owed him,” Cate said, slipping her hand around Jack’s forearm. “He’s saved me more than once.”

“I’m not sure I’ve ever done anything as dramatic as shooting a plane from the sky,” Jack answered.

“Oh, by the way, Cate, I thought you may like to know the pilot you shot down is alive. He was recovered earlier with minor injuries.”

“Thank you,” Cate answered as they arrived at a vehicle.

“Well, here we are. I’m sure you’re both exhausted, so if you’d like to slip into the back and doze off on the long drive, I won’t object.”

Cate nodded and smiled as she ducked into the back.

“I’ll sit up front, though I make no promises about staying awake,” Jack said.

They settled in as Lucas slipped behind the wheel. Cate found herself too wired to sleep on the first leg of the journey. However as the sun slipped below the horizon and the stars peeked out above them, Cate found herself dozing off.

Her sleep was interrupted by the buzzing of planes. Cate startled awake, exhaustion clouding her mind. She breathed easy as she realized she still rode along in the car driven by Lucas. Jack sat next to him, his head lolling to the side.

“Okay, Cate?” Lucas inquired as she sat up and stretched.

“Yes,” she answered, as she scanned the night skies in search of the planes while stifling a yawn. “Thank you for driving us back tonight. I’m sure you must be tired, too.”

“Of course! Plus, with my missed connection with Amelia, it gave me an excuse to see her.”

“It must be difficult to be separated, particularly at a time like this.”

“Yes, quite. Though we’re both making our contributions. I am so proud of the work Amelia has done to help. We’ve managed to save several convoys. And with your contribution, I’d wager we’ll save several more.”

“I’m honored to have been a part of the effort.”

“I am also quite anxious to determine how Sarah is.”

“She was alive when we left.”

“Yes, I received word she was at a base hospital undergoing emergency surgery. I do hope she pulls through, though her spying days may be limited.”

They spent the rest of the journey making light conversation. Cate found herself unable to sleep anymore. In the lulls, she calculated how long they’d been in 1942. They had arrived around 2:30 p.m. on September 21st. It was now midnight on September 23rd. They’d been here for nearly thirty-six hours. Of course, in their time only two and a half hours had passed. She wondered if they had been missed.

As they approached Dunhaven, Lucas inquired about stopping at the field hospital first. Cate preferred to so she could get information on Sarah,

a.k.a. Ruth, firsthand.

They approached the camp and after a few words with the soldiers guarding the entrance, Lucas pulled through and parked the car. With another yawn, Cate climbed from the car and stretched. After a poke to Jack, he too, spilled out of the car and stretched.

“What time is it?” he inquired, as they strode to the medical tent.

“Just about half-past two,” Lucas reported.

“Thirty-six hours,” Cate whispered to him, as they ducked into the tent.

Jack nodded in response to her comment. Lucas scanned the area. Across the space, Cate spotted Amelia sitting at Ruth’s bedside. She spun and caught sight of them. Her worried expression broke into a smile, and she hurried toward them.

“Oh, Lucas!” she said throwing her arms around him in an embrace.

“Amelia, I am so glad to see you,” he answered.

Amelia pulled back from him and eyed Cate and Jack. “Cate, Jack, what a relief to see you both, too. I fretted over my hasty decision to send you. I felt simply terrible about the danger I placed you in.”

“We understand,” Cate answered.

“And we’re more than happy to help,” Jack added.

“The cause was far too important.”

“Yes,” Amelia agreed. “Yes, it was. I would have gone myself but...” She flicked her gaze to the sleeping form of Ruth.

“Fret no more, Amelia,” Lucas said. “They survived it. And even got to ride in a plane.” He offered an amused grin. “And Cate shot down a Jerry!”

Amelia’s eyes widened and her eyebrows raised as she stared at Cate, who shrugged.

“Believe me, that story will be told everywhere by the end of the week,” Lucas said with a chuckle. “Now, how is Sarah?”

“Holding her own. The prognosis is good. She should survive it. She’s quite lucky we found her when we did,” Amelia reported. She glanced to Cate and Jack again. “Good thing you two happened upon her. Though, what were you doing in the folly?”

Cate swallowed hard. “We found a note that suggested meeting there about a critical mission,” she explained. “I thought it rather curious, so I suggested we follow up on it.”

“Ah, I see. Inquisitive as always,” Amelia said.

“What about Rita?” Cate questioned. “Have you caught her? Is she also a German spy?”

CHAPTER 35



“That’s the tricky bit,” Lucas answered. “We had our suspicions about Victor. But Rita was a complete surprise.”

“No hint of her true loyalties before this?” Cate asked.

Lucas shook his head as Amelia explained. “It’s not that. No hint of her whatsoever. She doesn’t seem to exist. She’d never been assigned by anyone to the Dunhaven base. When she showed up, everyone thought she’d been assigned there, but we’ve not been able to track down her existence.”

“Perhaps the Germans sent her to keep an eye on Victor,” Jack suggested.

“Then why kill him and disappear? I don’t understand it,” Amelia said. “Though I suppose we may never know.”

“Well, I hope she won’t cause any more trouble,” Cate replied.

“Not at Dunhaven,” Lucas said. “We’ll be closing that base entirely. With the infiltration, we’d rather shut it down completely and speak no further of it. Nothing undermines the war efforts and morale like a spy debacle going public.”

Cate nodded in understanding. After a few more moments, Lucas said, “Well, I suppose we should be going on to Dunhaven. I’m quite certain Cate and Jack would like to rest.”

They slipped out of the tent a few minutes later, despite Cate assuring him they could wait until he was ready. Within the hour, they arrived at Dunhaven Castle. The morning sky was already brightening when they

strode through the door. Rory greeted them, popping into the foyer from the sitting room.

He pulled Lucas into a tight embrace. “Good to see you, brother,” he noted.

Lucas offered a similar sentiment before he turned his attention to Cate and Jack. “And our intrepid heroes. Cate and Jack, you’ve come through once again.”

“Pleasure to be of service,” Jack said.

“How proud I am to call you family. Well, I suppose you’d like to crawl into bed. Unless you’d like me to send up a tray or have a nightcap?”

“No, thank you. We’re exhausted and we’re going to head up. But we’ll talk again tomorrow,” Cate assured him.

“Wonderful. Pleasant dreams, then.”

Cate and Jack left Rory and Lucas to have their drinks and conversation and threaded through the halls, slipping out a side door and hurrying across the darkened landscape to the crypt. As they entered the secret passage, Jack let out a sigh.

“I will be so happy to go home.”

Cate squeezed his hand and he flicked on his flashlight. “I hope you don’t mind my promising to come back tomorrow, but...”

“No, I understand. We can’t just disappear. And we need to pick up the luggage anyway. I was too tired to do it now.”

“Me too. What a day. I’m not sure words can even capture what’s happened in the past forty hours.”

Jack shook his head. “No, and once we’re back in the safety of our time, I will definitely need a post-time travel analysis to decompress.”

“You and me both!” Cate answered as they reached the hidden interior of the castle. Within moments, they were back in the present time.

With the coast clear, they slipped out of the secret passage and hurried upstairs to change. Cate’s mind raced as she slipped out of her clothes, mussed from days of difficult circumstances. She sank onto the tub’s edge. The magnitude of the experience hit her when a piece of straw fluttered from her dress to the floor.

Cate blew out a long, steady breath as images flitted through her mind. She fought through her emotions as she realized how close they had come to their own demise. After a moment, she pushed back her shoulders and stood.

She had other unanswered questions. She needed to consult her notes and she wanted to follow up on tracking several of the people she'd come in contact with in 1942.

Cate pulled on her clothes, fixed her hair, including removing a wayward piece of straw that still clung to the underside. As she put the finishing touches on her look, she considered how strange the shift in her circumstances really was.

With a deep breath, she left her bedroom behind and wandered through the halls to the library. As she pushed through, the dogs bounded to her, leaving a dozing Jack's side.

Tears stung Cate's eyes as she scooped both boys into her arms and ruffled the fur on their heads. Jack stretched as she carried them both over and settled into the armchair.

"I need to get my notes, but I need a minute," Cate said.

"A minute? I need more than a minute," Jack said. "You're a bigger person than me. Then again, you did take down a 109."

Cate chuckled at him. "That really was quite the feather in the cap, wasn't it?"

"I'm still not sure I can process what happened."

"Me either. And then we come back here and live normal lives. That might be the most mind-boggling part."

Jack weighed the statement before responding. "I can't pick a most mind-boggling part. There's so much. This is just as bad as the time we came back from the 1700s and learned there were witches and warlocks."

Cate nodded. "And still so many unanswered questions."

"Who is Rita? I feel so used if she's a German spy."

"I told you she was trouble," Cate said with her eyebrows raised. She set the dogs on the floor and strode across the room to retrieve her folder. "Stemming from your question, if Ruth lived and Rita buried Victor in the garden, why did the detective tell me it had been identified as a woman?"

Cate shuffled through papers to the notes she'd scribble when she spoke with the detective. She sucked in a sharp breath.

"What is it?"

"My notes. Jack, they're different. Look!" She passed the paper over to him. Where it had once said *Adult female, 5'4", 70-80 years ago, blunt force trauma to the head* it now read *Adult male, 6'2", 70-80 years ago, bullet fracture in skull*.

“So, the body found is now Victor’s,” Jack said.

“Which means history changed!” Cate exclaimed.

Jack stared down at the paper. “Aye, history changed all right. And I’m not certain that’s a good thing.”

Cate shuffled through to the newspaper articles. “This article still reads roughly the same. Amelia claims Ruth left for another position.”

“When we know she was shot.”

“Maybe that was always the case, but that doesn’t explain who was in the grave.”

“Rita?” Jack postulated. “Perhaps Victor killed them both in the last set of events. That would explain why no one missed her. No one seemed to know who she was or where she came from.”

“It could be.”

“This had to have left a ripple through time.”

Cate swallowed hard as her eyes darted around the room. “Come with me,” she said, as she stood and hurried from the library.

“Where are we going?” Jack inquired.

Cate led him below stairs. The voices of Mrs. Fraser and Molly talked and laughed in the kitchen. Cate’s heart leapt at the sound and continued down the hall.

“Hi, ladies! Mind if we snag a cookie or two?”

“Snag away, Lady Cate,” Mrs. Fraser said, handing her the cookie tin.

“Everything okay here?” Cate inquired.

“Aye. What would be amiss?” Mrs. Fraser said.

Cate shrugged. “Baking gone awry. Riley stealing a steak.”

“No, everything is just fine.”

“Mr. Fraser’s all good?”

“Of course, he is,” Mrs. Fraser answered. “What’s with you today, Lady Cate?”

“I had a bad dream last night. Probably silly, but I just wanted to make sure.”

“Everything is right as rain,” Mrs. Fraser assured her.

“Good.” Cate waved the cookies in the air. “And thanks!”

Jack grabbed one from her as they strolled back down the hall. “Well, it looks like nothing has changed here.”

“Nothing major,” Cate agreed.

When they settled in the library, she grabbed her laptop. A quick search of the internet revealed no major historical changes to the war efforts. The war ended as expected.

“So, history changed, but it left no noticeable difference,” Jack said.

“It seems so,” Cate answered as she pounded on the keyboard.

“What are you looking for now?”

“Information on our pilots,” Cate said. After a moment, she smiled. “Sergeant Roberts lived a full and happy life, it seems. I see him in the census after the war and a death certificate in the early 2000s.”

“What about Sergeant Williams?” Jack asked, inquiring about his pilot.

Cate tapped around, searching the records. “He was shot down in 1943 but survived. He returned to fly with his squadron after a few weeks, survived the war and lived to a ripe old age!”

“Wonder if that was always the case.”

“I’m not certain,” Cate said as she closed her laptop. “I wonder if we’ll ever learn the truth about what happened.”

“I hope we don’t learn our presence changed things radically,” Jack answered.

“It doesn’t seem to have. Let’s hope that trend holds out.”

Jack slouched in his chair and yawned. “Oh, I’m exhausted.”

“Me too,” Cate said. “My nap in the barn and the car were definitely not enough.”

“You’ll sleep well tonight!”

“Oh, please, I hope so. I hope I don’t have you up with my midnight roamings.”

“You and me both!”

They spent another hour together in conversation over the events in 1942, deciding they’d return to 1942 one last time tomorrow afternoon to say their goodbyes to Rory, Lucas, and Amelia.

“Again, I’ll miss them,” Cate said. “Especially after all that.”

“Well, you still have me, Lady Cate,” Jack said, offering her a cheeky grin.

“That more than makes up for it,” Cate assured him as Molly popped in with her dinner tray.

After her dinner, Cate found herself unable to keep her eyes open. She opted for an early night, taking the dogs for one last walk before she crawled into bed, exhausted.

Sun shone through the windows as Cate opened her eyes the following morning. She still laid in the same position she'd fallen asleep in. Had she remained in bed for the entire night? No traces of the necklace existed, though the music box tinkled away on her night table. Sheer exhaustion must have provided a temporary solution to her problem.

She stretched and climbed from the bed, feeling as though she could sleep the entire day away. The motivating factor, though, was their final trip to 1942.

She met Jack in the hall as she emerged from her suite with the two dogs. "Sleep okay?" he inquired.

"You tell me," she answered.

"I didn't get any notifications on my phone, though even if I would have, I was dead to the world last night."

"I think both of us were," Cate admitted, as they strode down the hall together. "I don't think I moved."

"Me either. I guess that's one solution to your problem," Jack said, as they stepped into the crisp morning air with the dogs.

"Spending three days in the span of two hours? I'll pass and hope Damien finds something."

"One more trip today and then we can get back to normal around here. I can't wait."

"I know what you mean, though saying goodbye is always hard."

"Let's plan to visit them when the war's over."

Cate smiled and nodded at the idea.

"Hey, do you want to go back earlier? Maybe this morning?"

"Anxious to get there huh?"

"I just figured we might have better luck catching everyone early in the morning. The place seemed deserted when we went in the afternoons."

"Outside of the spies, you're right. Okay," Cate agreed. "After breakfast?"

"Aye, perfect."

Cate spent her first meal of the day pouring over more internet searches to try to find something amiss or gather more information on the mysterious Rita Haverford. She found none. With any luck, they'd solicit more information on their final trip to 1942.

After changing and meeting in the hall, Cate and Jack slipped back to the past using the universal time portal. A nervous wave passed over Cate

as they stepped into the bright sunshine of September 23, 1942.

Mere hours ago, they had returned to Dunhaven after an intelligence mission. As they ambled toward the castle, Cate noticed the intelligence tent already being dismantled. Items were being carried to a waiting truck as the base ceased its operations.

They strode through the front door and made their way to their suite. Cate packed the few things she'd brought, and they carried their suitcases to the foyer. Lucas emerged from the hallway.

"Leaving?" he questioned.

"Yes," Cate answered. "We were just about to find Rory to thank him for the stay."

"Oh, that's too bad we didn't get the chance to visit more, though I'm afraid I'm heading back to London today, myself."

Cate grabbed Lucas's forearm and squeezed. "Be safe, Lucas."

He nodded and gave her a tight-lipped smile. "I will. And the same goes for you both."

"Is Amelia here?"

"Mmm, yes. She'll stay on for several more days, so she has easy access to Sarah. She should be along soon; she plans to go back to the hospital early."

"Has there been any change in her condition?"

"She awoke a few hours ago. Confirmed the details about her confrontation with Victor."

Cate shook her head, reminded of the frightening encounter. "Oh, here's Amelia now."

Amelia wandered down the stairs, still latching her watchband.

"Jack, Cate! Leaving?"

"Afraid so," Jack said.

Amelia pulled Cate into a tight hug. "Do be careful. And we'll have to plan to get together after this mess is over."

Cate smiled and nodded as Amelia pulled Jack into an embrace. She grabbed both of their hands and squeezed. "Thank you for what you did."

"Thank you for what you're doing," Cate said.

Rory approached the foursome, glancing at the suitcases on the floor. "Oh, how I hate to see those."

"I'm having mixed emotions about leaving, too," Cate admitted.

“Well, you’ve been through a terrible ordeal from what I understand,” Rory said. “Are you certain you shouldn’t stay a few more days? Recover a bit more.”

“I’m afraid we can’t,” Jack answered.

Rory nodded. “I understand, though I still wish you weren’t going. Anne will be so sad to have missed you.”

“Well, I’ve invited them back when the war ends,” Amelia noted.

“Yes, yes, that would be lovely. Let’s plan for that.”

“Oh, about the car...” Jack began.

Rory waved him away. “Don’t mention it. I never liked that car, anyway.”

They chatted for a few more moments, before Cate and Jack collected their luggage and headed out the front door. Cate gave the castle a final glance as they approached the crypt.

“You okay?” Jack inquired.

She nodded. “It helps to know the outcome here,” she said, as they ducked into the secret passage.

“I imagine so. We’ll have to make good on that promise to visit them when the war is over.”

“Wow! Jack Reid suggesting time travel!”

“You’ve earned the trip,” he said.

Within moments, they had arrived at the time rip and returned to the present. Jack helped Cate carry the luggage upstairs. She emptied it and returned all the items to storage before lunch. The time spent with her staff helped ease the nerves she still had over their latest time traveling adventure.

She found herself smiling and relaxed as she hurried upstairs to begin penning a chapter on wartime Dunhaven. As she waited for her document to open, Cate checked her phone. A message from Damien had arrived while she ate.

Hey Cate, how’s it going? Text me when you’ve got a minute.

Cate sent a message back, alerting him to her availability.

Within moments, she received a reply. *I think we’re on to something here about what’s happening to you... I mean with the wandering around and stuff.*

Cate raised her eyebrows at his message. Maybe now they could put this mystery to rest, too. Another message came as she contemplated her

response. *Tell me if this sounds like what's happening to you.*

She waited a moment as the screen indicated Damien's typing. A long message popped up with a list of symptoms. *Symptoms include: Time loss, often during a trance-like episode where the sufferer may walk, talk and function almost normally; incoherent thoughts or inability to concentrate; confusion, particularly about the order of events over a period of time; preoccupation with a specific moment or event; dizziness, particularly when a trance is beginning or ending; memory loss; loss of consciousness when transitioning between normal functioning and time loss periods*

Cate studied the message then typed back: *Yes, that sounds like it! What is it?*

Damien responded. *Temporalysis*

Temporalysis, Cate pondered. What did that mean? Another text appeared on her screen. *Time travel sickness.*

Time travel sickness, she questioned? What was that? She typed back: *I've never heard of that. What is it? How can I stop it?*

Damien responded: *Well, that's where things are tricky. This *sounds* like time travel sickness, but there's one odd thing that doesn't fit. It usually occurs when a human time-traveler hops between several different time points in a short period. Which, to my knowledge, you haven't done.*

Cate texted back: *No, in the past two weeks, we've only gone to 1942. Though in the past year we have visited four time periods.*

His response came quickly: *That's not enough. What I mean is, it has to be hopping through four or more time periods in a day or a week, something quick. Rapid succession travel to lots of different eras.*

Cate pondered his statement before she responded: *So, this isn't time travel sickness?*

Damien answered: *Well, we think it is. Weirdly, it can occur BEFORE you do the time hopping.*

Cate's brow furrowed. "Before?" she questioned aloud and wrote back: *So, I'm going to time hop in the near future?*

Damien replied: *It's a likely bet if our diagnosis is correct. We're still digging around to determine how to prevent this or stop it.*

Cate rubbed the back of her neck, growing uncomfortable suddenly. She fidgeted in her seat as she typed back: *Is it harmful? Beyond the obvious time loss and weird conversations.*

Dots popped onto the screen and disappeared, indicating Damien's typing and retyping a message. Finally, a message popped onto her screen. *It can be fatal.*

Cate's breath caught in her throat. "Fatal!" she exclaimed.

Another message chimed in. *Don't panic. We're looking for solutions. In the meantime, please don't time hop. You know the cause of it now, so try to avoid it.*

Cate's mind spun. If the sickness was already occurring, could she avoid it? She was destined to time hop for whatever reason. She already suffered from time travel sickness. How could she avoid triggering the ailment? Questions with no answers swirled in her mind and she rose to find Jack.

With her mind a blur, she plodded through the halls in search of him. When she stopped moving, she found herself in her bedroom suite. She stared at space. Jack. She had to find Jack. What was she doing here?

She blinked slowly as she stared at herself in the mirror. She knew what she was doing here. She had to find it. She had to find the room. The time was almost here. She had to find it.

Cate pulled her hair into an upswept style. She removed the sapphire silk dress from the wardrobe and changed into it. She pulled the necklace from the bottom drawer and clasped it around her neck.

"I'm coming," she murmured as she stalked through the halls. Images of the room she sought filled her mind. She descended the stairs and made her way to the west wing doors. They stood open, beckoning her to enter.

Cate plodded through them, winding through the halls to the large golden hall. Riley and Bailey waited, staring at the far wall.

Cate approached the pillar near the room's center. She pressed four of the decorative elements at once. A grinding noise filled the room and a screech followed by a whirring. Hidden in the walls, a mechanism sprang to life. Music filled the room. Cate recognized the music from the music box.

She glanced across the room where the dogs sat. The wall opened, splitting down the middle and swinging into the room.

Cate approached the new doorway and smiled. She'd found it. The mirrored walls stared back at her; soft light glowed from inside star-shaped lamps, and the floor spun.

Cate stepped onto the spiraling floor, careful to keep her balance. She smiled as the music filled her ears. She spun in a circle, despite the moving floor, her eyes searching the space.

“I’m here,” she said. “I’m here, where are you?”

The scent of musk filled the air. A shadow moved behind her. She spun in search of it, reaching her hand out. “I’m here!” she called.

The room began to spin faster. The music distorted and Cate’s legs began to wobble. “I’m here,” she breathed out, as her eyelids fluttered, and her eyes rolled back in her head. She slumped to the floor which continued to spin.

* * *

A voice called to Cate in the darkness, sounding thick and garbled. Confused, Cate searched for the source in her mind. “Cate!” the voice said again.

She tried to speak but found herself unable. “Cate!” She recognized Jack’s voice and fought to find it.

After a moment, her eyelids fluttered open. Blurred for a moment, she blinked to clear her vision. She lay in the west wing’s large hall. Music still filled the air. Jack hovered over her as she lay on the floor.

“Jack?” she questioned.

“Hey, Cate,” Jack said, a smile crossing his face.

“What happened?” she questioned, still feeling too dizzy to sit up. “What’s that music?”

“You found your room. At least, I think so.”

Cate’s head lolled to the side, and she spotted the room. She pushed up to sit, steadying herself by grasping hold of Jack’s arm. Music floated from inside as the floor spun.

Cate crawled over and sat on her haunches. “I found you here, passed out, spinning around in there.”

“How?” Cate inquired.

“The dogs. They were carrying on something terrible. I followed the noise here and found you in there.”

Cate pressed her palm against her forehead. “I don’t remember anything.”

“It’s okay, Cate. You’re back now.”

“Wait! I do remember something.”

“What?” Jack asked.

“Damien! He sent a message. He said I had something called temp... temporal something. Temporalysis!”

“Temporalysis?” Jack repeated, his voice questioning.

“Time travel sickness. He said I had time travel sickness, and they were searching for a solution. He sent a list of symptoms.”

“It’s caused by time travel?”

“Yes and no,” Cate said. “It’s caused by a specific form of time travel called time hopping where the sufferer visits multiple eras in a short period of time.”

“What? We haven’t done that, have we?”

“It was very confusing. I can read you exactly what he said. Well,” she said, staring down at her dress, “after I change, of course.”

“Of course,” Jack said with a chuckle.

“I’ll change and meet you in the library. Can you take the dogs with you?” Cate asked, staring down at the two furry faces who watched her intently.

“Sure. See you soon, Cate. And then we’ll get to the bottom of this.”

Jack pulled her from the floor, and she smiled up at him and nodded. They parted ways as Jack headed to the library with the two pups in tow, and Cate hurried up the stairs and through the halls to her suite.

With a deep sigh, she unclasped the necklace and returned it to the drawer. She shimmied out of the dress and pulled on her discarded leggings and tunic. As she zipped up her boots, she stared outside, her brow furrowing.

It had been a beautiful day earlier – now rain fell from the gray skies and thunder rumbled in the distance. She didn’t realize it was supposed to rain.

With a shrug, Cate stood and smoothed her sweater. She crossed her bedroom and entered her sitting room. She stopped before she crossed that room, approaching the window instead of the door. She frowned at the scene outside, the crease between her eyebrows deepening.

Bright sunshine gleamed over the budding trees and bright green grass. She glanced up to the cloudless blue sky. Seconds ago, gray clouds had socked out the sun. How had they disappeared so quickly?

She hurried back into her bedroom and glanced out the window. Not a dark cloud was in sight. “That’s odd,” she mumbled to herself. With a shake of her head, she abandoned her weather watch and headed for the library.

She toggled on her phone and pulled up Damien's message as she stepped through the doors. "Okay, here's what Damien..." She stopped when she found the room empty except for the two dogs.

A whine emanated from Riley as Cate entered. "Jack?" she called, despite it being obvious he wasn't in the room. She spun and searched the hall. "Jack?"

Where had he gone? she wondered, as she stalked back into the library. He must have stepped out for something, she figured as she crossed to her armchair. She'd wait for him here.

As she sank onto the chair, her eyes focused on an object laying on the coffee table. The local newspaper sat tilted toward her.

Her brow furrowed as she stared at it. Realization dawned and her eyes widened. Her heart skipped a beat, and her stomach somersaulted. She shook her head as though it would dismiss what she was seeing.

"No," she cried, as she grasped the paper with trembling hands. Her next mystery smacked her in the face. But it was a mystery she had never wanted to face. "Oh, no."

A tear fell to her cheek. Her lower lip trembled as she stared at the page. A picture of Jack stared back at her, framed above by the words: LOCAL MAN MISSING, PRESUMED DEAD.

* * *

THE END

MISSING FROM DUNHAVEN CASTLE



A TIME TRAVEL COZY MYSTERY

CHAPTER 1



Cate sank into the armchair as tears spilled onto her cheeks. Her lower lip trembled as she re-read the headline of the newspaper she'd found on her coffee table moments ago. Her heart thudded, drowning out any noise in the room.

From the page, a picture of Jack stared at her. The headline read LOCAL MAN MISSING, PRESUMED DEAD.

Cate sat stunned for a moment before she glanced at the phone clutched in her shaking hands. She swiped at it and tapped a name, initiating a call.

Still trembling, she pressed the phone to her ear and waited for a response. She barely heard the voice on the other end.

She blinked slowly as she struggled to form words. "Damien," she choked out, her voice weak and breathy, "I need your help."

"Hey, Cate," Damien answered. "Sure. Is it about the temporalysis? We're still searching for some information, but—"

"No, it's not that."

"Oh. Well, okay. If there's something else I can help with, just say the word."

Cate licked her lips and leaned her elbow against the chair's arm. She sunk her forehead into her palm, fighting back the tears forming in her eyes. She blew out a shaky breath.

"Cate?" Damien prompted.

Cate drew in a deep breath and straightened her posture. "Something terrible has happened." She broke down in tears, unable to get any other

words out.

“Oh, no. What is it? Cate, whatever it is, we’ll help in any way we can. Is it the time again?”

“No,” Cate cried. “It’s Jack. He’s gone.”

“What?”

“He’s gone. He’s gone,” she said, her voice catching in her throat.

“Okay, slow down. Just take a breath and tell me what happened. What do you mean, he’s gone?”

“I had another one of those episodes. Jack found me. I was dressed in a ball gown, I had passed out. We were going to meet in the library and discuss it after I changed. I told him to take the dogs with him.

“When I got here, the dogs were here but no Jack. Then I saw the newspaper.”

“Newspaper?”

“Today’s newspaper. It was sitting on the coffee table. There’s a picture of Jack and the headline says...” Cate’s voice trailed off as she choked on the lump in her throat.

“Take your time, Cate.”

Cate sniffled and wiped at her cheeks. She took a steadying breath and said, “It says local man missing, presumed dead.”

Cate heard a rustling on the other end of the line. “Okay, Cate. It’s going to be okay. We’ll figure this out. Give me a second.”

“Okay,” Cate said with another sniffle. She wiped at her cheeks. “The article says he’s been gone for a week. But he was just here. I just saw him not an hour ago. How did this happen?”

“Hold on one second.”

Muffled voices spoke on the other end of the line. Cate could not make out the words, though.

“Cate? You there?”

“Yeah.”

“Okay. Listen, we’re coming. We’ll be there tonight. I know this is hard, but sit tight, okay?”

“Tonight? Damien, you’ll never get a flight.”

“I don’t need a flight, Cate. Just a few hours to grab some stuff.”

“Oh, right.” Cate’s mind spun as she tried to make sense of the situation, including the latest development.

“We’ll see you soon. And, Cate?”

“Yeah?”

“Try not to worry. We’ll solve this. Together.”

“Thanks.”

Cate ended the call and sat for a moment staring at the paper. Panic bubbled inside her and she rubbed at her forehead. Her first attempt to read the article ended quickly. Her jumbled mind failed to comprehend the words on the page.

Riley approached her, staring into her eyes. She scooped him up as she fought back her emotions. Rubbing a hand down his furry back, she forced herself to read the page. It detailed an ongoing search for Jack, stating he’d been missing for over one week. Attempts to contact him or find him had produced no results. His cell phone had been found, but he had not been. Blood found within his home suggested he may no longer be alive.

Cate’s stomach turned over as she read the details. Her mind questioned how this occurred. Had the change in history they’d witnessed when solving their last mystery caused this? Why had the ripple been delayed? When they returned after their wild adventure, Cate’s notes had already been altered, reflecting the change in the victim buried in her garden, but Jack was with her.

Why had he disappeared only now? And where had he gone?

Cate bit her lower lip hard enough to wince. She climbed from her seat, feeling almost numb. She pushed her legs to move forward, leaving Riley behind with his brother, Bailey.

Cate threaded through the halls on autopilot. She descended the stairs and traipsed down the hall to the kitchen. She stepped inside, hoping to find things normal. Hoping the newspaper was some kind of cruel joke.

Molly sat at the kitchen table, a dishtowel clutched in her hand as she sobbed. Mrs. Fraser stood over her, rubbing her back.

“It’s okay, Miss Molly, you have yourself a good cry,” the woman said with a snuffle of her own.

Cate’s lower lip trembled at the scene as she stepped into the kitchen. Molly snapped her head up and stood. She wiped away her tears.

“Lady Cate,” she said with a snuffle. “Didn’t see you there.” She forced a smile on her face, but Cate noticed her lower lip tremble as she tried to hold it.

Cate’s face pinched as emotions overcame her again. Molly walked toward her, arms outstretched, and pulled her into a hug.

“Now, don’t you two girls go giving up hope,” Mrs. Fraser chided as she set a kettle of water on the stove. “Young Jack is a smart man. And we’d be doing him a disservice if we counted him out already!” Mrs. Fraser gave a firm nod at the final statement, as though that would make it true.

Cate squeezed her lips into a thin line. Molly wiped a few tears away. “It was just that article this morning,” Molly said. “It seemed so final.”

“Has it been a week already?” Cate inquired, trying to search for the story.

“Aye, I’m afraid so,” Mrs. Fraser said.

“It can’t be,” Cate murmured.

“I know what you mean,” Molly said, guiding Cate to a seat at the table. “It feels like we’ve lived a month in the last week.”

“Sit down and have a cuppa, Lady Cate,” Mrs. Fraser said, offering her a filled teacup. She set down a plate of cookies as she sat down across from her.

“I couldn’t eat.”

“You have to, Lady Cate,” Mrs. Fraser insisted. “It’ll do you good. Got to keep your strength up.”

Cate’s mind spun as the women talked in the background. She stared into the translucent brown liquid in her cup. Jack had been missing for over a week. Though to her, it had just occurred. History had changed again. Why? How?

“Lady Cate?” Molly’s voice echoed in her ears. She snapped her head up to look at the woman. “Lady Cate?”

“What? I’m sorry, I wasn’t listening.”

“It’s all right, lassie,” Mrs. Fraser said.

Cate’s eyes lowered to the teacup again. “He always called me that.”

“I know he did,” Mrs. Fraser said. “And he will again. I have faith. And I’ve been praying like the dickens.”

Cate offered the woman a weak smile and sipped at her tea. Mrs. Fraser turned the topic to other things, though the somber mood never broke. As Cate finished her cuppa, she said, “I need to go see Mr. Reid.”

Mrs. Fraser nodded. “Oh, just a moment, Lady Cate, would you mind waiting for me to pack up some food? I hope you don’t mind, but I think he could use it. Poor Stan.”

“Of course, I don’t mind,” Cate said.

Mrs. Fraser bustled about the kitchen with Molly, packing several meals in a hamper. "Now, wait a moment, I'll get Mr. Fraser to carry it to the car."

"I can do it," Cate insisted, hefting the heavy basket up.

"Tell him we're thinking of him," Mrs. Fraser said, placing her hand on Cate's forearm.

"I will," Cate promised.

She offered a fleeting smile before she climbed the stairs and headed out the door to the garage. Cate set the hamper in the backseat and slid behind the wheel. She made the short trip to Stanley Reid's cottage.

With the hamper in hand, she knocked on the door. The old man pulled the door open, offering Cate a consoling smile. "Lady Cate," he said, sadness etched in his eyes and on his features. "Come in." He signaled for her to enter.

"Mr. Reid," Cate began, trying to focus on the food in her hand. "Mrs. Fraser and Molly send their best and some food. They were concerned you weren't eating properly."

"That'd be Emily, all right." Stanley gave a weak chuckle.

Cate licked her lips as she grasped the basket handle with white knuckles. "Here, I'll take it, lassie."

"Oh, right." Cate handed the basket off to him and he set it on his coffee table. He turned to face her again. Cate tried to offer a smile, but tears came instead.

Stanley pulled her into a hug. "There, there, lassie. Jackie wouldn't want you to cry."

"I'm sorry."

"Whatever for?" He released her and stared into her eyes.

"I think..." She wiped at her cheeks and sniffled. "I think I had something to do with Jack's disappearance."

Stanley's forehead wrinkled and he screwed up his face. He guided Cate to an armchair and eased her into it. "What are you saying, Lady Cate?"

"I'm saying... I'm saying I think when Jack and I investigated in 1942, we messed something up. And that's what caused this."

Stanley considered the statement, sinking into an armchair next to Cate as she continued.

"We went to investigate the murder of a woman. But when we were there, a man's body was placed in that grave. And when we returned my notes were changed."

Stanley remained silent.

“Don’t you see? We changed history. Something went haywire. And I think Jack’s disappearance is a result of that.”

“How?”

“I’m not sure. But he just disappeared not more than three hours ago.”

Stanley cocked his head. “He went missing a week ago.”

Cate shook her head. “No. He just went missing.”

“You’re not making sense, lassie.”

“I know this is difficult. But I just spoke with Jack less than three hours ago. He was fine. He was normal. He found me passed out in the west wing. We were just about to discuss it when he disappeared and I found a newspaper article saying he’d been missing for a week. But, Mr. Reid, I just saw him today.”

Stanley shook his head and grabbed Cate’s hand. “Lady Cate, I---“

“No!” Cate insisted. “I just saw him! Something’s wrong here. He can’t be gone.”

“But he is, lassie, he is.”

Cate’s gaze fell to her hands. “But not for a normal reason.”

“Maybe so, but what can we do?”

She flicked her gaze back up to the older man’s face. “I’m going to find him. And I’m going to bring him home.”

* * *

Cate slogged through the front door of the castle, blowing out a long breath. Leaning against the thick wooden barrier, she attempted to collect her thoughts. Her jumbled mind failed to pull together coherent ideas.

On auto-pilot, she wandered downstairs again, knocking on the doorjamb leading into the kitchen.

“Oh, Lady Cate, I’m glad you’re back,” Mrs. Fraser said. She forced a smile onto her face.

Cate offered her a tight-lipped smile. “Mr. Reid was very grateful for the care basket. He wanted me to pass along his thanks.”

“Oh, of course. Poor man.” Mrs. Fraser shook her head but pressed on with dinner preparations as a distraction.

“How’s he holding up?” Molly inquired.

Cate sucked in a breath. "He seems okay on the surface. But you can read the sadness in his eyes."

"I'm not surprised. He adored young Jack."

"And Jack took such good care of him," Molly said. "Ugh, I just wish there was something we could do."

"There just might be," Cate said.

Molly glanced at her, cocking her head and furrowing her brow.

"We can find Jack."

"Oh, from your lips to God's ears, Lady Cate," Mrs. Fraser said. "I pray for it every night."

"I agree wholeheartedly. But the police don't hold out much hope."

"Well, on that note," Cate began, "I have a few friends. The people that were here a few weeks ago, in fact. They're adept in this type of thing."

"Locating missing persons?" Molly inquired as she pulled a pie from the oven.

"Yes," Cate said. "I contacted them about Jack."

"And?" Mrs. Fraser questioned as she sprinkled coarse sugar on the top.

"And they agreed to help. Damien said they'd be here this evening."

"Oh!" Mrs. Fraser said, cutting her gaze to Cate and pressing her hand on her heart. "Well, bless them, Lady Cate. How nice of them to drop everything and come to Dunhaven. I certainly hope they can help!"

Molly offered a hopeful smile. "Me too! Gosh, I hope they can find him. What's their record like on this?"

Cate pondered the question. "They're very, very good. I don't think there's a problem they've ever been unable to solve."

"That's quite a record!"

"I'll get some bedrooms prepared," Cate said. "But I wanted to let you know we may have company for a while."

"They can stay as long as they like, especially if they are pitching in to find young Jack. And dinnae you worry about those bedrooms. Miss Molly and I will handle it right now."

"Oh, no, you've got enough on your plate."

"Nonsense. We've finished our baking, we've just got a little cleaning up to do. And the work will keep our minds off things. You go upstairs and prepare for your guests."

"I really appreciate it, Mrs. Fraser."

Mrs. Fraser gave her a smile and a nod, gesturing that she could run along.

Cate wandered to the library and plopped into the armchair. The newspaper stared back at her. With a grimace, she flipped it over and slouched into the chair, covering her face with her hands.

Her head ached, her eyes stung and her body felt weak all over. She had made a promise to Stanley Reid and she intended to keep it. But she didn't know how. How could she fix something that didn't happen?

Her mind reeled. Visions of her last encounter with Jack earlier that day flitted through her mind. They'd talked. She'd touched him. He was real. Wasn't he? Was she losing her mind? She had begun to question her own sanity when a loud banging echoed through the house.

Cate startled, her muscles stiffening. For a moment, she expected to find Jack at the library door. The banging sounded again. It was the front door, she realized.

"Jack?" she questioned, hope filling her voice.

She hurried from the library to the front door and yanked it open. Three familiar faces stared back at her.

"Hey, Cate," Damien said with a weak smile.

Cate's shoulders sagged in disappointment and relief at the same time. On the other side of the door stood Damien, Celine, and Michael.

"Hi," Cate answered. "Thanks for coming on such short notice. I just can't believe what's happening. I didn't know who else to call."

"It's no problem," Damien said, unwavering from his spot outside.

"Well, please, come in. Mrs. Fraser and Molly are preparing rooms for you. I---"

"Cate," Damien interrupted, "there's something I need to tell you."

Cate stood stunned at the statement. She wasn't certain she could take any more news today. Before she could answer or Damien could continue, movement caught her eye. Someone stood behind the second door, hidden from sight.

A commotion ensued as the figure rounded the door. Michael held out his hands to stop the man, shouting something. Celine shook her head. Damien stumbled back a step. He came into full view, stepping into the foyer, a smile bordering on a smirk on his lips.

Cate's mouth went dry. Her eyes bulged and her jaw dropped open. Her breath caught in her throat and she stumbled back several steps, her hand

rising to cover her open mouth. She struggled to make sense of it. She struggled to remain on her feet. She struggled to process coherent thoughts.

The man studied her, raising his eyebrows, a smirk on his lips. “Hello, Catherine,” Duke Marcus Northcott said.

CHAPTER 2



Cate's knees went weak at his voice. She struggled to stop herself from trembling. Her mind failed to form any words.

"Get away," she finally gasped out as he moved toward her again. She backed away from him.

He continued toward her. "I *knew* there was something unique about you. From the moment I met you, I knew it. A time traveler! Now it all makes sense." He leaned in closer to her. A musky scent filled her nostrils. It matched the scent she'd been smelling in the west wing. "I told you, Catherine, I always find out the truth."

The others filed inside behind him.

"Come on, man," Michael said. "Was that really necessary?"

Damien waved his hand in the air. "Yeah, I was trying to prepare her."

"Back off, Marcus," Celine said, placing a hand on his chest and inserting herself between him and Cate.

Cate remained speechless. Was she dreaming? Marcus Northcott stood in front of her, amidst the Shadow Slayers and they remained perfectly calm. They detested the man. Didn't they? Had history changed that much? Cate pressed her palm against her forehead, her jaw still gaping open.

Damien wrapped his fingers gently around Cate's upper arm. "Can we talk somewhere? Privately?"

Cate nodded and managed to force out one word. "Library."

"We're wasting time," Marcus said.

Damien held up a finger, his voice low. "Just give us a minute."

“We’ll wait here, D,” Celine said.

Damien guided Cate down the hall. She glanced behind her as they walked, staring at the strange scene in her foyer. Marcus’s gaze remained trained on her as she disappeared down the hallway. She gulped again as his dark eyes bore into her and then turned away.

Damien pushed through the doors and into the library, closing them behind him. Riley and Bailey leapt to their feet and Riley let out a howl.

“Riley, it’s okay. It’s Damien, remember?”

Riley sniffed in the air and seemed satisfied with the explanation. He sank to his haunches. Cate spun to face Damien. “What is going on here?”

Damien held his hands in front of him, a penitent expression on his features. “I can explain.”

“I sure hope so because I’m not sure how many more surprises I can handle today.”

“I know. I’m sorry. This is not how I envisioned this happening. I realize seeing him is a shock, but—“

“A shock? I’m surprised I’m still on my feet! When we last saw each other, you hated him. Has history changed that much?”

“No,” Damien said with a shake of his head. “I can explain.”

“I wish you would!” Cate blew out a long breath and squeezed her eyes shut. “Sorry. I’m sorry, I’m just—“

“Stressed. I get it. It’s okay.”

Cate sank into an armchair. Riley wandered over and she stroked his back as he stood with his front paws planted on her thigh. Damien perched on the chair next to her. She was acutely aware of him being in the spot Jack usually sat in when they discussed their problems.

“When you called and told me about Jack, we consulted with the Duke.”

“Do you think he’s responsible?”

“No,” Damien answered with a shake of his head. “But there is a group. It’s called The Agency. It—“

The doors burst open and Marcus strode into the room. Celine and Michael trailed behind him.

“Sorry, I couldn’t stop him,” Celine said, throwing her arms in the air.

“Have we all recovered from our shock? There is work to be done,” Marcus said.

As he strode to the fireplace, Riley and Bailey followed him. Riley left his spot next to Cate and loped to Marcus. Marcus scooped the small dog into his arms. Cate's heart stopped, her eyes bulging from her head. She leapt to her feet.

"Hello, Riley." He scratched the little dog's head. The pup offered him a lick on his hand. He placed the dog back on the floor, giving Bailey a quick tousle on the head.

"Can someone please explain what is going on here?" Cate questioned. With a pained expression, she glanced around the room at the others.

"I was trying when *someone*," Damien said, side-eying Marcus, "burst into the room."

Marcus rolled his eyes. "Were you planning on explaining it in this century?"

"Give him a minute," Celine barked at him.

"Like I was saying," Damien said to Cate, "there's a group called The Agency. They're... they're not nice people, Cate."

"We think they had something to do with Jack's disappearance," Michael said.

"How?" Cate inquired.

"In addition to being nefarious in general, they have the ability to time travel. And they do it for their own gain. They can manipulate time, jump around in it," Damien said. "Cate, they can change history."

Cate stared at him as realization dawned on her. She swallowed hard. "Change history," she repeated.

Damien nodded. "Yeah, change history. You said that happened once in 1942, and then again when you saw the article, right?"

"Yeah," Cate said, sinking into her armchair. She processed the information for a moment.

"We think what happened in 1942 is related to Jack's disappearance. We think it was him they were after there, too," Michael said.

"Why?" Cate inquired.

"They want Dunhaven Castle," Marcus said. "Among other things."

Cate stared at him for a moment, before flicking her gaze away. Her brows knit as she considered his statement. "Why would they want Dunhaven?"

"Cate, you have access to a universal time portal," Damien explained. "Even with their ability to time travel, this provides easy access to anyone

in their group.”

“Why take Jack?”

“Because it weakens you,” Marcus answered. “They will use him as leverage.”

Cate bit her lower lip. He wasn’t wrong. Without Jack, she felt vulnerable.

“What do these people want?” Cate inquired.

“Control,” Celine said. “They want to control history, events, the world.”

“Wait, back up. How do we know it’s these people? Why haven’t they come before?”

“They may have,” Damien answered. “And bided their time, waiting for an opportunity.”

“And we gave them one,” Cate lamented.

“Tell us about what happened in 1942 when the normal timeline changed,” Michael said.

Cate took a deep breath before launching into her story. “We went to 1942 to investigate a murder. The dogs found bones in the garden. The police said they belonged to a female and were buried seventy to eighty years ago. We pieced together some information and found an obscure clue about a woman who disappeared around that time.

“We went back to investigate and found a German spy ring. It was very convoluted but the long and short of it is we believed the woman buried in the garden was a woman named Ruth Harper who sustained blunt force trauma to the head.

“But what we witnessed was something different entirely.” Cate took another breath before continuing.

“A man by the name of Victor, who was a German spy, shot Ruth in the stomach. She survived. Then a woman named Rita, a woman no one could track down, shot Victor and killed him. She had him buried in the garden. When we returned here, my notes had changed. The body now belonged to a man from seventy to eighty years ago.”

Damien blinked a few times as he pieced it all together. “So Rita changed history.”

“That’s what it seems like,” Cate answered.

Michael narrowed his eyes. “And then you said Jack was here earlier today, right?”

Cate nodded. "Yes. I spoke with him. We went to 1942 this morning."

"And he came back fine, right?" Michael inquired.

"Yes," Cate said. "He came back fine."

"And you saw him later," Damien said.

Cate nodded again. "Yes. I had an..." Her voice trailed off as her eyes flitted to Marcus. "Episode. Jack found me in the west wing. We talked. We were going to meet here to talk about the message you sent. About the temporalysis. I went to change my clothes and he brought the dogs here. When I came in, the dogs were here. Jack wasn't. Just this."

Cate grabbed the newspaper and turned it over. For a split second, she hoped to find the headline changed. Her heart dropped when she saw the same picture and news story.

Damien studied the paper.

Cate continued as he skimmed the article. "It says he's been gone for a week. And everyone I've talked to recalls it that way, except me."

"You recall him being here today," Michael said as he paced the floor.

"Yes."

Damien shot a glance at Celine.

"So, what do we do?" Cate inquired.

"We *should* do nothing," Marcus answered.

Cate frowned at him and Celine rolled her eyes.

"That wasn't the plan," Michael said.

"I said we should do nothing, not we will do nothing."

"We'll attempt to track him, but it'll take some work," Celine said.

"An abundance of work," Marcus corrected.

"So, you think he's alive?"

"We're fairly certain," Damien said.

Cate sucked in a breath. "Thank God."

"We think they took him to distract you," Michael said.

"I still don't see why?"

"Because while we chase them and him," Marcus said, "they will be doing something else. While we are distracted, they will capitalize."

"By doing what?" Cate questioned.

"We don't know," Damien said. "But we'll have to stay alert."

"Right," Cate said with a creased brow. She rubbed the back of her neck as her head began to ache.

“We don’t have many clues to go on,” Damien said. “We’ll need to start in 1942 where you last saw Rita.”

Cate nodded, biting her lower lip as her head swam. She stood, swallowing hard.

“Cate?” Damien inquired. “You okay?”

Cate tried to nod but found it difficult. Her eyes blinked in a slow, deliberate manner.

“Cate?” Damien questioned again, his voice sounding muffled.

“What’s wrong with her?” Michael asked.

Cate’s jumbled mind allowed her to see and hear the events around her but not to communicate. She struggled to maintain her focus.

Marcus twisted to face her, his eyebrows raising. “It’s the temporalysis.” He approached her. Cate’s mind jumbled, fighting to place him.

Her lips curled into a smile. “You’re here!” she said.

“Catherine, focus.”

“Are we going to the ball?”

“No, we are not going to the ball.”

Cate looked down at her clothes. “I have my dress. I’ll get ready.”

“No, Catherine. We are not going to the ball. Focus. We must find Jack.”

“Jack. Yes, but we have to go to the ball to find him.”

“Not now. We’re still in the present. You must focus.”

Cate slow-blinked at him again, her brow furrowing at his words.

“Catherine, focus. We are in the present.”

She shook her head, averting her eyes from him. She spun to face the door and took a step toward it. “I have to go.”

“No,” Marcus said, catching her elbow and spinning her back to him. “You must stay here.”

Cate attempted to wrench her arm from his grasp.

“Cate, maybe you should listen to him,” Damien said, skirting around her and placing himself between her and the door.

Cate shook her head again. “No, I…”

“No, Catherine,” Marcus argued. “You mustn’t leave. You must face the present.”

Celine rushed toward her and touched her cheek. Marcus shook his head. “It will not work. The temporalysis is preventing you from reaching her.”

Cate struggled to free herself from the confines of the group. “Let me go!” she shouted.

“Do not allow her to leave,” Marcus warned them.

Michael placed himself at the doors, barring any exit she had. Cate scanned the room for another escape. Her forehead crinkled as her headache worsened. She spun, searching for an exit. After two dizzying revolutions, her eyes rolled back in her head, and she collapsed.

CHAPTER 3



Cate's eyes fluttered open. Damien hovered over her. "Damien?" she questioned as memories of the last few hours rushed back into her mind. Her stomach turned as she recalled the circumstances that brought Damien back to Dunhaven Castle.

Cate struggled to push herself up to sit from her position lying on the floor. "Easy," Damien said.

"She is fine. Let her get up," a voice said.

The sound caused Cate's flesh to pucker into goosebumps. She sat up, clutching the coffee table as she glanced toward the fireplace over her right shoulder.

It had not been a dream. Marcus Northcott leaned against the mantle with a brandy in his hand. Cate's breath caught in her throat as she spotted him.

She climbed to her feet. "What happened?"

"You had another one of the temporalysis attacks. You passed out."

Cate heaved a sigh, pressing her palm to her forehead. "That's twice in one day."

Marcus reached into his pocket and withdrew a small pouch. He pulled it open and retrieved a small red object shaped into a disk. He held it out to Cate.

She stared at it, shrinking away. "Eat it," he instructed.

"Why?"

"It will aid with the temporalysis."

Cate eyed him warily.

“Well, go on, take it,” Marcus said.

“Take it, Cate,” Celine said with a nod. “He knows what he’s doing.”

Cate shook her head, her features pinching. “Why are we trusting him suddenly?”

“I know it’s weird,” Damien said, “but he’s the best resource we have right now.”

Marcus raised his eyebrows at Cate, a triumphant expression on his chiseled features. She narrowed her eyes at him.

“Marcus has extensive knowledge about The Agency. If we’re going to track them, we’ll need his help,” Celine said.

“And I’m just supposed to trust him?”

“No, Cate,” Damien said. “You just need to trust us.”

Cate scanned their faces. “And by extension, him.” Cate flailed her arm toward Marcus. “He almost killed me!”

Marcus rolled his eyes. “Oh, Catherine, please, that was centuries ago! You cannot honestly still hold that against me. And besides, I made certain you were found!”

“It was centuries for you. It was a few weeks for me!”

Damien approached her, holding his hands out to plead with her. “Cate, I know it’s weird. But alliances shift and allegiances change. It was hard for me to accept at first too but he’s the best resource we have. He’s the one who identified your temporalysis, and he has the best information about The Agency.”

Cate studied his face, her head tilting as she tried to decipher any meaning from his words. “How do you know he’s telling the truth? How do you trust him?”

“He’s saved our lives more than once,” Damien admitted.

“Damien’s right,” Celine said.

“As much as I hate to admit this, they’re telling the truth. He’s come through in the clutch more than once,” Michael added. “I don’t like the guy either, but he’s our best chance right now.”

Marcus wiggled his eyebrows at her and extended his hand again. The red disk stood out starkly against his palm. Cate squeezed her lips together and reached for the red object. She popped it into her mouth. Within seconds, her lips formed a grimace and she shivered. “Ugh, it’s awful. What is this?”

“Dragon’s blood,” Marcus answered. “A temporary solution to your problem.”

“What?” Cate asked, her eyes widening.

“Sap from a Dragon Blood tree,” Celine explained. “It can have some restorative properties for temporalysis. It doesn’t cure it though.”

Cate sank into her armchair. “What does?”

“Nothing that we’ve come across,” Damien said.

“It must run its course,” Marcus said.

“But it can be fatal,” Damien said. “So, you’ll need to leave the heavy lifting to us.”

“What? No!” Cate shouted.

“Cate,” Damien said with a shake of his head. “You can’t follow these people through time. Not only is it incredibly dangerous on its own, but with the added bonus of your temporalysis, it could cost you your life!”

Cate shook her head. “I don’t care. I have to help! For Jack.”

“I’m sure he’ll understand and probably even agree,” Michael countered.

“I’m not going to stand by and do nothing while these people have Jack! It’s not an option for me.”

“Cate, are you sure?” Damien inquired.

After a moment, Cate nodded. “Yes. He’d do the same for me.”

“All right,” Celine said. “Then we’ll get started.”

Damien nodded. “Okay. Now, Cate, I’ll need you to tell me everything you can about Rita. She’s our best lead on tracking these people.”

“Do you think she’s one of them?”

Marcus pulled a cell phone from his pocket and tapped around on it. “Is this the woman you know as Rita?”

Cate stood and studied the image on his phone. Ravishing Rita stared back at her. Her hair and makeup were different, but Cate would recognize her face anywhere. She nodded. “Yes, that’s her.”

“She’s a key member of The Agency. Her name is Gianna Caruso,” Marcus explained. “The woman is a ghost. She is extremely dangerous.”

“Well, that seems like the pot calling the kettle black,” Cate murmured as she sank into her armchair.

“What can you tell us about her?” Celine asked.

Damien added, “Specifically about the last time you saw her.”

Cate licked her lips. Her mind parsed through the details she possessed concerning Rita Haverford of 1942. “Ummm,” Cate murmured.

“Take your time,” Damien said. Michael handed him a laptop from the bag he’d carried in. Damien popped it open and tapped around before focusing his attention on Cate.

She licked her lips again. “When we met Rita, she was working in the intelligence tent.”

“Intelligence tent?” Michael inquired.

Cate nodded. “Yes, there was an intelligence tent on the grounds of Dunhaven Castle in 1942 for a very brief period. Jack and I discovered it when we traveled there. It’s not listed anywhere. Its existence has practically been erased from history.”

“Why?” Damien inquired.

“Because it was infiltrated by German spies. It nearly cost the Allied forces the ability to decipher the Enigma code.”

Damien nodded as he clacked away on his keyboard. Cate continued her tale. “She was posing as an intelligence agent for the British. She was extremely friendly with Jack, very interested in him.” Cate shook her head and sank her forehead into her palm. “Why didn’t I see it coming?”

“You couldn’t have, Cate,” Damien assured her. “Tell me everything you can about what happened with Victor’s death.”

“Jack and I were hiding in the folly after finding a cryptic note. Ruth, the woman we thought had been buried in the garden, came there. She met with Hans, an intelligence agent. He gave her the information to decipher the Enigma code. She swapped it with a fake file and met with Victor. He shot her and took the fake file. But before he could leave, Rita appeared. She said something about there being larger things in motion and he was collateral damage. She shot him. Then two men appeared and she told them to bury him in the garden and leave Ruth there.”

“Do you know what happened to Rita after?”

“No. Jack and I asked about her but my relatives at the time had no information. They said they had no idea where she’d come from and no idea where she’d gone. She simply vanished.”

“Okay, I’m going to concentrate my efforts in 1942 and see what I can dig up. Out of curiosity, why did you start investigating during that time?”

“Mrs. Campbell, our town librarian, gave me a folder of articles about any disappearances in the area. The only one that fit the time frame and

gender of the bones, the original set, was Ruth Harper.”

“Do you happen to have those articles?”

Cate nodded and retrieved the folder from the desk. She dug through and scanned the article on Ruth Harper. It remained unchanged. “This is the article that led us to that time period. None of the other articles fit because they were the wrong gender. Well, they were the wrong gender, but not anymore. Ugh, this all makes my head ache.”

“That’s the temporalysis,” Marcus chimed in.

Cate flicked her gaze at him before she handed the articles to Damien. She continued to suck on the dragon blood lozenge, hoping it did the trick for her symptoms.

Damien scanned the articles. “Are any of these others different?”

“Uh,” Cate murmured. She took the folder back and scanned through them. “Not to my knowledge. If there are any details that are changed, they’re imperceptible.”

Damien nodded. “Okay. I’ll concentrate on searching around 1942 for anything dealing with Gianna or The Agency.”

“Make a note of anything you find, and we’ll review it and go from there tomorrow,” Celine said.

Damien offered her a thumbs up. “You got it.”

“Mrs. Fraser and Molly set up the bedrooms you had the last time you stayed. I can take you...”

Damien shook his head as he closed his laptop and stood. “No, it’s okay, Cate. We remember the way. You relax.”

Cate slouched back in her armchair. Damien grasped her shoulder and squeezed. Cate grabbed his hand, offering him a similar gesture as she nodded. He took another step away. Cate twisted and tugged his hand. “Damien.” She waited until he turned back toward her and gave him a weak smile. “Thanks.”

“You’re welcome, Cate. We’ll get him back.”

Cate nodded as he slid his hand from hers.

“You can follow us,” Michael said to Marcus, bobbing his head toward the door.

Marcus swallowed the last of the brandy in his glass and stalked from the room.

“Get some rest, Cate,” Celine said as she patted her shoulder.

The doors closed behind her as everyone left her alone and silence filled the room. Cate grabbed the folder of articles from the coffee table and returned them to the desk. She shambled back to the armchair. The upside-down newspaper remained on the wooden table. Her eyes lingered on it as she bit into her lower lip again. The bitter lozenge in her mouth made her grimace.

She turned the paper over and stared at the picture of Jack. Damien's words echoed in her mind about the nefarious group and their ability to change history. She imagined Jack being held in some unknown location by people hoping to exploit his disappearance for their own gain.

Cate glanced at the empty chair next to her. At a time like this, she and Jack would have met right here and discussed their options. They'd have talked through plans, vetted ideas, and come up with potential solutions. Now she was alone.

Cate's lower lip quivered as she stared at the all-too-empty chair. A tear rolled down her cheek, followed by another, then another. She sniffled as she attempted to stop, but found her emotions too powerful. She sank her head into her hands and sobbed.

Riley and Bailey approached her. She gave them both a rub but their presence did little to comfort her. With her eyes squeezed shut, tears streamed down her cheeks and her body shook with sobs.

A hand squeezed her shoulder. She attempted to compose herself as she reached for it, assuming it belonged to Damien, but his gesture only made her cry more. Instead, she stood and spun, grasping hold of the figure behind her with bleary eyes and pressing herself into his chest. His hand stroked her hair.

After a moment, the tears slowed. Cate sniffled, her eyes still closed as she wiped at her face. She took a step back, blowing out a long, shaky breath. "Sorry," she said, glancing up.

She swallowed hard and retreated back two more steps, sobering quickly and wiping away more tears as she identified the man who consoled her.

CHAPTER 4



Marcus offered her a handkerchief. “Don’t cry, Catherine. I hate to see a beautiful woman cry.” He waved the handkerchief again. “Take it.”

Cate snatched it from him, using it to wipe her eyes. Riley wandered to him, and he ruffled the fur on the dog’s head.

“Why are you here?” Cate demanded.

“You are obviously upset. I came to check on you.”

Cate frowned at the statement. “Why?”

Marcus eyed her before he stalked to the brandy decanter and poured a glass. He waved it at her. She shook her head in response.

He stalked toward her. She stumbled backward. “Take it,” he said, holding out the glass.

“No.”

“We have a long road ahead of us, Catherine. You will need it.”

Cate stared at the amber liquid. She snatched the glass from his hand. “Happy?”

He raised his eyebrows at her, his lips forming a smirk, before he returned to the decanter and poured himself a drink. Cate sipped the fruity sweet beverage as she eyed him sideways.

He snapped his gaze to her over the rim of the glass. “If we are to work together, you must learn to trust me.”

“I’d never trust you.”

Marcus approached her and cocked his head. "You were very interested in me once."

Cate's features twisted into a stunned mask. "You had kidnapped me! I was trying to stay alive! Trying to figure out what was happening and what you were!"

He puckered his lips and narrowed his eyes at her. "And I told you then perhaps once we'd be allies. That day has arrived."

"Why are you here?" Cate inquired.

"You need my help."

"Why would you help me? You almost killed me."

"I explained that two centuries ago."

"You wanted Celine's attention."

"Yes."

"And now? How do I know you won't do that again."

"Simple. The stakes are far too high to fail."

Cate raised her eyebrows at him.

"The Agency is a threat to all of us. Myself included. Helping you helps me."

Cate processed the statement. If Marcus Northcott hoped to gain something over The Agency, could he be trusted? Would he bargain with Jack's life in order to garner favor with them?

Cate flicked her gaze from her brandy to Marcus. "Why are you tormenting me?"

"I don't know what you mean."

"The necklace, the music box. They're enchanted, right?"

"Yes."

"Why? Why did you send them to me?"

"The music comforts you, does it not?" Cate didn't answer and Marcus continued. "As it should. That is its purpose."

"No! It sends me into a trance, and I wander around the castle."

"You are confusing the effects of the temporalysis with the music box. The music box soothes you. Which is why you seek it during a temporalysis attack."

The crease between Cate's eyebrows deepened. "I still don't understand why you sent it."

He sipped his brandy before he answered, focusing his gaze on her. "Because you asked me to."

“What?” Cate said, her voice incredulous. “I never asked you for that!”

He offered her a smile that bordered on a smirk. He finished the last swallow of his brandy and set the glass on the table. With another pat on Riley’s head, he flicked his gaze back to Cate. “Get some rest, Catherine. You’re going to need it.”

He spun on his heel and disappeared from the room. Cate stood motionless for a moment, staring after him. Her brain threatened to implode. Between Jack’s disappearance and the temporalysis, the addition of Marcus Northcott in the mix had the potential to push her over the edge. And his cryptic remarks regarding her involvement in the delivery of the music box and its enchantment were not helping. Was he simply a master manipulator and fantastic liar? But to what end?

The questions made Cate’s head ache. She took another sip of the brandy Marcus had given her before she decided to heed his final words and go to bed.

Calling the dogs after her, she left the library and climbed the stairs, navigating through the halls to her bedroom. She passed the rooms occupied by her mysterious Shadow Slayer friends. She slowed as she passed their doors. Riley ventured to the room Marcus occupied, giving the door a sniff before continuing around the corner with Cate.

As she shut herself away in her suite, she considered locking the door. She pondered if she’d need to. Would she roam the halls tonight? And if she did, where would she go. A shudder passed through her as she imagined herself banging on the Duke’s door and dragging him to the west wing. Though she doubted the man could be dragged anywhere he did not want to go.

With a sigh, she forced herself to walk across the room without locking the door. She doubted the lock would hold her back anyway. In her trances, she usually found a way to get around any barrier.

After changing, she slipped under the covers. The dogs curled near her. She reached over to switch off the light and spotted the piano-shaped music box sitting on her nightstand. Her hand caressed the object. Without further thought, she twisted the winding key. Tinkling music filled the room.

Cate closed her eyes and inhaled deeply. The music did soothe her as much as she hated to admit it. The tension in her muscles eased away and her head stopped aching. And while her heart longed to find Jack and return

him to Dunhaven, for the first time since she read the heart-stopping news, she felt she may be able to sleep.

Cate flicked off the light and slouched down under the sheets. She turned onto her side, staring at the outline of the small music box, lit from behind by the pale moonlight streaming through her window. She reached out to caress the tiny keys as she drifted off to a dreamless sleep.

* * *

The music box tinkled its tune as Cate opened her eyes the following morning. Puffy and sore, she squeezed them shut as the harsh reality of her current situation hit her. The newspaper headline shot through her mind.

As she rolled onto her side, she reached for the piano-shaped music box and pulled it closer to her. Her brow furrowed as she recalled the other incredible events of the past twenty-four hours.

In particular, the arrival of Duke Marcus Northcott as an ally rather than an antagonist swirled in her mind. Her conversation with him last evening replayed.

He continued to insist she'd asked him to send the music box. An incredulous idea in her estimation. He must be lying. He had to be.

Cate's stomach somersaulted at the idea of seeing him again today. Intimidated didn't fully capture the sentiment she experienced when she was in his presence.

She bit her lower lip as the music continued to play. Oddly, it did soothe her. But she'd never requested the item from him.

Had something more happened between them in the 1700s? Something when she thought she'd been asleep?

She searched her memory but found nothing. With a sigh, she rose from her bed and shuffled toward the bathroom.

Before she reached the space, her eyes grew heavy. She blinked slowly, a fog building in her mind. Temporalysis. The thought shot across her brain as she struggled to stay conscious.

"No," she moaned as she clutched at the foot of the bed, struggling to stay alert. She dragged herself to the music box, gasping for breath as she pinched her forehead in concentration. Her hands trembled as she grabbed the little box and wound it.

Tinkling music filled the air again and she squeezed her eyes closed, concentrating on the sound. It faded in and out as she clutched the night table in a desperate attempt to tether herself to reality.

A cold nose nudged her. Her chest heaved as she sucked in a breath. She blindly reached for the furry animal next to her. The music box toppled from her lap and skittered across her bedroom floor.

The music slowed, sounding tinny and off.

“No,” Cate cried. She opened her eyes and tried to focus. Her vision blurred in and out of focus.

A bang sounded. Bailey barked, sounding miles away.

“Jack?” Cate called.

She tried to stand but her knees wobbled. She stumbled forward, collapsing to her knees.

Voices warbled but Cate only heard the pounding of her own heart. Hands wrapped around her arms and tugged her upward.

“Jack?” she questioned again. She glanced toward the figure. Only a shadow stood in front of her, blurred beyond recognition.

She reached out to grasp the figure, hoping it kept her conscious. The blue dress flitted through her mind. She swirled in it. A squeeze of her hand pulled her mind back to consciousness, but it threatened to slip away again.

Voices sounded again, garbled and incoherent. Something brushed past her lips. She turned her head away instinctively.

Hands grasped her cheeks and fingers pulled her lips open. Bitterness exploded on her tongue. She grimaced and shivered from the pungent flavor.

A voice mumbled again, still beyond her understanding. Moments later, her fingers touched wood. Music. The tinkling music reached her ears.

The absinthian flavor dripped down her throat. Her heart slowed and her breathing regulated. Her vision began to clear. Colors reappeared in front of her as her surroundings sharpened.

Damien’s concerned face hovered over her.

“Cate?” His voice warbled and echoed.

His fingers squeezed hers. She returned the gesture. “Cate?” he asked again. This time his voice sounded clear.

“Damien?” she murmured.

Another squeeze of her hand. “I’m right here. Let the dragon’s blood work.”

Cate sucked on the lozenge as her vision cleared. She fluttered her eyelids as her vision returned to normal levels. Her lips parted to speak.

“Take it easy. Don’t rush,” Damien said.

She nodded. “I’m okay,” she breathed. Her eyes flicked to the opposite side of the bed where Celine sat. Her full lips formed a smile and she placed a hand on Cate’s forearm.

“I had another attack,” Cate explained.

“We know. I came to check on you this morning and found you collapsed.”

Cate shifted her gaze back to Damien. “At least I wasn’t wandering around talking crazy.”

“Or waltzing,” Damien added with a chuckle.

“Or that,” Cate said with a nod.

“The dragon’s blood from last night allowed you to remain mostly conscious,” Celine said.

Cate shook her head. “This is an aggravating thing to deal with.”

“Cate,” Damien said, concern filling his voice, “are you sure you want to find Jack?” Damien shook his head. “That’s not– I didn’t mean– It’s not what it sounded like. Are you sure you want to do the time traveling to find him? Michael and I can do it, and –“

“I’m sure,” Cate said, pulling herself up to sit. “I want to help. I want to find him.”

Damien shot Celine a glance, one eyebrow arched.

“Is there something you aren’t telling me?”

Damien shook his head. “No. I hate to belabor what I’ve told you already, but this could be fatal, Cate.”

“I can’t leave Jack on his own. And I can’t make you do all the hard work. Besides, this could be fatal even if I don’t time travel, right?”

“We’re happy to do it. This is not unusual for us,” Celine said.

“Yeah,” Damien added, “we’ve done WAY harder stuff.”

Cate shook her head. “No. I want to help. And it isn’t always fatal, right?”

“No,” Damien said.

“You need to keep taking the dragon’s blood,” Celine added.

Damien nodded and handed Cate the black velvet pouch. She accepted the proffered bag and glanced inside. “How often?”

“At least once daily, if not twice,” Damien said.

“Really, you should always have one in your mouth.”

Cate glanced in the bag again. “There aren’t many in here.”

“We know,” Damien said. “Millie’s working on reverse engineering them.”

“And Dembe is retrieving more from the source.”

“Dembe?” Cate questioned, recalling the quiet man from her time with Marcus in the 1790s. “Is he—“

Damien nodded. “Yeah. Also a centuries-old warlock.”

Cate shook her head at how easily they spoke of such things. And how many of these supernatural creatures existed hidden from most people’s knowledge.

Cate flicked her gaze to Celine then Damien. “Can I ask another question?”

“Ask away, Cate,” Damien said.

“Assuming I don’t... you know,” Cate stammered, then gave the kill signal by slashing across her throat with her finger, “how does the temporalysis resolve?”

“Gradual decline of symptoms until there are none,” Celine explained. “Sometimes there is a pinnacle moment, but that can be hard to assess.”

“So, I’ll either continue to get worse until I... never mind. Or I’ll have these attacks but less frequently and less severe?”

“Right,” Damien confirmed.

“Our hope is the dragon’s blood aids in lessening the attacks while you recover,” Celine said.

Damien winced. “But our fear is they’ll mask any warning signs that your condition is worsening.”

Cate grimaced as she sucked on the lozenge in her mouth. With the taste, she’d prefer not to eat them at all. “Should I limit my use of them?”

“No,” Damien said. “But...”

“But what? Damien, please don’t hold anything back. I need to know what to expect.”

He shot Celine another glance. Celine faced Cate. “The truth is, the best person to assess how sick you are and how best to handle your condition is Marcus.”

Cate lowered her eyes and pursed her lips, swallowing the bitter liquid forming on her tongue. After a moment, she gave a slow nod of understanding.

“He really has the best knowledge of this, Cate,” Celine added.

“He’s the one who diagnosed you,” Damien said. “Not that that makes this any better. I get it. He still weirds me out, too.”

“I just can’t understand this,” Cate admitted. “Maybe it’s the temporalysis stunting my critical thinking but... how do you go from detesting him to trusting him?”

“It took centuries,” Celine answered. “But he has proven himself more than once.”

Damien nodded. “I wasn’t kidding when I said he saved my life. Literally, he did. And Celine’s. He’s gotten us through some tight spots. I hate to even admit that, but it’s true.”

“And right now, we have a common enemy. He is extremely powerful and knowledgeable,” Celine said. “We can use that help. And we must if we are to succeed.”

“How are you so sure we can trust him? What if these Agency people offer him something?”

Celine stalked to the window and glanced out. “Marcus would never bow to The Agency.”

“You’re sure?”

Celine twisted her neck to glance over her shoulder at Cate. She gave her a nod. “I would never trust your life to him if I wasn’t certain.”

“Me too, Cate,” Damien said, giving her hand another squeeze. “Really, we wouldn’t sic him on you if we didn’t have to! Although, honestly, he was pretty excited when he figured out your secret.”

“He insisted I had one when we met in the 1790s. And that he would find it. I guess he was correct.”

“Unfortunately, he usually is,” Celine said.

“Yeah, he has an uncanny knack at being correct. It’s annoying, actually,” Damien said. He puckered his lips and stared into space as though an unpleasant memory crossed his mind.

“About that,” Cate said, “he told me he sent me this music box because I asked him to. But that’s not true! Why would he say that?”

Celine lifted her shoulders and opened her mouth to respond when a knock sounded at the door. “Yeah?” Damien called.

Michael stuck his head in through the sitting room doors. “She okay?”

“Yeah,” Damien answered. “Recovered.”

“Good,” Michael said. He offered Cate a lopsided grin.

“Still weirded out by the whole Duke situation, but I told her we all are,” Damien said.

Michael stalked across the room and clapped his buddy on the shoulder. “Damien’s right. I still can’t get on board with pal-ing around with this guy.”

Cate’s eyes widened and she nodded at Michael. “Yes, I feel the same way.”

Michael pressed his lips together into a thin line and shrugged. “But he has saved our lives.”

Cate’s shoulders slumped at the same admission she’d heard from the others in the group. Michael leaned in closer to her. “Don’t worry. I’ve got my eyes all over him.”

Cate offered him a weak smile and a tiny nod.

“Well, if you’re feeling okay, we’ll let you get back to your morning. Meet you in the library?” Damien asked.

Cate nodded. “Thanks.” His last statement almost made her tear up. Jack had said it to her so often. In fact, it was one of the last things he’d said to her.

She firmed her resolve, determined to find him, and pushed herself to get out of bed and dressed after Michael, Damien and Celine left.

As she pushed through the kitchen door after her walk with the dogs, Mrs. Fraser stood waiting for her. “Have your friends settled in?” she questioned.

“Yes,” Cate answered.

“Good. Have they any leads?”

“I’m just about to find out,” Cate said. “Damien was checking on a few things last night. I’m going to get a progress report now.”

“Please let us know of anything they find,” Mrs. Fraser answered. “And I’ll send Molly up with coffee and cookies.”

“Thank you.”

“Want us to watch the pups?” Molly inquired as she arranged a plate of cookies.

“That would be great, thanks.”

Leaving the dogs behind, Cate continued down the hall and climbed to the main floor. She threaded through the halls and arrived at the library. Damien sat at her desk, clacking away on his keyboard. Michael and Celine leaned over his shoulder.

“Hey, Cate,” Damien said as she entered. “Feeling okay?”

“Yes, thanks,” Cate answered.

“I hope you don’t mind I stole your desk.” Damien offered her an awkward smile.

“Not at all. Have you found anything?”

Before Damien could answer, the doors to the library burst open. Marcus strode in. Cate’s posture stiffened and she held a shiver back.

“Where are we on a lead?” he demanded.

“Not very far,” Damien admitted.

“Have you managed to find anything at all?” Marcus inquired.

“A few loose references to someone who could be Gianna Caruso, but hardly anything and certainly nothing after September 1942 in Dunhaven,” Damien said.

Marcus scrunched his eyebrows and offered a frown at the statement. He flicked his gaze to Cate. She stood straighter and stiffer than she had a moment ago.

He approached her, resting the back of his hand against her cheek and then her forehead. “And how you are feeling today, my dear?”

“Fine,” she managed to squeak out.

“She had another attack this morning,” Celine reported. “The dragon’s blood seemed to temper it.”

Marcus narrowed his eyes at Cate. “And you are fully recovered?”

Cate nodded at him. “Yes. I didn’t lose consciousness entirely this time.”

“It is too soon to tell if that is a result of the dragon’s blood only or the reversal of symptoms.” He twisted to face Celine. “Where is the good doctor in her quest to synthesize this?”

“Gray said she spent the entire night formulating what she hopes is an equivalent and that she is working on something that may be a cure. Have you heard from Dembe?”

“No, but in the region he must travel to, I am not surprised.”

Molly pushed through the library doors with a large tray containing a silver coffee pot, cups, and a large plate of cookies. The two dogs trotted behind her. “Good morning, everyone,” she said, scanning the group. “Sorry, Lady Cate, the pups insisted on coming up.”

“It’s fine,” Cate said. Riley galloped across the room. Cate smiled down at him, expecting he missed her. Instead, he stopped short, leaping onto his

hind legs and placing his front paws on Marcus.

Marcus scooped up the small pup and ruffled the fur on his head. "Good morning, Riley."

"Oh, coffee, awesome," Damien said, leaping from his seat. "Mmm, and cookies, thanks!"

Michael joined him, pouring himself a cup of coffee.

Molly chuckled. "You're welcome. Got to keep you fueled up!" She stood for a moment, biting her lower lip.

"There's no news yet, Molly," Cate informed her. She flicked a gaze from Molly to the awkward scene of Marcus Northcott holding Riley.

Molly's shoulders slumped. "I had hoped to take some news back to Mrs. Fraser. She's really beside herself."

"Poor Mrs. Fraser," Cate lamented. "I'm sorry."

"We'll find something," Damien chimed in. "Tell her not to lose faith in us yet!"

"Yeah, Damien has never met a problem he can't solve," Michael said, clapping the man on the shoulder.

Molly straightened and firmed her jaw, offering them a smile and nod. "Well, if you need anything, just let us know. We'll do whatever we can to help."

She offered another encouraging nod before she left the room, pulling the doors closed behind her.

"They don't know, right?" Damien questioned.

"No," Cate said. "They don't have any idea. And when Jack went missing and I spoke with them about it, their memories had changed. They recalled him being missing for over a week. Same with his grandfather."

"Poor Stanley," Damien said.

"Yeah," Michael chimed in. "He seemed like a nice guy. I bet this is really upsetting for him."

"I spoke with him yesterday. I promised him we'd find Jack and bring him home."

"Did you tell him about the time change?" Damien inquired.

"Yes. I hope it gave him something to cling to."

Damien bit off a piece of shortbread and slurped another sip of coffee before returning to his laptop. "Well, I don't want to let him down. So, I'm going right back to it."

“We should gather information in another way while you continue your search,” Marcus suggested as he set Riley on a leather chair with a pat on his head.

“What way?” Michael questioned.

“A first-hand source.”

“Such as?” Celine asked.

“We know where Gianna was in 1942. We should follow her and determine when she departed from that year and any other clues we can glean.”

“All right,” Celine said. “Michael and I can go—“

“No. That would be foolish. It is best for you to stay here. If Damien stumbled upon a lead, you can open a time portal and allow them to follow up.”

“You shouldn’t go alone, Marcus. If something happens—“

“I won’t.” He swung his gaze to Cate. “Catherine and I shall go.”

CHAPTER 5



Cate's eyes went wide. "What?"

"Cate, you don't have to go if you don't want to," Celine said.

"I-I—" Cate stammered. "Well, I can't go."

"Why?" Marcus questioned.

"She has temporalysis," Michael snapped. "Stop badgering her."

"I was under the impression she preferred to find Zack herself."

"Jack," Cate corrected. "His name is Jack."

"Whatever, my dear, the point is you volunteered for the job. Do you wish to go or not?"

"I want to go," Cate said, crossing her arms over her chest. "But I can't."

"What is it, Cate?" Damien asked.

"I've already been to 1942. In fact, if we return to when we know Rita or Gianna is there, I'll already be there!"

"I don't see the problem," Marcus said.

"It's a direct violation of the rules for time travel!" Cate insisted. "Never travel to a time in which you already exist."

Marcus raised his eyebrows before rolling his eyes with a sigh. "You must be joking."

"No," Cate answered. "It's in Douglas's journal. And one of the first things Jack's grandfather told us after we discovered the anomaly."

"Ridiculous drivel. Nothing prevents you from traveling to a time in which you exist."

“Won’t the universe go haywire?” Cate inquired.

“I’d argue it already has, courtesy of The Agency,” Damien pointed.

“He’s right,” Michael said with a nod toward Damien. “And there is nothing stopping you from being in the same time period as a former version of yourself. We’ve seen it happen.”

“Yeah,” Damien said. “We’ve been to a time period with two of him!” He jabbed his finger toward Marcus who offered a triumphant expression.

“Excellent point, Damien. Live a little, Catherine. Break a rule,” Marcus said with a coy smirk.

Cate frowned at him.

“Look, either way, you can go. I’ll go with you, so you don’t have to go with him.” Michael jerked his thumb toward Marcus.

“That’s a wonderful idea,” Marcus said. “And in the event you need to return or immediately move to another time period, you can wander for days in search of someone able and willing to open a time portal.”

“Wouldn’t we just use the timepiece?” Cate inquired, waving it in the air.

Marcus chuckled. “Oh, you are amusing, Catherine.”

“As much as I hate to say this, he has a point,” Michael said. “If we need to do anything beyond come back here, we’d be stuck.”

Cate furrowed her brow as she stared down at the gold watch. Marcus approached her and pulled the item from her hand, letting it dangle on the chain around her neck. “This is a child’s toy compared to my ability, Catherine. Amusing, but limited in our current predicament.”

“If it’s so limited, why is The Agency after it?”

“Limited, yes. Useless? No. While it proves quite powerful, particularly for laypeople, it pales in comparison with my unique ability to open and enter a time portal. On top of that, we are dealing with The Agency. Not a troop of Girl Scouts. Michael couldn’t provide any effective defense against them.” The crease between Cate’s eyes deepened as she processed his statement. “Now, hurry along and ready yourself, Catherine. We have work to do. I shall meet you here in one hour.”

Marcus turned on a heel and strode from the library. Cate stared after him, her jaw still gaping open for a moment.

“Look, Cate, you don’t have to do this,” Damien said.

“It doesn’t seem like there’s another choice,” Cate answered.

“There’s always another choice,” Celine said. “If you don’t feel comfortable, you do not need to do it. We’ll figure something out.”

“Yeah, I could go with him,” Michael answered. “You stay here. If Damien finds something, Celine can send you two on that lead.”

Cate hesitated a moment, tempted to accept Michael’s offer. With a hard swallow, she shook her head. “No. This is my problem and I want to do the work to solve it.”

“It’s not a problem, Cate,” Michael assured her.

“Yeah, we’re all here to help,” Damien said. “It’s our problem. You’re not alone.”

“And Michael has more experience with Marcus,” Celine added.

Cate glanced around at their faces, all eager to help. She couldn’t ask Michael to take her place. She wouldn’t force someone else to spend time with Marcus Northcott to alleviate her own fears.

Cate shook her head. “As tempting as your offer is, Michael, I can’t accept it. If there’s a chance to save Jack, I want to be there. And I have firsthand knowledge of the events in 1942. I’m the best one to go.”

Michael nodded at her. “I understand that.”

Damien approached her. “Just... be safe, Cate.”

“And as odd as this will sound, listen to Marcus,” Celine chimed in. “He knows what he’s talking about.”

Cate raised her eyebrows and shook her head, blowing out a long breath. “I’m still getting used to that idea. But—“ She flicked her gaze between Celine and Damien. “If you say so, okay.”

Damien offered her a weak smile. “I know this is uncomfortable, but with any luck, we’ll have Jack home safe and sound, then you can time travel with him instead of... *him*.” He lowered his voice for the last word and jutted his thumb in the direction Marcus had just strode.

Cate forced a smile and nodded. The reminder of Jack’s absence left a lump in her throat. She tried to swallow it down as she blinked away the tears that threatened.

“I’d better get ready,” she squeaked out. She hurried across the room, biting her lower lip.

Damien caught her arm and prevented her from leaving. “Cate, good luck. It’ll be okay.”

Cate gave a curt nod and pulled her arm free, afraid her emotions may overcome her. She darted from the room with the dogs trailing behind her.

She swiped at a tear that escaped onto her cheek as she hurried up the stairs. She sniffled and blew out another long breath. She had to stop riding the emotional rollercoaster and focus. She could save Jack. And she needed to be on the top of her game to do it.

In addition to the at-times debilitating temporalysis, she had Marcus Northcott to manage. Assuming he could be managed.

This time travel trip held no charm for her. So often in the past when she'd time traveled, she'd been giddy. Even when the circumstances were less than ideal. This time, though, she felt nothing but apprehension.

She rounded the corner, lost in her thoughts. She stopped dead. Marcus Northcott stood in the hallway, staring out one of the large windows.

Her heart beat hard against her ribs and she suppressed a shiver.

"Hello, Catherine," he said with the smirk she'd already grown accustomed to.

She clenched her jaw in an attempt to stop her lower lip from quivering.

He approached her and studied her face. She struggled to maintain her composure and lowered her eyes after a moment. Her brow furrowed as she found Riley with his tiny paws planted on Marcus's pant leg.

"Catherine, you must focus."

She licked her lips and offered a barely perceptible nod. He tipped her chin up to face him, hovering close to her. "Focus, Catherine. You are fighting multiple issues. You must focus."

She gave him a more pronounced nod before stepping around him. "Come on, boys," she said to the dogs, steadying her voice.

"Catherine," he called as she scurried away. She twisted to face him. "We'll find him."

The corners of her mouth turned upward in a delicate smile and she continued down the hall. Her forehead creased again as she rounded the corner, taking one last glance back at Marcus. The man's last words to her rang in her ears. He seemed so sure. And she hated to admit it, but she found comfort in his words.

With a determined step, she continued to her room to prepare for her trip.

* * *

Cate ushered the dogs into her suite. She struggled to keep her mindset positive. It already faltered from the moment she'd rallied two halls ago. She swung her hair over her shoulder and forced herself to her bedroom. After winding the music box, she shuffled to the wardrobe.

A dress from the 1940s still hung after her last adventure in the time period. She pulled the doors open and removed the dress, recalling the events she'd experienced when she'd last worn it. A piece of straw still clung to the hemline. She freed it, rolling it between her fingers as memories flooded back into her mind. Throwing her arms around Jack after he'd survived a car wreck and assassination attempt. Falling asleep in the nearby barn while riding out the night.

She shook the memories from her mind and pulled the dress from the hanger. She tossed the straw piece in the trash bin as she entered her bathroom.

A quick glance into the mirror made her wince. Her puffy eyes and splotchy skin hinted at her rough few days. She splashed cold water on her face before she did her best to repair her make-up and pull her hair into a 1940s roll.

She shimmied into her dress and smoothed it out after zipping it. After pulling on her t-strap pumps, she stalked into her bedroom. Her steps stopped as she reached the jewelry armoire. Her eyes slid sideways to glance at it. Her fingertips reached for the drawer pull, lingering on it for a moment.

"I should get ready for the ball," she murmured before she pressed her palm to her forehead. "No. No, I'm not going to the ball."

The music box tinkled its tune across the room. "Yes, the ball," she said. "I have to be—"

She winced in pain and clutched her head again. "No!" she shouted with a shake of her head. "No. I'm not going to the ball."

She yanked her hand away from the drawer and sucked in a deep breath. "You're going to the 1940s to find Jack. Get it together, Cate. Focus."

She squeezed her eyes closed as Marcus's voice echoed in her brain. "Focus, Catherine, focus."

With a deep inhale, she took a step toward the sitting room when her footsteps faltered. She doubled over, gripping her head. Her mind jumbled and thoughts raced through it faster than she could process.

After a moment, the sensation passed. Cate recovered, straightening and gasping for breath. “What in the world was that?” she questioned. With an outstretched hand, she gripped the doorjamb as she recovered.

Any lingering effects passed within another moment. Cate bit her lower lip as she struggled to recall what had passed through her mind moments ago. Nothing came back.

With pursed lips, she squeezed her eyes shut and tried one last time. No memories returned. Her eyes popped open, and she sucked in a deep breath. Riley and Bailey stared up at her.

“I’m okay, boys. Just an elusive memory. But I have more important things to do! I need to go find Jack!”

Riley tilted his head as Cate said Jack’s name. “Yes, Riley. We’re going to get Jack back. Don’t you worry about it. I’ll find him. I promise.”

Riley’s tail waved in the air and Bailey’s pigtail bobbed up and down. Cate gave both dogs a pat on the head before she straightened and smoothed her dress. She pushed her shoulders back and raised her chin as she strode to the door.

Cate navigated through the hallways, firming her resolve with every step. They would find Jack. They would bring him home. Even if she had to do it with Marcus Northcott at her side. The man unnerved her, but she would do whatever it took to find Jack.

She recalled the tinkling music of the music box, still playing in her bedroom. She let the memory of it float through her mind. Even without the noise itself, the thought of the tune could soothe her. Perhaps trusting Marcus Northcott wasn’t such a terrible idea, after all, she ruminated as she descended the main staircase.

She’d take things one step at a time. Her heels clicked across the marble floor of the foyer before growing quiet as she stepped onto the hallway’s rug.

She entered the library, finding Michael leaning over Damien’s shoulder. They poured over something on the screen that appeared to be a handwritten note.

Celine fiddled with her phone across the room and Marcus sipped a brandy.

“Did you find something?” Cate questioned as she stepped inside.

“Ah, there you are,” he said as he set his glass on the side table. “Ready, Catherine?”

“Hey, Cate,” Damien said, twisting to face her. “Nothing much.”

Cate joined them at the desk. She scanned the papers.

“I found this on an obscure site. It’s a set of notes about the Enigma code from the short-lived Dunhaven intelligence outpost. Written by someone named—“

“Hans,” Cate said, the image of the backward blonde man’s face forming in her mind.

“Yes, that’s right,” Damien said with a nod. “Hans Schmidt.”

“This website details a story about how his notes helped crack the Enigma code,” Michael said.

Damien nodded again. “Including a tale about how two people smuggled it from the spy-laden outpost, risking life and limb to deliver it. The story claims they were a couple and the woman shot down a German 109 to ensure the code was delivered successfully.”

The corners of Cate’s mouth turned up as she recalled the event, occurring only days earlier for her. She licked her lips as she remembered downing the plane to stop it from shooting Jack’s fighter jet from the sky.

“Was that you?” Michael inquired.

Cate nodded at him. “Yes.”

“Wow, they really wanted to stop you from getting this to Bletchley,” Damien said with a nod to the computer screen.

“The truth is they nearly shot Jack’s plane down. We were the only plane in the vicinity. I had to do something.”

“So, you’ve saved his life once already,” Damien said with a grin.

“Time to do it again,” Cate said with a determined nod.

“Go get ‘em, Cate.”

She smiled at him.

“Are we finished fawning all over each other?” Marcus inquired, an annoyed expression etched into his features.

“Just a few words of encouragement,” Michael said.

“Save the pats on the back for when we have succeeded and we determine the fallout.” Marcus turned his attention to Cate. “Are you ready?”

Cate licked her lips and nodded. “Yes.”

“Good. Shall we?” He offered his arm. Cate stared at it for a moment before she slid her fingers around it, grasping the fibers of the expensive fabric that made his suit.

“Marcus,” Celine said, glancing up from her phone, “keep her safe.”

Marcus scoffed at the sentiment. “I will do whatever is necessary to keep Catherine safe.” He glanced to Cate who studied his face and offered her a slight smile.

Cate glanced back into the library as Marcus tugged her along. She offered a fleeting smile to Damien as he gave her a quick wave, then flashed his crossed fingers.

Marcus led her to the foyer, pulling open the front door.

“Where are we going?” Cate inquired as they stepped into the spring air.

“To 1942.”

“I meant right now,” Cate said. “1942 isn’t in my side garden.”

“1942 is wherever I wish it to be, Catherine. Though the process is quite elaborate. We do not wish to alert anyone in your household to the opening of a time portal.”

Cate considered his statement. She recalled Damien’s remarks about time portals being volatile and violent. With one of these portals about to stare her in the face, she squeezed her lips together as she pondered the meaning of his statements.

“Will the portal be obvious?”

Marcus slid his eyes sideways to glance at her as he led her around the castle. “Yes. They are quite different from your time rips.”

Cate arched an eyebrow. “What should I expect?”

The corners of Marcus’s mouth turned upward. “Your curiosity is a most attractive quality, Catherine.”

Cate eyed him, mystified by the man with whom she was about to embark on a time travel experience as he explained.

“When I begin to open the portal, the reaction will start small with a slight breeze and a barely perceptible twinkling. As the portal opens further, the scene will be quite chaotic. Winds will whip wildly, and the blackness will grow until it is large enough for you to step through.”

Marcus ceased his walking and spun to face her. Cate swallowed hard as she let her eyes float up to his.

“Once the portal is open, you must step inside. It will be black in the portal. It is vital that you do not stop moving forward until you exit the portal. Do you understand, Catherine?”

Cate nodded. “Yes.”

“Repeat the instructions.”

“Once the portal is open, step inside and continue forward until I exit. How will I know when I exit?”

Marcus looped her arm through his and continued down the path. “It will be obvious. You will be standing in 1942.”

Cate pressed her lips together as she considered his statements. “You said it’s vital that I do not stop moving forward, but what happens if I do?” She tilted her head to glance up at him.

“You question my instructions. You do not trust me?”

“It’s not that,” Cate answered. “The question is mostly academic, but I prefer to be prepared. What if I cannot continue to move forward? Or what if I move too slow? I’d like to know why that piece is so vital and what may go wrong if it is not followed properly.”

He slid his eyes sideways to glance down at her. “You are a most intriguing woman, Catherine. I find your interest in such things quite refreshing.”

His lips twisted into a smile, and he continued after a moment. “I must open the time portal and then enter it. It is a delicate matter that requires some finesse. As such, the time portal is beholden to my timing, more or less. The portal closes behind me as I pass through it. If you should stop moving forward, I may pass you in the portal.

“If that should happen, you would become stuck, lost between times, unable to return here nor go to the intended era. And you may not be able to be found. A terrible tragedy in my opinion.”

Cate’s eyebrows raised. “In mine, too.”

Marcus chuckled as he neared the rear of the back garden.

“Though I must say, your concern baffles me. You nearly—”

Marcus held up his hand to stop her speech. He closed his eyes for a moment, annoyance plain on his chiseled features. “If you’re planning to bemoan the incident between us over two centuries ago, I shall stop you.”

“Incident?” Cate exclaimed.

“I have explained that I meant you no harm.” He narrowed his eyes at her and offered her that smile that bordered on a smirk. “Besides, I have already told you, I quite like you, Catherine.” He allowed the statement to marinate in her mind for a moment before he added, “Now, are you ready?”

Cate nodded and swallowed hard.

Marcus made a quarter-turn away from her, stretching his hands in front of him. Cate eyed the area, detecting nothing amiss.

She side-eyed the man next to her. His jaw tensed as his eyebrows pinched together. She opened her mouth to ask a question when a slight breeze tickled the nape of her neck.

Cate whipped her head in the direction of the breeze, noting the leaves on the tree only meters away did not move. She twisted her head to face forward, and her jaw dropped open. Her eyes widened and her forehead wrinkled. She swallowed hard as she stared ahead of her.

A dull sparkle shimmered in front of them. Cate blinked a few times, wondering if her vision was deceiving her.

After another moment, the shimmering sparkle darkened. A black hole emerged, obscuring the scenery behind it. The winds picked up. Cate's skirt blew wildly. She firmed her legs against the gales that whipped around them.

The ominous black hole grew larger and larger until it eclipsed most of the space visible in front of them. Cate's breath turned ragged and her pulse quickened. She glanced at Marcus then returned her gaze to the growing hole.

"The portal is open! Go, Catherine!" Marcus shouted over the din.

Cate swallowed hard, her eyes wide with fear as she faced the blackness in front of her. She licked her lips and stepped forward. She reached her hand into the dark hole, her heart pounding in her ears as her hand disappeared.

CHAPTER 6



Her lower lip trembled as she stepped into the darkness. She continued ahead, blind to her surroundings. Marcus's words echoed in her mind as she continued to inch forward. She squeezed her lips together, hoping she would not become stuck in this desolate hole between times.

Within seconds, warmth touched her face. Still blind, she blinked her eyes, trying to acclimate to her new surroundings. She blew out a sharp breath as she realized sunlight blinded her rather than darkness.

Cate sucked in another breath, spinning to take in her new surroundings. She stood mere feet from where she'd been moments ago. Slightly behind her on her right, the intelligence tent sat nestled in the shadow of the castle.

Cate bit her lower lip. Her heart continued to race as stood alone in another era. A momentary panic caused her stomach to somersault. What if she was here alone? Would she be stuck?

Cate pulled the timepiece from under her dress. She squeezed it in her palm and closed her eyes as she clutched it. She could use this to return. She opened her eyes and snapped open the face.

Her heart sank and her hands trembled as she stared at the normally ticking timepiece. She hadn't passed through a time rip. Could she still use the watch to return? What if she couldn't?

As her mind spun through possibilities, a rogue gust of wind ruffled her skirt. A second later, Marcus Northcott stood next to her. He straightened his jacket as he glanced around, his gaze settled on Cate.

“Hello, Catherine. I see you made it, safe and sound. How fortuitous. I trust you are all right?”

Cate nodded at him. “Yes.” She glanced down at the timepiece still clutched in her hand. “My watch hasn’t slowed.”

“I am unsurprised. You did not use it to trigger a time portal. It remains in its normal state.”

Cate’s brows knit and she stared down at it for a moment before she slipped it under her dress.

“Are you quite sure you are all right, Catherine? Are you suffering from some symptom of the temporalysis?”

“No,” Cate confirmed. “I had a momentary panic about being stuck here. Alone.”

Marcus’s eyebrows rose toward his hairline. “I will not abandon you, my dear. Now, come along, we have much work to do.”

He took her hand, wrapping her arm around his and leading her toward the castle.

“I don’t seem to suffer from any temporalysis symptoms when I time travel. Is there a reason for that?”

“At the start, time travel should appear to alleviate the situation.”

“But?” Cate prodded.

He offered an amused glance at her. “You are quite clever. The time travel only appears to alleviate it. If you do not improve, you will eventually begin to suffer from symptoms even during time travel excursions.”

“So, I may lose consciousness and wander around in another time period.”

“I shall ensure your safety, Catherine.”

“I don’t see how,” Cate argued. “There is nothing you can do to alleviate the symptoms outside of the dragon’s blood and that merely masks the symptoms, but does nothing to cure me.”

“You are strong. You shall prevail. I have no doubt.”

Cate stared up at him as they walked, his response baffling her again. Before Cate could answer his latest comments, a voice sounded behind them.

“Oi, who are you?”

Cate’s heart leapt into her throat. She recognized the child’s voice. Her shoulders sagged and she bit her lower lip as both she and Marcus spun to

face him.

She plastered a warm smile on her face and offered the child a wave. "Hi, Stanley. Remember me? Cate."

"Aye, I remember you, lassie." The five-year-old poked a finger in Marcus's direction. "I meant him."

Marcus hiked his eyebrows high as he stared down his nose at the small child. Cate's heart raced. What would he do to the little boy? She swallowed hard. Perhaps Jack's fate would be permanently altered by his grandfather's poor decision to confront Marcus Northcott in 1942.

She licked her lips as she attempted to circumvent what she was certain would be a tragedy. Breathless, she slid her hand around Marcus's elbow as she attempted to stop him from replying.

"Hasn't anyone ever told you children should not speak that way to adults?" Marcus questioned.

Cate held her breath as the conversation unfolded.

"Aye, my Da does all the time. Never stopped me before."

"I see," Marcus said. "Well, perhaps you should consider listening to your father."

Stanley narrowed his eyes at the tall man standing in front of him. "Still never answered the question, did you?"

"My companion has already answered."

"Nay, she reminded me of who she was. But I remember the wee lassie from the last time we met. She was with her husband then. Big strapping Scot. Certainly not you."

Marcus's eyebrows lifted further at the boy's forwardness. "You are incorrect. Catherine was with a man pretending to be her husband."

"Pretending, is it? What for?"

"Did they not inquire after the intelligence tent?"

"Aye." The child nodded, his face scrunching in thought. "Ohhh, spies. Pretending to be married."

"Correct. Not married, just pretending."

Cate flicked her gaze from Marcus to Stanley, trying to assess the child's reaction to the conversation.

"So, what does that make you? Another fake husband?"

"No," Marcus answered. "That makes me her real husband."

Cate tightened her grip on Marcus's arm as her knees wobbled at his lie.

The child's eyebrows shot up. "Ohhh, lucky you, fellow. She's a pretty lassie."

Color rushed into Cate's cheeks. "Thank you, Stanley. We really should be going."

"Right. I should be off, too. Take care, Mr.—" Young Stanley scratched his head. "Say, I never caught your name."

Marcus straightened. "Duke Marcus Northcott."

"Duke, is it?"

"Correct. And you'd do well to remember it, young man."

"Well, then, Your Grace," Stanley said with a bow, "have a pleasant day."

Marcus's lips turned up in a slight smile. "You didn't think 'the lassie' as you call her would marry a lowly Scot, did you? Good day."

He spun on his heel and led Cate away. She glanced back at the boy still standing on the path before focusing on Marcus.

"Why did you tell him that?" Cate inquired.

"It is the truth."

"It is not! We're not married!"

"You aren't married to Mack either, yet you informed the child you were."

"Jack," Cate corrected. "His name is Jack. And—" Cate squeezed her eyes closed for a moment and shook her head. "Never mind. You've made a fine mess of things. He'll now tell his father that Jack and I are not married. And Lachlan thinks we are!"

"Who?"

"His father, Jack's great-grandfather. That little boy was Jack's grandfather, Stanley Reid."

Marcus let his head fall back as his eyes studied the blue sky. "Ah, that explains so very much."

"What does that mean?"

"His rude and impetuous manner. Like grandfather, like grandson."

"Well, that's the pot calling the kettle black!" Cate exclaimed. "You insulted his own grandson when you told him I'd never marry a lowly Scot."

Marcus shrugged his shoulders. "The child will survive, Catherine. And you deserve far better than a gardener."

“He’s not—” Cate cut off her own words with a flap of her hand. “Never mind. Let’s just do what we have to do and get back.”

“The task will be far easier if you are Mrs. Marcus Northcott.”

“Because it suits your ego?”

“Because no door is closed to Marcus Northcott. And as my wife, no door will be closed to you, either. Simply put, the subterfuge will allow us easier access to investigate.”

“Fine. I just wish you would clue me in on these things before they happen. Now Lachlan will think I’m a bigamist.”

“He will simply think the child was mistaken. You worry far too much, Catherine.”

“Where are we going?” Cate inquired as they approached the castle.

“Inside.”

Cate’s jaw dropped open and she stopped walking. “No! We can’t! What if we get caught?”

“We will not be caught,” Marcus huffed with a roll of his eyes. “And besides, do the MacKenzies not know you? Surely they will not question you wandering the castle.”

“They may question who you are. And I am *not* telling them you’re my real husband.”

“I am certain you will find the appropriate words to explain my presence if they are needed. Now, come along.”

Cate stared up at the castle rising in front of her. She’d never experienced such trepidation entering Dunhaven Castle as she did at this moment. Even in her first moments at the castle, she’d felt peace. Now, her heart pounded against her ribs and her knees wobbled, threatening to buckle.

She swallowed hard as Marcus led her toward the sprawling structure. They slipped in through the front door.

“Where did you usually see Gianna?”

“We only saw her at dinner or in the intelligence tent.”

“Where else may she be if she involved herself in the events that occurred here?”

“West wing.”

Marcus nodded and motioned for Cate to lead the way. They threaded through the halls and into the unused wing. Cate’s heels clicked off the

marble floor. “She often met people in the large hall where I found the—” Cate licked her lips and flicked her gaze to Marcus. “Never mind.”

They wandered through the hallways to the golden doors leading to the massive hall. Cate eased the door open and peered in. She swung the door wide. “Empty.”

Cate strode into the room, her footsteps echoing off the walls. She glanced around on the floor as Marcus closed the doors behind them. Her brow furrowed.

“What is it?” Marcus questioned.

“The note. The one that leads us to the folly to witness the murder. It’s not here. Where is it? It should be here!”

“Does not the murder occur on the twenty-first of September?”

“Yes,” Cate said with a nod.

“I have returned us to the twentieth of September.”

Cate’s eyes went wide. “The twentieth? Why would you do that? Rita won’t disappear until at least tomorrow!”

“Simple. We must collect as much information as we can.”

Cate huffed and pressed her hand to her forehead. Her face pinched with worry.

Marcus stalked toward her, circling her as he spoke. “Never fear, Catherine, we shall keep to the shadows.”

Cate’s shoulders slumped. “That’s not what I—oh, never mind.”

Cate spun away from him as he faced her. She focused on the wall where she’d stumbled upon the hidden music box room.

“Something of interest, Catherine?”

Cate’s forehead crinkled. She squeezed her lips together. Her body felt as though it was falling through thick air. She blinked hard, trying to keep her focus.

“Catherine?” Marcus’s voice called to her.

Images floated through her mind, flicking past quickly like a montage in a movie. A blue dress. The sapphire necklace. The piano-shaped music box. A rose. A mirrored hall. A large ballroom. A crowd of people. All eyes on her. She curtsied then stared up at her dance partner. Marcus Northcott.

Cate doubled over, clutching her head. “Blue dress. The ball. I have to find my dress. I have to—”

Marcus wrapped his arm around Cate as she folded at the hips.

“Easy, Catherine. You are not going to a ball. We are in 1942.”

“Blue dress,” Cate gasped.

Marcus tugged her upright, cupping her face in his hands. “No, Catherine. There is no ball now. You are in 1942. You must focus. Focus, Catherine.”

Cate blinked and focused on his face. “Are we late for the ball?” she asked him.

“No. Do you have the dragon’s blood with you?”

Cate sucked in deep breaths as she considered the question. Tears formed in her eyes, and she fought to piece together her surroundings. “I—“

Her gaze darted around, and she gulped in breaths. After a moment, her eyelids fluttered, and she grasped at the hand on her cheek. She squeezed her eyes closed and drew in a deep breath. A musky, sweet scent filled her nostrils as the world around her faded.

CHAPTER 7



She opened her eyes and focused on the man in front of her. For a moment, she expected to see Jack's face. She swallowed hard as she recognized Marcus Northcott.

She dropped her grip on his hand as a tear fell to her cheek.

He arched an eyebrow at her. "Catherine? Can you tell me the year?"

"1942," she whispered with a snuffle. She pulled away from his grip. "I'm fine."

Cate pursed her lips and wiped at the wayward tear. A handkerchief floated in front of her face. She side-eyed Marcus, who held it out toward her. A vision of the last time he'd offered her one darted through her mind.

She snatched it from between his fingers and dried her cheek.

"You had another episode," Marcus noted.

Cate remained silent, chewing on her lower lip.

"Do you have the dragon's blood with you?"

Cate blew out a shaky breath and nodded. She pulled the sachet from her pocket.

"Take one now," Marcus directed. "Then you must rest."

"I've never had one while time traveling before."

"You are worsening."

Cate winced as she popped the bitter lozenge into her mouth and pocketed the remaining few drops. A shiver ran through her body as the first bitter globule dripped down her throat.

"You must rest."

“I’m fine,” Cate contended.

“Come along, Catherine.” He extended his hand to her.

Cate ignored it. “I said I’m fine.”

He cocked his head at her. “And I said you must rest. You are worsening.”

Cate’s nose burned as tears welled in her eyes. She flicked her blurry gaze toward Marcus. “Am I dying?”

“I sincerely hope to avoid that situation,” Marcus answered.

“But I’m getting worse. I’m having episodes while time traveling. And I’m using the dragon’s blood.”

“That does not mean you will die.”

“It can be fatal, though, right?”

“It can be.”

Another tear spilled onto her cheek, and she flicked it away. “And does the severity of symptoms indicate outcome?”

Marcus frowned. “Catherine—“

“Do they?” she insisted.

He huffed. “It is often the case that more severe cases are more likely to be fatal, yes.”

Cate pursed her lips as she nodded, turning her gaze from him.

“That does not mean it will be fatal. There have been very severe cases where the sufferer has survived.”

“How?”

“Little is known about why some survive, and others do not.”

Cate sucked in a deep breath and blew it out.

“Catherine,” Marcus said, tilting her chin to face him, “you must fight through this. And to do that, you must rest.”

Cate stared into his deep brown eyes. She tore her gaze away after a few seconds. “No, what I must do is find Jack before it’s too late for both of us.”

“Even if you die trying?”

“Yes. I have to save him. There’s no sense in both of us dying.”

“There is nothing more to do here now. Let’s—“

“No!” Cate shouted. The outburst forced tears onto her cheeks. She pressed a hand to her forehead before flailing it in the air. “We have to stay and look for clues. Anything. Jack’s here with me. We could find him. Warn him. We—“

“Catherine,” Marcus said, grasping her thrashing arm, his voice even and measured.

“No,” she said as she struggled against his grip.

His grasp on her tightened. “Catherine. We will find him. But there is nothing to do here now. Come along.”

Cate sniffled as she stared at him. Her chest heaved with the effort to breathe as she struggled to contain her emotions. Her knees still wobbled from her temporalysis attack. Her muscles relaxed and she ceased to struggle.

She squeezed her sore eyes closed as a final tear rolled down her cheek. Marcus wiped it away with his thumb.

“We will find him.”

Cate glanced up at him and nodded. She allowed him to lead her from the large space into the hallway. They strode down the hall until noise sounded around the corner. Marcus tugged Cate toward another room across the hall. They slipped inside, leaving the door open a crack to view the hallway.

A moment later, a blonde woman strode past and slipped into the hall they’d occupied moments ago. With her hair pulled back into a low bun and wearing a black dress, Cate recognized Ruth Harper, undercover British spy.

“That’s Ruth,” Cate whispered to Marcus. “She’s a spy for the Crown. She’s undercover as a German spy. If I’m not mistaken, she’s meeting Victor Richard or Victor Richter, his real name.”

“With a name like that, no wonder he changed it,” Marcus said as a man strode past and slipped into the grand hall.

Cate almost chuckled at the attempt at humor. “They’re meeting because Ruth is ferreting out the spy and ensuring the appropriate intelligence information gets to Bletchley Park.”

“And this is the man Gianna kills?”

Cate nodded as she peered through the crack. “Yes. She kills him and has him buried in the side garden. However, in the original set of events, Ruth was buried in the garden. But in this timeline, Ruth survives a gunshot rather than dying by blunt force trauma to the head.”

Marcus nodded at the comment.

“If I’m not mistaken—” Cate said, pressing her cheek against the door to peer further into the hall.

The appearance of two other individuals creeping down the hall interrupted her speech. She swallowed hard and her knees wobbled.

Marcus grabbed her elbow. "Are you quite all right?"

Cate straightened, her muscles stiffening. She nodded. "It's just weird."

She forced a smile onto her face and peeked into the hall again. The couple stood at the doors to the grand hall, peering through the small opening in the doors.

Marcus glanced at her, then flicked his gaze across the hall. "I usually find running into another iteration of myself rather exhilarating."

Cate stared at a former version of herself. "That's not exactly the word I'd use."

Her former self's jaw unhinged, and she glanced up at Jack, mouthing some words. Her lip quivered as she eyed the former version of Jack. So close to her, yet somehow so far away.

She straightened again. "I still don't understand why we can't intervene now."

Marcus arched an eyebrow. "A wonderful idea if you prefer a temporary solution."

Cate's brow furrowed as she considered his meaning.

"Even if we approached him now, Gianna could still take him at the exact moment she did. He would return with the other you to your time several days ago."

Cate squashed her lips together before lifting her eyebrows and snapping her fingers. "We'll grab him and take him with us to the day after he disappeared and then he'd be back."

"But no longer available to travel back with you to witness the murder of Victor—"

Cate's head lolled to the side as realization dawned on her. "And we'd never take the message to Bletchley Park, which could seriously alter the course of history. Further than it already has been by the incorrect murder."

"We should disrupt as little as possible."

"But we've already disrupted history. Would it matter if we did it again?"

"In this case, the answer is most likely yes. Not only would your little escapade be erased, along with another key piece of history potentially, but it also muddles timeline. We're bringing the wrong man forward. The Scot

that is a match to your time is not that man.” Marcus pointed a finger toward the former Jack.

Cate worked through the difficult concept in her mind. “I understand. It would be like switching me with that me. She’d go forward to my point in time with no knowledge of the past few days.”

“Correct. And therefore, she would essentially be time traveling to the future.”

“Which could be a disaster.”

Marcus nodded. “It also leaves the current version of Jack trapped with The Agency. It does nothing to alter that situation.”

Cate returned her attention to the ongoing in the hallway. “He’s just so close,” she murmured as the former versions of her and Jack hurried back down the hall, slipping into the music room at the end of the hall. Moments later Ruth stormed down the hall followed by Victor.

Marcus flicked his gaze to Cate. She held up a single finger, signaling him to wait, then pointed toward the music room.

A few moments later, the door popped open as Jack and Cate burst into the hall. Cate babbled on about their latest findings as they disappeared down the hall.

The current version of Cate stared after them with a frown.

“We will find him, Catherine,” Marcus said. “The right him.”

She flicked her gaze to him, staring into his deep brown eyes, and nodded. She forced a momentary smile onto her lips and pulled the doors open.

“You know, I really am feeling fine now. We could—“

“We shall do nothing of the sort. You’ve experienced quite an episode with the temporalysis. On top of that, you’ve experienced a shock. Encountering a former or future version of yourself can be startling,” Marcus said as they strode down the hall.

“Didn’t you say exhilarating?”

Marcus offered her a coy smirk. “You seemed rather rattled.”

“You must admit it is very odd.”

“Sometimes you amuse me, Catherine.”

Cate flicked her eyes up to him. “I’m glad I can be of assistance on that front.”

Marcus pushed through a door, and they spilled into a side garden. “Come along. Let us get you to a place where you may rest.”

Marcus led her from the estate to the outskirts of town. Her heart skipped a beat as she stared at the two-story house they approached.

Cate ceased walking, her jaw set. "You're kidding!"

Marcus twisted to face her and offered her a questioning look.

Cate waved her hand at the house ahead of them. "That's the same house you took me to the last time."

"I fail to see the significance."

"You kidnapped me, imprisoned me in that house," Cate said, jabbing her finger at the home, "and then almost killed me."

Marcus stalked several steps back to her and took a firm hold of Cate's arm. "Really, Catherine, you *must* get over that. It's ancient history."

"It's not!" Cate argued as he dragged her along.

"The incident in question occurred hundreds of years ago. And I do not intend to imprison you this time!"

"Thank goodness for small mercies," Cate said as Marcus pushed open the front door.

Cate stepped into the foyer, her heels echoing off the wood-paneled walls and hardwood floor. Silence coursed through the empty home. Cate's pulse quickened as her eyes scanned the space. She swallowed the lump forming in her throat as her gaze raised up the staircase hidden behind the wooden railing.

Her former prison lay at the top of those stairs. She recalled the sparsely furnished room. The locked door. Crying into her pillow as she wondered if she'd ever see Jack again and if she'd ever return to her own time.

Marcus pushed the door shut, dimming the space as he blocked out the sun. "You should lie down."

Cate took a step toward the sitting room.

"You'd be more comfortable upstairs, wouldn't you?"

"I don't want to be in that room again."

Marcus arched an eyebrow. "Fine."

She continued into the sitting room. The fireplace stood against the adjacent wall, cold and dark. She recalled sitting near the warmth of it in 1792. This was the last room she'd seen before she'd awoken in the stone coffin.

Cate shut her eyes for a moment and shoved the memories from her mind before she crossed to the armchair she'd read in over a century ago.

She collapsed into the seat with a sigh. Her head thudded against the chair's high back.

She pursed her lips as she stared into space. Images of what she'd just witnessed danced through her mind. She let her eyelids slide closed as she pulled the images of Jack into her mind. She recalled the moments when they'd been sorting out the spy situation.

Days ago, they'd been happy, working together to solve a mystery. Now, she stood in almost the same place with a completely different man, solving another mystery. The odd trick of time that allowed her to see Jack and the former version of herself made the situation even worse.

Her heart ached as she considered how close they were, yet how far. Her eyelids slowly opened as the emotion of the moment threatened to overwhelm her. She jumped in her seat, startled to find Marcus Northcott hovering over her. He held a saucer and teacup in his hand. Steaming tan liquid filled it.

Without a word, Cate straightened in her chair and accepted the beverage.

She sipped the creamy tea. The warm liquid slid down her throat, clearing her taste buds of any of the remaining bitter dragon's blood.

"Thank you," she said just above a whisper.

"There are biscuits on the table," Marcus answered as he eased into the chair across from her.

Cate side-eyed the plate of cookies. "I'm not hungry."

"You should eat, Catherine."

The memory of the last encounter with tea and cookies flitted through her mind. She recalled Dembe offering her the small snack. She had refused it. Duke Northcott had insisted she eat it, offering her one of the cookies. She'd knocked it from his hand in a desperate attempt at defiance.

In the end, she'd eaten those cookies and drank that tea. She eyed the plate, pulling one of the wafers from it and nibbling on the corner.

Across the room, Marcus turned his attention to the book in his lap, satisfied with her choice. She finished the cookies and slid the empty teacup and saucer onto the table next to the plate.

"How do you feel?" Marcus questioned as she inched the teacup to the middle of the table.

"Much better," she said with a slight smile.

"Good." He returned to his reading.

“I’m actually feeling quite well,” she said. “Perhaps we should return to the castle and—“

Marcus closed the book around his finger. “Rest, Catherine. You must rest.”

Cate slumped in the chair, letting her head fall against the back. She stared into the blackened interior of the fireplace.

“Are you cold?” Marcus inquired, noting her gaze.

She flicked her gaze to him and shook her head. “No. Just antsy. I’ll never be able to sleep.”

“Try, Catherine.”

Cate sighed and let her eyes slide shut. After a few moments, she popped them open and thrashed her head. “It’s no use. I can’t rest.”

She leaned forward in the chair, clasping her hands over her knees. Her legs jiggled under them. “I’m just going to—“

“No, you are not,” Marcus said before she could finish the statement.

She stared at him. “Am I a prisoner here?”

He held her gaze. “Of course not.”

“Then why can’t I leave?”

“Because it would be extremely foolish for you to do so. If anything should happen to you, which is likely given your condition, we’d have to cease our current investigation to locate you. You do not want us distracted from the search for what’s-his-name, do you?”

Cate’s shoulders slumped and she sighed. “No. I don’t want us distracted from searching for Jack.”

“Then I suggest you stay here and rest.”

“Will resting really solve anything, though?”

“At the very least, it will not hurt. Your mind is jumbled. Allowing it to relax may not cure you, but it can alleviate your symptoms.”

Cate threw herself back in her chair with a sullen expression. “Fine.”

“Do not pout, Catherine.”

“I am not pouting,” she claimed. “I’m merely frustrated with myself. How can we gain any information when I’m losing my mind.”

“You are not losing your mind. We shall make more progress. After you have rested.” Marcus returned to his book, leaving Cate to return her gaze to the empty fireplace.

Her mind buzzed with worry and upset. On the opposite end of the spectrum, her body oozed with exhaustion. Her limbs felt heavy. She ached

all over. With a wiggle of her shoulders, she slouched down in the chair. Her eyelids became heavy, and she let them slide closed.

* * *

Cate awoke with a start. She glanced around the darkened space, not recognizing it. She spun, trying to find something familiar in the darkness. She squinted into the blackness around her. Lumps formed at the edges of the space as her eyes adjusted to the dim light.

Cate stumbled toward one. Something moved in front of her. She froze, her eyes desperately trying to make out what it was.

“Hello?” she called. Her voice echoed in the massive space.

Cate spun as she tried to find something familiar. Thick fabric twisted around her legs. She glanced down, running her hand over her abdomen. Her fingers swept across silky fabric. Her expression turned pensive as she wondered what she was wearing.

Pale, white moonlight glowed through a window at the far end of the space. The small amount of light appeared far away.

Cate sucked in a sharp breath, wrapping her arms around her midriff as she took a tentative step forward.

“Hello?” she said again.

She took another step forward toward the light before she glanced back over her shoulder. Her lower lip quivered as a chill raced up her spine. She shivered and rubbed at her bare arms.

With her lips pressed together, she stumbled forward toward the white glow. As she approached, movement caught her eye. Her breath caught in her throat as she snapped her gaze toward it.

Cate blew out a long breath as she identified the source of the movement. Her reflection stared back at her from the mirrored walls. As the alarm passed and her heart rate returned to normal, she studied herself.

Curled tendrils framed her pale face, the rest of her hair swept up into an elaborate style. Her sapphire blue dress skimmed over her body and trailed down to the floor. Her eyes lowered, focusing on the ostentatious sapphire necklace around her neck. She grasped at it, pinching the main stone between her thumb and forefinger.

“Where am I?” she whispered.

Music floated toward her. She snapped her head in its direction.

“Hello?”

Cate wandered toward the sound, passing by the moonlit window. Its white glow painted the marble floor below her. She turned the corner and the sound of the music intensified.

“The ball,” Cate breathed as she lifted her skirt to hurry toward it.

She ran toward a lit hallway, stumbling over something in her flight. She lost her balance and spilled to the hard floor, sprawling across the icy cold surface.

Something rubbed against her leg. Instinctively, she thrashed it as she tried to recover her footing.

Her vision clouded as she planted her hands against the floor and pushed. “Oh, no,” she lamented, squeezing her eyes shut.

Her mind blurred, images distorting. She slumped back to the ground below her and clutched at her forehead. Her temples throbbed.

“Not now.”

A sensation slithered up her leg again. She struggled to crawl forward as blinding visions shot across her mind faster than she could process them.

She moaned aloud as she labored to move forward and work through the pounding pain in her head.

She kicked her leg behind her to move herself. A blinding pain radiated from her ankle to further up her leg. She screamed as a burning sting paralyzed her.

Tears fell onto her cheeks as she gasped in agony, rolling onto her back and writhing on the floor. She lifted her chin, trying to identify the source of her injury.

Her eyes widened and a scream left her throat.

CHAPTER 8



Eate startled awake, gasping for breath as she stiffened in her chair, her eyes shooting open. She sucked in deep breaths as she glanced around, trying to place herself. After a moment, her breathing slowed, and her heart rate stabilized. She released her white-knuckled grip on the thickly padded arms and slumped back in the chair. Her head thudded against the wing as she let it loll.

She had awoken before she'd fully processed what had happened to her. Where had she been in her dream? And what had attacked her? She'd had the sense something had hurt her, but she hadn't identified it.

More nightmares, she reflected as she squeezed her eyes closed. Would these ever end? After the nightmares warning her about Marcus, she'd suffered from nightmares about her experience with him. Then the sleepwalking started. And now she was back to frightening dreams.

She popped her eyes open and glanced around. Her fingers grazed a blanket draped across her lower half. She arched an eyebrow at it. Marcus must have covered her after she fell asleep.

Her eyes scanned the room. Where was he?

She glanced out of the window. Stars twinkled in the dark sky. How long had she slept? She glanced to the clock on the mantle. Its hands pointed to just after one in the morning.

Her stomach rumbled. She had been more exhausted by the temporalysis episode than she'd realized. She'd slept through dinner and well into the night. Her last meal had been only tea and cookies.

Cate glanced to the table next to her, finding it empty of the teacup and saucer that had sat there when she'd dozed off. A note replaced it, her name scrawled across the tented paper.

She snatched the object from the table and flicked it open.

Catherine - I have gone to gather more information on our mutual friend. If you should awaken before my return, there is food in the kitchen.

Marcus

Her stomach grumbled again at the prospect of a meal. As she pushed the blanket back, her nose wrinkled at the idea of Marcus Northcott covering her sleeping form. It sent a shiver down her spine.

She stood and stretched before wandering from the room and down the long hallway leading away from the front door. In the darkness, she ran her hand against the wall to guide her. Her fingers bumped into a door casing and she grabbed hold of it, twisting to face the darkened room. Her fingers groped around on the wall inside, searching for a light switch.

She found one and flicked it on. Light flooded the room from a central chandelier. Under it, a well-polished, but bare dining room table. Cate stared at it, recalling her last encounter in the room while dining with Marcus.

Then her enemy, she'd spent the night on edge, wondering if she'd ever see her home again. Now they were allies. She recalled his words at one of their meals.

"In different circumstances, we may have made fantastic allies," he had said with a smirk.

Cate recalled her response. "I cannot imagine ever aligning with you."

He retorted, "Never limit your options, Catherine. Life can offer us strange circumstances in which we must accept what we thought we wouldn't."

Cate bit her lower lip as the accuracy of the statement punched her in the gut. She flipped off the light switch and left the room before the weight of Jack's disappearance sent her reeling again. She continued down the dark hallway and through an open doorway.

After a bit of fumbling, her fingers hit a light switch and she flicked it on. Bright light bloomed from the ceiling, revealing a kitchen. Bread sat on the counter. Cate tugged open the refrigerator, finding cheese inside.

She removed the plate and shuffled across the room, plopping onto the kitchen chair. After slicing the bread, she tore a slice apart, popping one piece into her mouth. Her rumbling stomach appreciated the meager meal.

As she bit into a chunk of cheese, the front door creaked open. Cate leaned back in her chair to glance down the hall. Darkness met her gaze as the door slammed shut. Footsteps approached but Cate could make out no details. She rose from the chair, her eyes darting around for a weapon in case the visitor was unwelcome.

Before she could find anything suitable, Marcus Northcott popped from the darkness into the well-lit kitchen.

He glanced at the half-empty plate on the table. "Hello, Catherine. I see you are awake and found the food." He flicked his gaze to her. "How are you feeling?"

"Fine," she answered before consuming the final bite of her cheese.

He offered her a fleeting smile as he studied her features for signs of an untruth.

"You should have woken me. I would have liked to have gone with you. I may have been able to help."

The smile spread on his features again. "You were asleep and needed your rest. There was no reason for you to gallivant around in the wee hours of the morning on the off chance that Gianna revealed something that may help."

"Did she?"

Marcus grabbed a piece of cheese from the plate. "Very little, but still a small tidbit that points us in a direction. A rather vague one, but, nonetheless, a direction."

Cate straightened, her eyes widening. "What direction? Did she say where they are keeping Jack? Or when they're going to get him?"

He shook his head. "Nothing that definite. From the conversation I caught a portion of, it seems as though she is going forward in time after she finishes her work here."

"Forward to get Jack?"

He shrugged as he took a bite of the cheese. "She did not say."

Cate's shoulders slumped and she fluttered her eyelashes in frustration. "That's not helpful at all." She sank into the chair and grabbed another slice of bread, ripping it apart and shoving a piece into her mouth.

"I told you it was vague," Marcus said behind her.

"That's less than vague. That's... that's dubious at best. It's not even dubious, it's pointless!" Cate flung her hand in the air before she set her elbow on the table. Her head fell into her palm, writhing back and forth.

A hand clamped on her shoulder and gave it a gentle squeeze. "It gives us some direction. We shall seek more information tomorrow."

Cate felt warmth next to her ear. She slid her eyes sideways, finding Marcus's face next to hers. "We'll find him, Catherine."

She pursed her lips, trying to find comfort in his words. She struggled to believe the man who had haunted her nightmares for months, put her in a stone coffin and left her to die, and sent her an enchanted object for some unknown reason.

The circumstances prevented her from latching on to those words and putting faith in them. She sighed as he lifted his hand and eased into the chair next to her.

He studied her face as she stared at the grain on the wooden table. Her finger absentmindedly traced the dark lines.

"You appear as though you do not believe me."

Cate flicked her gaze to his eyes. Those dark eyes bore into hers. She struggled to form words to respond to his statement.

He raised his eyebrows at her as her lower lip bobbed up and down. "Do not fear, Catherine, I shall earn your trust." He stood from the table. "Now, you should go back to sleep. We have a long day ahead of us."

* * *

The sun blared through the small window, lighting the barren room with its orange light. Cate opened her eyes, squinting against it. She flung her arm over her eyes and sighed.

After a moment, she slowly pulled it away, her eyes scanning the small room. She bolted upright, pushed away the blanket covering her, and swung her legs over the bed.

She recognized the space. A small bedroom with a single window at the foot of the bed. A tiny nightstand sat next to the bed and a small wooden dresser stood across the room, next to a door.

Cate stared at that door. A lump formed in her throat and her heart thudded in her chest. Her lower lip quivered as she slowly rose. She squeezed her lips together as she tried to firm her muscles to stop her knees from wobbling.

The last time she'd been in this room, she'd been a captive. Kidnapped by Marcus Northcott and kept here until he dumped her in a stone coffin.

Hours ago, she'd fallen asleep after her early morning snack of cheese and bread in the armchair in the sitting room. She had refused to go to the bedroom even at Marcus's urging. She insisted she'd sleep in the chair, not wanting to return to this room and the last memories of it.

How had she gotten here? Her brain answered the question with a response she preferred not to accept. Marcus Northcott had carried her here and laid her in bed, covered her with a blanket, and left her to sleep. The idea gave her chills.

She rose and approached the door. Trembling fingers reached for the doorknob. The icy cold brass touched her hand as she grasped it. With a deep inhale, she twisted it. The door swung open easily.

She closed her eyes and breathed a sigh of relief. With straightened posture, she stepped into the hallway and peered down the stairs to the foyer below. Quietness reigned. Her throat went dry. She swallowed and took a step toward the stairs. She hovered at the top before she sneaked down them.

As she reached the bottom, she stared at the door catty-corner from her. Her eyes searched the sitting room to her left. Empty. She could run. The timepiece could return her to her time.

Panic washed over her, and she stumbled down the final step and surged toward the door.

"Good morning, Catherine," a voice said behind her.

Cate froze, her muscles stiffening. She twisted slowly, finding Marcus Northcott striding down the hall behind her.

"Did you sleep well?"

She stared at him for a moment. "Yes. Why did you move me to the bedroom?"

"I thought you'd rest more comfortably there."

She nodded in response.

He closed the gap between them. "And did you?"

"Did I what?"

"Sleep comfortably."

He studied her, his dark eyes boring into hers.

"Yes, I did."

He offered her a slight smile as he smoothed a wayward lock of hair behind her ear. "Good. You needed your rest. You should eat breakfast. We have a long day ahead." He spun on his heel and stalked toward the kitchen.

Cate stared after him. Her fingers reached for the lock of hair he'd touched, lingering on it for a moment.

"Are you coming?" he called over his shoulder.

Cate forced herself to walk forward. She stepped into the kitchen to find a full English breakfast prepared. Her eyebrows lifted as she sank into the chair.

"You cook?"

He set a plate in front of her before settling into the chair next to her. "Of course, Catherine. I don't *always* have access to Dembe or Stefano to tend to my meals."

"You are a man of many surprises," she admitted as she picked up her fork.

He gave her another smile-smirk as he chewed his eggs. Cate pushed her eggs around on her plate before she bit into them.

"Did you believe me to be backward enough to expect you to cook because you are a woman?"

Cate swallowed the forkful of eggs, surprised at the taste. "You would have been sorely disappointed by that."

"You would have refused?"

Cate stabbed at a mushroom and a piece of egg white as she shook her head. "I'm not a very good cook."

"I cannot imagine you being terrible at many things."

"Thankfully, you did not have to find out the hard way," Cate said with a chuckle. "For both our sakes."

She fidgeted in her seat as she raised her eyes to find him staring at her. "You are a very intriguing woman, Catherine."

She lowered her eyes to her plate as she collected another forkful of food. "I'm not really. I told you that before."

“You are a time-traveling Countess who has spent time in multiple eras. That alone is intriguing.”

“Not to someone like you.”

Marcus cut his sausage into pieces. “Someone like me?”

“You seem to have a very unique set of abilities that extend far beyond the occasional time-travel trip. And you’ve lived for centuries. Through all the eras I’ve traveled to. That must be interesting.”

“The passage of time when one is immortal can be very boring, actually.”

“Lonely, I would imagine.”

He narrowed his eyes at her as he chewed.

“Most people are born, age, and die. It’s painful for those around them, but we all have our time. In your case, though, only your fellow immortals move through life with you. Everyone else dies around you. But you live on. There’s no end. No change. The world lives and dies, but you do not.”

“And you would find this life lonely?”

She flicked her gaze to him, holding his stare. “I imagine it would be difficult to experience the deaths of friends and loved ones for centuries on end.”

“There are other immortals though. Would you not find comfort with them?”

“Have you?”

The corner of his mouth turned up. “I do not seek their comfort, my dear. I do not require it.”

She poked around at her food before changing the subject. “What is the plan today?”

“You said you saw Rita with two men when she murdered Victor, correct?”

Cate polished off the last of her toast and nodded. “Yes, that’s right.”

“I did not manage to locate them last evening. I imagine they will arrive today. We shall go to Dunhaven and hope to find them. Any details we may glean will prove helpful.”

Cate nodded as she wiped her mouth with a napkin before lifting her plate from the table and taking it to the sink.

“And if we can’t learn anything from them?”

“We shall follow them after they dispose of Victor. If my assumption proves correct, and it usually does, Gianna will not remain here for long.”

Cate ran water over the plate before scrubbing it. “Why was she here in the first place?”

Marcus joined her, setting his plate in the sink. “Because you were.”

She flicked her gaze to him, her washing slowing to a crawl as she processed the statement.

“She was laying the groundwork for the abduction.”

Cate’s face pinched and her shoulders slumped. She busied herself rinsing the plate. “We played right into her hands.”

“Do not trouble yourself over it, Catherine. No matter what you had done, she would have set the events in action.”

Cate rubbed the dishrag against Marcus’s plate. “Jack warned me about time-traveling and changing things. We shouldn’t have done it.”

“It had little to do with your decision to time-travel. Had you spent your days frittering away your time at Dunhaven Castle, she would have done the same thing.”

Cate rinsed the plate, her eyebrows pinching together as her mind continued to parse through her guilt.

She swiveled off the water and grabbed a dishtowel, rubbing the plate in circular motions before she set it aside, grabbing the other. Could she have changed things had she not been so impulsive? Would Jack still be at Dunhaven Castle if she’d not insisted on hopping through time to solve mysteries? Was his disappearance her doing?

The plate lifted from her hands. Marcus pulled it away and reached around her to set it down. “It is not your fault, Catherine. No amount of staying in your own time would have prevented The Agency from coming after you.”

Cate blew out a breath and nodded, unsure if she believed it.

“Now, let’s go.” He waved a finger in the air. “Oh, do you have your dragon’s blood? Now would be a terrible moment to have a temporalysis attack.”

Cate patted her pocket. “Yes. I have them. So far, no symptoms.”

Marcus nodded. “I would recommend taking one in either case in the early afternoon.”

“I hate to use them if I don’t need—“

“You do need them.”

Cate pulled the sachet from her pocket, feeling the few lozenges remaining in it.

“Do not worry about running out of them. Dembe is retrieving more.”

“What if—“

“He will not fail. If you have no symptoms, use one this afternoon. We shall hope it stops any attacks at an inopportune moment.”

“Okay,” Cate agreed, shoving them back in her pocket.

He held out his hand. “Come along, Catherine.”

Cate stared at the outstretched fingers, her gaze traveling up the length of his arm to his dark eyes. She forced a tentative smile onto her face and grasped his hand.

CHAPTER 9



Marcus tugged Cate forward, wrapping her arm around his as they strode to the front door. Cate stepped into the bright sunshine outside. Dunhaven Castle stood high on the hill in the distance. It glittered in the late morning sun.

Her mind stretched to the property. In a few short hours, she and Jack would appear there, hidden deep within the castle's interior. They would witness an attempted murder and then a murder. Then their lives would take a shocking turn.

The incidents slipped from her mind as Marcus turned her away from the castle and toward town. She forced her mind to focus on the task at hand.

"Will they come through town first?"

"I am not certain, though I should think so. Stefano has been watching several key areas for them."

"You mentioned him earlier. Who is he?"

"An associate of mine with unique skills."

"Like you?"

Marcus chuckled at the comment. "Not quite, my dear. Though if you are asking if he is an immortal, the answer is yes."

Cate nodded, her forehead wrinkling as she considered the information.

The town of Dunhaven filled in around them before she could ask any further questions. Cate scanned the people, wondering if they'd come across Rita's associates.

Marcus led her to the pub. The familiar surroundings of the wood-paneled walls and thick wooden booths taunted her. They failed to provide her with the usual sense of ease. Every glance brought back a memory she'd experienced with Jack.

Their first meal in the establishment. Their discussion about the strange ongoingings at the castle. Their visit with her great-grandparents in 1925. Her fingers caressed the polished wood of the table they'd shared on their first visit as Marcus tugged her along with him toward a back corner.

A man sat with his feet propped on another chair at the table, his hat pulled low over his face. As they approached, the hat tipped back and he leapt to his feet, catching the hat in his hand and sweeping it onto his nearly black hair in one smooth motion. His dark skin and wide nose suggested his ethnicity to be Roma.

"Duke," he said with a sweeping bow.

"Stefano, have you anything to report?"

"Nothing yet, Duke." His dark eyes scanned Cate, who still clung to Marcus's arm. She offered him a demure smile. "Well, hello, pretty lady." The man whipped the hat from his unruly, black hair and made a sweeping gesture, bowing low toward her.

Marcus arched an eyebrow and huffed at the man. "You may cease your theatrics, Stefano. The lady is hardly interested in them."

Stefano returned his hat to his head and straightened. "Surely she deserves a proper greeting."

"Yes, she does. Proper being the key word. This is Lady Catherine Kensie, Countess of Dunhavenshire."

Stefano clicked his heels together and bent slightly. "Hello, Catherine."

Cate began to answer when Marcus interrupted. "You shall address her as Lady Kensie. Though through the duration of our travels, you should address her as Your Grace. She is posing as my wife. Now, I suggest you cease napping at the bar and start searching for Gianna's associates."

"Yes, Duke," he said with another bow. He flitted past them, disappearing through the door of the bar and whistling a tune.

"He was quite a character," Cate said as he left.

Marcus guided Cate through the pub and out into the streets of Dunhaven. They strolled toward the town's center. "Do not remind me. His behavior is less than appropriate on most occasions, though he has his uses."

“Was he... you know... when you met him?”

“Immortal? Yes. Though floundering.”

“And you took him in.”

“More or less. He possesses several qualities useful to me.”

Marcus ducked down a side street.

“Where are we going?” Cate inquired as they veered around behind the buildings.

“Stefano identified a location where a meeting may take place. If it does, I should like to overhear the discussion.”

They arrived in a darkened alley. The sunshine, obliterated by the buildings surrounding it, barely lit the space.

Marcus slinked through the darkness as though accustomed to it. Cate followed behind him as they approached the dead-end.

Marcus pressed her into a doorway, hiding her from sight. He squeezed next to her. In the tight quarters, Cate’s nostrils detected the thick, musky scent of his cologne. She bit her lower lip as she recalled smelling it before he’d used his unique magic to put her to sleep with the touch of his fingers on her cheek.

Cate squirmed in the small area, fidgeting to press herself as far into the corner as possible.

Marcus stared down at her. “Are you all right?”

She lifted her eyes to his and gave a tiny nod coupled with a slight smile. He narrowed his eyes at her as though assessing the statement for truthfulness.

A shout interrupted any further conversation. Cate’s heart skipped a beat before it began to pound in her chest. Her knees suddenly wobbled, and her throat went dry.

She risked a glance around Marcus’s body. She leaned from the doorway, placing her hand on his chest to steady herself. Marcus twisted to glance over his shoulder.

He narrowed his eyes at the two men who marched down the alley.

He turned back toward her. “Do you recognize them?” he whispered into her ear.

Cate gave them a second glance, biting her lower lip. She returned her gaze to Marcus and nodded. “It’s the men who were with Rita.”

He nodded and pressed a finger to his lips. She pursed her lips and nodded, her hand still resting on his chest. He closed his hand around hers

and pressed closer to her.

She sucked in a deep breath as they waited in the dark corner. The men stopped midway down the alley. They conversed in low voices about something Cate couldn't overhear.

They waited several moments with no action. Warmth coursed through Cate's body and sweat beaded on her forehead. She swallowed hard, using her free hand to fan herself. She fought to control her breath, squeezing her eyes shut before blinking them rapidly.

Marcus raised his eyebrows in a silent question. She cocked her head, her face pinching into an upset expression.

He pulled her toward him, his head hovering next to hers. "The dragon's blood."

She wrapped her arms around his shoulders as her knees wobbled again. "I can't open the pouch without making noise."

"How bad are your symptoms?"

Cate considered the question. She'd had far worse symptoms, but this seemed like only the start of the attack. The last thing she needed was to parade down the alley, asking the other occupants about her dress and a ball.

"Medium," she breathed into his ear. "Though my legs are wobbly."

He wrapped his arms around her waist tighter. "Try to focus. If you continue to slip, squeeze my shoulder."

She nodded as her stomach turned over. The worry that she'd give away their position made her head spin along with the temporalysis. She squashed her lips together as her lower lip began to tremble. Tears filled her eyes and she fought to not let them spill onto her cheeks.

She blinked them away as blood rushed through her ears. Her legs threatened to buckle, and she wobbled. Marcus's arms tightened around her waist, steadying her.

She fought to maintain her focus. She concentrated on the smell of summer in the air, mixed with the musky scent of Marcus's cologne. She focused on the feel of the expensive fabric beneath her fingertips.

"Focus, Catherine," Marcus breathed in her ear.

The men milled around yards from them. She fought to stay in the moment. A figure approached them. Her blurry eyes could not identify the individual. She blinked rapidly. The measure served as a temporary relief.

She gasped as she established the identity of the newcomer: Rita. Her high heels clicked on the cobblestone street as she sashayed down the alley.

Cate tapped Marcus's back.

"It's Rita!" she hissed.

"Easy, Catherine, focus."

She held her breath, as she stared at the approaching woman.

"I see you've made it," Rita called to them, tossing her blonde hair over her shoulder.

One of the men answered though Cate did not hear the response. She squeezed her lips together as she focused on their conversation. Rita opened her mouth to respond.

Cate strained to listen, but nothing reached her ears. She frowned as she narrowed her eyes. Rita's lips slowed, moving as though she'd been set to slow speed.

Her features began to melt. Cate's breathing turned ragged. She blinked again and stared up at the sky. The color dripped to the buildings below. A large blue drip smacked Cate in the forehead. She gasped as she wiped it away, glancing upward again.

The sky broke apart. Blackness pushed through, eating away the blue sky. She was slipping. She desperately hoped to glean a clue from Rita's conversation, but she feared giving them away more. What Marcus could do to help her, though, she did not know. But she'd let him know as he'd requested.

She squeezed his shoulder as a tear slid down her cheek. The world faded away, replaced by darkness. Images flitted through her mind. Her fingers reached out into the blackness until they touched cool metal. The room lit suddenly.

Cate stood in a large, mirrored hallway. She stared into the mirror. Her reflection wore a sapphire blue dress. The large sapphire necklace hung around her neck. Cate spun around to search her surroundings. A large moon hung in the sky. Music filled the air.

Cate sucked in a deep breath as the scene suddenly changed. She gasped as she stumbled back a step. Hands steadied her and prevented her from falling over.

She grasped onto them as she caught her breath. A garbled voice called her name. She felt herself being eased into a chair. A warm, tingling feeling shot through her from head to toe.

The chair's cool fabric surrounded her and she doubled over, squeezing her eyes closed until her mind focused. She sat up straighter and blew out a long breath.

Her brow furrowed as she scanned her surroundings. She sat in the sitting room of Marcus's house on the edge of town. Her breathing turned ragged again as she focused on Marcus.

"How did we get here?"

He stalked across the room and poured a brandy. "You squeezed my shoulder."

Cate's features turned incredulous. "Yes. That doesn't explain how we got out of a dead-end alley past Rita and her associates."

Marcus handed the brandy off to her. "Drink this. How are you feeling?"

She accepted the offered drink and sipped it. "Okay."

"You should use the dragon's blood."

"Right," she said, grasping the sachet in her pocket. She tugged it open, the package crinkling as she shook one into her hand and tossed it into her mouth.

"I still don't understand how we got here."

"I used a location hop."

Cate's eyes widened. "A what?"

"A location hop. It allows us to disappear from one location and reappear in another."

The odd tingling returned, and her flesh turned to goosebumps as she considered the statement he made. Even odder, the way he said it was as though it was a completely normal phenomenon to relocate via some unknown magic from one location to another in an instant.

Cate rubbed at the back of her neck as she pondered it.

"Are you feeling any better?"

She nodded. "Yes."

"Drink your brandy. You look a bit peaked. Perhaps you should lie down."

"No," Cate said, slamming the glass down on the table next to her. "I'm not going to rest. I'm fine. The temporalysis attack has waned." She let her gaze fall to her lap and bit the inside of her cheek. "I'm just still stunned by the location change thing."

“It is nothing to concern yourself over, Catherine. I am quite adept at it. You were in no danger.”

She grabbed the glass and sipped the brandy. “It’s just... odd.” She reflected for another moment. “And thanks to the temporalysis, I’ve cost us potential information on Jack.” She sighed as she slumped in her chair.

“Do not fret. We’ve missed nothing.”

Cate leapt from her chair and paced the floor. “We have. We missed what they were discussing! It could have been important. It could have been about Jack!” She bit her thumbnail as she fought the tears forming in her eyes.

He followed her trek back and forth across the room with his eyes, leaning against the mantle with a nonchalant expression.

“Now what?” Cate inquired as she stopped her pacing to stare at him.

“I suggest you rest. We shall find more information later when Gianna intends to enact her plan.”

Cate huffed. “Please stop saying that to me! I can’t rest anymore!” She buried her face in her hands with a deep sigh. After a moment, she pulled them away. “I’m sorry. I’m just frustrated.”

He arched an eyebrow at her.

“Really, I appreciate your help. I don’t mean to be so difficult.”

The comment produced the tiny half-smile, half-smirk she’d seen before. “You forget, Catherine, I was engaged to Celine for years. She is far more difficult than you.”

Cate collapsed into the chair, resting her chin in her palm. “I just want to find Jack.”

“I told you before. This will not be easy. And it will likely not be quick. You must prepare yourself for what may be a lengthy process to retrieve him.”

Cate nodded and blew out a long breath, her eyes remaining fixed on the floor. Marcus approached her and she glanced up at him. He extended his arm toward her. She glanced at it then back to his face, her features pinching with confusion.

“If you’re certain you’re quite well, let us take a walk.”

She slipped her hand into his. “I’m okay,” she told him as she stood.

“We shall find out what transpired during the meeting between Rita and her compatriots.”

“How?” Cate asked as he led her into the bright sunshine outside. “Do you have a magic rewind button?”

He chuckled at the statement. “Your innocence is sometimes very refreshing.”

She scrunched her face at the statement.

“Stefano should have caught the conversation. I had him follow them. While I would have preferred to hear it firsthand, our abrupt change in plans will mean we shall have to rely on Stefano’s observations.”

“Oh. That was smart.”

He offered her a coy smirk as they strolled toward the town. They wound through the streets to the pub. Marcus turned off at an alley flanking it. They reached the midpoint and Marcus positioned Cate against the pub’s outer wall.

“Wait here. Do not move. Do you understand?”

“Yes. But where are you going?”

“Inside to find Stefano.” He spun to leave.

Cate grabbed his arm. “Wait. Why can’t I go?”

“If Gianna’s associates are inside, I do not wish them to see you with me.”

“Oh, right. Okay.” Cate inched back against the wall.

Marcus grasped her arm gently. “If you prefer me not to leave you, I will not.”

“I’ll be okay. Just... don’t forget about me.”

His lips twisted into a tight-lipped grin. “I could never forget you, Catherine.”

He strode down the alley toward the main street. Cate leaned against the wall as he disappeared from her view. She stared up at the bright azure sky. Fluffy white clouds floated past, failing to blot out the bright sun.

The bitter lozenge in her mouth made her cringe. She shuddered as she recalled the debilitating temporalysis attack. Before Jack’s disappearance, she’d been searching for the revolving room.

What was she searching for now? Where was the mirrored hall? And why was her mind fixated on it?

CHAPTER 10



Cate stared at the end of the alley. She suddenly felt alone. She pulled the timepiece from under her dress and stared at it. At least she had a way to return home if Marcus abandoned her. She closed her fingers around it and squeezed it.

After another glance at the main street, she flicked open the timepiece's cover. It ticked away normally, an odd sight for her while in another time. It gave her a moment of panic. What if she couldn't get home with it? Normally when activated, the timepiece ran slow, indicating the passage of time in the present, which moved at a rate of one minute to every fifteen spent in the past.

Now the watch ticked normally. Her stomach turned as she realized it may not interact with the time rips in the castle. And on top of that, she realized they'd been gone longer than twenty-four hours. What had Damien, Celine and Michael told Mrs. Fraser and Molly about her disappearance?

As she fretted over both issues, a shadow crossed over her. She glanced up to find Marcus Northcott with Stefano in tow. He eyed the timepiece in her hands as she snapped it closed and dropped it under the collar of her dress.

"I thought you may wish to hear Stefano's account."

"Yes, I would. Thank you."

Marcus signaled the man to recount the conversation he'd overheard. "Gianna chided them for being late, though she indicated she did not really

need their assistance. One of them said The Agency felt she'd wasted too much time here. She took umbrage to that and told them the arrival of one Jack and Cate MacKenzie caused her to alter her original plans as it provided her with an opportunity."

"What opportunity? The opportunity to change history or the opportunity to kidnap Jack?" Cate asked, her voice hurried.

Stefano shrugged. "She didn't say. Only told them to meet her this evening following dinner to wrap up their business here. She said she'd leave immediately after it."

"Anything else?" Marcus inquired.

Stefano shook his head. "The encounter was relatively brief."

"Continue to follow them. Make note of anything that could help us locate Mr. Reid."

Stefano gave a single nod. He twisted toward Cate and offered her a bow. "Your Grace," he said with an amused grin.

Marcus scowled at him as he disappeared down the alley. "His sense of humor is almost as terrible as your Scot's."

Cate giggled. "Jack's sense of humor isn't that bad."

Marcus shook his head at her assessment as he offered her his arm again. "I am not impressed by it."

She slipped her arm around his and they set off. "I'm not surprised. You don't seem impressed by much."

"You impress me, Catherine. I find you a most intriguing woman."

"So you've said. Though I still don't understand why. Given the life you've led, I can't imagine anything being intriguing."

He offered her an amused glance.

"Anyway, where are we going now?"

"To Dunhaven Castle. To wait for the events of this evening. Gianna plans to leave tonight. I would like to determine what clues we can glean from her departure to lead us to—"

"Jack," Cate finished for him. "To lead us to Jack."

"I would doubt it. But, with any luck, it will lead us to another time where we can collect more information."

Cate bit her lower lip and her shoulders slumped ever so slightly. "Oh. I know you keep saying to prepare for a long search, but I just keep hoping to find him around the next corner. I mean, isn't there an Agency stronghold or something where they'd keep him."

Marcus chuckled at her comment. “Unfortunately, no. There are many members of the organization. He could not only be anywhere, but he could be in any time. And, if they had any brains at all, they would move him regularly to prevent us from tracking him down.”

Cate’s eyes fell to her feet as she walked along the road leading to the castle. Her features twitched with upset. “How will we ever find him then?”

“By being more clever than them.”

Cate’s features pinched at the words.

Marcus ceased walking. “I am quite insulted, Catherine.”

She snapped her gaze up to him. “Why?”

“You do not believe me more clever than they.” He pressed his hand against his heart. “I am terribly wounded.”

Cate’s brow pinched and she studied him with widened eyes. “Are you—are you actually making a joke?”

He shrugged. “Not really. I am terribly wounded if you have no faith in my abilities.”

Cate eyed him with uncertainty.

“I told you at the start of this, you must trust me.”

“I suppose that’s what I must do then.”

He grabbed her hand and wrapped it around his arm. “We will find him. Trust me.”

* * *

Cate stood with her hands on her hips, her jaw set. The dark stones of the MacKenzie family crypt rose in front of her. She shook her head and grimaced. “No.”

Marcus offered her an unimpressed glance. “Catherine, you are being impossible.”

Cate crossed her arms over her chest. “I don’t care. I won’t do it.”

Marcus matched her stance. “Fine. Then we shall stand here until you are feeling less obstinate.”

Cate scrunched her face in frustration and flung her arm toward the stone structure in front of them. “I’m *not* going into the mausoleum with you!”

“It provides us with a perfect vantage point to remain hidden while watching the folly.”

Cate shook her head. “No.”

“Need I remind you, Catherine—“

“Need I remind you that the last time you brought me here, you—“

Marcus held up his hand. “No, you need not. You have mentioned it several times. And I have explained several times that my intention—“

“Was not to harm me. Yes, I know,” Cate said with a roll of her eyes. “That doesn’t make it any better! And it doesn’t mean I want to go inside the mausoleum where I was buried alive.”

“Did you not use this egress when you visited this period with Zack?”

“Jack,” Cate said with a clenched jaw. “Stop calling him other names just to annoy me.”

“I’m doing nothing of the sort.”

“You are so. And yes, I did come through here with Jack. But he didn’t stuff me into a coffin!”

Marcus narrowed his eyes at her. “Pretend I’m the Scot.”

Cate glowered at him, her hands sliding back to her hips. “My imagination isn’t *that* good.”

He offered her a growling sigh. “I could solve this easily.” He wiggled his fingers at her.

She narrowed her eyes, recalling his magical touch that could cause her to lose consciousness. The idea caused her heart to seize.

With a sour expression, she stormed up the stone steps and pushed through the creaky gate into the crypt.

“Thought you’d see it my way,” he murmured as he followed her inside.

Cate stopped short as she entered the stone walls. Marcus skirted around her. She shivered as her eyes fell to the stone coffin she’d laid in over a century ago.

Marcus flitted his gaze to her before he glanced out the window overlooking the folly. Cate tore her eyes away from the resting place and stalked across the mausoleum. She stared at the ring that opened the passage into the castle.

Her fingers reached out to caress the cool metal. Her lower lip trembled as her mind wandered to the events about to occur in the nearby folly. Again, Jack would be so close, yet so far. She closed her eyes. Images flitted through her mind.

She recalled hiding in the folly, Jack's hand pressed over her mouth as they witnessed a murder, the stars twinkling overhead as she climbed into a tree to watch the Germans run Jack's car off the road, the cold, wet hug she received when Jack climbed from the pond.

"Are you feeling ill?" Marcus inquired.

Cate snapped her eyes open, the memories fading. She flicked her gaze to him, her eyes misty, and shook her head.

He tilted his head and narrowed his eyes at her.

She sniffled. "No. No, I'm fine. Just memories of this night the last time I lived through it cropping up."

Marcus nodded. "If you prefer not to witness the events at the folly—"

"No," she said with a sniffle, blinking away tears. She raised her eyes to his. "No, I'm fine."

"If the temporalysis symptoms crop up—"

"I've got my lozenges at the ready." She patted her pocket. "Though I hope not to need them."

"Do not worry about using them. Dembe will retrieve more."

She joined him at the window. "I know. I mean I hope I don't ruin our chances of finding information about Jack. Also, I'm not exactly thrilled about descending into another bizarre scenario of visions."

The sky darkened outside as the sun set. The last rays of red light shone through the window, lighting their faces with a rosy glow.

Cate glanced out over the painted landscape, worry creasing her features. She spun back to face Marcus. "What will happen to me if this continues? Will I just collapse in on myself? Become stuck in my own mind?"

"That is one outcome, yes."

"And the other is that I die."

"Another is that you pull through it and live."

Cate licked her lips, then squeezed them together as she focused on the folly. Marcus pushed a lock of hair behind her ear.

"You are strong. You can survive this."

She nodded at him. "I hope so. But I'm afraid the symptoms are getting worse."

Marcus gazed out toward the folly. "I'm not convinced they are."

"I'm still having strange visions, although they're new ones now. And I'm continuing to have them despite the dragon's blood."

“But you are remaining conscious for longer durations during them.”

“Maybe that’s just the dragon’s blood. It could be masking the progression of symptoms.”

Marcus slid his eyes sideways to glance at her. “You are strong, Catherine. You can survive this.”

Cate pursed her lips and bobbed her head. “I will survive this.”

“What visions are you having?”

“I saw a mirrored hallway. I was wearing the ball gown I found at the castle with the sapphire necklace. I had a similar dream about that hallway. I fell trying to run. Something was after me. But I don’t know what it was.”

Cate tapped her fingertips against the stone windowsill. Her breathing turned ragged. “What was it?”

“Allow the memory to pass, Catherine. Do not strain yourself.”

“But what is this? First that room and now this other place.” Cate massaged her temples. “Why are these images haunting me?”

Marcus studied her for a moment. “They are not random images.”

“Then what are they?”

“Visions of your future.”

Cate’s eyes widened and she snapped her eyes to him. Her jaw hung open as she processed the statement.

Before she could formulate a response, Marcus waved a finger toward the folly. “There.”

Cate swallowed hard and pushed the conversation from her mind as she gazed outside. She and Jack hurried along the path to the folly, ducking inside.

Cate’s heart seized as she spotted herself with Jack. She promised herself they would find him and she would survive the temporalysis.

As the sun set, she paced the floor. She recalled sitting in the folly with Jack, waiting for something to happen. As the stars sparkled in the sky above, Cate rejoined Marcus at the window. His cool, calm demeanor amazed her. His patience seemed endless, while she was ready to jump out of her skin waiting for something to happen.

At long last, Ruth wandered to the folly and disappeared inside. Hans followed shortly after.

“That’s the British intelligence agent,” Cate said. “He gives her the code for Bletchley. The one that Jack and I will end up carrying there.”

Moments later, Hans stalked from the folly, hands shoved into his pockets as he strode away. Another thirty minutes passed before Victor's lithe form appeared on the path.

"Victor," Cate reported. "The German spy Rita, or Gianna, kills."

"And the one who ended up in your garden."

"Yes, but only in this line of events. In the original, it was Ruth who was buried there."

"Gianna modified history. Not enough to cause things to go haywire, but enough to throw you off."

Cate rubbed at the back of her neck. As she considered it. "Why?"

"The Agency uses this technique to slowly modify conditions to suit and benefit them."

"Because too big of a change could cause unintended consequences for them?"

"Very good, Catherine. You are an excellent pupil."

Cate offered him a tight-lipped smile. A muzzle flash lit up the folly's interior. Cate jumped as she recalled the bullet striking Ruth in the gut.

Cate chewed her lower lip, the memory still too fresh for her taste.

A figure approached the folly in the moonlight. Two men followed. Cate grabbed Marcus's arm and squeezed. "There she is!"

Marcus's face showed indifference or perhaps disdain. "Indeed."

Gianna disappeared into the folly. Another muzzle flash lit up, followed by a second. Moments later, Gianna emerged.

"That's our cue," Marcus said. He grabbed her arm and steered her toward the exit.

"What is our plan?" Cate inquired as they stepped under the starry sky.

"Follow her. She should be moving on soon."

Cate nodded without fully understanding how this may help them. They hurried in the direction Gianna departed in. Cate scanned the horizon in search of the woman.

Marcus wrapped his hand around hers and pulled her from the path. They strode through the grass toward a large tree. A figure moved in the dim light, hunched over and tugging at something.

"Going somewhere, Gianna?" Marcus said.

The figure straightened and stepped from under the branches into the moonlight. Her head lolled to the side and her lips curled at the edges. She shot him a coy glance as she stuck her hand on her hip.

“Marcus Northcott. Fancy meeting you here.”

He narrowed his eyes at her. “I asked you a question. You have failed to answer.”

“Yes. I am.” She glanced around him. “I’d ask what you’re doing here but I think that’s the wisp of a woman, Cate Kensie, behind you. So I can only guess she somehow convinced you to help her find the dimwit of an estate agent.”

“I don’t suppose you’d save me the trouble and hand him over.”

She chuckled and batted her eyelashes at him. “Oh, Marcus, you always were such a comedian.” She paced in front of the tree, the moonlight glinting off her blonde locks. “What I can’t figure out is how mousy little Cate solicited your assistance. She seems beneath you, Marcus.”

He puckered his lips at her. “I am unimpressed with your so-called analysis. I’d prefer to know where you’re going.”

She threw her head back and cackled as she ran her fingers up and down her throat. When she recovered, she faced him, lowering her chin and staring up at him through her eyelashes.

She puckered her lips and narrowed her eyes as she sauntered forward. She laid her hands on his lapels, batting her eyelashes at him as she raised her eyes to his.

“Why don’t you come with me and find out for yourself?” she purred.

Cate frowned at her over-the-top, flirtatious performance. Marcus ran his fingers up her arm, closing his hands around hers. His lips twisted into that half-smirk, half-smile.

Gianna eyed the man she clung to with a flirty stare. Cate’s heart skipped a beat as she worried Marcus may take Gianna up on her offer.

CHAPTER 11



Gianna eyed Marcus as Cate frowned at them, locked hand in hand and gazing into each other's eyes.

"Keep a lady company," Gianna cooed, tossing her leg in the air behind her as she leaned into him.

He lifted his eyebrows, staring down his nose at her. "Then I suppose I should stay where I am. The only lady present is standing behind me."

The flirtatious smile faded from her lips, and she yanked her hands from his. "When are you going to realize the benefits of joining The Agency?"

"My dear Gianna, when you are as powerful as I, there are none."

She stalked away and grabbed what she'd wrestled from the tree earlier. She slung the bag over her shoulder and withdrew a small object from its front pocket.

She scoffed at his last comment. "We'll see who wins, Marcus. Your power is no match for The Agency. I hope both you and your mousy little friend realize this." She glanced over Marcus's shoulder, rising onto her toes to glance at Cate. "Jack's ours, Cate. And there's nothing you can do about it."

She palmed the object she'd retrieved earlier and in an instant, she twisted into a pinpoint, disappearing from view.

Cate's breath caught as the invisible vortex sucked her inside, leaving nothing behind but a gust of wind. Marcus strode forward and studied the spot where she'd stood.

Cate hurried forward to join him, flinging her arms out. “We learned nothing. As usual, she was too busy flirting. Ooohhh, I can’t stand her!” She stamped her foot on the ground.

Marcus’s lips curled again as his hands traced something invisible. “Stop reacting emotionally and pay attention to your surroundings. She has left subtle clues.”

Cate scoffed at the statement. “Clues too subtle for me to see!”

“Not true. You are not paying attention. You are only seeing red over her poor behavior rather than the clues.”

Cate scrunched her face and balled her fists at her sides. She shook her head to dismiss his claim. He crooked his finger at her, motioning for her to join him.

He circled behind her and placed his hands on either side of her head. “Look carefully, Catherine.”

Cate licked her lips and rolled her eyes, about to argue with him when she noticed a slight shimmer against the dark night sky.

She reached her finger toward it. Her skin tingled as she came into contact with it. She cocked her head as she studied the swirling, glittery dust.

“How does this help us?”

“To someone learned in these matters, this tells us the direction of her time travel as well as something about how far she’s traveled.”

Cate glanced over her shoulder at him, her face questioning.

“Notice how it swirls clockwise. This indicates that she’s gone forward in time.”

“How far? To our time? Did she go to get Jack?”

Marcus shook his head. “No, look at how closely the particles cling to each other. She hasn’t gone that far in time.”

“How far did she go?”

“I’d say ten to fifteen years, give or take.”

“So, somewhere in the 1950s,” Cate said as she stared at the dissipating pixie dust swirls.

“I’d say so, yes.”

“Now what?”

“Now we go home. You need your rest, and we need to search for what drew her to the 50s.”

Cate bit her lower lip, disappointed at the answer, but nodded.

“Ready? Do you recall the rules? Straight through the portal, do not stop.”

She nodded again. Her features pinched. “Wait. How did Rita, or Gianna, know Jack was gone? He wasn’t when we met her the first time.”

“Gianna has likely traveled back and forth dozens of times. She’d be well aware of what is about to transpire. In fact, she likely set up some of it while she and you were here.”

“Dozens of times,” Cate repeated as she considered his words. “Why can’t she get temporalysis?”

Marcus chuckled at her statement. “Come, Catherine. Let’s return home and continue our search.”

She offered him a tight-lipped smile and nodded. He stretched out his hands in front of him, pulling open the time portal. As the small twinkling turned into a gaping black hole and her hair whipped wildly around her, Cate stepped into the blackness to return to the present-day.

* * *

Cate stepped into the bright sunshine of the spring day. She shielded her eyes as she glanced around, finding herself near where they’d entered the time portal.

Marcus Northcott appeared beside her moments later.

“It feels good to be home,” she said as they strolled back to the castle.

“How are you feeling? Any ill effects from the return trip?”

Cate shook her head, pushing through the front door. “None so far.”

“You should get some rest in the hopes of staving off another.”

“I’d like to check on any progress the others have made,” Cate said.

Marcus furrowed his brow at her statement but followed her to the library. She burst through the doors, finding them in a similar position to where she’d left them.

“Oh, hey, Cate, welcome back!” Damien mumbled around the shortbread he’d just taken a bite of.

“Have you found anything?”

His eyes shifted from side to side as he munched on the cookie. “No?” he responded. “Is that a trick question?”

“No,” Cate said, her eyelashes fluttering. She glanced at his screen. “That’s the same website you were looking at when we left!”

Damien glanced at it and frowned before he faced her again. “Yeah.”

“You’ve gotten no further?”

Damien bit his lower lip, his eyebrows pinching together. “You’ve only been gone for like five minutes.”

Cate collapsed into the desk in front of her, her eyes wide. “What?”

Damien slowly chewed his cookie as he stared at her. “You’ve been gone five minutes.”

“How? We were in 1942 for over twenty-four hours.”

“There is no time differential when using the time portals we create. We can return to whatever time we choose,” Celine answered from the armchair near the fireplace where she sat with Bailey.

Cate glanced at her, her forehead wrinkling as she spotted Marcus holding Riley again. She shook her head and focused on the information she’d just learned. She’d expected to have been gone at least several hours.

She pressed her palm against her forehead. “Five minutes?”

“Yep. So, sorry to say, we haven’t made much progress in that time, but we’ll keep at it. How was your trip?”

“Any temporalysis issues?” Michael asked.

Cate opened her mouth to respond when Marcus beat her to it. “Yes. She had two attacks, one more debilitating than the other, but after some rest, she seems improved.”

Damien pursed his lips and rubbed Cate’s hand. “How are you feeling now?”

“I’m okay. The worse of the two attacks happened at the worst possible moment.”

Damien patted her hand. “You should get some rest now. I’ll bet you’re exhausted. Between the whole time travel business—“ He lowered his voice. “—and the company. I’m sure you could use a break.”

“But we have to discuss what we found!”

“You found something?” Michael asked.

“Travel trail?” Celine questioned with her gaze on Marcus.

He nodded at her as he stroked the white streak on Riley’s head.

“Any information on where it led?”

“Forward, I’d say ten to fifteen years.”

Damien pounded on his keyboard. "So, we're looking for something in the range of 1952 to 1957."

"Roughly, yes," Marcus answered as he set Riley on the floor. The dog stared up at him as though he held a steak.

"Okay, I'm going to run a search for anything related to Rita Haverford or Gianna Caruso."

"I doubt you'll find anything," Marcus said. "She isn't that foolish."

Cate's shoulders slumped. If they could not track the woman through history, how would they ever find information?

Marcus wandered toward them. "Search for large gatherings in prominent places like Paris, London, Rome."

Damien nodded as his fingers clacked across the keys. "What kind? Anything specific?"

Marcus answered, "Conventions, business, finance, the sort of thing that would bring together prominent businessmen."

Cate rubbed her chin as she considered his response. "Why those?"

"She went forward to this time for a reason. Something is occurring. Something she wants access to or furthers her plan in some way. It may be a discussion with the powers that be at The Agency. It may be to approach a key person to join their initiative."

"What if it's just some random place in time where they've stashed Jack."

"Doubtful," Marcus said. "She wouldn't be going to visit the gardener. She's going to make something happen."

Damien laced his fingers together behind his head and leaned back in the chair. "Okay, searching for any historical events in that time period in major cities." He glanced at Cate. "This could take a while. Why don't you get some rest?"

"I'm okay," she answered.

"At least get changed," Michael said. "We'll let you know if anything comes up in the search."

"Yeah, but like I said," Damien repeated, "it will probably be a while."

"You should rest, Catherine," Marcus said. "If Damien finds a lead, we will need to pursue it."

Cate sucked in a breath and nodded. "Okay. I'll change and come back here. I can rest here."

“Sure, Cate,” Damien answered. “Whatever makes you feel comfortable.”

She smiled and nodded at him before she stalked from the room. She glanced back, her hand lingering on the doorknob, finding Riley sitting at Marcus’s feet. Bailey lounged by the fire.

With a long exhale, she let go of the door and continued to her bedroom alone. The oddities of the situation played in her mind as she wound through the halls. Why was Riley so enamored with Marcus Northcott?

She had only been gone for minutes, so their reaction to her return was understandable. However, Riley’s infatuation with the enigmatic Duke confounded her. Did he put some sort of spell on the animal? But why?

Perhaps to make himself seem trustworthy to Cate. She chewed the inside of her cheek as she considered Celine’s reaction to him. No longer hostile, she seemed to almost trust the man. Even Damien did not seem perturbed by him.

During their encounter in the 1700s, he’d seemed frightened of him and exhibited an extreme dislike. Now they worked together.

Cate pushed through the doors of her suite and into the familiar space as her head began to ache. She hated to admit it, but Marcus was correct. She needed some rest. The adrenaline that fueled her in 1942 no longer coursed through her veins.

She slogged across the sitting room and into her bedroom, collapsing on the soft duvet. With a deep sigh, Cate pushed a lock of hair from her face. She stared blankly ahead as her mind whirled.

Following any other time travel trip, she’d have returned here to change clothes, then meet Jack in the library to discuss their findings. Today, she’d change and go to the library. But Jack would not be there.

Tears filled her eyes and blurred her vision. As her chin quivered and the tears threatened to fall, she rose and stalked to her nightstand. Within moments, music filled the air.

She eased onto the bed, pulling the tiny music box toward her chest. She clutched it close to her and closed her eyes.

Her fingers caressed the smooth wood. The tiny keyboard lifted as she touched it. Cate snapped her eyes open and studied the music box. She recalled finding a note in her handwriting inside. Damien’s text stating the Duke claimed she’d been the source of the music box raced through her mind followed by Marcus’s own words. “You asked me to.”

Cate's forehead pinched as her vision clouded, replaced by a new image.

Cate gasped as she glanced at the candlelight lighting the room. She stared down at her centuries-old clothing, caressing the ribbon tied at her waist. The wooden chair creaked under her as she shifted in it to gawk around a room she'd never seen before.

A large mahogany canopy bed stood in the middle with a thick coverlet. A vanity stood against the far wall. Ornate wood trim decorated sapphire walls.

Cate spun to face a window, catching her reflection in it. Her stunned features stared back at her. Soft, curled tendrils framed her porcelain skin while the remainder of her hair had been swept up.

Cate's eyes fell to the desk at which she sat. She reached out to caress the tiny piano-shaped music box tinkling away. A scrap of paper lay next to it, wet ink scrawling a message across it: *You've always loved this.*

Cate's eyes widened at the sight, and she leapt from the chair. It scraped back across the hardwood as Cate stumbled backward. She tripped over the leg, spiraling backward. Her arms flailed to try to regain her balance, but she lost the battle.

Her stomach turned as she toppled backward, and the room began to turn black.

CHAPTER 12



Cate gasped as her eyes shot open. She gulped in breaths as she flitted her gaze around the room. She clutched at her duvet, hoping it eased her trembling.

She recognized the space: her bedroom. With another gasp, she sat up, perching on the edge of her bed. She swallowed hard, her chest heaving as she continued to suck in air.

The music box tinkled away, still clutched in her hands. Cate ran her fingers through her hair as she pushed the little piano onto her nightstand.

With weak knees, she stood, teetering for a moment before she gained her balance. She trudged into the bathroom and changed her clothes to her usual leggings and a tunic.

As she stared in the mirror, brushing her hair out of its 40s style, she froze. What had she experienced when she'd sat on the bed? She'd felt as though she'd been somewhere else. The past. But where? How? She'd not activated the timepiece. Even if she had, she'd have ended up in 1925.

By her dress and hair, it appeared she was much earlier than that in time. Then there was the note. The same note she'd found in the keyboard of the music box. Had she written it in the past? But why was she seeing it now? What was happening to her?

After a head shake, she finished her hair and laid the brush on her vanity before she left the bathroom. On her way through the bedroom, she grabbed the music box, taking it with her to the library.

She entered the room to find Michael and Damien conversing over a game of chess. Damien's computer blazed through a search of some kind, information flitting across the screen faster than Cate could process.

Celine curled in the armchair Jack normally used, typing a message on her phone. Marcus sat in the other chair with Riley next to him. He absentmindedly rubbed the dog's head.

"Hey, Cate!" Damien said as she stepped inside the room. "Welcome back."

"Thanks." She motioned to the laptop at the desk. "Any hits yet?"

"Nothing yet. It'll alert us. Hope you don't mind us playing a quick game of chess. It helps me think."

"Not at all," Cate said, crossing the room.

Marcus rose from the armchair and motioned for Cate to take it. He gave Riley another pat on the head and signaled for the dog to stay on the chair.

A weak smile formed on Cate's lips. Cate waved him back down. "Oh, you don't--"

"Of course I do, Catherine," Marcus said. "You need your rest." He motioned toward the chair again.

"Thank you," Cate said as she slid into the soft leather.

Celine side-eyed the exchange before returning to her phone as it chimed.

"Hey, D," she said over her shoulder.

"Yeah?"

"Alexander said to try the years 1954-1956. He recalls a meeting of businessmen occurring sometime in that range."

Damien leapt from his seat and hurried to his laptop. "Can he be any more specific?"

"I'll ask."

"I mean, either way, this narrows the search by half which helps tremendously."

Cate tugged a blanket over her legs as Riley glanced at Marcus, then eased to laying next to Cate. Marcus studied her, his eyes narrowing. Cate fidgeted under his scrutiny.

"Okay, new search running," Damien announced with an emphatic pound against his ENTER key.

“Oh, Alexander says perhaps in the fall. He can’t be more specific than that. But he does recall it being during a time when he was traveling.”

Damien returned to the keyboard. “Fall is a little broad, but I’ll restrict to September through November and see what that gets us.” He clacked around again before the computer began its frantic search task.

Cate nestled under the blanket as the computer worked and Damien crossed back to the chess table. She caressed the music box in her hands.

Marcus stalked to her and eased the piano from her grasp. He twisted the winding mechanism and propped the lid open, setting it on the coffee table.

“You should rest. This will ease your nerves.”

“He’s right,” Celine added. “If you’d like to lay down in your room, we’ll be fine here.”

Cate pressed her lips together, her shoulders rising to her ears. “I’d rather not be alone.”

Celine nodded and smiled. “Of course.”

“No one will mind if you want to close your eyes, Cate,” Damien assured her. “We’ll wake you if we find anything in the search.”

“Thanks.”

Cate slouched in the chair, drawing her knees to her chest. She reached out to stroke Riley’s back as she let her head fall onto the wide cushion behind her. Her eyes scanned the room, taking in all the unfamiliar faces and not Jack’s.

She bit into her lower lip as she felt the emotions rippling inside her. She stared over at the computer as it blazed through its search. Her eyelids slid shut before fluttering open again.

The music tinkled in the background. She focused on the little wooden piano until her eyes slid closed.

Her mind jumbled as she drifted in and out of sleep. She ran through the halls of Dunhaven Castle calling for Jack. She glanced into the library, finding it empty. In a frenzy, she continued to wander the halls.

The doors to the west wing stood open. She slowed and approached them. Voices floated down the hall.

“Jack!” Cate exclaimed and hurried down the grand hall.

“How is she really?” Celine’s voice inquired.

“Her second temporalysis attack was pronounced,” Marcus answered.

“Is she getting worse?” Damien inquired.

“It’s difficult to say, though she is doing an admirable job of fighting through.”

“Yeah, she’s fighting,” Michael’s voice said. “But can she beat it?”

“I certainly hope so,” Marcus answered.

Cate passed the music room. Damien sat at the piano. He poked at various keys. She continued on toward the grand hall. The doors blew open as she approached.

“Cate!” a muffled voice called.

Cate’s eyes widened. “Jack!” she shouted, recognizing his voice. “Where are you?”

“Inside the waltz room! Hurry!”

She hurried across the room and toggled open the revolving music room. Cate rushed toward it. A figure blocked her from entering.

“Hello, Catherine,” Marcus said.

“Marcus! Help me! Jack’s inside the spinning room.”

“He isn’t. It is only a trick.”

“No!” Cate cried. She attempted to skirt around the man, but he blocked the entire entrance. “Marcus, please!”

The room behind him began to crack apart. The music wobbled and slowed. A pillar crashed to the floor. Tears spilled onto Cate’s cheeks. “Please,” she begged again.

“It is for your own good,” he said as he prevented her from entering the crumbling space. The ceiling fell toward the floor, sending a deafening bang through her mind.

Cate startled awake, gasping. The banging continued. Marcus strode from the room.

“It’s okay, Cate. Someone’s at your door,” Damien said.

Cate tossed the blanket off and stood. Before she could leave the room, Marcus returned with a bulky dark-skinned man in tow. He gave her a slight bow.

“Hello, Miss Catherine.”

“Dembe, hello.”

“Dembe has brought you something,” Marcus said.

Dembe pulled a large pouch from his pocket and offered it to Cate with a bow. Cate accepted the proffered object, tugging open the sack.

“Is this—“

“Dragon’s blood,” Marcus answered. “Enough to last you several weeks even if you increase the dose to two to three times per day.”

Cate breathed a sigh of relief.

“That’s plenty, right?” Damien inquired.

“Yes,” Marcus nodded. “You should not need more than half that pouch.”

Cate twisted to face him as she pulled the pouch closed. “Why?”

Marcus flicked his gaze to her and took a sip of brandy from the drink he poured. “Because in two weeks’ time, you should no longer need them.”

Cate’s heart fluttered. “Because I’ll be—“ Dead, her mind added, but she could not bring herself to say the word.

“Cured,” Marcus answered before another sip of brandy.

Cate’s lips curled up on the edges and she nodded, appreciating the vote of confidence.

“Thank you, Dembe,” Cate said to the quiet man.

“It is my pleasure, Miss Catherine,” he answered.

“Will you be staying with us, too?” Cate inquired.

“No,” Marcus answered for him as he strode across the room. “Dembe has more pressing matters to attend to. Dembe, a word before you depart?”

“Of course, Duke,” he answered, his hands clasped behind his back as he followed the man from the room.

Cate set the pouch on the table and eased into the generous seat of her armchair.

“Well, at least that matter is solved,” Damien said. “Now you don’t have to worry about running out.”

“Yes,” Cate answered as the music box wound down. She reached for it, winding the mechanism again before setting it on the coffee table. “I hope no one minds this constant droning, but it does help.”

“Not at all,” Celine assured her. “I understand. My father gave me a music box when I was sixteen just before his death. I still listen to it, and it has a similar effect on me.”

Cate smiled at the words as her mind processed the statement. She tried to imagine a sixteen-year-old Celine in the late 1700s accepting the music box as a gift. How odd.

It reminded her of her odd experience earlier. She must have fallen asleep and imagined she was in another century. It had seemed so real.

Cate leapt from her seat, the blanket draped over her knees falling to the floor. “Will you excuse me for a moment?”

“Sure, Cate,” Damien said.

She hurried from the room, leaving the others behind and hurrying down the hall. Marcus approached from the foyer.

“You should be resting, Catherine.”

“Can I speak with you for a minute? In private?”

“Certainly.”

Cate led him across the foyer and into the sitting room, pushing the doors slightly shut behind them. She spun to face him, still clutching the brass doorknobs.

“What did you mean when you said I was experiencing visions of my future?”

“Exactly that.”

Cate crossed the room, her brow furrowed. “I don’t understand.”

“What are you seeing?”

“A mirrored hallway. I hear music. I’m wearing a sapphire dress. And—“

“And?”

“And when I went upstairs to change, I fell asleep, or I thought I did. I saw myself in another century. I had the music box. And I was penning a note. I thought it was a dream, but it felt so real.”

Marcus nodded. “You are remembering things.”

“Remembering things? I’ve never been to the room I saw myself in. It can’t be a memory.”

“It is. Of your future.”

Cate’s eyes widened and she collapsed onto the couch. “How is that possible? Are these visions of my future?”

“Yes. Though your future occurs in the past.”

Cate chewed her lower lip before covering her face with her hands. “This is so confusing.”

Marcus approached her, reaching toward her as she smoothed her hair behind her ears.

“Hey, Cate?” Damien’s voice called.

“Yes?” Cate answered, leaping from her seat.

Damien popped his head through the opening between the doors. “Oh, hey! I heard voices and just followed them. Sorry if I’m interrupting.”

“Not at all, what is it?”

“We’ve got something,” he said with a grin.

Cate’s eyes lit up and she rounded the couch, hurrying toward Damien. “What?”

Damien led her down the hall to the library. Marcus trailed behind them. She entered the room, finding both Michael and Celine tapping around on their phones.

A giant text box on Damien’s screen announced success. Confetti rained from the top. Damien sat down in front of the machine, dismissing the notification.

“Sorry, ignore that, just a bit of fun,” he murmured.

He clicked around, pulling up an old newspaper article. “The Business Summit,” he said, pointing to the screen. “Held in London in October 1955. A meeting of minds from across the globe to discuss international business.”

“Alexander says that’s the one he remembers,” Celine reported.

“Looks like there were tons of people there who were major players on the world business stage,” Michael added.

Damien nodded. “This is the type of event you mentioned, right?” He directed his gaze toward Marcus.

“Yes,” Marcus answered. “I’d bet that was Gianna’s target.”

“Do you think they have Jack?”

“I doubt it,” Marcus answered causing Cate’s shoulders to slump. “However, they may be deciding what to do with him at that meeting.”

“Then we should go, right?” Cate asked. “Oh, how will we get to London? I’m not sure I can drive a car from the 1950s. Can you?”

Marcus chortled a laugh. “I do find you so amusing at times.”

“Marcus will open a portal that leads to London in October 1955,” Celine explained.

Cate’s jaw dropped and she returned her gaze to Marcus. “Really? They aren’t location-locked?”

“No, Catherine. I am no amateur. The world is easily within our reach, no matter how far-flung.”

Cate nodded. “So, we should go then, right?”

“Yes. Though perhaps you should rest more before we depart.”

“I’m fine. I feel fine.”

“We have no idea what we may encounter. We should wait until you are rested and ready.”

Cate pressed her lips together in frustration. She balled her palms into fists as she sought an argument, her face pinching.

Marcus arched an eyebrow at her behavior. "Your tantrum will get you nowhere, Catherine. We will not go until you have properly rested."

He stalked across the room as though the conversation had ended.

Her eyes shot wide. "I'm not having a tantrum! This is Jack's life on the line."

"And we are not doing him justice by racing there when we risk your life and well-being."

"I'm not risking my life."

"You are. The temporalysis is one issue. Your fragile human state is another."

"Uh-oh," Damien whispered to Celine as Cate narrowed her eyes at the statement.

Celine shot Damien a side-eyed glance, her lips pursed, and wiggled her eyebrows at him. Michael crossed his arms over his chest, his eyes darting back and forth between them as the argument continued.

"I am not fragile! I have been through a lot more than you give me credit for."

"This has nothing to do with giving you credit, Catherine. It has to do with protecting your life."

"I fail to see how delaying a few hours or even a day protects my life."

"This is not up for debate."

"You just don't want to find Jack," Cate accused. "You don't like him. You've said as much."

"Ohhhh, wow, she went straight for it on that one," Michael whispered.

"Yeah, no kidding," Damien said.

"My feelings have nothing to do with the situation," Marcus retorted.

Cate narrowed her eyes and cocked her head. "Oh, I think they have very much to do with it. You haven't liked him since we met in the 1700s!"

Marcus puckered his lips and sighed. "You can accuse me of as much as you'd like, but it changes nothing."

Cate huffed. She flung her arms out and rolled her eyes. "Fine. I'll get some rest." She waved a finger at him. "But I expect to go as soon as I've slept."

Marcus raised his eyebrows at her. "Fine."

Cate spun on a heel and stalked toward the door. She hesitated a moment before she turned back and swiped the pouch of dragon's blood off the table along with the music box before she stalked from the room.

Cate fumed as she stormed up the stairs. With no ability to travel to 1955, she had little choice in the matter. She had to give in to Marcus's demands.

She hoped it wasn't a stall tactic. His dislike for Jack was obvious. Was she correct? Was he scheming to make sure they would not find Jack?

She crashed through the doors to her suite and marched across the room into her bedroom. She slid the music box and dragon's blood pouch onto her nightstand, kicked her shoes off, and climbed between the sheets.

The music box tinkled away as she lay on her side, staring at it. She narrowed her eyes at it as she recalled the argument she'd just had with Marcus.

She reached out and slammed the lid closed on the little item. Much to her dismay, it continued to tinkle away even with the lid closed. She offered a strained scream in her throat as she flopped onto her other side and pulled the pillow over her head.

CHAPTER 13



Cate opened her eyes to a darkened room. She lifted her head and squinted into the darkness. The music box tinkled in the blackness. Had she slept longer than she'd intended?

Cate shot up to sitting, pulling the covers off. More of the room came into view as Cate's eyes adjusted to the darkness. It didn't look like her room. She glanced to the window. The peaked windows rose to the ceiling.

"Where am I?" Cate whispered as her pulse quickened. She swung her legs over the side of the bed, noticing her attire for the first time. She wore a long white nightgown.

Cate grabbed at it, her forehead pinching. She reached for the light on her nightstand, finding none. Instead, her flailing hand knocked over something else.

"Shoot," Cate hissed as she bent toward it. Her fingers wrapped around something waxy. It smelled like beeswax. Was it a candle, she wondered?

She sat up, pulling the object toward her. Light pierced the darkness. Cate snapped her head toward the light, squinting her eyes against it.

A small voice called out. "Your Grace?"

* * *

Cate gasped as her eyes popped open. She scanned the dimly lit room. She clutched at the pillow underneath her as she recognized her surroundings.

Where had she been seconds ago? Had she dreamt up the other place?

She pushed herself up to sit and glanced at her clock. It read quarter after six. Judging by the already darkening sky, it was evening. The music box on her nightstand tinkled away.

Cate pushed back the covers as a light knock sounded at the door across the suite.

“Coming!” she called.

The door popped open, and Molly stuck her head in. “Just me. I’ve got a tray of dinner for you.”

Cate hurried across the room and pulled the doors open further. “Thanks.”

“No problem. I figured I’d give it a try. Celine said you were trying to get a little rest.”

Cate nodded. “Yeah, I managed to fall asleep for a few hours.”

“That’s good,” Molly said as she eased the tray onto Cate’s bed. Molly turned to face her, grasping Cate’s upper arms lightly. “You still look a little tired. Maybe you should turn in for the night after supper.”

“I’m okay, Molly. How are you? Maybe you and the Frasers should do the same. Just leave the cleanup for another day. I’ll even help you with it.”

“Nonsense. The work keeps us distracted. Has there been any news?”

“Damien found something he’s following up on.”

Molly’s eyebrows shot up and a hopeful expression lit up her features.

“It’s not much but we may glean some information from it. We’re going to follow up on it now.”

“Well, after you eat, of course.”

Cate offered her a grin. “Of course.”

Molly nodded at her. “Do you need any help with looking into it?”

“No, I think we’re okay. Everyone has offered to help with that.”

“Okay,” Molly said with a tilt of her head. “We’ll just keep supplying meals and cookies for their efforts.”

“They’ll enjoy that. Especially Damien.”

“Which one is he again?”

“Tall, longish brown hair, blue eyes.”

“They’re all tall, Lady Cate,” Molly said with a giggle. “But I think I know who you mean. The one at the computer all the time.”

“Yep, that’s him.”

“So, the blonde is Michael.”

“Right.”

Molly’s lips curled up on the edges. “He’s a handsome man.”

“Molly!”

“Well, he is! A girl can look. And who’s the other guy?”

Cate swallowed hard and licked her lips as Molly continued.

“Tall, dark, mysterious vibe.”

“Duke Northcott,” Cate answered.

“Duke? Oh boy! Don’t tell Mrs. Campbell. She’ll probably tie him to a chair and beg him to come to all her parties.”

A sarcastic laugh slipped from Cate’s lips. “I’d like to see her try.”

“Oh, a slippery one, is he?”

“You could say that. Anyway, I’m keeping you from your dinner.”

“It’s okay. If you need anything, let me know, okay?”

“I will. Thanks, Molly.”

After a quick hug, Molly flitted from the room, pulling the doors shut behind her. Cate stared down at the tray of food. While appealing, she didn’t know if she could stomach it. She preferred to head downstairs and determine if any progress had been made and plan for their trip to 1955.

She took a step toward the door before she stopped. Visions of Marcus Northcott insisting she eat before they did anything danced through her mind. She returned to her tray, perching on the edge of her bed as she consumed a spoonful of soup.

She finished most of the meal in record time and gathered her tray before leaving the room. She navigated down to the kitchen to return her dishes. After a brief conversation about their tenuous lead and wishes of good luck, Cate climbed to the main floor and wandered to the library.

She pushed into the room. Damien sat near his laptop still savoring a piece of pie. His monitor showed several windows open with articles regarding the 1955 “Meeting of the Minds.”

“Here I am, rested, fed, and watered. Now, can we go?”

“Oh, hey, Cate,” he said with his mouth full, waving his fork in the air. He set the plate down and tapped around on his laptop. “We’ve dug up some more information about the big meeting thing.”

“Hi. Sorry, I didn’t mean to interrupt your dinner.”

“You didn’t,” Damien assured her.

Cate flicked a glance at the half-eaten piece of blueberry pie.

“That’s his third piece,” Michael informed her.

“Oh,” Cate said with a chuckle. “I’m glad you’re enjoying Mrs. Fraser and Molly’s cooking.”

“I am. Remind me to thank Jack when we find him for this opportunity.”

“I’m not sure he’ll think it’s an even trade.”

“Probably not. Okay, we found out a few interesting things about this meeting and we’re pretty sure this is where Gianna was headed.” Damien flicked the articles onto his screen in rapid succession. “All these people are full-fledged members of The Agency. But this guy—” Damien’s screen showed a photograph of a short, round, well-dressed man with glasses and a handlebar mustache. “—is who we think Gianna is meeting with.”

Cate nodded. “Who is he?”

“Thomas Winston. A high-ranking official in The Agency. Gianna often reports to him,” Marcus said from across the room.

“So, we should follow him in the hopes of finding her?”

Marcus rose from his chair and straightened his jacket. “Correct.”

“Do you think he has Jack?”

“No. I think Gianna has been tasked with handling him. And I do not believe he is in 1955, but we must try to determine where she is going next to locate him.”

Cate nodded, her heart broken by the words. She set her lips in a determined line. “Okay. I’m ready. I just need to find clothes and—”

“Not necessary,” Marcus informed her. “Clothes will be prepared for you at our location.”

Cate stared at him for a moment, confused by the words, then nodded. “Okay. Oh, I need the dragon’s blood.”

“We shall leave as soon as you’ve retrieved it.”

Cate nodded and ducked from the room, swiping the large pouch of sour lozenges from her nightstand before she returned to the library.

“Ready?” Marcus inquired.

Cate offered him a weak smile and nodded.

“Good luck, Cate. We’ll be monitoring on this end,” Damien said with a smile.

“Thank you.”

She turned to find Marcus offering his arm. With a small amount of reluctance, she accepted, and he led her from the room and into the cool night air.

“How are you feeling?” he inquired as they strolled along the castle’s front.

“Fine,” she answered.

His eyes slid sideways to glance at her.

“I’m fine!” she insisted. He remained silent. “Okay, okay, I had another one of those vision things. I still don’t understand how these are memories.”

“Your mind is focusing on events that have already occurred in the past, though you have yet to experience them.”

“When I have the visions, they almost feel real. Like I’m there.”

“That is normal for your circumstances.”

Cate’s features pinched as she struggled to piece it together. “And this is related to the temporalysis?”

“Yes.”

“So, I’m getting worse,” Cate murmured.

“I do not believe so.”

“How do you figure that?”

“Most people who reach this stage do not remain as cognizant as you have. I’d wager you are improving and will recover.”

“When?” Cate cried.

“That I cannot say with certainty. The dragon’s blood should keep most of your symptoms at bay, though.”

He stopped walking near the spot where they’d disappeared into 1942 earlier in the day. “You remember the rules?”

Cate nodded and pushed her hand forward. “Straight through, no stopping until I reach the other side.”

Marcus nodded at her statement before he spun away from her, holding his hands out in front of him. The dim sparkling began shortly after, and the winds whipped her hair around wildly.

Marcus gave her the signal and Cate hurried into the large black hole. Within seconds, she emerged into an unfamiliar space.

Cate glanced around the windowless room. A few candles lit the small area. Unadorned walls surrounded her. She didn’t even see an exit from the space. Had she walked into a trap?

Seconds later, Marcus Northcott stepped next to her. He straightened his jacket and glanced down at Cate.

“Where are we?” she asked as she scanned the room again.

“My London home.” He slid a small gold band from within his pocket and grasped Cate’s left hand. With a flick of his gaze to her eyes, he slid it onto her ring finger before motioning for her to step toward the wall.

He triggered a panel and a doorway popped open. He tugged it back toward them and gestured for her to exit.

“After you, my dear.”

She stepped through the opening and into a large library. Marcus followed her, pulling the bookcase closed behind him.

Dembe stood in the room, his hands clasped in front of him. “Good evening, Duke Northcott,” he said with a bow.

“Good evening, Dembe. Is everything prepared?”

“Yes. I have arranged the clothing you requested and a ladies’ maid for Duchess Northcott.”

“Excellent.” He twisted to face Cate. “We shall dine out tonight. You should be ready at six.”

He strode toward the door. “Where are you going?” Cate inquired.

“I have a few matters to attend to. I shall see you at six.”

“Wait! Marcus!” Cate called as he disappeared through the door. With a huff, she flung her arms in the air.

She turned to find a patient, quiet Dembe waiting for her. “When you are ready, Duchess.” He bowed to her.

“I suppose I’m ready,” she said. “And please, call me Cate.”

Dembe’s face twisted into an amused grin as he motioned toward the exit. “This way, Duchess.”

Cate’s shoulders slumped as her request went unheard. Dembe led her into a hallway with a hardwood floor. Thick wood paneling covered the walls. Portraits adorned the space. Cate studied them as they walked.

“Are these Duke Northcott’s family?” she inquired.

“Yes. Come along,” Dembe answered, tugging Cate away from a portrait and ushering her toward a set of stairs.

She climbed to the next level and allowed Dembe to circle around her, leading her to a set of double doors on her right. He pushed them both open in one smooth motion and stood aside.

“Your suite, Duchess.”

“Thank you.” Cate’s pulse quickened for a moment as she wondered if this was the room she’d glimpsed in her visions.

A quick glance revealed that it was not. Decorated in crisp whites and navy, the room had no resemblance to the large space she'd seen in her vision. A woman stood near a vanity positioned between two windows offering a view of London.

"Your Grace," she said with a curtsy.

"Miss Evans has been engaged as your ladies' maid," Dembe said. "Miss Andrea Evans, meet Duchess Northcott. I shall leave you to dress for the evening. If you require anything, Duchess, please call."

"Thank you, Dembe."

Andrea offered Cate a broad smile as she scanned her clothing. "It is my pleasure to work for you, Your Grace. If you'll sit down, I can style your hair, and then we can change to your evening wear from your—" The woman paused as she eyed Cate's leggings and tunic. "Pajamas."

"Oh," Cate said with a giggle, glancing down at her outfit, "this isn't... never mind."

Cate sank into the vanity chair as Andrea circled behind her, brush in hand. Cate drummed her fingers on the vanity top.

"Is something on your mind, Your Grace?"

Cate flicked her gaze to the girl behind her through the mirror. She lifted a shoulder as she pushed her lower lip up in a mouth shrug. "No. Completely blank."

Andrea paused for a moment before continuing to tuck Cate's hair into a fancy updo.

"I mean, not blank. I have thoughts. I—" Cate babbled. "What about you?"

Andrea offered Cate a warm smile. "Where are you dining this evening?"

Cate realized she had no idea. She licked her lips as she considered her answer. "I don't know," Cate admitted.

"A surprise then," the woman said. "How exciting!"

"Yes," Cate said with a smile. "A surprise."

"Is it a special occasion? Perhaps your birthday or anniversary?"

"Oh, no, it's not."

"Perhaps a new moment to mark then. It sounds very special."

Cate smiled at her as she finished taming Cate's hair back into a stylish bun. She retrieved a small, bejeweled crown attached to a hair comb. She settled the heavy hair decoration on Cate's head.

After a moment of looking over her work, she snapped her gaze to Cate in the mirror. "How is it, Your Grace?"

"Very pretty, thank you."

Andrea smiled and gave her a curt nod. She stepped away from the vanity and disappeared into a doorway, returning with a large white box with rose pink ribbon.

"This arrived for you earlier. Dembe said Duke Northcott sent it for you to wear this evening." Andrea eased the box onto the bed, stepping away and clasping her hands in front of her as she grinned at Cate.

"Oh, how fun!" Cate feigned, attempting to play along with the ruse. With a fake smile at Andrea, she undid the bow and pulled the top off the box. Nestled inside was a rose pink and black cocktail dress with gold accents.

Cate pulled the dress from the box and studied it. "Oh!" Andrea exclaimed, clapping her hands together. "Your Grace, it's beautiful."

"Indeed," Cate said. "Well, I suppose I'd better change." She offered what she hoped was a polite, but dismissive smile at the woman.

Instead, Andrea stepped forward to take the dress.

"Oh," Cate said as the woman carefully laid the dress on the bed before retrieving other accessories. "Right."

She had hoped to avoid being dressed by a ladies' maid, having been uncomfortable with the experience in the 1850s when she'd been dressed by her great-great-grandmother's ladies' maid.

She offered a nervous smile as Andrea waved the crinoline underskirt at her and tossed it on the bed. She approached, tugging at Cate's tunic.

"Now," Andrea said with a grin, "let's get these pajamas off."

In short order, Andrea had Cate dressed in the delicately detailed cocktail dress. She fastened the skinny belt around her waist before she adjusted the shawl collar around her shoulders. She tugged on Cate's elbow-length satin gloves.

"Thank you," Cate said with a nod.

"Any finishing touches? I didn't know what jewelry you preferred. Dembe did not believe you sent anything ahead."

"Oh, no, I didn't. No jewelry. Thanks."

Andrea's lower lip bobbed up and down for a moment before she clamped her jaw closed and twisted her mouth into a smile, giving Cate a nod.

A knock sounded at the door. Andrea hurried across the room and pulled the door open. Duke Northcott waited in the hall in his tuxedo, a dark box clutched in his hands.

“Good evening, Your Grace. Duchess Northcott is ready.”

“No, she isn’t,” he answered as he stepped through the door.

Andrea’s face fell as she glanced at Cate with wide eyes, her chest heaving with concern.

Marcus strode into the room, his focus on Cate. “You look lovely, my dear. But you forgot to send your jewelry ahead.”

Cate chuckled nervously as his dark eyes bore into hers. “I did. Silly me.”

“Good thing I remembered.” He flipped the box open. Cate’s eyes widened and she blinked at the massive diamond necklace against the black velvet.

He whipped the necklace from the box and opened the clasp, swinging it around Cate’s neck and fastening it.

“Now, you are ready, dear.”

Cate twisted to offer him a smile over her shoulder as he offered her his arm.

“Have a wonderful evening, Your Grace,” Andrea said with a curtsy.

Marcus led her downstairs and to a waiting car. Cate settled in the back as Marcus slid in next to her.

“Where are we going?”

“To dinner at an exclusive club.”

Cate fidgeted in her seat as the car snaked through the city streets. Cate wanted to ask more but preferred not to discuss it in the presence of the driver.

The car pulled to a stop outside a large stone building. Wide steps led up to a large double door. The driver pulled Marcus’s door open before circling toward Cate’s. Marcus offered his hand as she climbed from the car.

Cate stared up at the building as they climbed the steps and entered the opulent space. Marble floors peeked from underneath thick red carpeting. A massive crystal chandelier lit the space. Thick wood doors led to other rooms on either side of the entryway. Men in formal attire circulated. Women in cocktail dresses flitted around with their husbands or chattered together on their way to the ladies’ room.

Marcus led her to doors in the back. A man glanced up from the podium he stood behind. His eyebrows raised and his muscles stiffened.

“Duke Northcott! What a pleasure to welcome you back. I have your table prepared. Right this way.”

Marcus led Cate behind the man to a table near a thickly draped window. The maître d' removed Cate's fur stole and Marcus eased the chair in behind her. Cate sucked in a breath as she tugged off her gloves. Her eyes scanned the room. She leaned toward Marcus to inquire about the club when a waiter approached.

After Marcus ordered a bottle of champagne and the waiter stepped away, Cate leaned toward him again.

“Why are we here?”

“For dinner.”

Cate narrowed her eyes at him. “No, really. Why are we here?”

Marcus leaned toward her and lowered his voice. “Dinner.”

Cate sat back in her chair, an unimpressed expression on her face as the waiter returned, showcasing a bottle of champagne. After perusing the label, Marcus offered him a nod. The man set to work popping the cork and filling their glasses.

Cate drummed her fingers against her thigh. After filling their glasses, the man inquired about their order. Cate glanced at the menu in front of her in a panic. It soon became obvious her panic was unnecessary when Marcus ordered for her.

The waiter departed and Cate narrowed her eyes at Marcus again. He casually sipped his champagne. Cate fumed silently, her jaw flexed.

“Relax, Catherine. Enjoy your meal.”

Cate leaned over the table. “This is ridiculous! We're here to find Jack! Not go to dinner together.”

“You must eat.”

Cate's features turned stony. “You cannot be serious. I could have eaten anywhere! We're here to track a lead on Jack, not for you to dress me up and take me out for a night on the town!” Cate rose from her chair, poking a finger at him as she spoke.

“Sit down, Catherine.”

“No! I need a minute.” She stormed from the table, her flurry skirt bouncing as she crossed the room. She fumed as her sensible heels pounded across the floor, heading for the ladies' room.

CHAPTER 14



Cate pushed through the ornate wooden door to the ladies' room, entering the warmly lit space. The soft glow reflected off the deep burgundy wallpaper. Thick carpeting covered the floor. Across the space, makeup lighting wrapped around several mirrors paired with vanity stools. Ladies buzzed around inside, fixing makeup, spritzing perfume, or powdering their noses.

Cate stalked across the room and collapsed onto one of the padded stools. She stared at herself in the mirror for a moment. What was she doing here? Why did she trust this man? Jack was missing and she sat in a ritzy club with a small fortune in diamonds hanging around her neck having a lavish dinner.

Cate shoulders slumped and her eyes fell to her lap. She pursed her lips as she held back tears, propping her elbow on the vanity and sinking her forehead into her palm.

"Oh, now, it can't be as bad as all that, can it, dear?" a bubbly British voice said next to her.

Cate raised her eyes to find a platinum blonde seated next to her. She tapped at her nose with a powder puff before flicking a gaze to Cate through the mirror. Her eyes fell to Cate's neck.

"That's a lovely necklace. What'd he do?"

Cate's brow furrowed as her fingers touched the necklace. "What?"

The woman pulled a tube of lipstick from her handbag and flashed a glance at Cate as she uncapped it.

“Are you a missus or a mistress?”

Cate knit her eyebrows. “Missus,” she answered slowly, wiggling her left hand to show her ring, surprised she was playing along with this stranger.

The woman lifted a shoulder and smiled at Cate. “Ohhhh, lucky girl.” Her eyes fell to the necklace again. “That’s a lovely apology necklace. Did you catch him with his secretary?”

Cate’s fingers fell to the ostentatious diamond necklace again. “Oh, no.”

The woman turned to Cate, eyeing her face to face instead of through the mirror. She cocked her head and offered a consoling glance. “Don’t take it so hard, dear. What you do is tell him the necklace simply isn’t enough. Then you take yourself on a shopping spree on his charge account. Really teach him a lesson.” She patted Cate’s leg and spun back to the mirror.

“I’m just having a bad night.”

“Oh, I understand. But that apology necklace should be a good start at making it brighter. And, like I said, don’t let him off the hook there.” The woman winked at Cate.

Cate smiled and nodded, digging in her purse for a distraction. Cate rummaged through the small bag, surprised to find a compact and a tube of lipstick, apparently packed by Andrea.

“What’s your name, sweetheart?”

“Cate,” Cate said. “Uh, Catherine. Catherine Northcott.”

“Northcott. Hmm, I don’t recognize that name.” The woman twisted in her seat to face her again. “Well, Cate Catherine Northcott, welcome to the club. I’m Ginger. Ginger Fallinger.”

Cate shook the woman’s hand. “It’s a pleasure to meet you.” Cate pulled her compact from her purse and fiddled with it.

“I’m a mistress, in case you were wondering.”

Cate flicked her gaze to the woman. She offered Cate a giggly smile. Cate gave her a faltering smile and returned her compact to her purse, pulling out the lipstick tube.

“You don’t need to be embarrassed. I’m not! And I’m fairly sure Mrs. Merton has a good number of apology jewels thanks to my relationship with her old man.

“Like I said, the trick is to hold your head high and make sure you get a new fur coat out of it, too.”

Cate giggled at the statement. How wrong the woman was, but at least she was trying to be supportive. "I'll remember that."

"There's a better look, dearie. Don't let him ruin your life. You snagged him, now make it the best life you can!"

Cate slicked on a bit of the lipstick and offered a nod at Ginger. "I won't let him ruin my life."

"Good girl."

Cate returned her lipstick to her purse and snapped it shut. "I'd better get back." She rose from the stool. "Nice meeting you, Ginger."

"Oh, I'm sure I'll be seeing you around." Ginger winked at her. "Bye, Cate."

Cate clutched at her bag, striding to the door and blowing out a long breath before she exited into the club's lobby. She swallowed hard as she strode back into the dining room. She spotted Marcus at their table and with a sigh, she strode across the room.

Marcus stood as she approached and seated her.

"Finished with your tantrum, my dear?"

Cate whipped the white cloth napkin onto her lap. "It wasn't a tantrum," she spat between clenched teeth.

"No? My apologies. I must have misread your storming from the room after shouting at me."

"I didn't shout," Cate countered. "I— never mind. Let's just get through this ridiculous dinner and focus on finding Jack. Remember him? The reason we're here?"

Conversation halted as the waiter arrived with plates of food. Cate picked up her fork and pushed the food around.

Marcus slowly slid his knife through the filet on the white plate, enjoying a bite of food before he spoke again.

"I have not forgotten the reason we are here. It is, in fact, the reason I 'dressed you up and took you out' to this particular venue."

Cate nibbled at a carrot, raising her eyebrows at the statement as she kept her focus on her plate. "What twisted logic are you using to justify that statement?"

"Look to your left. The table near the center of the room."

Cate sucked in a breath, growing tired of playing games. She flicked her gaze toward the center of the room, doing a double-take as she spotted a balding man with a handlebar mustache and round wire-rimmed glasses.

Her jaw dropped and she leaned toward Marcus. “Is that Thomas Winston?”

Marcus offered her a smug smile and raised his eyebrows.

Cate eyed him. “Why didn’t you tell me that?”

“I was not certain he’d dine here tonight, though he often does. I did not wish to dash your hopes if he did not. And perhaps next time you will realize you must look the part if we are to track leads in plain sight.”

“You really need to tell me these things. My hopes will be just fine.”

“I just told you.”

“I mean before things happen. I don’t like surprises.”

“Such a pity. I do enjoy surprising you.”

Cate narrowed her eyes at the statement before she flicked her gaze back to Thomas Winston. “Do you think he’s here to meet Gianna?”

“That remains to be seen.”

They continued their meal. Cate stole glances at the man at every opportunity. Her heart pounded against her ribs and her stomach fluttered as she wondered what may unfold.

“Your eyes seem glued to Mr. Winston. Really, Catherine, I am becoming jealous.”

“I’m sorry, I thought we were here to track Winston, not to stroke your ego.”

“You are posing as my wife. It seems that should come with the territory.”

Cate shot him an unimpressed glance before she flitted her eyes to the center table. She straightened, her muscles tensing as she spotted an empty chair.

“Oh, no! He’s gone!” she breathed, her head swiveling to search the large dining room.

“Finish your meal, Catherine.”

She ignored him, scanning the well-clad occupants remaining in the room. “There!” she exclaimed. “He’s leaving.” Cate grabbed her purse, shoving her napkin aside.

“Finish your meal,” Marcus repeated.

Cate’s jaw dropped as she glanced at him. “We should follow him. We’re going to lose him!”

“He will not disappear.”

“But—“

“Mr. Winston will spend a fair amount of time enjoying cigars and after-dinner drinks in the bar room. There is no rush.”

Cate bit her lower lip and fidgeted in her seat as she took the final bites of her dinner.

“Okay, I’m finished. Let’s go.”

“You are quite impatient, Catherine. I had hoped to enjoy dessert.”

Cate bounced in her seat. “I can’t enjoy anything wondering where that man went and if he has any information on Jack.”

Marcus offered her an unimpressed glance but relented. “Fine. I cannot stand to see the disappointment on your face.”

The corners of Cate’s mouth turned up as Marcus rose from his seat and offered his arm to Cate. She leapt from her chair, and they strode from the dining room and across the lobby. An open lounge with windows overlooking the building’s front hid behind two large plants.

Marcus led Cate to an empty barrel chair. “Wait here.”

“What?” she questioned, her features twisting with shock. “No!”

“Yes.” He eased her into the chair.

She leapt from it. “I want to go with you!”

“You cannot go. Wait here. I shan’t be long.”

Marcus strode from the lounge, disappearing into another room outside of Cate’s view. Stunned, Cate stood with her jaw agape as she stared after him.

With a scoff, Cate took a step toward the departing duke before she twisted the other way. She glanced around before settling down into the chair to wait. With her tiny evening bag balanced on her knees, her legs bobbed up and down as she blew out a breath, her eyes never leaving the door where Marcus had disappeared.

Her toes tapped the floor as time seemed to stand still. A couple passed her, striding through the lounge and disappearing around the corner. Cate followed them with her eyes as she drummed her fingers on the chair’s arm.

As she turned, she caught sight of another couple at the end of the hall. Cate’s eyes widened and she gasped. Gianna Caruso stood with a rough-looking man with a scruffy beard.

Cate’s palm patted the chair as her posture stiffened. “Oh!” she murmured, shooting a gaze back toward the room where Marcus disappeared.

Her chest heaved as she whipped her head back toward Gianna and her mysterious companion. She craned her neck in search of Marcus one final time before returning her focus to Gianna.

The woman let out a loud cackle and threw her palm against the man's chest. It was unbelievable how flirtatious she was, Cate fumed.

Gianna slid her arm up to the man's shoulder, then down to his forearm before leading him down the hall.

"No," Cate mumbled, her breath turning ragged. With Marcus nowhere in sight, Cate leapt from her seat. She hurried through the lounge and peeked around the corner. Gianna continued down the corridor, ducking down another hall.

With a deep breath, she tiptoed after them and sidled up to the next corner, peering around it. She wrinkled her nose as she found the hall empty.

"Great," she lamented. Cate glanced behind her before she decided to continue her search for Gianna's whereabouts and any potential clues she may find with her.

Her knees wobbled as she crept down the hall, glancing into the open doors. Most rooms contained offices, though many of them were empty.

In one room, a man sat behind a heavy wooden desk, his feet kicked up on the blotter as he spoke into a phone receiver. No sign of Gianna or her companion.

Cate completed her circuit of the hall, finding nothing. One office door stood open at the end of the hall. She glanced inside, finding it empty. With a sigh, she spun to return to the lounge.

Cate froze, her eyes wide and her jaw falling open as she faced Gianna's companion. With a forced smile, she excused herself and attempted to step around the man.

"I don't think so," he spat at her as he grabbed her wrist.

"Let go of me!" she squealed as she struggled against his grip.

The man shoved her backward through the open door and into the large, square office. Cate wrestled her wrist from his grasp, her eyes scanning the space for an exit. Bookshelves lined the side walls. Outside of a large, stained-glass window behind the desk, no other egress existed.

Cate stumbled back a few steps, colliding with the desk. The glass banker's lamp screeched across the wood top as she clutched at the desk's top.

The man stalked into the room, his eyes fixed on her. The door swung shut and from the shadows, Gianna Caruso stepped forward into the moonlight streaming from the window.

“Well, well, well, if it isn’t the little mouse, Cate Kensie.”

She shook her head at Cate, then glanced around the room before waving her hands at her sides. “And no big, bad Duke to defend you. Well, that’s too bad.”

“What have you done with Jack?” Cate shouted.

Gianna offered her a coy smile and a chuckle. “You’ll never know. Especially not now. You’ve just made this exceptionally easy.” Gianna snapped her gaze to the man. “Kill her.”

“My pleasure,” the man said with a grisly laugh.

“Goodbye, my dear Cate. I cannot wait to tell Jack you’re dead.”

CHAPTER 15



Gianna strode from the room, slamming the door behind her. Cate leapt at the sound. Her hands fiddled behind her as she searched for a weapon to defend herself. She knocked over a pencil cup, spilling its contents across the desk. Pencils rattled to the floor, rolling away.

The man pulled a knife from his pocket, flicking it open. The blade glinted in the moonlight. A harsh laugh escaped his lips as he stalked toward Cate.

She spun and searched the desk for anything she could use to facilitate her escape. She found nothing. She whipped around, inching down the desk away from the man who approached her.

When she reached the desk's corner, she made a run for the door. The man lunged toward her, catching her after her second step. He tossed her backward and she stumbled, slamming hard into the desk behind her.

A cry escaped her lips as she found herself trapped. The man closed the gap between them, squashing her into the desk behind her and wrapping his fingers around her throat. He slid the blade of the knife against her cheek. The cold, hard metal pressed into her skin.

Cate let out a gasping sob. "Please let me go."

"Not going to happen." He studied Cate's face as she tugged at his iron grip. "Say goodbye, Cate Kensie. Tonight's your last night on earth."

"I don't think so," Marcus's voice said.

The man twisted to glance over his shoulder at the man standing in the open doorway, limned in the hall's light. Within seconds, Marcus stood

behind him. He grasped the hand holding the knife and bent it backward.

The man cried out in pain as Marcus squeezed until he dropped the knife. Cate wobbled away from the desk as Marcus dragged the man to the middle of the room. She trembled all over and gasped for breath.

Marcus's eyes never left the man he held. "Are you all right, Catherine?"

Cate swallowed hard as a tear ran down her cheek. "Y-yes," she gasped out.

Marcus shoved the man to his knees as he glanced over his shoulder at her. Her attacker clutched at his mangled hand, still moaning in pain.

Marcus stepped toward Cate. The man took the opportunity to run for the door.

"I'm not quite done with you." Marcus spread his fingers out, reaching toward the man. Like a magnet, the man slid backward. Marcus flicked his hand, sending the man flying into one of the bookshelves. He crumpled to the floor in a heap.

Marcus took another step toward Cate. "Wait for me in the hallway."

"Wh-what are you going to do?"

He grabbed her upper arm and escorted her from the room. "Wait in the hallway."

The door slammed in her face as she stood in shock, gasping for air. She pressed a palm to her forehead as she caught her breath.

A scream emanated from behind the thick wooden door. Cate jumped at the sound and stared at the barrier. She leapt again as the door whipped open.

Marcus smoothed his jacket as he stepped from the room. Cate's forehead wrinkled as she glanced around him, her lower lip bobbing up and down.

Marcus grasped her arm and tugged her down the hall.

Cate struggled to keep up with him as he dragged her along. "What did you do?"

"What was necessary," he snapped.

She struggled against his grip. "What—"

"We shall discuss the rest at home."

He strong-armed her through the lobby and out into the evening air. After putting her into the car, he slid in beside her. They rode in silence through the streets until they reached Marcus's home.

Cate followed him up the few steps to the townhome. He pushed the door open, entering behind her.

As the door slammed shut, Cate spun to face him. “What did you do to that man?”

“I told you I did what was necessary. You, however, did not.”

“I saw Gianna—“

“You were told to stay in the lounge and wait.”

Cate flung her arms out to her sides. “I wasn’t just going to sit there while she escaped right out from under us.”

“No, instead you were going to nearly get yourself killed. If I hadn’t arrived when I did, the situation may have unfolded very differently.”

“I thought—“

“No, you didn’t. That’s the problem. You didn’t think.”

Tears formed in Cate’s eyes as his words stung her.

“When I tell you to wait, you wait.”

She firmed her jaw and her nostrils flared as anger replaced hurt. “You can’t keep sidelining me!”

He wagged a finger at her. “I can and I will when it keeps you safe.”

“We have to find information! And Gianna—“

“You risked your life to gain information and were very nearly killed. And for what? What information did you gain?”

Cate’s lips formed a shaky pout as she considered the question.

“As I thought. Instead, you have only set us back.”

Cate drew her chin back. “How?”

“I have told you once before that this is a delicate and time-consuming process. We will not solve this with brute force, amateur sleuthing, or in a day. This is not the MacKenzie’s footman or their under-butler. These people are cunning and dangerous.”

Tears brimmed again in Cate’s eyes. “Like you?”

“No,” he answered. “I have no desire to end your life.” He closed his eyes for a moment before he opened them, focusing on Cate. He spoke again, with his voice calmer and measured. “Try to understand, Catherine, every time you do things like this, you make it one thousand times more difficult to find your esteemed estate manager.”

Cate bit her lower lip at his words. They stung her. “I’m sorry,” she choked out, stalking away from him. A tear streamed down her cheek, and she hurried to flick it away, struggling to compose herself.

He approached her. "You must learn to trust me."

She pursed her lips in an attempt to stop her shaking jaw. Unable to form words, she nodded.

He sighed behind her. "Get some rest, Catherine. We have more work to do tomorrow."

Cate nodded in another silent response, sniffing and wiping at her cheeks as she hurried past him from the room. She climbed the stairs and pushed through the door into her bedroom.

Cate pushed the door shut and leaned her back against it, burying her head in her hands.

"Your Grace?" Andrea questioned.

Cate jumped, pulling her hands away and staring at the woman across the room in surprise.

"Oh, Your Grace," Andrea said, her shoulders falling as she hurried toward Cate, "sit down." She guided Cate toward the bed and eased her onto it. "Would you like a glass of water?"

Cate shook her head. "No, thank you." She sniffled and wiped at her cheeks.

"Would you like to talk about it?"

"No," Cate said as Andrea handed her a handkerchief. She dabbed at her eyes. "It was a silly argument, really. I'd just like to change and go to bed."

Andrea rubbed Cate's arm. "Of course."

In short order, she had Cate changed into nightclothes. Andrea pulled the door shut as Cate slid between the sheets and squeezed her puffy eyes closed.

She covered her face with her hands as she sank into the pillows behind her, tears threatening again. A quiet knock at the door startled her. She pulled her hands away and stared at the wooden barrier.

With a deep inhale, she rose from her bed, tugging her robe around her, and shuffled to the door. She eased it open a crack and peered into the hallway, expecting to find Andrea. Instead, she found Marcus Northcott.

"I thought this may help you sleep." He offered her the piano-shaped music box she'd grown fond of in her own time.

Her lips parted as she stared at it. She offered a meek "thank you" as she accepted the offered item.

"Perhaps a nightcap may help," he offered.

“No, thank you,” Cate said, her eyes remaining on the musical object clutched in her hands.

He paused for a moment as if considering her response before he slid the music box from her grasp, setting it on the dresser nearby.

“It will help you sleep,” he said, taking her hand and drawing her into the hallway.

Cate followed him downstairs to the room they’d argued in earlier. She eased onto the couch, clearing her throat as he poured her a brandy.

Cate accepted the drink in the heavy glass, staring into the amber liquid before taking a sip.

“Are you certain you are unharmed?”

“Yes,” Cate said with a nod, her eyes fixed on the drink in her hand. “I am only shaken.”

Marcus tipped her chin up, studying her face.

“Really, I’m fine,” she added.

“I cannot impress upon you enough how careful you must be, Catherine. I would not wish to see anything happen to you.”

His last statement crinkled her forehead. “I am sorry if I’ve set our search back further. I only wanted to help.”

He stared at her for a moment longer, then sipped his brandy.

“The damage is minimal. However, you really mustn’t do something so foolish again. In order to rescue your friend, we will need to play our cards carefully, like a well-orchestrated game of chess.”

“It would help if I had any idea what was happening. It’s extremely frustrating to be kept in the dark.”

“It would help if you trusted me. Even a little,” Marcus countered.

Cate sipped at her brandy. “I’d trust you more if you shared more with me.”

He arched an eyebrow at her. “I am not keeping things from you. My primary aim is to keep you safe.”

“I’m not as delicate as you imagine.”

“You have no idea what they will do to you, Catherine, and I do not wish you to find out. This evening’s experience should have been enough to more than hint at their intentions.”

Cate recalled the cold steel of the knife’s blade pressed against her cheek. She hated to admit it, but he was correct. Gianna obviously hoped to

eliminate her. She shouldn't have been foolish enough to chase her down on her own.

Cate sighed, sinking her chin into her palm. A lump formed in her throat as she spoke. "You're right."

"Of course, I am," Marcus said. She glanced up at him, expecting to find him gloating. Instead, he offered her an amused smile. "Which is why you should trust me."

Cate finished the last sip of her brandy. "Fine. As long as you keep me informed of what it is we're trying to do."

"We are attempting to follow Gianna until we can ascertain where and when she may have put Jack. Once we do so, we shall formulate a plan to retrieve him."

"How will we know when we've found him?"

"We will know. She will make a stand."

Cate considered his statement, her brows knitting.

"I am far more experienced in this than you. It may be difficult to comprehend, but we will know."

Cate nodded slowly after a moment. "All right. I'll trust you." She rose to stand, setting her glass on the table.

"Feeling better?" he asked her.

"Yes," she admitted.

He offered her a fleeting smile. "Good night, Catherine. Sleep well."

"Good night," she said with a slight smile before she left the room, climbing the stairs and pushing into her bedroom.

She eased the door shut and leaned her shoulder against it. The music box caught her eye. She reached for it, winding it and shuffling to the bed. After setting the tinkling item on the nightstand, she climbed into bed again.

As she settled back into the pillows, she wondered if trusting Marcus Northcott was a mistake. The thought plagued her as she attempted to fall asleep. In trusting him, was she dooming both herself and Jack?

CHAPTER 16



Cate descended the stairs the following morning in her lilac day dress and sensible heels. Andrea had swept her hair up in a becoming style, tying a matching ribbon into a large bow at the crown of her head.

Dembe greeted her at the bottom of the stairs with a bow. “Good morning, Duchess.”

“Good morning, Dembe.”

He motioned for Cate to follow him. “Duke Northcott is awaiting you for breakfast.”

“Thank you,” she said as the soft-spoken man led her into a bright dining room. Fall sunshine filtered through the large window across the room. Marcus sat at the head of the table, a newspaper spread in front of him. Dembe pulled the chair out next to Marcus.

Marcus rose from his seat as she entered. “Good morning, dear.” He eased the chair in behind her as she sat. “How did you sleep?”

“Well, thank you.”

Dembe placed a plate with eggs, toast, and bacon in front of each of them. Cate thanked him for the breakfast before she dug into the meal.

“How will we find Gianna today? What if she left already?”

“She hasn’t.”

Cate snapped her head toward him as she lifted a piece of toast for a bite. “How do you know?”

“She is here for a reason.”

“What reason?”

“Likely to discuss her plans with several key members of The Agency.”

Cate broke a piece of her toast in half and dipped it in her runny yolk.
“And they will be at the business summit?”

“Yes.”

“And so will we,” Cate added.

Marcus smiled at her before taking a sip of tea. “Yes, we will.”

“How will we know where she goes after her meeting?”

“That may be a trickier proposition, but I hope to find information from an unlikely source.”

“What’s that mean?” Cate inquired.

Marcus sipped at his tea again without answering.

Cate shot him a glance. “Truth and trust, remember?”

He flicked his dark eyes to her with an amused smile. “I plan to ask a member of The Agency.”

Cate almost choked on her eggs, pressing a hand against her chest.
“*That’s* your plan?”

“You sound as though you do not have any confidence in it.”

“I don’t!” Cate answered. “Why would any of them tell you her plans?”

“I hope to persuade him.”

“And if you don’t?”

His teacup clattered onto the saucer below it as he shot her a concerned glance. “I’m becoming concerned about your confidence in me.”

“I like to have a backup plan.”

“If I fail, we shall have to find an alternate method of determining Gianna’s next move.”

Cate nodded as she finished her breakfast. Marcus rose from his chair after Dembe cleared their plates.

“Would you care to take a walk before the summit?”

“To find Gianna?”

“No, to enjoy a morning walk. You cannot be all work and no play, Catherine. We wouldn’t want you to become dull.”

“Sorry, the ship may have already sailed on that front.”

Marcus knit his brow as they entered the foyer. Andrea approached with a capelet for Cate, her gloves, and her handbag. They stepped into the crisp fall morning moments later.

Marcus led her down the sidewalk past the stately homes. “You cannot seriously find yourself dull, Catherine.”

“Again, I’ll say I can’t imagine I am that interesting to someone who has lived for centuries.”

“On the contrary. I find you immensely interesting.”

Cate glanced up at him, wondering if he was being sarcastic. He smiled down at her.

“I maintain your life has to have been far more interesting than mine. I spent most of my twenties studying and even after I inherited a castle, I rarely leave Dunhaven, I always order the fish and chips, and I still spend most of my time on research.”

“You mistake a flashy lifestyle with intrigue, though it rarely is so.”

Cate considered it as they strolled past the colorful trees.

“Do you find Celine an interesting woman?” Marcus inquired.

“Yes, who wouldn’t?”

“Would it surprise you to learn that she spends most of her time in a tiny hamlet in Maine and rarely leaves the Buckley estate?”

“But she has lived for centuries.”

“And does that appeal to you, Catherine?”

“Living for centuries?” Cate shrugged. “I’ve never considered it, really. Do you find it appealing?”

“Yes. I find it very appealing.”

Cate puckered her lips and tilted her head at the answer.

“You should consider the proposition, Catherine. In the event that you are ever offered the choice.”

She shot a glance his way, again confused by his statement. It escaped her when she’d ever be offered that choice. Though one year ago she would never have imagined she’d inherit a castle allowing her to time travel nor that she’d be standing in 1955 London with an immortal duke.

They wound through the streets, arriving in front of a stately tan building. Several men in business suits bustled into the building.

“Is this the Business Summit?” Cate inquired.

“Indeed. Shall we go inside?”

Cate nodded as her stomach churned wondering what they’d find inside. Marcus pushed through the door, tugging Cate along with him. In the large lobby, a few men milled around, some in discussions, others reviewing paperwork.

A few smartly dressed women flitted around, handing off papers, jotting notes on a steno pad, or retrieving a cup of coffee.

Marcus scanned the space as he guided Cate to the side of the room. Cate searched the occupants for any familiar faces.

“Do you see anyone from The Agency?”

“Yes,” Marcus answered. He nodded toward a man in a brown suit with perfectly polished shoes. “Elliott Stevens, a financier.”

Cate studied his ruddy features as the man pontificated something or another to the men grouped around him, waving his hand in the air emphatically.

A dark-haired man in a boxy black suit strode through double doors leading to a meeting room. “Harold Payne. A railroad baron.”

He nodded toward another man. “Arnold Chapman, an oil company executive.”

Marcus pointed out several other individuals. It appeared The Agency’s tentacles reached far and wide and into almost every industry.

“I wonder where Gianna is?” Cate questioned, as she continued to scan the room for the woman.

“Duke Northcott,” a voice said. Elliott Stevens strode toward them. “Are my eyes deceiving me?”

“No,” Marcus answered. “They are not.”

“How interesting to see you here. Are you attending a particular meeting?”

“I plan to drop in on several.”

Elliott’s eyebrows raised at his statement. Marcus tugged Cate forward. “I don’t believe you’ve met my wife, Catherine. Catherine, Elliott Stevens, he handles other people’s money.”

The man smiled at Cate. “Well, and my own self-made fortune,” he added.

“Lovely to meet you,” Cate said, clutching at her purse.

“The pleasure is all mine,” the man said to Cate before turning to Marcus. “I hadn’t realized you married. Though I can certainly see why. Quite a lovely woman.”

Cate felt her pale skin flush.

The man rocked on his heels, shooting an amused glance at Cate. “And attending a business summit. What a good sport.”

“Oh, no,” Marcus said with a chuckle. “Catherine is going shopping. She insisted on seeing me off. She is quite devoted.”

Marcus stared into her eyes as his thumb caressed her cheek. Cate offered what she hoped passed as an adoring and devoted smile, suddenly feeling uncomfortable.

“Well, I look forward to seeing you in some of the meetings. Have a lovely time shopping in London, Duchess.”

“Thank you,” Cate said. Marcus offered him a dismissive smile and a nod. The man spun on his heel and stalked away. The smile faded from Marcus’s lips and he grabbed Cate’s forearm, dragging her several steps away and around a corner.

“I’m *not* going shopping,” Cate warned.

“I certainly prefer you did not. I’d rather you stay close while the wolves circle. Particularly after last night.”

Cate nodded, peeking around the corner again.

“There will be a lounge for secretaries, you can stay there.”

Cate pursed her lips, frustrated but understanding that she would not be welcome into closed-door meetings of business minds in this era. She nodded again.

“Though I prefer to keep closer tabs on you.”

“I should have brought my doggie cam.”

His brow furrowed at her statement and he froze for a moment. “What?”

“Oh, when I started to suffer from the temporalysis attacks, I’d roam around the castle. I didn’t know what was happening so I bought a camera that attaches to a dog collar and I put it on my wrist. Voila! I could follow myself around even when I was in a trance.”

He wiggled his eyebrows. “And you do not find yourself intriguing. In the absence of the camera for dogs, I suggest something a bit more magical. Give me your hand.”

Cate offered her right palm.

He glanced into her eyes. “Do you trust me?”

Cate swallowed hard and gave him a tiny nod.

He pulled a small blade from his pocket, snapping it open and slicing her hand.

Cate gasped, pulling her hand back. “Ow! Maybe I shouldn’t trust you!”

“I shall heal it in a moment, Catherine.”

He sliced at his finger, pressing it against her wound. After a few muttered Latin words, he pulled it away. His finger healed in seconds. Cate stared down at her bloodied hand, then flicked her gaze up to him.

He waved his hand over hers, then wiped any traces of blood away with his handkerchief. She glanced down, doing a double-take at her healed hand.

Her jaw fell open and she stared up at him. An odd sensation passed through her body. It felt as though she could sense a second heartbeat. “What just happened?”

He grasped her hand and held it against his chest. “Do you feel my heart beating?”

Cate nodded, color rising into her cheeks again. “Yes.”

“And now I feel yours whenever you are close to me. We are connected by blood. If you are in danger, I shall know.” The corners of his mouth curled up as he let go of her hand.

She kept it pressed against him, pressing the other against her own chest. He cocked his head at her. “What is it?”

She let her hand drop from his chest. “I feel your heart here.” She glanced up at him with knitted brows.

“I am impressed, Catherine. You are quite perceptive for a human.”

“So, will I be able to sense when you are in danger?”

He shoved his hands into his pockets. “Should the situation ever arise, in theory, yes.”

She let her hand drop to her side as he motioned for them to return to the lobby. “We should tuck you away safely in the ladies’ lounge while I make my rounds.”

“I’m starting to really detest time periods without gender equality,” Cate murmured as they wandered across the lobby, approaching an open set of doors where several ladies flitted in and out.

“Here we are,” Marcus said. “Stay in sight. Do not slink off anywhere alone.”

Cate nodded at him. “Okay.”

“Do you promise?”

“Yes, I promise. I have no desire to have a repeat performance with Gianna or any of her associates. I’ll stay right here.” Cate pointed to the lounge with a nod and a smile.

“Good.” He squeezed her arm before striding away.

Cate sucked in a breath and turned to face the room. Women bustled around. A few chuckled together as they swapped office stories. Some shuffled through papers, sorting them into folders.

Cate swallowed hard and stepped into the room as she tapped her fists against her thighs. She searched for a quiet corner where she could hide.

After a few tentative steps, she chewed her lower lip, offering a demure smile to a clutch of women who eyed her. She licked her lips as she realized her attire made her appear as though she didn't belong. She continued forward until she heard a familiar voice.

CHAPTER 17



“Well, if it isn’t Cate Catherine Northcott.” The woman followed her statement with a giggle.

Cate spun to face her, a smile forming on her lips.

“It’s Ginger. We met at the club last night.”

“Yes, I remember.”

“What are you doing here? Surely you’re not a secretary, too.”

“No,” Cate answered. “My husband is sitting in on some meetings and—”

“Oh, heavens. And he dragged you here? He really owes you, love.”

“He shouldn’t be long—”

Ginger waved her hand in the air, cutting off Cate’s statement. “That’s what they all say. And then when the brandy is flowing and they’re in a cloud of cigar smoke, they lose all sense of the time. He’s not coming anytime soon, dearie.”

Cate struggled to find an answer when Ginger grabbed her by the arm and tugged her forward.

“Come on, let’s head for a drink.”

“Oh, no,” Cate countered, pulling back against the forward motion. “I really should wait here. I—”

“Don’t be silly, Cate! Trust me, he’ll be gone forever. And it serves him right leaving you here like this. Don’t forget,” she said, wagging her finger at Cate, “he’s a two-faced liar. The least he can do is provide you some entertainment while you wait.”

Ginger led her to a bar room. A bartender polished the wooden bar, empty of customers. Ginger sidled up to it, climbing onto a bar stool. She patted the one next to her, encouraging Cate to sit.

The bartender approached. "Two martinis, dirty."

Cate shook her head, her mouth forming an "o." "Oh, no. None for me, thanks."

"Nonsense," Ginger said. "It's five o'clock somewhere. Two martinis." She waved two fingers in the air and winked.

The bartender set to work making the drinks as Cate climbed onto the bar stool. The second heartbeat in her chest still thudded away. She wondered how long it would take to get used to this. She also pondered how alcohol may affect the strange phenomenon.

The bartender delivered their drinks, inquiring about a tab. "Put it on Mr. Merton's tab, both drinks."

"Oh, no," Cate said. "That's where I draw the line." She turned her attention to the bartender. "Put it on my husband's tab. Duke Marcus Northcott."

The man nodded and stepped away as Ginger's eyebrow shot toward her hairline. "Duke, is it?" She patted Cate's arm. "Well, good going for you, Duchess!"

Cate giggled at her statement. "So, how long have you worked for Mr. Merton?"

"I've worked for Lloyd for nearly ten years."

"I see." Cate's mind whirled as she attempted to come up with small talk, an art she struggled with on most occasions.

"Been his mistress for eight," Ginger added. She offered her high-pitched giggle. "Cost him four apology necklaces for the missus." She chortled a few more seconds before sipping at her drink. She pulled the olives from the glass and stirred them around in the liquid. "How long have you been married to your Duke?"

"Oh, um," Cate murmured as her mind raced to come up with a lie. Her mind quickly did the math between 1942 when Marcus first told the lie about their relationship and now. "Thirteen years."

"Oh, I bet he's given you quite a number of apology necklaces."

"I have more than one," Cate admitted, her mind focusing on the sapphire necklace. "And a lovely music box."

“Oh, a creative one, is he?” Ginger pulled one of the olives off the toothpick with her teeth.

“That’s an understatement.”

“So why have I never seen you in London before?”

“Oh, it’s my first time. I’ve never traveled here, usually Marcus comes alone. Though, under the circumstances...”

“He brought you along for a relaxing vacation so you wouldn’t divorce him,” Ginger finished. “Then he dragged you here. The lousy sod.”

Cate allowed her to believe the lie and attempted to change the subject.

“You must see a lot working for someone like Mr. Merton for ten years, I’d bet.”

“Oh, you couldn’t believe it.” Ginger waved her hand in the air with a chuckle. “And not only that, but I handle some of the ledgers for his business partners. So I see it *all*.”

“Such as?” Cate inquired, sipping at her martini.

“Such as the amount they spend on their own pleasures. Brandy. Cigars.” She flicked her gaze to Cate and lowered her voice. “Mistresses.”

Cate sucked in a breath. “I wonder...” she began, her voice trailing off.

“How much they spend on entertaining their lady friends? They spare no expense, believe me, dearie.”

Cate shook her head. “It’s not that so much as... Well, I wonder if you’d recognize any of their names.”

“Of the ladies they keep?”

Cate nodded, biting into an olive. “Mm-hm, yes.”

Ginger narrowed her eyes at Cate as she sipped at her martini. “Why do you ask?”

Cate pursed her lips and shrugged. “No reason. Just curious.”

“Curiosity killed the cat, Cate. Or made the wife insane with jealousy at least.”

Cate sighed. “I doubt you’ve ever seen her name. I’m just curious to know how well they’re treated, that’s all. You know, to justify that shopping spree he owes me.”

Ginger burst into laughter, slapping the bar with her open hand. “Well, if that’s what you’re after I may be able to help. Let me tell you, they keep them in some rather swanky places.”

“I’ve heard she’s been romping around with a few others and I just wondered if maybe you’ve come across her name in any of your books.”

“Shoot, Cate.”

Cate licked her lips. “Gianna Caruso.”

Ginger gazed into the air, her nose scrunched and her eyes narrowed.

“Mmm, nope, don’t recognize that name.”

Cate’s shoulders slumped. “Long shot.”

“Two more, please,” Ginger called to the bartender.

Cate shook her head a moment too late, missing the chance to decline. She lifted the glass to her lips. Ginger tipped up the bottom. “Bottom’s up, Cate. Got to make space on the bar for the next one!”

Cate swallowed the last of it, coughing as she placed the glass down on the bar. The bartender swiped it away as he set down two fresh drinks.

She grabbed the toothpick of olives and swirled it in the drink.

“Don’t let it get you down, Cate. It’s better you don’t know her. You’ll only drive yourself crazy.”

Cate recalled her reactionary behavior when she’d noticed Rita flirting with Jack and then with Marcus. Maybe Ginger was right.

Her brow furrowed and she straightened on the stool. “Could I ask you one more name? Sometimes she uses it.”

“Sure.”

“Rita Haverford.”

Ginger tilted her head as she set down the martini glass on the bar. She began a slow nod. “Yes, that name I do know.”

Cate’s eyebrows shot up and she sucked in a breath. “Really?”

Ginger nodded. “Mm-hm. Yes. Not in Lloyd’s books, but in Arnie Chapman’s. Flat rental every month for an R. Haverford. And in a swanky part of town, no less. On the fifteenth of every month, like clockwork.”

“Do you happen to recall the address?”

Ginger snapped her gaze to Cate and waved a finger. “Oh, no! No, no. I’m not giving you her address so you can confront her. Believe me, love, there’s nothing you’ll gain from that. You’ll only lose. Most of us mistresses don’t give a fig about the wife’s feelings. We’re just making the best life we can for ourselves.”

Cate shrugged again. “I don’t want to confront her.”

“No? You only want to drive yourself crazy by wondering if she’s prettier than you or better in the sack?”

“Like I said, I just want to make sure I run up his accounts as much as I should.”

Ginger giggled at her. "You're too much, Cate. You've got the right idea. All right, just this once between friends. But I'd better not hear you've been bending her ear about hopping around with your husband. And believe me, I will hear about it." She waved her finger at Cate in warning.

Cate crossed her heart. "I promise."

Ginger pulled a pen from within her purse and jotted an address on her cocktail napkin. She slid it over to Cate.

Cate studied it and smiled, slipping the address into her purse. "Thanks, Ginger. And believe me, I won't confront her. I have no desire to speak with her."

Ginger winked. "No, just make sure you note how swanky her place is so you can justify all those new dresses you'd like."

Cate smiled and nodded. She spun to the bartender. "Two more!"

"Your husband's tab is going to be out of sight!"

With a grin at Ginger, she said, "He owes me, right?"

Ginger gave her a toothy grin and a wink. "That he does!"

The women spent the next hour talking and laughing over Ginger's tales from the office. Cate interjected a few comments but allowed Ginger to monopolize the conversation. Her stories nearly had Cate in tears as she giggled through them.

At the conclusion of one of her stories, as Cate threw her head back with laughter, Ginger sobered a bit. "Uh-oh."

Cate wiped at her eyes with the back of her hand. "What is it?"

Ginger leaned closer and lowered her voice. "Your old man, I think." She burst into giggles, her nose wrinkling.

Cate's eyebrows raised and she spun to find Marcus Northcott perusing the room.

"Oh, yes, that's him," Cate said.

"Ohh, naughty girl, you're going to be in trouble." The two women chuckled together as the alcohol coursed through their veins.

Marcus strode across the room toward Cate. He raised his eyebrows as he approached her. "Catherine, I thought we agreed you would stay in the lounge."

"Ohh!" Ginger burst out, before covering her mouth as she held back a giggle.

Cate forced herself to sound composed. "Yes, though Ginger thought we may be bored. So, she brought me here." Cate waved a wobbly finger

toward her companion as her elbow slipped off the bar. "Have you met Ginger?"

Marcus cocked his head and narrowed his eyes as he leaned against the bar. "Have you been drinking?"

Cate brought her index finger and thumb together. "Maybe a little."

Marcus's jaw flexed at the answer.

"Also, there may be a small bill for you to take care of, dear," Cate whispered, poking a finger at the bartender.

Ginger snickered next to her. Marcus huffed and motioned for the bartender to pass along the bill. Cate cleared her throat and pursed her lips as Ginger struggled to compose herself.

After Marcus settled the bill, he grasped Cate's arm. "We should be going."

"Oh, okay," Cate said, sliding down off the stool. She stumbled, leaning into Marcus until she got her legs under her. "Just let me say goodbye to Ginger."

Ginger spun on the stool to face her. Cate offered her an embrace. "Thank you for the company, Ginger."

"You're welcome, dearie. And remember, he owes you!" she whispered. "I hope to see you again."

Cate smiled at her as she pulled back.

"Look me up next time you're in town."

"I will, thank you." Cate clutched her handbag in front of her, pulled on her gloves, and nodded.

She spun, catching herself before she toppled again and squeezing her eyes closed. She centered herself before she took a step forward. Marcus huffed again as he offered her his arm. She accepted and waved to Ginger as he led her toward the bar's entrance.

They passed through the lobby and into the fresh air outside. Cate gulped a few breaths in, feeling a bit steadier. Marcus stopped as they reached the sidewalk, turning to face her.

"Really, Catherine, I'm surprised at you."

Cate blinked a few times. "Sorry, Ginger can be very persuasive."

With an unimpressed sigh, Marcus tightened his jaw again.

"You told me to live a little," Cate added.

"I'm so pleased you took my advice and proceeded to have multiple martinis at eleven in the morning."

Cate swallowed and puckered her lips. "So, did you find out anything?"

Marcus sighed again. "No," he admitted. "My plan did not play out the way I'd hoped. We will need to reassess."

"No sign of Rita—" Cate shook her head, wobbling on her feet as she tried again. "Gianna."

"None. We received an invitation to a cocktail party this evening. We shall try to gather more information there."

"What about Gianna's flat? Do you think there is any information there?"

"Perhaps, though it is a moot point since we do not know where it is."

"Oh!" Cate said, digging in her purse and pulling out a cocktail napkin. "I do!"

Marcus's brows knitted as she waved the white serviette in the air.

"Here. This is it. Quite a swanky part of town, I understand."

Marcus snatched the napkin from her hand and studied it. "How did you come across this information?"

"Well," Cate began, "Ginger is the secretary for Lloyd Merton. And as such, she handles some financials for him and a few business partners. I asked her if she'd ever come across the name Gianna Caruso, but she hadn't." Cate wrinkled her nose. "But then I tried Rita Haverford, the name Gianna used in the 1940s, and she remembered it. She said Arnold Chapman keeps an apartment for her at this address."

Marcus narrowed his eyes at Cate.

"What?" she asked.

"Why would that woman give you her address?"

Cate licked her lips, stumbling a bit as she tried to explain it. She squeezed at the handles of her purse, crushing them between her fingers. "Oh, well... I actually met Ginger last night in the ladies' room when I was rather upset. She assumed it was because my husband had cheated on me. And then today, she... well, I let her believe Rita was the offending party and she offered her address so I could assess how much you may owe me as an apology."

Cate offered a demure smile as she awaited his response. He stared at the scrawled writing on the cocktail napkin for a moment before he shoved it in his pocket. With a wiggle of his eyebrows, he said, "Well done, Catherine."

Cate's smile broadened. "See, I am useful."

He offered her his arm and they strolled down the street. “You realize, it was not about your usefulness, my dear, it is about keeping you safe. That is my primary priority.”

“Do you know how to get to that address?”

“Yes, though we are not going there.”

Cate scrunched her forehead. “Why?”

“Stefano will do a bit of reconnaissance work first. I prefer to be apprised of what to expect, particularly before I allow you to enter, which I am certain you will insist upon.”

“Yes, I will insist. I worked hard for that information. I had to drink all those martinis.”

“I cannot imagine the horror of it.”

Cate smirked at him as he led her back to the street where his home was located. “I’ll bet.”

They climbed the steps and entered the house. Both Dembe and Andrea greeted them as they arrived. Andrea relieved Cate of her gloves and handbag.

“I have a task for Stefano,” Marcus said to Dembe. The man bowed and disappeared down the hall as Cate and Marcus entered the sitting room.

Cate flopped onto the couch and blew out a long breath. A headache formed at her temples and she began to regret the martinis.

Marcus poured himself a brandy. “I’d offer you a drink, but I think you may have had enough.”

“Definitely,” Cate groaned as she massaged her temples.

She slouched down the couch’s cushions and squeezed her eyes shut. “Why did I drink so many martinis?”

“Apparently, it had something to do with your cheating louse of a husband.”

Cate snapped her eyes open and offered him an amused smile before her features wrinkled with pain. “Oh, I never want to see another martini for as long as I live.”

Stefano hurried into the room as Cate returned to massaging her temples. “Dembe said you wanted to see me, Duke?”

Marcus set down his brandy glass. “Yes. Catherine has managed to acquire Gianna’s address. We should scour her flat for clues and use its location to keep tabs on her.”

“Do you wish me to go?”

“We shall go together. Catherine will remain here.”

Cate shoved herself off the couch, climbing to her feet. “No, Catherine will not.”

“Perhaps you should after your morning.”

“I’m not going to sit here while you search Gianna’s apartment. I want to go, too.”

“Are you certain you’re up to it?”

“I’ll be fine.”

Stefano’s gaze bounced between the two of them as they discussed the matter. “Shall I call for the car, Duke?”

“Yes,” Marcus answered, dismissing him. “Catherine, are you sure you shouldn’t—”

“I’m not going to stay here! This is the best lead we’ve had.”

He tilted his head and pinched his features. “I wouldn’t say best—”

“I would. Now, let’s go.”

Cate retrieved her purse and gloves from a waiting Andrea and pulled them on as they awaited the car.

Within the hour, they were pulling alongside a large apartment building. Cate stared up at the building as Marcus motioned for Stefano to exit the car and peruse the flat.

Cate twisted to face him as Stefano gained admittance to the building. “What are we waiting for?”

“For Stefano to ensure no surprises await us inside.”

“Shouldn’t we go with him? You know, safety in numbers.”

“I will not allow you to enter that space until we know it is safe.”

“Allow me? You’re kidding, right?”

“I am not. Much to your independent nature’s chagrin, I will continue to keep you safe whether you like it or not.”

Cate opened her mouth to reply when Marcus waved his hand at her.

“Calm your modern sensibilities, Catherine. I did the same with Michael and Damien when we’ve worked together in the past. Though I will admit your safety is more important to me than theirs on most occasions.”

Cate ducked to glance up at the building again. She twisted to face him. “Shouldn’t you have gone with him?”

Marcus smoothed his tie as he waited. “Stefano is capable and I will not leave you alone.”

Cate returned her attention to the building rising next to her, sinking her chin into her palm as she awaited Stefano's return. After what seemed an eternity, the familiar dark-haired form of Stefano strode from the building's door.

He slipped into the front seat of their vehicle. "Empty," he reported. "Perfectly safe to enter."

"Excellent." He turned to Cate. "Shall we?"

"Most definitely." She shoved her door open and exited onto the sidewalk. She stared up at the building as the crisp breeze ruffled her lilac dress and her expertly coiffed hair.

Marcus rounded the car and joined her, buttoning his jacket. "You certainly are raring to go."

"I hope we find something!" Cate stepped toward the entrance.

"Catherine," Marcus said, grasping her elbow and stopping her, "you must be prepared for the fact that we may find nothing."

Cate nodded and tried to take another step.

"Or that you may not like what we find."

"Noted," Cate said with a nod.

They strode down the sidewalk to the building's door, entered the foyer, and climbed the stairs to Gianna's third-floor flat. As they approached the door, Cate bit her lower lip. How had Stefano determined the flat was empty? Had he knocked and received no response? How would they enter?

They approached the door marked with a brass seven. Marcus reached for the handle, and with a quick twist of his wrist, the door popped open. He pushed it into the flat and motioned for Cate to enter.

"She leaves her door unlocked?" Cate questioned as she stepped into the apartment.

"No," Marcus answered flatly. "That would be rather foolish."

Cate glanced at him as realization hit her. "Ohhh, another one of your talents."

He smirked at her. Cate nodded and turned her attention to scanning the apartment. A living room filled the space in front of her with a small kitchen on her right. An archway led to a hall.

Cate stepped toward the living room, pulling the drawer open on a console table and swiping the items around inside.

"Do not leave this flat without me," Marcus warned her as she milled around the living room, checking books on the bookshelf.

“Okay,” she murmured.

He eyed her for another moment before he strode down the hall, apparently satisfied with her response. Cate pulled several books from the ceiling-high bookshelf, paging through them or hanging them upside down and giving them a shake. No loose papers fell from within.

She opened a small wooden box, finding nothing inside. With a frustrated sigh, she wandered down the hall. Marcus stood inside a small office. She bypassed it in favor of the next door, leading to Gianna’s bedroom.

Cate scanned the space before she tugged open a few drawers. She shoved the clothing around inside, searching for anything that could be a clue to Gianna’s next step. She found nothing outside of Gianna’s trendy wardrobe and love of shoes.

She blew out a breath, easing herself toward the bed before she leapt up, realizing she shouldn’t leave a trace of her visit behind. Instead, she stalked from the room and retraced her steps to the office.

Marcus stood behind the desk, perusing documents.

“Did you find anything?” Cate inquired.

Marcus cut his gaze up to her, sliding something into his pocket. “A few interesting items.”

“Such as?” Cate inquired, circling the desk to peer over his shoulder.

Marcus snapped the folder shut and cleared his throat.

“What are you doing?”

“It was nothing of note,” he claimed, shoving it to the side and sliding a few other documents around on the desk’s top.

Cate reached for the discarded folder. “I’d like to be the judge of that.”

Marcus grabbed her hand, his fingers wrapping around hers. “No need.”

Cate narrowed her eyes at him. “Why don’t you want me to look in that folder? What are you keeping from me?”

“Nothing of importance. I’ve already told you.”

Cate stuck her hand on her hip and cocked her head. “I feel like the conversation about trust and working together didn’t make the appropriate impression on you.”

He raised his eyebrows at her. She reached for the folder again, sliding it toward her and flicking it open. Her eyes widened as she stared at the contents. She shuffled through the pictures in the folder, her breathing turned ragged and her eyebrows furrowing.

“What is this?” she breathed.

Picture after picture of her filled the folder. Walking across the quad at Aberdeen College, playing ball with Riley at Dunhaven Castle, eating at the pub, touring the gardens at Fyvie Castle with Molly. One final picture showed a close-up of Cate. Dunhaven Castle loomed in the background. A large red “X” had been drawn on top of her face.

CHAPTER 18



Cate picked it up to study it, a scoff escaping her.

“I feel the conversation about your safety didn’t make an appropriate impression on you, my dear,” Marcus said as he collected the images and stuffed them back into the folder. He tugged the last one from Cate’s hands and returned it to the bottom of the pile before closing the folder.

Cate frowned at the closed folder as Marcus set it aside.

“You can’t keep information like that from me. It is relevant.”

“It provides no clues beyond what we already know. And it only proves to further upset you.”

Cate’s eyes widened. “I think I should be upset. It’s obvious I’m a target.”

“Not new information.” Marcus shoved a few more papers around. “There is nothing else here. We should go.”

She sighed as she stared down at the desk. “I can’t believe there was nothing here.”

“It was a good lead, Catherine. We shall leave Stefano behind to keep tabs on Gianna. But for now, we should go.”

Cate’s shoulders slumped but she nodded. They made their way through the flat and to the door. They descended to the car. After a few words to Stefano, he slid from inside the car and took up his post on the street to watch for Gianna.

Cate stared up at the building as they pulled away. Another dead-end. How would they ever find Jack?

* * *

The buildings of 1955 London rolled past Cate's window as they traveled to the Business Summit's evening cocktail party. Cate's gloved hands fiddled with the diamond necklace clasped around her neck for a second night. It completed the pale blue floor-length evening gown with its full skirt and draped back. With her hair swept up into a high bun, large diamond drop earrings completed the look.

Her stomach fluttered as she contemplated running into Gianna again. Would they make any progress in determining her next move? What if they didn't?

Before heading to the party, they'd spoken with Stefano, who maintained his post outside Gianna's flat. The woman had returned home and left fifteen minutes before Cate and Marcus arrived. By her appearance, she'd attend the cocktail party.

Cate sucked in a deep breath as the car eased to a stop. Partygoers climbed the stone stairs into the venue. Cate waited inside the car until the driver opened her door, standing aside as Marcus offered his hand to assist Cate with climbing out of the car.

She accepted, staring up at the building as though it was a prison.

"Chin up, Catherine," Marcus said as he wrapped her arm around his.

Cate offered a fleeting smile. "I'm a little nervous."

"Why, dear? Stay close to me. She will not be able to harm you."

"But what if we don't find anything?"

"We will find our lead. Do not fret."

Cate nodded. "Okay. I'll trust you."

"Good," he said with a smile, patting her hand. "We are making progress."

They entered the ballroom and Cate scanned the space. Businessmen and their wives flitted around the room. Waiters filtered throughout the room, champagne flutes teetering on their carefully carried trays. A few couples danced to the strains of the string quartet.

Marcus handed a glass off to Cate before grabbing one for himself. Cate stared at the bubbly liquid, her stomach turning as she recalled her martini lunch.

“Well, Duke Northcott,” a gentleman Cate had not met before said as he approached them, “I’m very pleased to see you here. This must be the lovely Catherine.”

Marcus offered him a fleeting smile. “Yes. This is my wife, Catherine. Catherine, this is Lloyd Merton. I believe you met his secretary earlier.”

“Pleasure to meet you. Oh, Ginger, yes. Please tell her ‘thank you’ again for keeping me company earlier,” Cate said as he wiggled her hand in the air delicately.

He turned his attention back to Marcus. “I wondered if you’d considered my proposal from earlier. I—“

Marcus waved his hand in the air. “I promised Catherine not to bore her with business this evening.”

“Of course,” the man said, the disappointment clear in his voice. “Perhaps tomorrow—“

“I doubt I will attend. The Summit has already offered all it has to interest me.”

“Oh,” Lloyd murmured as the corners of his mouth turned downward in a frown, “I see.”

Cate glanced from Lloyd to Marcus, then back to Lloyd. “Perhaps you shouldn’t be so quick to decide, dear.”

Marcus arched an eyebrow at her as Lloyd’s expression changed from dejected to hopeful. Cate offered a slight shrug.

Marcus turned his attention back to Lloyd. “Catherine makes a point. Though the Summit holds little interest, perhaps your proposal does not. Forward it to my attorney in the morning and I shall execute contracts after reviewing them.”

“Yes, of course,” Lloyd said. “I shall have them messengered over first thing. And thank you.” He chuckled. “Also, thank you, Catherine. What a wise wife you have.”

“Indeed,” Marcus said as he led Cate away from the man and further into the room. “Really, Catherine, I did not expect you to be so keen on playing businesswoman.”

Cate shrugged again as she sipped at her champagne, nearly shuddering as she recalled her earlier excursion with alcohol. “Ginger did give us

Gianna's address. It felt right to return the favor to her boss." Cate flicked her gaze away from him, studying the room. "Though the information did little for us."

Her eyebrows pinched and she craned her neck to glance behind her then scanned the opposite side of the room. "Why is everyone looking at us all the time?"

"Because I am a Duke and you are a Duchess. We should not be unpopular, you know. Quite the opposite actually."

"Oh, great. That's perfect. My people skills are so phenomenal."

"You seemed to do quite well with Lloyd Merton and his secretary," Marcus said as he led Cate toward the dance floor.

"I haven't seen Gianna, have you?"

"Not as yet. But also noticeably missing are several members of The Agency."

"Oh!" Cate said, her lips forming an "o." "Do you think they're having a secret meeting?" Her eyes scanned the space as though she hoped to catch them in a corner.

"I'm not certain how secret it is, but yes."

"Maybe we should try to find them."

"A useless waste of time. They will be behind closed doors and we will not gain admittance."

Cate sighed as she scanned the room again. "You're probably right. I guess we'll have to wait here then."

Marcus slid the champagne flute from her fingers, setting it on a waiter's tray as the white-gloved man flitted through the room.

"What are you doing?" she asked as she turned her attention to him.

"Dancing."

"What?" Cate said with an amused smile and a chuckle. The expression waned as he led her to the dance floor. "Oh, you're serious."

Marcus pulled her closer to him, taking her hand in his.

"You know, we could just hide in a corner somewhere," Cate suggested.

"Really, Catherine, you must learn to live a little." He swept her around in a circle.

"I tried that this afternoon, remember? All I got was a splitting headache and a bit of nausea."

"You can avoid using your terrible people skills."

“Ah, so you do admit they are terrible,” Cate said with a coy glance at him.

“I do not. I am only quoting you.”

Cate offered him an amused smile and a shake of her head as he continued to move her around the dance floor.

“How have you been feeling? Outside of your experience earlier.”

“Fine,” Cate said. “I’ve been using the dragon’s blood. No time losses.”

“Good,” he said, sweeping her around in a semi-circle.

“Do you think I’m cured or is the dragon’s blood just masking my symptoms?”

“Both. I think you’re close to this passing.”

“How will we know when it has passed?”

“If you recognize the moment your mind is so fixated on and it passes, you will be cured.”

Cate’s eyes went wide. “Really? So, these visions are all related to the moment I become cured?”

“Yes and no. The moment your mind is fixating on is an important moment for you. Once it passes, the temporalysis should pass as well.”

“But—”

“It is not an important moment because it is the moment you are cured. It is an important moment for some other reason.”

Cate’s brow furrowed as she swayed to the music. What moment was she seeing and why was it important to her? Would it be the moment they found Jack?

“What are you thinking?” he inquired, noting her pensive expression.

“Just wondering what the moment is and why it’s so important to me.”

He smiled down at her before something across the room caught his attention. “The meeting must be over.”

Cate followed his gaze. A few of the gentlemen Marcus had pointed out earlier this morning strolled into the room.

“Still no Gianna, though,” Cate noted.

“I shouldn’t think you’d be so eager to see her after last evening.”

“I’m not eager. I just want the information she has so we can find Jack.”

“She will not give that up easily.”

“Too bad,” Cate lamented. Her eyes lit. “There! She just came in.”

Marcus spun them to eye the door. “So she has.”

Cate craned her neck around, spotting the blonde making her way across the room in a form-fitting evening gown with a ridiculously wide butterfly train. She bustled around with her hour-glass figure on full display as she tossed her head back with laughter and grabbed her companion's forearm.

"Ugh," Cate groaned. "Always a flirt."

The man led Gianna to a circle of men. She leaned forward toward one of them, dangling an arm on his shoulder as she wrinkled her nose in a giggle.

Cate shook her head at the woman. "Gosh, I hope she doesn't split a seam in that ridiculous dress."

"My goodness, Catherine, with talk like that I may begin to believe you dislike the woman."

Gianna scanned the room, her eyes focusing on Cate and Marcus. Cate's eyes widened and she winced. "Uh-oh, spotted."

Gianna grabbed the arm of Elliott Stevens and took a step toward them. Cate tried to flee toward a corner. Marcus held her firmly. "Where are you going?"

"Away from her!"

"Did you not wish to find her and determine what we could learn from her?"

Gianna sashayed across the room, her hips rolling with every step in a seductive waddle. She narrowed her eyes at Cate, a set expression on her face. "Not when she's looking at me like that," Cate admitted. She tried to take another retreating step.

Marcus stopped her again. "We will not run away, Catherine. There is no reason to run."

Cate frowned but stood her ground as Gianna and Elliott approached. The scent of Gianna's heavy perfume wafted to Cate's nostrils. The smell was overpowering. She must have bathed in the stuff, Cate ruminated.

"Duke and Duchess Northcott, what a pleasure," Elliott said.

"Indeed," Gianna added. "I hadn't expected to see Catherine, in particular, this evening. I hope you are well."

"She is quite well," Marcus assured the woman. "Unlike your associate. I fear he may be a little worse for the wear."

Gianna's lips turned down into a frown. "You'll pay for that, Marcus."

"I doubt it."

She flicked her gaze to Cate. "Oh, I'll find a way."

"Harm Catherine and I will personally rip you limb from limb."

"My, my! So protective of the little mouse." Gianna cocked a hip, placing her hand on it. "I wonder what Jack would think of—" she waved a finger at them "—this."

"Where is he?" Cate demanded.

"So impatient," Gianna said. "We'll get to that all in good time. There's still so much of the game to go through."

Cate frowned at her, stamping a foot on the floor. "This isn't a game."

"Really, Elliott, have you brought her here simply to agitate my wife?"

"No," the man said. "That's enough, Gianna."

Gianna's mouth turned upside down in a displeased frown as she shot a glance at Elliott before returning her gaze to the couple.

"We are here with a simple proposition. Duchess, would you care for a dance?"

Marcus tightened his grip around Cate's waist, yanking her closer to him. "No, she does not."

"Oh, come, now, Marcus," Gianna taunted, "surely, she doesn't mean that much to you."

"It's fine," Cate said, tugging his hand from her hip. She held her hand out to Elliott.

Gianna offered a sly smile. "Good girl, Cate. I figured you'd see reason."

Marcus yanked the woman toward him as Elliott grasped Cate's hand. "I'll be watching you."

Gianna ran her hands up his lapels, clutching at his neck. "Not if I can help it."

Elliott whisked Cate closer to him and onto the dance floor. "Where's Jack?" Cate asked.

"Patience, Duchess, we haven't even begun to enjoy our dance."

"I'm not enjoying anything with you. I just want Jack back."

"Hmm, how interesting. I find it fascinating how fiercely you speak about him. Your husband does not seem the type to suffer this sort of infatuation with another man."

"It's not an infatuation. Jack and I are friends." Cate searched the dance floor for Marcus, finding him carefully watching her as Gianna draped herself across him.

Elliott twisted to ascertain the focus of Cate's gaze. He deftly spun her in the opposite direction.

"I prefer your focus kept on me."

"And I prefer Jack home at Dunhaven. So what is the proposal?"

"Simple. Relinquish any and all claim to Dunhaven Castle."

CHAPTER 19



Cate's jaw dropped. "What?"

"Trade Dunhaven Castle for Jack. It's quite a simple proposal. Oh, silly me, I left out one detail. We'll need this, too."

His finger hooked around the chain under her diamond necklace and fished the gold timepiece from under her dress.

"We've got big plans." He winked at her.

Cate considered the proposal. He'd asked her to give up her home so The Agency could take control of the time portals that existed there. Dunhaven Castle would exist without her. Where would she go? Would she ever see Jack again once she left? What would become of Molly? The Frasers?

Her mind raced ahead as it worked out the possibilities. It didn't matter. Jack's life mattered. She opened her mouth to accept when fingers closed around her upper arm. She stumbled backward a few steps as Marcus tugged her toward him. She collided into him, grasping onto his lapel for balance.

"This conversation is over," he growled at Elliott.

Gianna circled them, joining her associate.

"I don't believe it is. Why don't we ask Catherine?"

Cate's lower lip bobbed as she formulated an answer.

"You will not speak to Catherine again. Her answer is no. She does not accept the terms of whatever deal you have laid out."

"Again, I believe Catherine may disagree."

"I can assure you, she does not. Come along, Catherine, we have everything we need from this event."

"No, wait," Cate said, tugging against him.

Marcus slid his arm around her waist, lifted her from the floor, and carted her away.

"Consider it carefully, Catherine," Elliott called, "the offer will not stand forever. And neither will Jack."

Marcus stormed from the room with Cate in tow. She thrashed as they entered the lobby. "Put me down!" she insisted.

"No," he argued as he continued into the evening air. He set her down on the sidewalk.

"Why did you do that?" Cate shouted.

"Keep your voice down."

"No!" Cate shouted. Cate flung her arms in the air as she stalked away from him. Their car slid to a stop at the curb.

Cate sighed as the driver opened the door and Marcus motioned for her to enter. With a huff, she slid into the seat, gathering her dress into the car before the door slammed shut. Marcus slipped in next to her and they drove the short distance to Gianna's apartment. Cate crossed her arms tightly over her chest. Her foot tapped against the floor as she tensed her jaw. Silence filled the air for the duration of the ride.

Marcus spoke a few words to Stefano before the car pulled away, this time heading for his home. When they reached it, Cate stormed up the stairs and into the foyer. She thundered into the sitting room, pacing the floor.

"Calm yourself, Catherine," Marcus said as he stepped into the foyer and eased the door shut.

Andrea hurried into the foyer. "Give us a moment," Marcus said.

"Or two," Cate huffed as she spun, her hands on her hips.

Andrea nodded and disappeared from sight. Marcus stepped into the sitting room where Cate paced.

"Why did you do that? You didn't even know what the proposal was!"

"Dunhaven Castle for Jack."

"Okay, so you did. Still, it's not your decision to make!"

"You cannot give them Dunhaven Castle. Under no circumstances."

"They were willing to trade him back. Now they'll never give him back! You heard what Elliott said. He said..."

Cate bit her lower lip as she ground her pacing to a halt. She wrapped her arms around her torso as she failed to find the words to describe the vague threat, realizing all too well what it meant.

Marcus approached her, wrapping his hands around her shoulders. "We will find him and retrieve him."

Cate's eyes turned glassy as she lifted a hand to her mouth, biting her thumbnail.

"But you cannot under any circumstances give in to their demands."

She didn't respond.

"Do you understand? They will use Dunhaven to destroy more than what is currently at stake. And they cannot be trusted."

Cate continued to chew her lower lip, dropping her hand to her elbow.

"Catherine?"

She closed her eyes for a moment and sucked in a deep breath before flicking her gaze to him and nodding. "I understand."

"We'll find him."

"How?" Cate questioned, pulling away from his grasp. "We have no lead."

"I have our next destination. We shall leave in the morning."

"Do you? Where is it?"

"1965."

Cate bit her lower lip as she searched her mind for the reasoning behind the year. "1965," she repeated. "Why then?"

"The Agency will go after your grandparents. They are attempting to remove you from the equation in any way they can."

Her jaw fell open as she stared up at him.

"You see why they cannot be trusted? The man offered to trade Jack for your castle not thirty minutes before giving Gianna the all-clear to threaten your grandparents."

"So, what do we do?"

"We must convince your grandparents to move to The States and change their names. Gianna will not be far behind and we would not want your bloodline wiped from history before you have been born."

"No, that wouldn't be very good, would it?"

"It would be a terrible shame in my opinion."

"Perhaps we should go now," Cate suggested.

"You need rest."

“I’m fine. And isn’t wiping my family off the face of the earth more important than my beauty rest?”

“You do not need beauty rest. But you do need rest. Your temporalysis has not yet subsided and we do not want it to worsen.”

Cate sighed. “I had almost forgotten. I haven’t had an attack the entire time we’ve been here.” She glanced up at him. “But are you sure we have the time? I can go—“

“I am certain. We’ll leave in the morning and go straight to 1965.” He smiled at her as he rubbed his thumb on her cheek.

“Okay,” she said with a deep sigh as she pulled away from him and wandered from the room.

“Good night, Catherine,” he called as she stepped into the foyer.

She flicked her gaze to him as her dress swished across the marble tiles. “Good night, Marcus.”

* * *

Bright sunshine streamed through Cate’s window as she opened her eyes the following morning. She stretched and glanced at the clock ticking away on her night table. She slid to sitting as she grasped it, sucking in a sharp breath.

“No, no, no, no, no,” she murmured as she ran her fingers through her hair. She kicked the covers off and scurried from her bed, sliding into her slippers and tugging her robe around her.

She flung the door open and scanned the hallway. “Andrea!” she called. “Andrea!”

Her slippers scuffed across the smooth tile of the floor as she hurried across the hall and down the stairs. Out of the corner of her eye, she spotted Marcus in the dining room, sipping tea as he read the morning paper.

Cate ignored him, spiraling off the last stair and taking one step down the hall toward what she presumed was the kitchen.

“Good morning, Catherine,” Marcus called to her. She froze and twisted to face him, abandoning her trek to the kitchen in favor of the dining room.

“Good morning. Why didn’t you wake me? I’ll be ready as soon as I find Andrea—“

“Sit down and eat your breakfast.”

“But—“

He pulled his eyes from his newspaper and flicked them to her. “Sit down and eat your breakfast.”

Cate sank into the chair next to him as Dembe appeared with a plate of breakfast. “Thank you, Dembe.”

“Good morning, Duchess. You are very welcome. Please enjoy.”

Cate took a few bites of her eggs, washing them down with orange juice. She dabbed at the corners of her mouth with her napkin. “Okay, I’ll just—“ She started to rise.

“Finish your breakfast.”

Cate plopped back into the chair. “I will finish my breakfast.”

He offered her an amused smile as she dipped her toast into the egg yolk. “I’m a little concerned that my leisurely morning followed by my equally leisurely breakfast is going to cost us precious time.”

“Gianna has not left this year yet and she will not until this evening, so you may enjoy your leisurely morning, my dear.”

“That’s good news. But how do you know?”

“The Agency is welcoming a new member today. She would not miss such an occasion.”

“She seems rather slippery. How certain are you?”

“Very. Stefano is keeping excellent track of her. Should she disappear, he will inform us.” He sipped at his tea.

“I suppose you have everything under control, then.”

He turned the page of his newspaper and shook it straight. “I usually do.”

Cate stared at him for a moment as she sipped her juice. She almost felt at ease. His confidence encouraged her. She would find Jack. They would find Jack.

* * *

Cate finished her breakfast, dabbing the corners of her mouth with her napkin as Dembe swept into the room to remove her plate.

“Would you care for tea, Duchess?”

“No, thank you, Dembe. Could you send Andrea up?”

He smiled and nodded at her request and, with a bow, he left the room.

Cate stood from her seat at the table. "I won't be long."

"Take your time. We shall leave as soon as you are ready."

Cate climbed the stairs and navigated to her bedroom, finding Andrea already waiting.

"Good morning, Your Grace!" she said with a broad grin as she laid a black dress with white piping on the bed. "This dress arrived this morning and Duke Northcott said you should wear it today."

Cate nodded as she eased onto the stool at the vanity. The style, quite different from the full skirt of the 1950s, fit with the next decade's clothes. Andrea eyed her with her hands clasped in front of her.

"Yes, that will do quite nicely."

Andrea flitted around the room, gathering other accessories before she grabbed the hairbrush from the vanity and proceeded to stroke Cate's hair from top to bottom.

"I am unfamiliar with the dress style. Is it quite new?"

Cate's gaze flicked to it. "No. We're going to a costume party."

"Oh, what an interesting party."

Cate offered her a smile through the mirror.

"What hairstyle would suit your costume?"

Cate's mind spun through the icons of the era before describing a full softly curled style with a headband. Satisfied with Andrea's work on her hair, she rose from the vanity. Andrea helped Cate change from her nightclothes to her 1960s dress.

"Do you have another event this evening?" Andrea inquired.

"No," Cate answered as she pulled the sachet of dragon's blood from the drawer of her nightstand and slipped it into her purse. "Duke Northcott and I will be leaving straight from the costume party for a new location."

Cate slid the clasp closed on the purse and eyed her temporary ladies' maid. "I'm afraid this is goodbye."

Andrea plastered on a wide smile. "It has been a pleasure serving you, Your Grace. I hope your regular ladies' maid is feeling up to snuff in no time. Though if you should require my services any further, I should be happy to return at any time. And, of course, I am happy to travel with you."

"Thank you," Cate said. "I would be happy to have you should the need arise again."

"Have a pleasant day, Your Grace."

"Thank you. You do the same."

Cate offered one final smile before she left her 1955 bedroom behind. Odd, she ruminated, as her heels clicked off the stairs leading down, how easily she'd become accustomed to this lifestyle. Specifically, she'd become attached to Andrea in the short time she'd known her. She felt a pang as she left the woman behind. Her fingers lingered on the thick wooden banister as she glanced into the sitting room. Marcus capped a pen and slid it into an interior pocket of his suit jacket.

A wiry gentleman with an odd resemblance to William Smythe collected the papers, sliding them into a folder. She paused in the doorway as they finished their business.

"Ah, Catherine, come in," Marcus said, waving her into the room.

"Sorry to interrupt."

"No interruption at all. I do not believe you've met my legal counsel, Charles Smythe."

A tingly sensation crept up Cate's spine as he spoke the last name. She stuck her hand out as the man accepted it. "Charles, my wife, Catherine."

"A pleasure." He twisted to face Marcus. "I shall messenger the executed contracts over right away. I will see myself out."

Marcus nodded as the man collected his briefcase and strode from the room.

"Was that—"

"William Smythe's father, yes. I thought you may recognize the name."

"And the resemblance."

Marcus escorted her from the room to the library. "He handled the contracts you so skillfully negotiated last evening."

"Oh, sorry, I didn't—"

"It's fine and you were quite right." He smiled at her as he tugged a book, causing the bookcase to pop open. He dragged it back and motioned for Cate to enter.

She stepped into the windowless room, and he followed behind her, closing the bookcase and sealing them off from the elegant library. Candlelight lit the small space, glowing against his chiseled features.

"Ready?"

She nodded as he took his usual stance. Cate glanced around the small space, wondering if the effect of the opening time portal would differ.

The tiny twinkling began in front of Marcus's outstretched arms. A rogue breeze fluttered Cate's carefully coiffed hair. The candles flickered in

the gentle wind.

Within moments, the black hole gaped in front of her. A few candles lost their battle against the torrents of wind that blew Cate's hair across her face. Their flames extinguished as Cate stepped into the black hole, walking forward until she landed in a room she recognized.

Marcus joined her seconds later in the bedroom in which she'd once been a captive. He buttoned his suit jacket as he stepped forward, offering her a tight-lipped smile.

"Ready, dear?"

She slid her arm into the crook of his as she nodded. "What's our plan?"

"Your grandparents should be visiting Dunhaven Castle. This is the final day of their trip. We must speak with them and convince them to leave the country."

He led her down the stairs and into the foyer. "We must also erase any trace of your family from the castle."

"And if we fail, I won't exist anymore." Cate puffed out her cheeks as she blew out a long breath. "No pressure, right?"

"I have no doubt you can achieve the goal."

They stepped into the bright afternoon sunshine. Dunhaven Castle rose high on the hill in the distance. Cate swallowed hard as she considered the task ahead of her. What would they say? How much should she reveal? And most importantly, what would happen if they failed?

CHAPTER 20



The gravel crunched under their feet as they walked up the drive toward the castle. The bright sun gleamed overhead and the crisp fall air gusted past them. Cate's stomach somersaulted as she considered the task ahead.

If they couldn't convince the MacKenzies of 1965 to flee to America, more than Jack's future would be at stake. What would happen if Gianna managed to erase her from the timeline? Would she merely pop out of existence? Would she die a slow, agonizing death? Would she slowly fade away until she disappeared?

Her mind searched for answers in a dark well of which she had little knowledge. She bit her lower lip and glanced up at her current partner in crime. Would he know, she wondered?

Cate opened her mouth to ask but snapped it shut quickly. Maybe she didn't want to know what to expect if they failed.

The castle's shadow blocked the sun as they approached. Marcus banged the door knocker against the brass plate, causing Cate's throat to go dry. She'd felt nervous on prior trips but not as nervous as she felt at this moment.

A butler she did not recognize answered the door. Marcus introduced them, requesting to speak with Mary MacKenzie first. The man motioned for them to enter the foyer and follow him to the sitting room.

"I shall announce your arrival at once," he said before stepping out of the room and pulling the doors shut behind him.

Cate sighed and sank onto the couch, her hands clasped in front of her. She glanced around the familiar space as she tapped her fingertips together to release nervous energy.

The door across the room burst open and Cate shot up to stand. Her brow furrowed as two unexpected individuals entered the room.

A young woman, clad in a bright green dress entered. A matching headband pushed her long, blonde hair off her face. Her features carried an unexplained sadness about them. Her hand clutched that of a small boy's.

"Oh, excuse me," she said with a slight Scottish accent. "I didn't realize anyone was in here."

Cate stared at them for a moment before she murmured a response, her lips pulling into a fleeting smile. "Not at all. We were just waiting for Mary"

"She was on a call," the young woman said, "but I'm certain she'll be along any moment." She stepped forward and offered her hand. "I'm her daughter, Gertrude Mackenzie. May I offer you some tea?"

Marcus shook it, then Cate. Cate's eyes lingered on the small boy next to the woman before she flicked her gaze back. "No, thank you."

The woman smiled at her. She patted the little boy's hand. "This is my cousin, Logan MacKenzie. Can you say hello to the nice people, Logan?"

Logan offered a shy wave and a meek "hello."

"Hello, Logan. It's a pleasure to meet you," Cate said.

The doors behind Cate burst open and a lithe woman strode into the room. Dark hair framed her delicate features and her big, green eyes. A polite smile formed on her soft, full lips. "Duke and Duchess Northcott?"

"Yes," Marcus answered.

"Oh, my apologies," Gertrude said with a small curtsy. "I did not realize."

Cate smiled at her and waved the comment away.

"I see you have met my daughter, Gertrude. Gertrude, have you offered the Northcotts tea?"

"I have, Mother, yes, but have not called for it yet."

She nodded at her, giving her a sweet smile. "Thank you. Why don't you take Logan into the garden for a bit."

"Yes, Mother," Gertrude said. She turned to Marcus and Cate and gave another slight curtsy before she led the boy from the room.

Cate followed them with her eyes as she watched Gertrude lead her five-year-old father from the room.

Gertrude pulled the doors closed, and Mary turned her attention to them. “How lovely to receive a visit from a Duke and Duchess. However, I must apologize for my poor memory. I cannot recall how we are acquainted.”

“We are not,” Marcus said. “However, there is an urgent matter which requires your immediate action.”

Mary’s eyebrows raised as she attempted to piece together the puzzle with the few clues she’d been given.

“You are aware of the secret this castle houses, correct?” Cate said.

Mary’s quizzical expression morphed into one of shock. “I’m sorry, I—“

Cate waved her fake denial away as she reached to the gold chain around her neck and tugged the timepiece from under her dress.

Mary’s eyes widened at the sight of the pocket watch. “Then you know the answer to your question. But what brings you to this time?”

“There is a problem,” Cate explained.

“Quite an urgent one,” Marcus added.

“With the time rips? Or the watch?” Mary inquired.

“No,” Cate answered.

“Please, sit down and explain,” Mary said, motioning toward the sofa behind Cate. Cate eased onto the cushion next to Marcus as Mary hurried to the call bell hanging near the door and pulled it. A man entered and she ordered tea before settling on the loveseat across from Cate.

As Mary perched on the soft cushion, Marcus began his explanation. “There is a group who wishes to control the anomalies housed in these walls. They are quite dangerous.”

“Are our lives in danger? Should I have the children removed?”

“We must convince your brother-in-law, Charles, to move his family from this country. It is imperative that he leave immediately,” Marcus said.

Cate eyed the woman. “We understand he is visiting you with his young son, Lucas, and that this is their last day with you. Would it be possible for us to speak with them? Arrangements must be made immediately.”

Mary pursed her lips at the news. “Well, of course, though—“ She paused, her eyebrows pinching together. “—he is unaware of the secret.”

“We understand that,” Cate said. “However, the threat still exists.”

“Is there any danger to my daughter?”

“No,” Marcus answered. “There is not.”

“How can you be sure?”

“We are,” Cate answered. “Removing Gertrude from the equation does little to nothing to change the line of succession.”

Mary lowered her eyes to the polished coffee table below as she considered the news. After a moment, she nodded. “I understand. I shall fetch Charles at once.”

She rose from the loveseat, circling it and heading toward the door. “Please help yourselves to tea when it arrives while you wait.”

Cate settled back into her seat as they waited. Her stomach continued to roll as she considered the remaining half of the battle.

“That was easier than I expected at least,” she murmured.

Marcus side-eyed her, grasping her hand in his. “You’re doing quite well, Catherine. Though I am not surprised.”

She smiled up at him as the doors opened. Cate snapped her gaze to the newcomer, her stomach settling back down once she realized it was merely a maid with the tea tray.

“Tea, dear?” Marcus inquired as the girl flitted from the room. “It may settle your nerves.”

“I would accept, but I’m afraid I’ll rattle the teacup to pieces with my shaky hands.”

The corners of Marcus’s lips turned up as he poured tea into a cup for her. She accepted the proffered beverage and sipped at it before returning the cup to its saucer and sliding it onto the coffee table.

She bit her lower lip and drummed her fingers on her thigh. Marcus sipped at his tea, dumping the saucer and cup onto the side table before closing his hand over hers.

“Calm yourself, Catherine.”

She flicked her gaze sideways to him, glancing up through her eyelashes. “Saying ‘calm down’ to a nervous person almost never works.”

“This is nearly over. And once we solve this issue, we can focus on forcing Gianna’s hand to return your landscaper.”

“Estate manager and he has a name,” Cate reminded him.

Marcus furrowed his brow and he rubbed his chin in a fake display of confusion. “It always seems to escape me.”

Cate narrowed her eyes at the statement, an amused half-smile on her lips. “Sure it does.”

The doors to the sitting room popped open before he could respond. Mary entered with a man at least a foot taller than her. His dark blonde hair, cropped close to his head, matched the small mustache punctuating his long nose in color. Marcus stood as the couple entered.

Cate swallowed hard as her grandfather's eyes fell on her.

"Charles, please meet Duke and Duchess Northcott."

The man's thin lips offered a polite smile, though his forehead betrayed his confusion.

"I'll leave you alone to speak privately," Mary said. She squeezed Charles's arm as she hastened from the room.

"My sister-in-law said you had some disturbing yet urgent news?" Charles questioned.

"Yes," Cate answered. "We're very sorry to tell you this but we believe your life and the lives of your family may be in danger."

The man's mustache wiggled as he puckered his lips at the statement. He narrowed his eyes at Cate. "I'm not certain I understand why nor why you would go to great lengths to inform me."

"The details are difficult to explain, however, you must take immediate action to secure your family's safety," Marcus said.

"And you cannot tell me whom or what threatens them?"

"A group called The Agency. A powerful set of individuals with several connections, both legal and... less than legal. The property of Dunhaven Castle is of interest to them. We must ensure the Mackenzie bloodline continues to maintain the property in future generations."

Cate nodded at Marcus's statement, turning her attention to her grandfather to gauge his response.

"Why would Dunhaven be of interest? And why is my sister-in-law's family not in danger? They are the direct heirs."

"For now. If they should produce no additional heirs or something should happen, the estate goes to your line," Marcus said. "That must be kept intact."

Charles paused for a few moments before he spoke again. "I must admit I find this tale most fantastical."

"I assure you, sir, this is no tale," Marcus informed him. He reached into his interior jacket pocket and removed a folded paper. He slid it across the coffee table toward the man.

Charles stared down at the paper for a moment.

“Open it,” Marcus encouraged.

The man grabbed the paper, unfurling it. His eyes scanned the writing on the page, one eyebrow arching high. He snapped his gaze up to Marcus and Cate. “What is this?”

“That is the handiwork of The Agency,” Marcus answered.

Charles swallowed hard, returning his gaze to the paper as Marcus continued. “An entire family wiped out. Notice the last line. With no other living relatives, the property was willed to one Gianna Caruso. A woman who acts on behalf of The Agency.”

“I still do not understand why,” Charles said as Mary slid into the room again. “Mary, perhaps you can fill me in on the circumstances Duke and Duchess Northcott seem to be concerned over.”

Mary eased onto the couch next to him. “I am afraid I can share precious few details other than to say they are not speaking out of turn.”

“Are you saying you believe their story?”

“I have every reason to believe them. Charles, I cannot comment much further, but Dunhaven Castle is unique. And it must be protected at all costs. Before his death, Oliver imparted to me just how vital this task is. I am not surprised it is being threatened. And I should very much not wish to see any harm come to you because of it.”

“What of you? Gertrude?” Charles questioned. “Surely your lives are also at stake.”

“Someone must stay at Dunhaven Castle,” Marcus said. “There are forces in place to ensure their safety. Yours, however, is best served by leaving the country. Tonight.”

“Leaving the country?” Charles questioned, his eyes going wide.

“Yes,” Marcus answered. He removed another set of papers from his jacket pocket and placed them on the table. “Three tickets to Chicago along with passports with new names. Someone will meet you at the airport once you’ve arrived and take you to the appropriate location.”

“This cannot be. I cannot simply pick my family up and leave!” Charles contended.

“You must,” Marcus implored.

Charles’s lower lip bobbed up and down as he searched for a reason to refute Marcus’s direction.

“Please, Charles,” Cate said. “I realize how difficult this will be, however, for the sake of your family, you must go now.”

He stared at Cate's blue eyes, his face pinching as he studied her.

"Please, Charles, you must listen to us," Cate implored.

A smile tugged at the corner of his lips. "Your eyes remind me so much of my son, Logan's," he remarked.

Cate breathed out a shaky breath as her grandfather compared her own blue eyes to the blue of her father's eyes.

"Well, I shall think about this," he said, waving the paperwork in the air.

"No, Charles, you must act now," Marcus said. "If we have failed to convince you of that, we have failed in our mission."

"Duke Northcott, I cannot simply remove my family from the country without at the very least a discussion with my wife." He glanced to Cate before flicking his gaze back to Marcus. "Surely, you understand."

"I do not. If Catherine's life was in peril, I would act immediately. Without question."

Charles huffed out a breath. "There are things to be dealt with. We cannot simply—"

"You can and you must," Marcus said.

"I do not disagree about the move. And we shall after a discussion and at least a visit to our home to retrieve our things."

"Take what you have now and go," Marcus countered.

"It is not that simple. It's—"

His statement was cut off by Marcus leaping from his seat next to Cate. "Charles, will you oblige me with a private discussion for a moment."

Cate raised her eyebrow at him. "Surely anything you say can be said in the company of your wife and Lady MacKenzie."

"You may prefer your reaction to be kept private."

The man's eyebrows pinched at the statement, but he rose with a nod.

"You may use the study," Mary offered.

"Shall we?" Marcus said, motioning to the door leading to the foyer.

He and Charles strode from the room, leaving Cate alone with Mary. She flicked her gaze to the woman and offered a smile.

"I hope your husband can convince him," Mary said. "I cannot tell him of our connection."

Cate nodded. "I know." She chewed her lower lip for a moment before she added, "If Marcus can convince him, we will need to remove any traces of their connection to the family. Only you and then Gertrude can know about Charles's branch of the family and their whereabouts."

“I understand. There are records in the office. I shall gather them and burn them immediately.”

“Thank you,” Cate said.

Mary slipped through the doors at the back of the room, leaving Cate alone in the sitting room. She leapt from the sofa and paced the floor.

Cate huffed out a breath as she spun and stalked across the room in the opposite direction. She gnawed on her lower lip, her fingers curling and uncurling into and out of fists. What would Marcus say that would convince her grandfather?

Cate spiraled in the opposite direction. Her shoulders slumped and she squeezed her eyes closed. She hoped it wasn't anything too nefarious. Marcus's special set of skills meant anything could happen. Visions of Marcus wrapping his fingers around her grandfather's neck as he threatened him popped into her mind. She shook her head, dismissing it. He wasn't *that* bad.

The second heartbeat inside her chest thudded alongside hers. She pressed her hand against it. Steady. Strong. She hoped that meant he was playing by the rules.

She focused on her task. She needed to ensure any records linking her father and grandparents to the MacKenzies were destroyed. Her mind flashed through any locations where records may exist.

Marcus promised he would wipe the other records. He'd already provided documents to allow the family to travel to the States under their new names, becoming the Kensies rather than the MacKenzies. That left only records within the castle.

Cate swiveled on her heel and made another trek across the sitting room. Her jaw dropped open as she recalled one place a written record existed and it wasn't in the office.

Cate gulped in a breath and hastened to the door leading to the foyer, starting down the hall across from her.

Her pace quickened as the library doors came into view. She pushed through them, finding the room empty. Her eyes focused on the object she sought across the room. On a pedestal, the family bible stood open.

Cate raced toward it, flipping it closed before she flicked open the cover. Transcribed on the blue-green fabric interior, the family tree sprawled across the inside.

Cate traced it from Douglas to her great-grandfather Lucas. A chill ran up her spine as she recalled reading this for the first time when she arrived at the castle.

A large inkblot had concealed any names below Lucas and Amelia's. Cate moved her finger down, finding the next two branches unobscured. She smiled down at the names of her grandparents and father.

They hadn't been erased from the family over an argument. They'd been blotted out for their own safety. Cate swallowed hard. And she had been the one to do it.

Cate squeezed her lips together as she hurried across the room to the desk. She tugged the middle drawer open and searched inside. A fountain pen clattered across the wooden bottom.

Cate's fingers fumbled to grasp hold of it. The cold metal pressed against her skin as her trembling fingers grasped it. She unscrewed it, pulling out the ink cartridge as she crossed to the Bible.

With a deep inhale, she turned the cartridge over and squeezed. Ink spilled through the pierced end and splattered across the page.

Cate stared down at the erased piece of history, her emotions mixed. The source of her consternation when she'd inherited the castle had been of her own doing.

As she contemplated the ramifications of the odd situation, the door creaked open behind her. Cate spun to face the entrance, expecting to find the children.

Her heart thudded in her chest as she recognized the figure sauntering into the room. Cate's breath caught in her throat as Gianna eased the door shut behind her and took one step closer to her.

Gianna's lips curled into a wicked smile as she cocked a hip in her colorful paisley dress and crossed her arms.

"Well, well, well, if it isn't the little mouse."

Cate set her features in a stony stare. "You won't win this time. My grandparents are already safe."

Gianna chuckled and offered a fake round of applause. "Bravo, little mouse." She stalked toward the desk and shuffled papers around, picking one up and studying it. "Though this really was just an exercise in futility."

Cate's features scrunched as she squeezed her fists, her nails digging into her palm. "What?"

Gianna flicked her gaze to Cate, narrowing her steely eyes. She shrugged and puckered her lips. “Your grandparents weren’t *that* important to me.” She offered a fleeting smile.

Cate swallowed hard as her pulse raced. She inched to the side, hoping to sprint across the room and through the door. The two leather armchairs she cherished so much in her time and a coffee table littered the path to freedom.

Her eyes lingered too long on the door, giving her intentions away. Gianna whipped a metal letter opener from the pencil cup on the desk. The steel glinted in the afternoon sunlight streaming through the windows.

“I don’t think so, mouse.”

Blood rushed through Cate’s ears as her heart thumped hard. Her throat went dry and she fought to steady herself. She couldn’t outrun her. She’d have to stay and fight.

CHAPTER 21



Cate's breathing turned ragged as her fight or flight instincts kicked in. Gianna wiggled the makeshift weapon at her.

"Too bad your guardian isn't here. It looks like the great Cate Kensie won't be a problem much longer."

Cate side-eyed the fireplace. Could she make it to the tools hanging on the opposite side? If she could, the poker would make a nice weapon.

As she lunged for them, Gianna charged toward her. She caught her by the forearm, wrenching Cate back and away from the tools she desperately sought to protect herself. The letter opener sliced Cate's arm as they struggled.

"Uh-uh-uh," she chided, clamping down on Cate's flailing arms.

The doors to the library burst open as Cate continued to fight against Gianna's strong grip. Marcus thundered into the room, his features set in an angry stare.

Gianna retreated behind Cate, wrapping her arm around Cate's throat and dragging her backward. She held the razor-sharp letter opener to Cate's throat.

"I wouldn't do anything hasty, Marcus. I will kill her."

"And then I will kill you. I wouldn't risk it, Gianna."

Cate struggled against Gianna's grip, unable to free herself.

"I understand you completed your little mission here. Bravo, though I'm looking forward to the next stop. Aren't you?"

Cate grasped Gianna's forearm as she tried to pull it away. Her face pinched at the statement. "Which is where?" she questioned.

Gianna's muscles tensed for a moment at Cate's statement. Her head cocked, pressing against Cate's. She offered a sharp chuckle. "Oh, ho, well, what's this? The little mouse doesn't know?"

Cate gritted her teeth as Gianna tugged at her, forcing her spine to bend backward to stay upright.

"My, my, what a naughty boy we've been keeping things from our spouse, Marcus."

Cate's brow furrowed as she tried to follow the conversation. Was Gianna implying Marcus somehow knew her next move? But how? And why had he not shared it?

She cackled again. "Well, this is simply too delicious. Cate has no idea where I'm going next. But you do, don't you, old boy? You've known ever since you swiped that note from the desk in my flat."

Cate's muscles stiffened and she stared, wide-eyed, at Marcus.

"It couldn't be more perfect. And since you'll likely kill me before I can escape if I harm her now, I'll let you two sort this out. I'm sufficiently satisfied with the disappointment you'll witness on Cate's delicate little features when she realizes you've been lying to her." She giggled. "Maybe she'll even cry!"

Gianna unfurled her arm from around Cate's neck and shoved her forward toward Marcus. Cate stumbled ahead, crashing into him. He grasped her, holding her steady.

Gianna removed something from her pocket and tossed the letter opener aside. It clattered across the floor as she offered them a smirk. "Have fun explaining this little indiscretion to wifey-poo. See you at the next stop. Oh, and I expect to see *both* of you there." Her smirk intensified. "And then I'll tell you where we're keeping good old Jack. Toodles!"

She winked and waved as she rolled an object in her left hand. Cate gasped as she, once again, disappeared from sight.

She heaved a sigh of relief as Gianna disappeared. Her shoulders sagged and she squeezed her eyes closed for a moment.

Fingers wrapped around her forearm, turning it. "You're hurt."

"It's just a scratch," she answered, trying to stop herself from trembling.

Marcus removed a handkerchief from his pocket and pressed it against her wound.

“I’m fine, really.” She clamped a hand over the white fabric and tugged her arm away. She stared up at him for a moment. “Gianna was lying about you knowing where she was going next, right?”

Marcus flicked his gaze out the window, avoiding her stare. “Catherine—“

“Right?” Cate repeated, her voice rising an octave.

Marcus lowered his gaze for a moment before he answered. “No.”

Cate swallowed hard, her eyebrows shooting skyward. She sucked in a hard breath and fluttered her eyelashes as she tried to formulate a response.

“There is a reason,” Marcus began.

“Well, I’d love to hear it!” Cate shouted at him.

“You should not go on to the next time stop.”

Cate’s eyes went wide again. “That’s not your decision to make. And it’s not up to you to decide what I get to know and what you get to hide from me!”

“Catherine—“ Marcus tried again, shooting a frustrated glance at her.

She waved a finger at him. “No! No, you don’t get to do that. You lied to me! I asked you if you found anything in her office and you said no! Why?”

“Because you should not go on. I will take you home and I will go myself.”

Cate licked her lips, annoyance forming on her features as she shook her head, her gaze darting around the room as she formulated a response. “Gianna wants *both* of us there. She said that. We have no choice. And even if she didn’t, you don’t get to make all the decisions.”

“I will handle Gianna. We will get the information we seek, but you must—“

“What? Trust you?” Cate let out a sharp laugh. “You’ve got to be joking. You still haven’t explained why you lied to me about finding that note. How do you expect me to trust you when you keep hiding things from me?”

Marcus sighed and reached into his pocket. He withdrew a scrap of paper and held it toward her. As she reached for it, he tugged it back. “Are you certain you wish to know?”

Cate lowered her chin and gave him an unimpressed glance. “Of course, I want to know.”

She snatched the paper from his fingers and unfolded it. The date and location on it caused a shiver to snake up her spine. Black ink stood in stark contrast to the white paper. In script handwriting the note read:

September 20, 2013, 10:03 P.M.

Pine Hill Road and Route 53

Her muscles stiffened and her heart thudded in her chest. A warm, tingly sensation caused her knees to go weak and her skin to turn to gooseflesh.

“Now you can see why I kept it from you. There is no need for you to go to that particular date.”

Cate licked her lips as she struggled to hold back the tears brimming in her eyes. She sucked in a sharp breath.

“I have to go for Jack,” she said, her voice barely above a whisper.

“No, you do not. I will handle her.”

Cate shook her head. “I won’t risk it.” She sniffled, blinking away her tears before she glanced up at him, firming her jaw. “I’ll be fine.”

He stared down at her for a moment before he averted his gaze, staring out the window as he flexed his jaw. “Fine, though I do not consider this wise.”

“Noted,” Cate said as she stared down at the date again, preparing herself, “though I will again point out that you do not get to decide. You need to stop keeping things from me.” She waved the note in the air. “Even things like this.”

“I will always protect you, Catherine,” Marcus said as he approached her.

He wrapped his fingers around her wounded arm and tugged her other hand away. Fresh blood sprang to the surface as she removed the pressure. Marcus traced his finger up the wound.

Cate’s eyes widened as it disappeared, fully healed without leaving a trace on her porcelain skin.

Marcus glanced at her, catching her gaze. “Whether you like it or not.”

Cate stared up at him as he caressed her forearm. Her brow furrowed as a fleeting memory crossed her mind. Her pulse sped as she worried she may experience another temporalysis attack.

“What is it?” Marcus asked her.

The sensation passed and she relaxed. "I don't know. A memory or a vision. It was fleeting and it's gone now."

"Have you kept up with your dragon's blood?"

"Yes," she said with a nod, tugging her arm away from his grasp. "Anyway, it's gone. I suppose we should be going."

He nodded and she slipped her hand through his arm. He led her from the castle and back toward the house from which they'd come.

"How did you convince my grandfather, by the way?"

"I showed him what would happen if he did not comply with our request."

Cate considered the statement. "Which was?"

Marcus shrugged. "I do not know. Whatever he saw prompted him to make his decision."

Cate's face scrunched. "Are you saying you just showed him something? And you have no idea what it was and that did it?"

"Yes."

Cate blew out a long breath. "Whatever works, I guess."

They reached the house as the sun lowered in the sky. Cate's throat went dry as they entered the silence of the house. They climbed the stairs to the bedroom they'd arrived in.

Marcus eyed her. "Are you certain, Catherine? I can—"

"I'm sure," she interrupted with a slight nod. Her heart thudded and she felt anything but certain, but she pressed forward. For Jack, her mind added.

She pushed her shoulders back and squeezed her hands into fists.

Marcus gave her a slight nod before he took his usual stance to open the time portal. Within minutes, the air in the room ripped in a torrent around them and a black hole yawned in front of them.

Cate stepped forward into the blackness, heading toward a destiny she preferred not to face. She arrived on a grassy knoll. Stars twinkled in the dark skies above and a full moon painted the landscape in an ethereal glow.

A warm breeze fluttered the already-changing leaves, knocking some of them from their perch. They fell in a lazy dance to the ground below.

Cate scanned the horizon, spotting a crossroads in the distance below. Her heart ached as she stared at it.

Marcus arrived seconds later. His eyes flitted around their new surroundings before landing on Cate. She offered him a weak, faltering smile.

Tears filled her eyes even before she witnessed what she expected to happen on the date written on the paper.

Marcus reached for her and pulled her closer to him. “You should not have to endure this.” Her face pinched as the gesture brought the tears closer to sliding onto her cheeks.

In the distance, car lights meandered along the winding road toward the crossroads. Cate’s face twisted as she spotted them. A moment of panic surged through her and she wondered if she could change history.

Her eyes scanned the horizon, spotting another car careening along Pine Hill Road. Cate groaned, watching helplessly as the two cars approached each other, hidden from each other’s view by the large hill between them.

She pressed a trembling hand to her mouth as her emotions threatened to spill over. Tingling warmth surged through her before she stumbled back a few steps. As the cars approached each other, strong arms wrapped around her and pulled her close.

A tear slid down her cheek as she buried her face against Marcus’s chest, squeezing her eyes shut. Her fingers clutched at the expensive material of his suit. She squeezed her eyes tighter as a sob escaped her. His hand clamped over her ear, pressing her closer to him and muffling some of the night noises.

Time slowed as Cate counted the seconds until tragedy struck. Her muscles tightened and she squeezed his suit jacket tighter, twisting it in her hand. She struggled to keep her sobs under control. She considered opening her eyes but decided against it.

His arms held her tighter and she understood why. The hand over her ear failed to drown out all the night’s sounds. Her muscles went rigid as the sickening scrape of metal on metal tore through the air.

A wail escaped her lips. Marcus murmured something to her, but her mind failed to comprehend the words. A horn blared in the distance, breaking the otherwise silent night.

CHAPTER 22



Sirens screamed moments later. Cate peeled her eyes open but clung to Marcus. Tears stained her cheeks, and her breaths came in gasps.

She breathed in the thick, musky scent of his cologne as she swallowed hard. Marcus stroked her hair. The horn finally ceased its blaring. Red and blue lights flashed in the distance, painting the hills in eerie shades of toggling colors.

After a moment, she pulled away, sniffing. “I’m sorry,” she said.

“There is no need to be sorry, Catherine,” he said, keeping a firm hold of her.

“I’m okay,” she choked out, her shoulders heaving as she attempted to cease her sobbing.

“Catherine—” he began, when she collapsed toward him again, wrapping her arms around him. He stroked her hair again as she allowed her emotions to settle.

A car approached their location, its brakes squealing as it slowed to a stop and pulled to the side. Cate lifted her head, wiping at her tears.

“You made it!” Gianna said as she climbed from the vehicle and sauntered toward them. “I wasn’t certain you’d come.”

“Where’s Jack?” Cate asked in a low voice.

“Wouldn’t you like to know?” Gianna said with a smirk.

“You said—”

Gianna waved her hand in the air, her features turning stony. “I know what I said.” She relaxed, cocking a hip and crossing her arms. “Though I

suppose you deserve the answer I promised. After all, I am impressed you came to witness your own parents' fatal car accident courtesy of my esteemed colleagues, little mouse."

Marcus tugged Cate closer. Cate's lower lip trembled, and she worked to keep her jaw tight to stop her teeth from chattering.

"The location, Gianna, without your running commentary," Marcus said.

She pouted her lower lip. "Aww, so sweet. First, you lie to her, and then you play the hero." She shook her head at him. "Oh, how the mighty have fallen."

"I assure you I am still as mighty as ever," Marcus spat back.

A wicked smile formed on her lips as she toyed with a lock of her hair. "We'll see. August 11, 1810, follow if you dare." With a wink and a grin, Gianna disappeared from their sight.

Cate's eyes fell to the ground as Gianna disappeared and she gulped in deep breaths.

"We should return home and inform the others. They'll make their stand in 1810. That's where we'll find Jack."

Cate bit her lower lip and nodded.

"Are you ready?"

Cate blew out a long breath and nodded again.

"Let's get you home." Marcus stretched his arms out in front of him and opened the time portal.

Cate stepped through it, landing near the back garden of Dunhaven Castle. Without waiting, she hurried toward the castle. Her emotions threatened to overwhelm her again as the events replayed over and over on a loop in her mind.

The cool evening air caressed her skin as she reached the side of the castle and trudged up the path toward the front. Marcus arrived behind her and called out to her. She did not stop or answer. Instead, she concentrated on holding herself together. The task took all of her energy.

"Catherine!" Marcus called again as she rounded the corner. She squeezed her lips together, holding back a sob as she hurried toward the front door and pushed into the foyer.

Celine and Damien emerged from the hall leading to the library as she burst through the door. They slowed to a stop, staring at her as she crossed. Michael joined them seconds later.

“Hey, Cate,” Damien said, his voice slowing as he studied her pinched features.

Marcus hurried through the door behind her. “Catherine!”

Cate ran up the stairs, her chest tight.

“Marcus, what happened?” Celine questioned.

“Yeah, man, what d’you do to her?” Michael asked.

“I just need a minute,” Cate choked out as she hurried up the last few stairs and disappeared down the hall. She sprinted through the halls with a palm clamped over her mouth. Tears clouded her vision as she raced for her suite. She burst through the doors, closing them behind her as she leaned on them and let more sobs escape.

She slid to the floor and pulled her knees to her chest, burying her head.

A light knock sounded on the door behind her. “Hey, Cate?” Damien’s voice questioned. “Everything okay?”

“Yeah,” Cate called through the door in a shaky voice.

“Can I come in?”

“Just a second,” Cate said, wiping at her tears and scrambling to her feet. She sucked in a trembling breath as she pulled the door open.

Damien lifted his eyes to her, suppressing a wince. “Hey. You seem really upset. I just want to be sure you’re okay.”

“I’m fine,” Cate squeaked out. She pressed her lips together as she tried to control her emotions.

Damien offered her a consoling smile. “You don’t look fine, Cate. And that’s okay.”

Cate’s forehead crinkled as she nodded, tears forming again. She shambled a few steps away and sank onto her chaise. Damien followed her.

“You’ve got a lot going on. With Jack missing, that’s enough to bring you to tears. And having to time hop with Marcus, well—“

Cate leaned forward with her elbows on her thighs and scrubbed at her face. “It wasn’t his fault.”

Damien lifted his eyebrows and nodded. He rubbed the back of his neck. “Okay, well, that’s good. Umm, I don’t know what else could have happened. Is it the temporalysis?”

Cate shook her head. “No. The dragon’s blood has kept the symptoms in check, thankfully. But...” Her voice trailed off as she parsed through the words.

Damien eased onto the chaise next to her and placed a hand on her shoulder gently. "You don't have to tell me if you don't want to."

"It's okay." She wiped at a tear that had rolled down her cheek. "Gianna, she... she kept going to different places in time and we were following her." Cate rolled her finger in a circle as she mimed the time-hopping.

"What times did you visit?"

"Umm, we started in 1955 where you found the Business Summit. And then she went to 1965 and we followed her. And then she—" Cate sniffled and wiped at her face as she choked back a sob.

Damien rubbed her shoulders as she continued. "She said she'd tell us where they had Jack if we went to the next location."

"And did she?"

Cate offered a jittery nod. "She did." Cate clutched the edge of the chaise, digging her nails into the velvety fabric.

"Okay, that's good, right? We can go there and get him."

Cate's face fell as she tried to nod. She covered her eyes with her hand. "I'm sorry," she said after a moment.

"Cate, what's wrong? Is it Jack? Did she say something happened to him?"

"No," Cate answered with a sob in her throat. "It was the last location she made us go to."

"Okay," Damien prodded.

"It was the moment of my parents' car crash."

Damien's shoulders sagged and he shook his head. He rubbed Cate's shoulders harder. "Cate, I am so sorry."

"It's okay," she hiccupped. "I just...I just need a minute. It hit me harder than I thought even though it's been years, and—"

"There's no need to explain," Damien assured her. "I can't imagine having to witness my parents' crash. And they died over two decades ago."

Cate snapped her head to him, her eyes red and puffy. She sniffled and pressed a tissue to her red nose. "Your parents—"

Damien nodded. "Died in a car accident when I was five, yeah."

Cate reached out and grabbed his hand.

"And I can't imagine being forced to watch it happen and being anywhere near as composed as you are right now."

“Ha,” Cate barked. “I’d hardly call this composed.” She motioned to her tear-stained cheeks and her red, splotchy face.

“Way more composed than I’d be, I promise.” He grinned at her.

She returned his smile and dabbed at her eyes with the tissue. She blew out a long breath. “We got a clue to Jack’s location, though. We need to focus on that.”

“You can take a minute, Cate. Why don’t you lay down for a little while? We’ll brainstorm the next move and have it all ready when you come down.”

Cate squeezed his hand and sniffled. “It’s okay. I want to be part of it. I need to be part of it. I just needed a minute.”

“Okay, cool. Whenever you’re ready.”

“Just let me splash some cool water on my face.”

“Sure thing.”

Cate disappeared into her bedroom. She spotted the music box on her nightstand and crossed to it. She wound it and set it down as she shuffled to the bathroom. She glanced in the mirror and winced at what stared back.

She ran the cold water and splashed it onto her skin. Her eyes stung as the water hit them. She squeezed them closed as she pressed her towel against her skin. Her head ached and her stomach rumbled.

Exhaustion coursed through her as she hung the towel on her towel bar and shambled into her bedroom. The tinkling music floated across the room. She closed her eyes and let it wash over her. After a moment of listening, her muscles relaxed and she felt more at ease.

She opened her eyes and continued into the sitting room.

Damien tapped his palms on his knees and rose from the chaise. “Ready?”

Cate offered him a slight smile and nodded. “Yeah,” she said just above a whisper.

Damien wrapped an arm around her shoulders as she approached and they wound through the halls and down the stairs, heading to the library.

He swung the doors open in front of them. Celine, Michael, and Marcus stiffened as the doors opened and Damien strode in with Cate.

“She’s okay,” Damien reported, keeping his arm around her as he guided her to the leather armchair.

Cate sniffled as she sank into the supple leather. Marcus poured a brandy and crossed the room, holding it out for her. She accepted it with a

meek “thanks.”

He circled around the chair, letting his hand rest on her shoulder. She reached up to grab it, her fingers lacing through his. Celine perched on the other leather chair. She eyed their hands for a moment, her eyes narrowing slightly at them.

She licked her lips before she spoke. “Marcus said you were able to learn a little about Jack’s location.”

Cate nodded. “Yes,” she answered with another sniffle before she sipped at her brandy.

Damien perched on the arm of Celine’s chair. “That’s great. Where? When?”

“1810,” Marcus answered.

Michael scoffed at the date as he paced the floor. “That’s it? That’s pretty vague.”

“August 11, she said,” Cate added.

“Did she give you a place?” Celine questioned.

Cate shook her head as Marcus slid his fingers from hers. “Yes.”

Cate snapped her gaze to him, her brow furrowed.

“More or less,” Marcus added. “Several key members of The Agency will be in Germany at that time.”

Cate glanced behind her at Marcus. “So, we start in Germany?”

Marcus nodded. “Yes. I’d stake my life that he is there.”

“Germany’s a big place,” Michael said as he paced the floor. “Can you be any more specific?”

“I do not know which Agency members specifically will be there. That would help us identify the places to check.”

“How can we find that?” Damien questioned.

“Maybe there are some records—” Cate began.

“No,” Marcus interrupted her. “We will need to travel to 1810 and search from there.”

“But that could take months!” Cate exclaimed, leaping from the chair. “Or longer!”

“She’s right,” Michael said as he continued his pacing.

Marcus shook his head. “No.”

“No?” Michael questioned. “Care to elaborate.”

Marcus leaned against the mantle, a smirk on his lips. “We shall make them come to us.”

Cate arched an eyebrow, sinking back into her chair. Michael ceased his pacing, his eyes narrowing at the man. Damien's eyebrows squished together. A slight smile formed on Celine's lips and she shook her head.

Marcus raised his eyebrows. "We're going to throw a ball."

CHAPTER 23



Cate crinkled her nose at the plan. “So, your plan is to go to 1810 and throw a party?”

“Exactly, dear,” Marcus said.

“And how does this help?” Cate asked.

“Marcus’s family is quite well known in Germany,” Celine explained.

“A ball at Rosenberg Palace is an event not to be missed.”

Marcus bowed his head at her.

Celine sucked in a deep breath. “It isn’t a half-bad plan, Marcus.”

“Once we learn who is there, we will find Jack. And once we find him, we can retrieve him.”

Cate licked her lips and bit into her lower one, the corners of her mouth turning upward. They were so close. Hope filled her. Damien grasped her forearm and squeezed.

“It must be a concerted effort,” Marcus added.

“We’ll all need to go,” Celine said with a nod.

“You should start in Dresden and travel to Rosenberg,” Marcus said to Celine. “A contingency of Agency members arrive there on August 11.”

“All right.”

“Observe and nothing more. We do not know the full extent of those who will meet later that month and we do not want to frighten them into closing ranks.”

“Understood,” Celine said with a nod.

“Catherine and I will travel straight to Rosenberg.”

Cate took another sip of her brandy before she set the glass on the coffee table and rose again. "Should we go now?"

"No, you should get some rest. We shall travel tomorrow."

"We'll handle getting everything together," Celine said, grasping her arm and squeezing it. "Get some rest."

"I'd like to help," Cate said.

"We know, Cate," Damien said as he climbed to his feet. "But you should rest. You've done all the hard work so far. You deserve a break."

Cate offered a weak smile and grabbed Celine's hand and then Damien's. "Thank you."

She lifted her chin and glanced at Michael. "And thank you."

"You're welcome," he said with a smile. "Get some rest."

She nodded and twisted toward Marcus. "Good night, Catherine."

"Good night. And thank you." She placed her hand on his forearm, her fingers lingering there for a moment as she smiled up at him.

She collected Riley and Bailey and retreated to her suite. She rubbed at her stinging eyes as she slipped her shoes off. With a tired sigh, she peeled her dress off and pulled on her pajamas. Cate sank onto the edge of the bed and stared blankly ahead.

Riley nudged her with his nose. She turned to stroke his head, pulling Bailey toward her, too. They brought a smile to her face.

"I really should try to sleep, boys, though I'm not sure if I can." She stroked their soft fur. "We're one step closer to finding Jack."

Riley cocked his head at the name. "Yeah!" Cate exclaimed. "Jack! We're going to get him tomorrow." She blew out a long breath. "At least I hope so."

A quiet knock sounded at the door to her suite. "That's probably Damien checking on me. I was a wreck before."

She climbed to her feet and shuffled across the sitting room after pulling on her robe. She swung the door open, finding Marcus on the opposite side.

"Hi," she said, surprised by his presence. "Is everything okay?"

"I've come to ask *you* that question."

Cate studied him for a moment as Riley bounded from the bed and hurried toward Marcus. He leapt onto his hind legs, staring up at him.

Marcus glanced down at the small dog before scooping him up. "Hello, Riley," he said, tracing his finger down the dog's head before he returned his gaze to Cate, raising his eyebrows to prompt her to answer.

“I’m fine,” she said.

“Will you be able to sleep?”

Cate lifted a shoulder. “I hope so.”

Marcus studied her for a moment. “Use the music box.”

She nodded. “Okay.”

He stared at her for another moment, his hand absentmindedly stroking Riley’s fur. “Good night, Catherine. I hope you sleep.” He handed Riley to her with a smile.

She offered him a nod and a closed-mouth smile as she shut the door. She shuffled back to her bedroom, setting Riley on the bed and perching on the edge next to her nightstand.

The small piano-shaped music box sat silent. Cate caressed it before she twisted the winding key.

Sweet music filled the air. She sat for another minute listening to it before she slid between the sheets. After flicking the light off, she stretched out in bed. Her mind whirled as she squeezed her puffy eyes closed.

She focused on her breathing, allowing the music to fill her mind. She concentrated on every note until she finally drifted off to sleep.

* * *

Cate thrashed in the sheets as images flitted across her mind. The sapphire blue of a dress flowing in the breeze. The glint of the diamond and sapphire necklace. A mirrored hallway. Music.

Cate experienced the sensation of spinning. The spiraling soon became dizzying. The music distorted, turning disturbing. Waves of nausea passed over her and her head ached at the temples.

With blind eyes, she searched for somewhere to lie down. Her fingertips brushed the soft fabric of bedcovers. Cate clung to it, pulling herself onto the bed. She closed her eyes and sucked in a deep breath.

Her eyes squeezed tighter as pain shot up her leg. The pain intensified until she opened her mouth in an unrestrained scream.

Cate shot up to sit, gasping for breath. She grabbed at her leg where, moments ago in her dream, she’d experienced the most agonizing pain she’d ever experienced in her life.

She flicked the light on and pulled her pant leg up, searching for a wound. Her skin remained unblemished.

It must have been part of her nightmare. She sank back into her pillows, switching the light off. It had seemed so real. Riley lazily climbed to his feet and wandered up the bed to snuggle next to her. Cate let her fingers caress his fur as her mind whirled.

She hoped the nightmare would end soon, though she worried it was just beginning.

* * *

Sunlight streamed through the tall windows. Cate squinted against it as her eyes fluttered open. She laid still for a few moments, her mind acclimating to her surroundings.

The music box tinkled away on her nightstand. Her gaze flicked around and she blew out a sigh as she recognized her bedroom. The events of yesterday flooded back to her, including the time-hopping to multiple eras.

Her forehead pinched as she recalled their final stop. The realization that The Agency had murdered her parents dredged up more emotions than she had been prepared to handle. Tears threatened again and Cate pushed herself up to sit, refusing to give in to the sweeping sadness that could eat her up.

Instead, she swung her legs over the side of the bed and slid her feet into her slippers. She'd focus on moving forward. On finding Jack. They were so close. They just needed to execute their plan. She hoped to be reunited with him soon.

She went about her morning routine, focusing on bringing Jack home. As she zipped up her boots, the odd nightmare from the previous night crept into her mind. She touched her leg where the pain had been before she dismissed it from her mind and tugged on her boot.

After a walk with the dogs, she pushed into the kitchen. The cinnamon scent of baking snickerdoodles rose from the oven.

Mrs. Fraser and Molly both studied her as she entered. "How are you, Lady Cate?" Mrs. Fraser inquired.

"Okay, thanks. Those cookies smell delicious."

Mrs. Fraser offered her a tight-lipped smile. “Fresh batch for the work today.”

Molly wrung a tea towel in her hands. “Have they found anything?”

Cate swallowed hard, trying to formulate a response. She wanted to give them hope, but not if it would be dashed. Cate licked her lips before she began to nod.

“Y-yes,” she stammered out.

“Lady Cate!” Molly exclaimed, tossing the towel in the air. “That’s great news!”

Cate nodded, a tight-lipped smile on her face.

“Is something wrong, Lady Cate?” Mrs. Fraser asked.

“No,” Cate assured her. “Just trying not to get my hopes up too much. We may still have some work ahead of us.”

Mrs. Fraser squeezed her lips together in a stern expression. “Was that what was bothering you last night?”

Cate furrowed her brow.

Molly tilted her head, a concerned expression crossing her features. “Your friends told us you went to bed early because you were exhausted.”

“The Englishman said you should not be disturbed,” Mrs. Fraser said, throwing her shoulders back and wagging her head. “As though we’d disturb you!”

“I’m sorry, Mrs. Fraser. I’m sure he—“

Mrs. Fraser shook her head and waved Cate’s comment away before she finished. “I suppose it’s fine. He seems very protective of you. Just like we are.”

“Anyway, yes, I was exhausted. It feels like I lived through days instead of hours. I just needed some rest. Especially with the plans to follow up on the lead today.”

Mrs. Fraser grasped Cate’s shoulders and stared at her. “If you need any help, Lady Cate, you know where to find us. And I mean that for more than just biscuits.”

Molly approached and rubbed Cate’s arm. “Yeah. You can’t take this all on yourself. If you need anything, Lady Cate, just ask.”

Cate smiled at them both. “Thanks. We’re all going to track this lead from two different angles, so we should have it handled. But thank you.”

Mrs. Fraser offered a tight-lipped smile and a nod. “But not before your breakfast! We’ll have it up in just a moment.”

“Thanks, Mrs. Fraser,” Cate said. “And do you mind if I leave the dogs with you while we travel?”

“Not at all. Molly and I will take good care of them. You go and don’t worry about a thing. Bring Jack home. And we’ll be here waiting, giving the pups lots of treats.” At the last word, Riley cocked his head and Bailey sat at attention.

“They’ll be in good hands, then,” Cate said with a chuckle. She strode from the room.

As she reached the door, Molly’s voice stopped her. “Where’s the lead?”

Cate twisted back to face her, her hand clutching the door jamb. “What?”

“Where’s the lead you’re tracking?”

Cate flicked her gaze between the two women, both of them waiting for her answer. She swallowed hard and forced a fleeting smile onto her face. “Germany.”

Molly’s jaw dropped and her brow furrowed in confusion. She shot a glance to Mrs. Fraser, who matched her expression. Cate took the opportunity their stunned silence gave her to hasten from the room and up to the dining room.

Damien and Celine already waited inside. Damien’s face lit up as she slipped into the room. “Hey, Cate! Good morning.” He leapt from his chair at the table and pulled a chair out for Cate. “Did you get any sleep?”

Cate nodded as she sank onto the cushion while he eased the chair behind her. “I did. And I’ve informed Molly and Mrs. Fraser we’re following up on a lead today.” Cate ran her fingers along the chain of her pocket watch pendant. “Gosh, I hope I didn’t give them false hope.”

“We’ll find him, Cate,” Celine promised.

Cate smiled and nodded at her, clinging to the certainty hinted at in her statement. Marcus strode into the room moments later. Michael followed him, still strapping on his watch.

“Good morning, Catherine,” Marcus said. “Did you sleep?”

“I did, thank you,” Cate said. “I’m ready for today.”

The conversation dropped off as Molly and Mrs. Fraser delivered their breakfast. “And good luck today,” Mrs. Fraser said before she excused herself from the room.

Cate waited for the door to swing shut behind them before she spoke. “Once we see who is in Germany, how will we track Jack?”

“We shall begin with the most obvious places based on those who attend. They have certain strongholds, places he’d be more likely to be kept,” Marcus explained.

Cate nodded as she stirred her oatmeal before eating a spoonful. “And then what?”

“That depends,” Marcus answered.

“On?”

“On where he is and how easily we can get him back.”

Cate nodded as she stared at the swirls in her oatmeal. Her leg bounced up and down as she considered the task ahead. So close, yet they still seemed so far. Celine’s words echoed in her mind and she clung to them again. They would find him.

As they continued their breakfast, a knock sounded at the door. Marcus rose from the table, waving Cate back to her seat. “That would be Dembe.”

He disappeared from the room as Cate hurried through the last bites of her meal. She wiped at the corners of her mouth before she rose from her chair, discarding the napkin on the table.

The others followed her lead. She made her way to the foyer, finding the front door already closed.

“Library, probably,” Celine said.

Cate nodded and led the group down the hall, finding Marcus and Dembe in the library as Celine suggested.

“There you are. Clothing for our journey. We shall meet here and proceed to 1810 in one hour.”

Dembe distributed the clothing and they went their separate ways to change.

Cate closed herself in her suite with the dress box in her hand. Her stomach somersaulted and she wondered if her oatmeal may make a reappearance in an unwelcome form.

She forced herself to cross through her sitting room and bedroom and into the bathroom. She pulled her hair into an upswept style before she wandered back into the bedroom.

As she jiggled the top off the box, the music box began to play across the room. Cate stared at it for a moment before she tugged the top off the large dress box. A cream-colored dress lay inside. Green, gold, and orange embroidered details trimmed the sleeves, bust, and bottom.

She pulled the garment on and fastened it, settling the empire waist into position. With a glance in the full-length mirror, she blew out a long breath. "I'm coming for you, Jack," she whispered before she tugged up the long train and hurried from her room.

Cate snaked through the halls, her heart in her throat, and descended the back stairs, making her way to the library.

Marcus awaited her. He smiled at her as she entered the room, studying her up and down. "You look quite lovely, dear."

"Thank you," Cate said, feeling color rising in her pale cheeks.

Michael strode in a few moments later, tugging at his collar. "Man, I hate the past."

"Get over it, buddy, you'll live," Damien said as he strode in. Celine followed in a dress similar, though much plainer than Cate's.

"Are we ready?" Marcus inquired.

"Yes, I think so," Cate answered, eyeing the others for confirmation.

With nods from everyone, Marcus offered his arm to Cate. They strode from the castle to the back garden. He eyed Celine, Michael, and Damien. "I will open one portal for you to Dresden. Once that closes, I shall open the portal for Catherine and myself."

Cate nodded and stood back as he opened the time portal for her time-traveling companions. As the wind whipped around them and the black hole yawned open, Celine, Michael, and Damien entered, disappearing into the blackness.

Marcus lowered his hands and the portal snapped shut. He twisted to face Cate. "Ready, my dear?"

Cate nodded and Marcus repeated the procedure, opening another time portal to 1810. Cate stepped into the black hole, stepping forward until she met bright sunshine.

CHAPTER 24



Cate's features pinched as she spun in a circle, scanning her surroundings. She expected to appear in a hidden room inside a castle or somewhere on its grounds. Instead, she stood in an alley in some unknown city.

Marcus appeared moments later. She slipped her hand around his arm and he led her forward.

"Where are we?" she inquired.

"Zurich," he answered as they approached a black carriage, drawn by four jet-black horses.

Dembe stood near the coachman, who held the door open.

"Has the missive been sent as directed?" Marcus inquired as Cate climbed into the conveyance and settled into the seat.

"Yes, Duke. It has been sent as instructed."

"And arrangements have begun?"

Dembe gave him a silent nod. Marcus's lips formed a fleeting smile and he climbed into the carriage. The coachman closed the door behind them. The carriage wobbled as he and Dembe climbed up to the coachman's seat. A whipped crack and the carriage lurched forward.

Marcus smiled at Cate as she stared out the window, watching the buildings of 1810 Zurich pass by her window.

She'd never traveled to the city in any time period before. In fact, she had rarely traveled outside of the States before her move to Dunhaven. She

found the foreign city's streets and buildings fascinating regardless of the era.

The coach slowed to a stop, still surrounded by the cityscape. Cate ducked her head to glance out at their surroundings as Marcus alighted from the carriage. She switched her view to the opposite window, studying the man with whom Marcus spoke. The carriage swayed as Dembe disembarked to join the discussion.

She did not recognize the man. Graying temples accented his jet-black hair. His sharp features offered him a sinister appearance. He spoke a few words to Marcus, bobbing his head up and down and waving his hands in front of him in what appeared to be an assurance of some kind.

Marcus gave him a nod as the door to the home behind him opened. A blonde woman hurried out, sidling to the dark-haired man and slipping her hand through his arm. She offered a demure smile, batting her eyelashes at Marcus.

Her big blue eyes, high cheekbones, and full lips reminded Cate of someone. Marcus nodded to her and she spoke a few words to him before he shook his head.

Disappointment filled her full features and her shoulders sagged. She flicked a gaze away from him, her icy blue eyes landing on Cate in the carriage. She crinkled her brow and tilted her head, snapping her gaze back to Marcus. Her face pinched as she spat out a few words at him, waving her hand toward the carriage.

Marcus spoke a few words to her before returning his attention to the man. He offered a few more words before he spun on his heel and strode back to the carriage.

"I shall ensure it is done!" the man called behind him.

"See that it is, Theodore. I do not tolerate failure as you well know," Marcus said over his shoulder before he climbed aboard.

Dembe returned to his seat and the carriage lurched forward again. The blonde remained outside as they pulled away, her icy gaze and pinched features glaring at them.

Cate swayed with the movement of the carriage for a moment before she spoke. "Problem?"

"No," Marcus said. "Mr. VanWoodsen will be keeping track of several things for us to make finding your gardener easier."

Cate bit her lower lip, allowing the reference to Jack to slide, as she parsed through the words. “The woman seemed agitated.”

Marcus offered her a half-smile. “You are very observant, Catherine.”

Cate stared at him, awaiting more of a response, but fearing she would not receive one.

“That was Celine’s sister, Celeste. She was less than impressed that I am traveling with another woman.”

Cate’s lips parted as realization struck her. “Oh, that would explain why she looked so familiar.”

“Yes, the Devereaux women share a certain beauty.”

Cate nodded. “Yes, she looks very much like Celine. They’re both extraordinarily pretty.”

The buildings thinned, giving way to the countryside. Cate settled back in her seat as the city faded away. “How long will it take to reach Rosenberg?”

“The better part of the day. We shall arrive in the late afternoon.”

Cate smiled and nodded as she settled into her seat, content to watch the countryside pass her by as they continued along their journey. The German landscape soon filled her window. She stared out at the green hills, thick with lush trees. The bright sunshine painted the countryside in a cheery, idyllic light, reminding her of a landscape painting.

After a midday picnic, they climbed back into the carriage and continued along their way. As Cate climbed into the conveyance, she spotted trunks loaded onto the back. Her brow furrowed at them. They had not traveled with luggage before. Why were they traveling at all, though, her mind questioned? Marcus said he could open a portal to any location. Why did he not open one inside his own castle?

Cate concluded the meeting with Celine’s sister and the man she presumed was her husband must be the reason. She hoped Celeste’s disdain over Marcus’s traveling companion did not ruin any plans of finding Jack.

As the carriage sprang to life and the countryside rolled past, she concluded it would not. Marcus indicated that her visions of the future centered around some important moment. It had to be when they found Jack or when she reunited with him.

The dress in her visions, the one she’d found in the tower room, fit with this time period. She must reunite with Jack, perhaps at the ball, while wearing the dress. She clung to the hope.

As the sun lowered in the sky, they continued past rolling green hills and small towns. Cate glanced out the window, her eyes sweeping over the picturesque scenery. A large hill rose in the distance. Something appeared to sit atop it. Cate ducked for a better view as they approached.

Her lips parted as the carriage closed the distance and she spotted a massive sprawling castle atop. Its many towers and turrets rose high into the sky. Flags and banners waved from the top. A few fluffy white clouds floated below the castle. It towered on the tall hilltop over the surrounding lands.

Cate arched an eyebrow at the impressive, fortified castle, flicking a gaze to Marcus. "Is that Rosenberg?"

"Yes," Marcus answered. "We should arrive within the hour."

"That's quite an impressive castle," Cate said as she settled back in her seat.

Marcus smiled at her. "Oh, I nearly forgot." He dug in his pocket and produced a gold band. "You'll need this again."

Before Cate could reach for the shiny object, Marcus took her left hand and slid the ring onto her third finger. She pulled her hand away, staring at the object for a moment before she directed her gaze out the window as the carriage tilted backward.

They had begun the winding climb to the towering palace on the hill. The climb took over forty-five minutes in total. As they approached the final stretch, Cate eyed the castle. A contingency of people waited at the entrance.

She assumed the staff had been summoned to welcome Marcus to his family's estate. A woman stood separate from the others. Her bright red dress stood in stark contrast with the tan stones of the castle. The thick fabric and gold embroidery along the edges of the dress suggested she was not a servant.

The carriage eased to a stop and swayed as the coachman leapt from his perch and tugged open the door. Marcus stepped out of the conveyance. The woman approached him, opening her arms in an embrace.

Marcus kissed her cheek in greeting. "Hello, Mother."

Cate's eyes went wide. "Mother?" she breathed.

"You are looking well," Marcus said as his mother held him out at arm's length to inspect him. Her flawless ivory skin still held a youthfulness despite the few streaks of gray in her blonde hair.

Cate stared down at the gold band glinting off her ring finger. Her heart pounded and her stomach turned over.

“As are you,” his mother answered. “Marriage agrees with you. I am looking most forward to meeting your bride.”

Cate cringed at the words. “Oh no,” she whispered. “This can’t be happening.”

Marcus’s hand slid inside the carriage. Cate swallowed hard, her limbs going weak and warmth flushing over her as she slid her hand inside his. He tugged her forward and she climbed down from the carriage, swallowing hard as the woman, a pleasant smile on her face, eyed her.

Cate plastered a smile on her face as her mind scurried to recall appropriate protocol. The woman was a duchess, she should curtsy. No, her mind corrected, if she was married to her son, the duke, she was the duchess. The woman would be a dowager which meant she was not the current duchess, so she did not need to curtsy. At least she hoped.

“Mother, this is Catherine, my wife. Catherine, my mother, Anna.”

Cate’s insides jiggled as she stepped forward, the smile still plastered on her features. She offered a demure, “Hello.”

Anna pulled her into a warm embrace. “Welcome to Rosenberg Palace, dear.”

“Thank you.” Cate stepped back, trying not to fidget as nervous energy coursed through her. She had not expected this. On top of finding Jack, she had not anticipated meeting her mother-in-law. Fake or otherwise. She was a terrible conversationalist. The woman, once a duchess, would likely wonder what her son ever saw in her to warrant marriage. How would they manage to search for another man while keeping up the ruse of a newly married couple?

Cate’s mind spun out of control as the conversation continued around her.

“She is very lovely, Marcus. I look forward to getting to know you better while you stay.”

Cate offered a nervous chuckle, glad that Marcus picked up the conversation.

“Have preparations begun for the ball?”

“Yes,” Anna said as she led them toward the entrance. “Though, really, Marcus, we mustn’t discuss it now. Surely, Catherine is quite tired after the journey.”

Cate offered her another smile, wondering if she may have lost her voice. She cleared her throat and squeaked out a “yes.”

Anna squeezed her arm and offered a knowing smile. “Of course, you are, dear. I’m certain you’d like to settle in and rest. I trust you can lead her to the sapphire room without badgering at her about the details of the upcoming celebration of your nuptials, Marcus?”

“Of course, Mother.”

Anna offered another pleasant smile at Cate before she stalked away. Cate relaxed her stiff muscles as Marcus led her up a curving staircase. They disappeared into a wide hallway devoid of any doors.

Cate caught her breath from the encounter as they passed by the tall, round columns holding the tall ceiling high above them. “Do you remember how we discussed not springing things on each other?”

“Yes,” Marcus answered.

“That was one of those moments that should have been discussed,” Cate scolded.

“I fail to see how I’ve sprung anything on you.”

Cate halted near a life-sized bust of a woman in a tiara sitting atop a pedestal, her eyebrows high. “Some warning that I was about to meet your mother would have been appropriate. And also, you said a ball, not a wedding celebration.”

“Semantics,” Marcus said as he pulled Cate’s arm around his elbow and continued down the hall.

“How are we going to manage this *and* find Jack?”

He tugged one corner of his mouth upward in a half-smile and wiggled his eyebrows at her. “Do not worry, Catherine, I am very talented.”

Cate offered him a wry glance.

“The simple fact is, while a ball at Rosenberg may be an event not to be missed, under the circumstances, we may not gather everyone we hoped.”

“How does our fake marriage fix that?”

“No one would miss a wedding celebration, particularly mine.”

“Well, ours,” Cate pointed out. “You’ve dragged me into this, too.”

“Dragged? You seemed to come willingly.”

“That was before I knew there was a mother-in-law and wedding ball involved.”

“Mother seemed most intrigued by you.”

“I’m sure,” Cate said, rolling her eyes at the statement and her own behavior. “The three words I managed to get out probably captivated her.”

Marcus chuckled as they arrived at an ornate door. Ivory decorations trimmed the ivory double doors. Marcus pulled them open and pushed open the interior doors before leading Cate into the massive suite.

Sapphire blue walls adorned in ivory and gold rose to high decorative ceilings. A blue chaise trimmed in ornate woodwork stretched in front of a massive fireplace. A sitting area with a love seat and two chairs were expertly arranged near a tall window overlooking the picturesque landscape below.

Through another set of double doors, a four-poster bed rose on a pedestal. Thick sapphire blue velvet curtains framed the large bed. A writing desk was tucked in the corner across from the bed. A full-length mirror stood opposite it.

Cate’s breath caught in her throat. Beyond the room’s stunning decor, she recognized it. This was the room from her visions. This was the room that would lead to her monumental event.

Cate stepped forward, biting her lower lip as she took in the space.

“Are you pleased with it?” Marcus inquired.

“It’s beautiful.”

Marcus narrowed his eyes at her. “But?”

Cate twisted to face him, tearing her eyes away from the intricately detailed ceiling. “But nothing.”

Marcus approached her and pushed back a wayward curl in her upswept style. “Something is churning in your mind.”

“This is the room I’ve been seeing in my visions.”

Marcus nodded. “Then the temporalysis is nearing its end.”

Cate agreed with a nod and a tiny smile. She waved her crossed fingers in the air. “Let’s hope!”

He stared down at her for a moment, a smile playing across his features. “I suppose I should leave you to rest before Mother scolds me.”

The statement elicited a chuckle from Cate. The man who seemed to have no boundaries still preferred not to anger his mother. “Okay.”

“I shall have your trunks sent up along with your ladies’ maid.”

Cate nodded at the statement as he turned on his heel and strode from the room. She ran her hand across the luxurious fabric of the chaise, her

footsteps echoing off the marble floor. Her neck twisted as she scanned the large room. It made her beloved suite at Dunhaven look shabby.

The entire castle outdid hers, she reflected as she shambled into the bedroom. The opulence in its design and decor outshined anything she'd seen before.

Her fingertips caressed the polished wood of the writing desk. Her heart skipped a beat as she recalled the vision of her writing the note she'd found in the music box.

Cate scanned the room in search of the small item, but she did not spot it. Had she received the music box in this time? She bit her lower lip as a chill passed over her and she shuddered.

She pulled her hand away from the desk and crossed to the mirror. She stared into it, almost expecting to see herself clad in a sapphire dress. Instead, the reflection of her cream-colored dress stared back.

The normalcy eased her tense nerves. The room did not transform in front of her eyes. No visions plagued her. Hopefully, she'd recognize the important life moment and push past her temporalysis soon.

CHAPTER 25



A light knock sounded on her door, pulling her thoughts away from their meandering path through her mind.

“Yes?” she called, hoping it was not Marcus’s mother.

“Your Grace?” a voice answered. “May I come in?”

The voice sounded familiar and Cate stepped away from the mirror and through the large opening into the sitting room. “Yes,” she called out again. This must be the ladies’ maid Marcus mentioned.

A familiar blonde pushed into the room, her clothing and hair changed to fit the era. A smile spread across Cate’s face. “Andrea!”

Andrea curtsied to her with a smile. “It is a pleasure to serve you again, Your Grace,” Andrea said.

“How did you get here?” Cate asked.

“After you expressed your approval of me, His Grace explained to me the abilities he possesses and the lives you lead. I’ll admit I was intrigued yet did not believe it entirely. He offered me the role of your ladies’ maid and I happily accepted. I hope you are pleased.”

“I am, very,” Cate said, still smiling.

“His Grace felt it may settle your nerves to have a familiar attendant. And do not fret, I have spent my days waiting for the call, studying the prominent styles of each time period as instructed by His Grace. I hope to be indispensable to you.”

“His Grace was correct. I am so pleased you are here.”

Andrea clasped her hands in front of her and nodded with a slight smile. “Your trunks should arrive in just a few moments and I shall unpack them. Is there anything you require first?”

Cate began to shake her head when another knock sounded. “That must be the trunks,” Andrea said, scurrying to the door. She tugged it open and stepped aside. A maid scooted into the room, a large tea tray spread between her outstretched arms.

The young woman kept her eyes lowered as she slid the tray onto the table. “Tea, Your Grace,” she said with a curtsy.

“Thank you,” Cate answered.

The girl gave her another curtsy before disappearing from the room. Andrea already poured the steaming liquid for Cate, handing her a cup balanced on a saucer.

Cate accepted, added sugar, and sipped at the sweet, warm liquid. The trunks arrived as Cate sank into the chair. She studied the delicate rose pattern on the china as men hefted several trunks into the room.

Andrea heaved the first open and pulled a dress from it, studying it before carefully refolding it as she glided across the room and into the bedroom, heading for the wardrobe. Cate rose from her chair and pulled the next dress from within the chest.

“Oh, Your Grace! Please allow me,” Andrea said.

“I could help,” Cate offered.

Andrea guided her back to her chair and eased her into it. “Drink your tea. You must be exhausted after your travel.”

Cate raised her eyebrows at the statement, marveling at the level of luxury to which the Northcotts must be accustomed.

As Andrea pulled another dress from the trunk, Cate began to wonder how many days Marcus planned to be here. She had hoped the search for Jack would be swift, but by the number of clothing items emerging from the trunks, she worried she’d be in 1810 far longer than she anticipated.

She sucked in a deep breath before finishing her tea and nibbling on a biscuit. Andrea finished the task as Cate finished her biscuit. She found herself missing Mrs. Fraser’s shortbreads, though she could not complain about the taste of her current selection.

Andrea returned to the sitting room and clasped her hands in front of her. “Would you care to take a walk around the property before you retire for the evening?”

“Oh, umm,” Cate hesitated.

“The Dowager Duchess’s ladies’ maid said the gardens are quite lovely in the summer months and she pointed out several paths you may enjoy exploring.”

Cate’s mind whirled. Her introverted nature drove her to seek solitary time. She glanced through the towering, peaked window. The allure of exploring the idyllic scenery won over her tendency to shut herself away.

“I would love to view the gardens briefly,” she said, rising from her chair.

Andrea smiled and led Cate from the room and through the wide halls and downstairs. They exited through a side door into a large walled garden. The gravel crunched under their feet as they wound through the perfectly manicured bushes, hedges, miniature trees, and flowering plants.

Cate lamented the era before cell phones, wishing she could snap a picture of the lovely gardens to share with Mr. Fraser. Though she wasn’t certain how she would explain her presence in a German castle’s gardens on her search for Jack.

“It is quite lovely, isn’t it, Your Grace?” Andrea said.

“Yes,” Cate agreed. “And most unexpected in this location.”

Cate studied a row of several bushes as they meandered along the paths. She approached the large flowering growth, her fingers caressing the dark purple flower. She pressed her nose to the deep purple bud and sniffed the sweet scent.

“I’ve never seen purple roses before, have you?” Cate inquired of her companion. Andrea did not respond. “Andrea?” Cate twisted in search of her ladies’ maid.

Andrea stood several yards away, eyeing a nearby bush. Between them, Marcus stood, a slight smile on his face.

Cate straightened as she eyed him. “Marcus.”

He strode toward her, his hands clasped behind his back. “Good afternoon. Enjoying the gardens?”

“Yes,” Cate answered. “I’ve never seen purple roses before. They are very pretty.”

Marcus eyed them, reaching out to touch one of the flowers. “They grew wild here before the castle was built. My mother’s family insisted they become part of the gardens.”

“Is that the reason for the name Rosenberg?”

“Yes. Quite literally, it means—“

“Rose Mountain,” Cate said.

He smiled at her as he tugged a rose from the plant. “Correct.” He offered her the flower.

“Thank you,” she said, accepting the violet bloom.

He offered his arm, and they strode through the gardens. A cool breeze tickled Cate’s bare skin as she leaned against the low wall to stare out over the vast landscape below. The sun lowered toward the horizon in a brilliant fiery ball, casting dusky blue, purple, and pink hues across the sky.

A chill swept past her again and she drew her arms closer to her.

“Are you chilled, dear?” Marcus inquired.

“A little. I should go. I wouldn’t want your mother to scold me for not resting.” She offered him an amused grin.

Marcus removed his jacket, slipping it around Cate’s shoulders before he began to lead her back to the castle. “Mother will not scold you, but rather me for dragging you about the castle’s gardens.”

Cate arched an eyebrow and chuckled as she sniffed at the rose she held. “I hope to make it back to my suite before she catches us.”

“For my sake, yes,” he answered with a laugh.

They rounded the corner, the doorway coming into view. Andrea waited patiently, her hands clasped in front of her dark uniform.

“I shall leave you in Miss Evans’s capable hands,” Marcus said as he clasped her hand in his. “Good night, Catherine.”

“Good night.” Her lips curled into a slight smile before he let her hand go.

Andrea ushered her into the castle. “Did you enjoy your walk, Your Grace?”

“I did, yes. Oh, I’m sorry to have left you. I didn’t expect Duke Northcott to be there.”

“Quite all right, Your Grace. I am so pleased you were able to enjoy the gardens with His Grace,” Andrea said as she guided Cate through the halls and back to her suite.

Cate slipped Marcus’s jacket from around her shoulders as she entered.

“I shall see that this is returned to His Grace as soon as I have you settled. He is such a gentleman, Your Grace. You are a lucky woman.”

Cate smiled at her as she studied the purple rose in her hand. “Yes, he is quite well-mannered.”

“I shall fetch water for the rose.” Andrea grabbed an empty vase from the long table against the wall and flitted from the room. Cate wandered to the large window, twirling the violet bloom between her fingers. She stared out over the darkening landscape. Another day had come to a close with no sign of Jack. Perhaps tomorrow would bring more information.

Andrea returned with the vase and Cate dropped the rose into it. “I shall place it on your night table, Your Grace, so you can view it as you fall asleep and when you awaken in the morning.”

With a smile, Andrea carried the crystal vase with its single rose into the bedroom and placed it near the bed. She readied Cate’s nightclothes before she signaled to remove Cate’s dress.

As she tugged it over her head, she said, “Are you very tired from the travel?”

“A little,” Cate answered. “The carriage was quite rough at times, though I found the scenery breathtaking.”

“Indeed. The palace sits on a picturesque spot. It reminds me of a painting.”

“Yes, I thought the same.”

Andrea’s gaze flitted to the purple rose after she tugged the nightgown down to the floor and held out her robe.

“The purple roses are very beautiful.”

“I have never seen roses that color before,” Cate admitted.

“Neither have I. And how romantic for His Grace to pick one for you.”

Cate adjusted the robe as she sat at the vanity. Andrea loosened her hair and brushed it. “Has he always been so romantic?”

Cate paused for a moment before answering. Apparently, when Marcus had explained their time-traveling lifestyle, he had not informed her their marriage was a sham. She scrambled for an answer, settling on, “Yes. As long as I have known him, I’ve found him quite drawn to extravagant gestures.”

Andrea smiled at her through the mirror. “The diamond necklace was stunning.”

Cate nodded in agreement as Andrea set down the brush. “Finished. Is there anything else, Your Grace?”

“No, that’s all, thank you.”

“Would you like me to fetch you something to read?”

Cate stood and stretched. “No, thank you. I think I will go to sleep. I’m more tired than I realized.”

Andrea dipped into a curtsy with a smile as Cate climbed into bed and settled into the pillows. “Good night, Your Grace.”

“Good night, Andrea.”

The woman flitted from the room, leaving Cate to stare at the darkening sky through the window and ponder where Jack may be in the vastness of the German landscape expanding beyond her window.

* * *

Cate’s eyes flitted open the following morning and she stretched and climbed from her bed, pausing at the window to admire the sun rising over the valley below. She pulled the cord on the wall as she tugged her robe around her. Moments later Andrea scurried into the room, carrying a tray.

“Good morning, Your Grace. I have your breakfast. Would you care to eat it before dressing or after?”

“Umm, before, please,” Cate said as her stomach rumbled.

Andrea slid the tray onto the table as Cate eased into the chair. “I shall prepare your dress for the day whilst you eat.”

Cate sipped at the hot tea before biting into her toast.

“Did you have a dress you preferred?” Andrea called from the other room.

“The cream and brown, please,” Cate answered. “Have you seen Duke Northcott this morning?”

“I have not, Your Grace. Would you like me to fetch him?”

“Perhaps wait until after I’ve dressed. I do not know his plans, but I should like to speak with him.”

Cate hurried through the meal and within the hour, Andrea had her dressed and ready for the day with her hair swept up and her dress expertly fitted around her. Andrea finished tying the bow in the back before she fussed with the frilly sleeves.

“I shall send for His Grace,” Andrea said with a slight curtsy.

“No need. I’ll go looking for him.”

“One of the stable hands was readying a carriage this morning if that helps.”

“Thank you,” Cate said as they exited into the hall. They parted ways and Cate wandered down the wide hallway, hoping she recalled the way to the foyer.

She found the two sweeping staircases leading down and hurried down the many steps as the sound of horses neighing floated through the halls.

Marcus emerged from a hallway below as she stepped onto the marble floor.

“Catherine, good morning. Did you sleep well?”

“Yes, I did, thank you. Are you leaving?”

“Yes, I have business to attend to.”

“Regarding Jack?” Cate asked as they stepped into the warm morning air.

“Yes,” Marcus answered as the coachman whisked the carriage door open.

“I’ll go with you,” Cate said.

Marcus opened his mouth to speak when the front door burst open again. Anna strode from inside.

“Good morning,” she greeted them with a pleasant smile. “Off already?”

“Good morning, Mother. Yes, I have several things I must attend to.”

“Please do not tell me you are dragging poor Catherine with you?”

Cate’s eyes widened at the statement. “Oh, I volunteered. I do not mind,” Cate assured her.

Anna slipped her arm around Cate’s elbow. “Nonsense. There is nothing so boring as to sit in the carriage drumming one’s fingers against the seat whilst your husband conducts business.”

“Oh, but—” Cate protested when Anna waved her hand in the air.

She flicked her fingers at Marcus to shoo him into the carriage. “I will not hear of it. Marcus, be on your way. Catherine and I shall take tea together. I would very much like to get to know you better, dear.”

Cate’s eyes widened further and she shot a panicked glance at Marcus. He offered her an amused smile. “Enjoy your tea, dear.” After kissing a stunned Cate on the cheek, he climbed into the carriage.

Anna tugged Cate toward the door. The carriage pulled away, dashing Cate’s hopes to escape the situation.

Anna led her into a large sitting room, decorated in burgundy hues and released her arm at the loveseat, circling the coffee table and sinking onto

the couch across from her. She motioned for Cate to sit.

With a hard swallow, Cate sank to the cushion, remembering to keep her posture straight. The task was not difficult, given her tense muscles. A maid arrived with a tray of tea moments later and disappeared shortly after she gave them both a curtsy.

Cate returned Anna's smile as the woman poured tea into a delicate china cup adorned with purple roses. She poured her own cup, dropping a sugar cube into it and pouring in cream. After stirring the mixture noiselessly, she picked up her cup and saucer and focused her attention on Cate.

Cate swallowed hard again under the woman's scrutiny.

"And how was your first night in the palace?" Anna inquired before lifting the delicate china cup to her lips.

"Very well, thank you," Cate answered. "The room is beautiful."

"Did you have any trouble sleeping?"

Cate sipped at her tea before settling the cup into the saucer with a clatter. She chided herself for being so careless, though her hands were on the verge of trembling. "No," Cate said with a shake of her head.

"Oh good. I often find myself restless after a long day in the carriage."

"I took in the gardens last evening before I retired. They are very beautiful."

"Yes, I saw you and Marcus from my balcony," the woman said with a Cheshire Cat grin.

Cate's mind reeled at the statement. The woman seemed protective of her son. Not good, she assessed.

"I had never seen purple roses before. They are very unique and beautiful."

Anna offered a polite smile. "Yes, they have been here since before Rosenberg was built. My ancestors found them quite lovely and built the garden around them."

"Has your family been at Rosenberg for very long?"

"Seven generations. From the time the land was gifted to my great-great-great-grandfather, the first Duke of Rosenberg, by the Kaiser."

"What a rich history," Cate answered. So, Anna had married laterally, and her family ranked similarly to the Northcotts. Even worse, Cate's mind ruminated. After seven generations of Dukes and Duchesses gracing these halls, her son had married a common American. The woman must be

disappointed in his choice, particularly if she had known of his engagement to Celine, a marquis's daughter. And if she ever found out they were faking this for the purposes of finding another man... Cate's thoughts broke off as she felt Anna's eyes upon her.

Anna sipped at her tea, her eyes peering at Cate over the rim. Cate cleared her throat and sipped at her tea again.

"Biscuit?" Anna offered, holding out a tray of flat square cookies.

"Thank you," Cate answered, accepting them.

"And how did you meet Marcus?"

Cate's mind searched for a lie as she used chewing the cookie as a stall tactic. She settled on a misleading truth. "Oh, we were introduced through mutual friends at a dinner party."

"Were you in Europe at the time?"

"Scotland," Cate said, figuring it was true.

The door behind Cate opened and a maid flitted in, carrying a white box in both hands. She offered it to Anna before curtsying and scurrying from the room.

Cate sipped at her tea, avoiding eye contact. As she glanced up, she found Anna's eyes on her again. A smile spread across the woman's face. "This is for you, dear. A gift. I ordered it the moment I read Marcus's letter announcing his marriage. Then I fretted over it. Though I suppose it is appropriate. I hope you fancy it."

Anna slid the box across the table toward Cate. Cate set her teacup on the table and retrieved the proffered box. "Oh, you didn't have to," she said. "But thank you."

"Of course, I had to," the woman argued as Cate set the small box on her lap. "I have a new daughter-in-law!"

Cate untied the mauve ribbon around the box and slipped the top off. Inside, nestled in paper, was the piano-shaped music box. Her heart skipped a beat as she spotted the small object. The music box she had grown to love had been a wedding gift from her fake mother-in-law.

"Oh, it's lovely!" Cate said as she pulled it from the box.

"Do you find it so? I did. Then I fretted you may not enjoy music. It's musical, you see. There is a knob on the side."

Cate twisted it and opened the piano's lid. The familiar tinkling tune filled the air.

“Though,” Anna continued, “I suppose if you did not like music, you may just keep it closed.”

“I do enjoy music and I am very smitten with this little box.”

“Oh, how lovely. I am so pleased. I must admit, I was not at all sure what to expect when Marcus wrote to me.”

Cate’s stomach twisted into a knot. Here it came. The disappointment over his choice. Rather, his fake choice. Though Anna did not know their marriage was a sham. She believed her son had stooped low enough to marry a common American. Cate bit her lower lip as she settled the music box into its package and slid on the lid, setting it aside.

Cate recalled Mrs. Fraser’s initial reaction to her inheriting Dunhaven Castle. While the woman had warmed to her since, her first sentiments of disappointment, disapproval, and being called a “crass American” whirled through her mind.

Cate swallowed hard and raised her eyes to the woman. “Duchess,” she began.

“Oh, please, dear, call me Mother.”

Awkward, Cate thought, though she forced a smile onto her lips and pushed the word out. “Mother,” she said as she retrieved her teacup, “I realize I am not what you expected in a daughter-in-law.”

Anna slid her eyes closed and flicked her hand in the air. Her eyelashes fluttered open as she spoke. “Allow me to stop you there, Catherine.”

Cate swallowed hard, fighting to stop her lower lip from trembling.

CHAPTER 26



Cate settled into silence, awaiting the inevitable lecture and expression of disappointment. She hoped it may be followed by a promise to try to get along for Marcus's sake.

"When I say you are not what I expected, please know I do not mean it in a negative way. Quite the opposite, in fact. I am pleasantly surprised."

Cate flicked her gaze from the china pattern to the woman across from her. She wore a broad smile.

"You are quite lovely. I have not seen a genuine smile on my son's face in quite some time, though you have managed to elicit one. That pleases me. And you are a vast improvement over the last woman he brought to Rosenberg."

The statements stunned Cate into silence. She had not expected this level of acceptance, nor their farcical marriage to make such an impression. And then the last statement. What sort of women did Marcus bring to the palace? Perhaps he had paraded many here. His social standing would make it easy for him. Was he similar to her great-great-uncle Lorne who brought questionable women home all the time?

Anna winced before continuing. "I do not wish to be indelicate, however, you should be aware in case it comes up from some ill-mannered busybody. You do realize Marcus was engaged to Marquis Devereaux's daughter for several years, don't you?"

"Oh, yes," Cate said with a nod, "yes, I am aware."

Anna offered a wistful side-glance as she smashed her lips together in a half-frown. "A most disappointing choice."

Cate's mind reeled as she took the last few sips of her tea. The very beautiful Celine, daughter of a French Marquis, was a disappointing choice?

"The dreadful woman brought out the worst in Marcus." Anna flicked her gaze to Cate and smiled as she lifted her teacup. "It is clear you bring out the best."

Cate's mind parsed through the statements. Anna must have picked up on Celine and Marcus's tumultuous relationship. Specifically, Celine's lack of interest in her son regardless of his peerage or their engagement status.

Cate offered a nervous, but warm smile as worry filled her that they would not be able to continue their charade, particularly after Celine arrived.

Before she could speak again, the doors burst open a third time. A maid carried in a small black-and-white dog, cupped carefully in her arms.

"Oh, there you are, my darling," Anna said, reaching for the small pup. She lifted the dog from the girl's arms, a broad smile on her face as she pulled it close. With a kiss on the pup's nose, she wrapped the small animal in her arms and held it close to her chest.

"Oh, I hope you do not mind Athena."

Cate set her teacup down, a genuine smile forming on her features. "Not at all. I like animals, especially dogs."

"How refreshing you are. Athena is almost as important to me as Marcus. Perhaps more so," she said with a chuckle. Cate joined her in laughter, connecting with the sentiment. She felt the same way about Riley and Bailey.

"Athena had pups several weeks ago. Perhaps you'd like to see them."

"I would love to," Cate answered.

Marcus's arrival interrupted their conversation. He strode into the room and poured himself a cup of tea.

"Back so soon? I trust your business went well," Anna said to him as she cuddled Athena.

"Yes, it did. And I hurried home to see how your tea was going."

"Quite well, darling. You needn't have rushed. We are getting along swimmingly."

"I see," Marcus said with a wink and a smile at Cate.

“Catherine expressed an interest in seeing Athena’s pups. Could you take her, dear, or are you off again?”

“I would be happy to. I am home for the day. I could not bear to be away from Catherine for a moment longer.”

Anna stood, still stroking the small dog in her arms. Cate followed her lead, rising from her seat as Marcus set down his teacup.

“Oh, leave the box, Catherine, I shall have your ladies’ maid fetch it and deliver it to your room.”

“Thank you,” Cate said as she slipped her hand around Marcus’s arm.

Marcus led her from the room and down a long hallway. “That seemed to go well,” he said as they strolled.

“You’re laying it on a little thick, aren’t you?” Cate inquired.

“Mother loves you.”

“That only makes me feel worse for being so disingenuous.”

“Who is being disingenuous?”

Cate crinkled her eyebrows at his statement. Rather than follow up, she changed the subject. “Did you find anything out about Jack?”

“No, but I have several things in place so we can find him quickly after the ball.”

“Which is when, by the way?”

“Tuesday.”

“Tuesday!” Cate exclaimed, grinding to a halt. “It’s only Sunday!” Cate groaned. “That’s two days away! Two more days of fooling your mother, who, by the way, doesn’t seem to be easily fooled.”

Marcus raised his eyebrows as they turned a corner. “It should not be a problem for you, Catherine. As I said, Mother loves you.”

“Until she figures out we’re not really married. And,” Cate continued, “she does not seem to like Celine at all. When is she arriving?”

“Tomorrow,” Marcus answered as he pushed through a doorway into another room.

“That ought to be interesting.”

“I am not looking forward to it. Mother detests Celine.”

“No kidding. She said as much. How are we going to explain this?”

“Leave it to me,” he said as they approached a makeshift pen in the middle of a large room. “Mother simply would not have Athena’s pups in the stables.”

Cate glanced down into the cordoned-off area, spotting several small puppies scurrying around. They ranged from brown and white, to gray and cream, to black and white like Athena.

Cate squatted down to pet one as it ran past. The brown and white speckled puppy frolicked across the space. Cate smiled after him when a small tongue licked her fingers. She flicked her gaze to the new puppy vying for her attention.

A smile spread across her face and she scooped the small black-and-white dog into her arms, rising to stand. "He's so cute," she said as she stroked his tiny head.

She cuddled him close as Marcus tickled his chin.

"He reminds me so much of Riley! He's got a feather-like tail just like him. Similar markings. And look, he's even got the white streak down his head. It's almost identical!" She glanced at the pup's face closely. Her smile faded, replaced by a confused expression.

She snapped her gaze to Marcus. She flicked her gaze back to the small pup in her arms. He stared up at her with dark, almond-shaped eyes, offering her a lick on the cheek.

She shook her head slowly. "No. It can't be." She returned her gaze to Marcus. "Can it?"

"Can it be what, dear?"

"Never mind, it's ridiculous." Cate set the tiny dog down in the pen. He scurried around and stood on his hind legs, staring at her.

"He likes you," Marcus said, scooping him up and stroking his fur. He handed the dog back to Cate.

Cate rubbed his tiny head. "Sorry, buddy, I won't be getting a dog for another two centuries."

"He'd be happy to wait."

She flicked her gaze back to him and cocked her head. "Are you saying... Marcus, is this Riley? *My* Riley?"

Marcus offered her an amused smile.

"Are you kidding?"

"Mother was very pleased that you took one."

"But...He...I..." Cate stammered.

Marcus lifted the dog from her arms and gave him a pat before returning him to the pen. "The side effects of time travel can be very confusing."

“How did you know where to take him?” Cate asked as they strolled from the room.

“The Agency is a constant threat to you, Catherine. It was imperative that someone kept an eye on you.”

Cate stopped walking, her jaw agape and her eyes wide. “For how long?”

“As long as you needed it,” Marcus said.

Cate stood in stunned silence again.

“Come along, Catherine, we should take in the gardens before we dress for dinner.”

After a walk through the gardens, Cate joined Marcus and Anna for dinner. The conversation flowed easily with Anna in the lead, though Cate found it difficult to continue lying to the woman. Her pleasant demeanor and obvious goal to make Cate feel welcome caused guilt to course through Cate’s veins.

The sensation continued as she returned to her suite for the night. As Andrea slipped her robe around her, her eyes fell onto the piano music box sitting on her night table.

Andrea noted her gaze. “What a lovely gift, Your Grace. Was it from His Grace?”

“No, from the Dowager Duchess.”

“Oh, how lovely.”

“Yes, very much so.”

“Would you like me to wind it for you before I go?”

“No, I can do that. Thank you, Andrea. And good night.”

Andrea curtsied and hurried from the room. Cate sank onto the edge of her bed and caressed the small music box before winding it and setting it on the nightstand. She slipped under the covers, blowing out the candle and plunging the room into darkness.

The music box tinkled away as the pale moonlight filtered into the room. Cate rolled over to stare at the music box, limned in moonlight. Their search for Jack was leaving a larger footprint than she expected. And causing more ripples in the pond than she’d bargained for. What else would they alter as a result of their search?

* * *

Morning light streamed through Cate's window as Andrea put the finishing touches on her hair.

"The seamstress is coming today for the final fitting for your gown. The Dowager Duchess's ladies' maid reminded me earlier," Andrea said.

"Oh, I hadn't even thought of it."

"Are you very excited about the ball?"

Cate considered the question. From what she had gathered from her temporalysis visions, the major event her mind attempted to recall in fragmented bits and pieces occurred at the ball. She'd have confirmation if the dress the seamstress brought today matched with the one she'd found in her tower room.

What would the event be? Would it be Jack's return? Or at least learning his location? Either way, she anticipated the event with great interest.

"Yes," Cate admitted. "I am."

Andrea tugged open a drawer and pulled out a string of pearls. "I found these in the trunk and thought we could use them in your hair."

Cate recalled the fleeting vision of herself in the full-length mirror. Her elaborate hairstyle had been decorated with pearls. "That would be lovely, Andrea, yes."

Andrea nodded and grinned at her. "I shall show the dressmaker in as soon as she arrives."

"Thank you." Cate rose from the vanity and crossed to her nightstand. She wound the music box and strolled with it toward the window.

A knock sounded at the door before it opened a crack. "Catherine, may I come in?" Marcus inquired.

"Yes," Cate called.

"Good morning," he said as he strode toward her. "How are you this morning?"

"Good, thank you."

Marcus lowered his eyes to the music box still clutched in her hands. "Mother will be pleased you are enjoying her gift."

Cate gazed down at it. "I do. Very much. I understand why I left myself the note." She flicked her gaze to the writing desk. "Oh, which I still need to write. This back and forth is so confusing."

"I have no doubt you will grow used to it in time."

Cate's features scrunched at the statement. Marcus changed the subject before she could question it.

“Celine, Michael, and Damien will arrive later this afternoon.”

“Oh, good,” Cate said. “Do you think they’ll have any news?”

“Some, though I would not expect them to have stumbled upon Jack’s location.”

Cate nodded and bit her lower lip, attempting to temper her hope.

“We will find him. You have my word.”

Cate smiled up at him. “Thank you.”

Another knock sounded at the door, interrupting any further conversation. “Your Grace, the dressmaker has arrived.”

“I shall leave you to your dresses, dear,” Marcus said as his mother strode into the room with another woman in tow. Marcus kissed Cate’s cheek before he stopped to offer his mother a kiss, then disappeared from the room.

Cate closed the music box lid and slid it onto the nightstand.

“I am so pleased to see you with the music box, Catherine,” Anna said. She introduced the seamstress, Frau Wagner, who had already prepared a gown.

“With a few minor adjustments, it will be perfect for your ball,” Frau Wagner said. “Shall we try it?”

Andrea stepped forward to accept the dress the woman produced from a garment bag. In a stunning sapphire blue silk with embroidered accents, Cate’s heart fluttered as she recognized the dress she’d found.

She stared at it in the full-length mirror as Andrea finished fastening it. A smile crept across her face as she studied it. This was the dress. The ball must be the moment she envisioned. What event would be that meaningful to her?

“It is quite lovely, Your Grace,” Andrea said.

“Yes, it is,” Cate murmured.

“Come out, dear, so I may make adjustments,” Frau Wagner said.

Cate strode into the sitting room in the dress. Anna clapped her hands together and bit her lower lip. “Oh, Catherine, it is lovely. You are a vision.”

Color rose in Cate’s cheeks and she dipped her chin downward, gazing at the beautifully colored fabric. “Thank you.”

“And the fit is quite good,” Frau Wagner said, pinching the fabric in a few places and tugging at it in others. “Just a few minor adjustments and it shall be perfect!”

She waved to an assistant, speaking in German and requesting what Cate assumed to be pins as the woman rushed forward with them. Frau Wagner pinched and pinned a few places then shooed Cate away to remove the dress, informing Andrea to be mindful of the pins.

Cate returned in her day dress as Anna poured tea. The ladies chatted about ball details, Anna's dress, and a few of the guests before the morning waned. Frau Wagner departed in the early afternoon with the promise of the perfected dress to be delivered by mid-morning tomorrow.

As her carriage pulled away, another trundled up the winding path. Marcus strode from inside.

"Good, you're both here."

Anna raised an eyebrow at him.

"We have guests arriving," Marcus said, motioning to the carriage approaching.

It rounded the last bend and the horses trotted toward them, silencing Anna's question. The carriage pulled to a stop and the coachman dismounted, pulling the door open.

Michael stepped out first, adjusting his jacket as he climbed down. He smiled and stuck his hand out to Marcus before he took Cate's hand.

"Welcome to Rosenberg, Mr. Carlyle," Marcus said. "Of course, you remember Catherine, my wife. Mother, this is Michael Carlyle, a business associate. Mr. Carlyle, my mother, the Dowager Duchess Northcott."

"Duchess Northcott," Michael said with a bow.

Damien followed from the carriage behind him. "And his brother, Damien Carlyle."

Damien greeted everyone before he returned to the carriage and offered his hand to the final passenger.

Celine disembarked from the carriage and took a step forward. Next to Cate, Anna's posture stiffened. She raised her chin and narrowed her eyes at the blonde.

"Mother, you remember Celine Devereaux, now Buckley."

"Duchess," Celine said with a brief curtsy.

Anna's features turned stony. "How could I forget?" She spun on a heel to face the palace. "Marcus, a word."

"As soon as I show our guests to their rooms."

"I trust one of the maids can handle the task."

Cate swallowed hard at the icy greeting and the curt words Anna spoke. She recalled Marcus's statements yesterday. Obviously, he had been correct.

Cate bit her lower lip as Marcus said, "Of course, Mother." He directed his next statement to the group. "Will you excuse me?"

"Of course," Michael said.

"What's that about?" Damien inquired as they disappeared into the house.

"Marcus's mother and I do not get along very well," Celine said. "She's quite a difficult woman."

Cate crinkled her brow at the statement. Before she could follow up on the conversation or invite them inside, fingers wrapped around her hand and tugged her forward.

She turned to find Anna pulling her toward the door. "Come along, Catherine. There is no need for you to remain outside with *them*."

Cate allowed herself to be led into the house, offering a wave to the others. "I apologize for my son's poor judgment," Anna said as she dragged Cate through the halls. "I assure you it will not stand under this roof while I draw breath."

Cate shot a wide-eyed glance at the woman next to her. A purple-red flush colored the Dowager's fair skin and her jaw tensed.

Cate swallowed hard as they paraded through the halls. "I apologize, but I believe there must be some mistake."

"Oh, there has been a mistake. Marcus has made a grave error."

She tugged Cate along and into a private sitting room where Marcus awaited her. Cate jumped as she slammed the door shut behind them.

"Just what do you think you're doing, Marcus?" Anna demanded. "How dare you invite that woman to stay under this roof. The same roof as your new bride."

"Mother—" Marcus tried.

She flung her arms outward. "I will not have it! I simply will not stand for it! If Celine Devereaux has come crawling to you unhappy with her choices, you should have sent her straight back to the man she chose. Do not forget, Marcus, how unhappy she made you for years. Do not endanger your newfound happiness for that woman."

"I—" Marcus tried again.

Anna waved a finger at him. "Do not speak back to me until I've told you you may."

Marcus sucked in a breath, his frustration obvious.

Cate flicked her gaze between the two of them, interjecting a comment before Anna could continue berating her son. "I'm sorry but I feel I must be the one to apologize," Cate said.

Anna grasped her hand and patted it. "There is nothing for you to apologize for, dear."

Cate shot a glance to Marcus, then back to Anna, flipping her hand over to grasp the woman's hand. "There is, I'm afraid. You see, Damien Carlyle is quite a close friend. He handled several things for me after my parents' deaths. I invited him. It turns out, by pure chance, his cousin is Celine Devereaux. I did not realize she was traveling with him. I had already extended the invitation before we spoke yesterday. Had I realized the extent of the difficult relationship, I never would have done so."

Anna studied Cate's face. Cate bit her lower lip. "I am very sorry," she added.

Anna flicked her gaze to Marcus who raised his chin as he awaited her response. Anna returned her attention to Cate. She wiggled her shoulders back and cupped Cate's cheek in her hand.

"There is no need to apologize. You couldn't have known the difficult situation." She shot a glare at Marcus. "I shall do my best to welcome them for your sake."

"Thank you. I appreciate that very much and again, I—"

Anna pressed a finger to Cate's lips to stop her third apology. She squeezed Cate's hands in hers and shot an icy glance at Marcus. "You are lucky your wife is so gracious."

"Indeed, Mother," Marcus agreed.

She wagged a finger at him. "Keep yourself in line, Marcus. And steer clear of Celine Devereaux."

Marcus nodded as she spun to storm from the room. Cate blew out a sigh of relief as she pulled the door closed behind her.

Marcus strode toward her. "You handled that well."

She fixed her gaze on him. "I hope so. I really don't want your mother angry at me."

"Frightening, isn't she?"

Cate giggled. "You'd better stay in line, then."

"I would not dream of stepping out of it and risk angering both Mother and my new bride."

Cate chuckled at him again as she slipped her arm around his elbow.

“Shall we visit our controversial guests and determine what they’ve learned?”

“Yes,” Cate agreed.

Marcus led her on a rambling journey through the palace. He had apparently housed them in rooms as far as from his mother as possible, Cate figured, as they arrived at a plain door. Marcus knocked at it. Michael pulled the door open seconds later, waving them inside.

They entered the tastefully decorated room, small yet comfortable.

“Hey, Cate,” Damien said with a warm smile. “That was some greeting! I hope everything’s okay.”

Cate nodded as Celine flopped onto the small armchair and sank her chin into her palm. “Your mother is as pleasant as ever, Marcus.”

Marcus shot her a glance. “She seems perfectly pleasant with Catherine.”

“Lucky Cate,” Celine shot back.

Cate blew out a soft breath and focused her attention on Damien. “Have you learned anything about Jack?”

“We haven’t found anything about his location,” Damien answered. “But we did track a few individuals who may be of interest.”

“What are the names?” Marcus inquired.

“Lord Mountbatten was in Dresden,” Celine answered.

“And a fellow by the name of Archduke Hansen,” Damien said.

“Among others,” Michael said, rattling off several more names.

Marcus clasped his hands behind his back and strode to the small window to gaze out. Cate followed his trek across the room.

“Anything promising?” Cate inquired.

“We can rule out Hansen, I doubt he’d dirty his hands with this.”

“Anyone else?”

“We should keep an eye on Mountbatten, Williams, Hanscomb, and Ivanov. Any of them or all of them could be involved.”

Michael nodded. “Will they attend the ball?”

“Of course. Even Archduke Hansen will attend, but do not waste your time with him. Focus on the other four.”

“Okay, sounds like a plan,” Michael said. “We’re all over it.”

“Should we each concentrate on one of those four? Between all of us—” Cate began.

“No,” Marcus interrupted. “You will have enough on your plate as the new bride. The others will need to monitor all of them.”

Cate lowered her gaze to the floor as she considered the statement’s implications and her lack of skills to handle it.

“We’ll handle it, Cate,” Damien assured her. “We’re so close!”

Cate glanced up to smile at him. Marcus passed between them and grasped Cate’s arm gently, spinning her toward the door. “We should leave them to settle in,” he said, swinging the door open.

“I think we’ll skip dinner,” Celine grumbled. “For everyone’s sake.”

“See you tomorrow, Cate,” Damien said with a wave.

Cate waved at him as Marcus tugged her into the hall.

“Oh, Cate,” Celine said as she stepped to the door to pull it closed, “I wouldn’t mention Jack around here too much before Anna isn’t quite so pleasant to you either.”

She pulled the door shut, closing out Cate’s view of the room. Cate drew her chin back at the acrid statement from the normally pleasant Celine.

Marcus drew her further down the hall. “Do not let Celine’s enmity with my mother perturb you.”

“Well, I don’t want to upset her. Your mother, I mean. Celine seems to be upset already. I won’t mention him to her.”

“I have every confidence that even if you did, it would be with the utmost tact, and Mother would not bat an eyelash.”

Cate sighed as they strode down the hall. She had caused so much strife. So much tension existed because of her insistence on time traveling to help her ancestors. She had caused Jack’s disappearance. She had exposed him to Gianna and her shadowy organization. And she continued to cause ripples through time even now.

“Is something wrong, Catherine?”

“I’m sorry,” Cate choked out, her eyebrows pinching as her eyes clouded with tears.

“Whatever for?”

“All this disruption. This is all my fault.”

“None of this is your fault.”

Cate did not answer. Marcus stopped walking and grabbed her shoulders. “None of this is your fault.”

Cate nodded without making eye contact with him.

“Ignore Celine’s tantrum. She and Mother are like oil and water.”

Cate’s mind spun as she considered the difficulty she’d thrust upon everyone. No, she thought, Gianna had thrust it on them. They would get through it. She would find Jack.

She reached up and clasped his hand in hers and flicked her gaze up to him, offering another nod.

“Shall we take a stroll in the garden to distract your troubled mind?”

A slight smile spread across Cate’s face. “Yes.”

Despite her acceptance, tension continued to build in her as the ball hurled toward them.

CHAPTER 27



Cate paced the floor of her bedroom in her dressing gown. Despite the music box's pleasant tune, she found herself anxious. She wrung her hands as she stalked across the floor. She settled in front of the large window for a few moments.

The blue sky faded into purples and pinks as the sun set. Not much longer, she ruminated. The thought sent her scurrying across the room again. She twisted her right hand with her left as she considered the impending event.

Would they learn anything relevant? Would they find Jack? What would be the life moment emblazoned in her mind? And would her temporalysis be cured? Or would she succumb to it?

A lump formed in her throat. She leapt, flailing her arms in the air as a knock sounded. Andrea entered a moment later.

"It is time, Your Grace."

Cate nodded and took a seat at the vanity. Andrea brushed her hair before she began to fashion it into an elaborate upswept style with pearl beads woven through it.

"You are quiet, Your Grace," Andrea said. "Is everything all right?"

Cate flicked her gaze to the woman through the mirror. "Yes. Just nervous."

"About the ball?"

Cate nodded with a tight-lipped smile. "So many people will attend. I hope I can keep them all straight as I meet them"

“I am certain you will.” Andrea teased a final curl into place. “There. Do you fancy it?”

“Oh, Andrea,” Cate said as she twisted her neck to view the style from each side, “it’s beautiful.”

Andrea smiled as she clasped her hands in front of her. “And now the dress.”

Cate slipped off her robe as Andrea readied the dress. After a few moments, the silk sapphire fabric hung loosely around Cate’s frame and Andrea worked to fasten it.

Cate’s heart thudded in her chest as the moment from her visions approached. Within moments, Andrea finished her task. She smoothed the dress and fluttered the trumpet bottom.

“Beautiful, Your Grace.”

“Thank you,” Cate said as she stared at the mirror.

Andrea pulled on her gloves to finish her look. “Jewelry?”

The sapphire necklace flashed through her mind. She’d had it in her visions.

“No,” Cate answered, not recalling the item in the luggage.

A knock sounded at the door. Andrea flitted toward it, tugging it open after peering out. Marcus strode inside with a velvet box in his hands.

“Oh, Catherine,” he said, stopping for a moment.

“What?” Cate asked, glancing down at her dress as she wondered if something was amiss.

“You are stunning.”

Cate let out a breath. “Thank you,” Cate said, feeling color rising in her cheeks.

“I have a gift.” Marcus snapped open the case. Cate’s breath caught in her throat as she eyed the sapphire necklace. All the items had come together. The music box tinkled in the background. She wore the sapphire blue dress. And the sapphire necklace was about to be fastened around her neck.

“May I?” Marcus asked.

Cate nodded and spun as he swept the necklace around her neck. She recalled the first time he’d done it. His fingers had been icy cold. Though at this moment, they were warm. She gazed in the mirror at the large stones as her thumb and forefinger pinched the center stone.

“You know, Catherine, when I first gave you this necklace, I had no intention of harming you.”

Cate raised her eyes from the stone to his dark eyes.

“The necklace ensured you remained alive.”

Her brow furrowed as she stared at him in the mirror’s reflection. “So, I couldn’t have died in that coffin?”

He cupped her shoulders and eyed her through the mirror. “No, dear, you could not have. I would never have harmed you. Even then.”

Perhaps this explained her draw to the necklace. It kept her alive. She spent another moment staring at it in the mirror before Marcus’s voice pulled her back to the present.

“Ready, my dear?” he asked, holding out his hand toward her.

A smile turned up the corners of her mouth as she twisted toward him. She slipped her hand into his and stepped forward toward the moment her temporalysis visions showed her. Toward her moment.

Marcus wrapped her hand around his arm and led her from the room. They snaked their way through the halls as they approached the ballroom.

As they turned the corner, Cate’s breath caught in her throat. The mirrored hallway matched her visions exactly. Conversation and music filtered from a well-lit room at the end of the hallway.

“Oh, there you are!” Anna said as she hurried toward them. “Oh, Catherine, you look lovely.” She offered her a kiss on her cheek.

“Thank you,” Cate said as Anna kissed Marcus’s cheek.

Anna studied them both for a moment, fiddling with Marcus’s lapel. “You two are perfect. Ready?”

“Yes, Mother, we are ready.”

Anna squeezed Cate’s hand and flitted back into the ballroom.

“She’s making me nervous,” Cate whispered. She blew a small breath out.

An amused grin formed on Marcus’s lips as he led her closer to the room. “Relax, Catherine. And smile. You will be the envy of every woman here tonight.”

Cate’s heart pounded as they approached the large room. They stepped inside. Cate’s eyes went wide as the music stopped and a trumpet sounded in her ear. The trumpeters on either side of them lowered the instruments with military precision.

Cate forced a smile on her face as all eyes turned to them. A formally clad man next to Cate announced their entrance. Marcus led her down the trio of steps into the ballroom and toward the middle of the floor.

He turned to face her, pulling her into closed position. "Oh, no," Cate breathed.

"Relax, dear."

Music began from a full orchestra and Marcus whisked Cate across the floor effortlessly. The smile on her face grew as she found the waltz easy. Others joined in as they continued.

"Why were you nervous? You are an excellent partner," Marcus said to her as the floor became crowded with other dancers.

"I'm not certain that's true. I think you're making me look good."

"Impossible," he said with a smile at her.

The music ended and the dancers applauded the musicians. Another song began as Marcus led Cate from the floor.

"There are several people we should greet," Marcus said.

Anna rejoined them. "Archduke Hansen has arrived, you should begin there, then Duke Cranston, followed by Lord Dixon then Lord Palmer."

Marcus nodded as Cate attempted to keep track of the names thrown at her. Anna patted Cate's arm. "You are a lovely dancer, Catherine, among so many other wonderful qualities. Marcus has chosen very well."

Anna approached a couple holding champagne flutes. Marcus extended his hand to the man as Anna kissed the woman's cheek.

"Duke Northcott, congratulations," the man said.

Marcus nodded at the man before introducing Cate. "My wife, Catherine. Catherine, Archduke Hansen and his wife, Sophia."

Cate offered her hand to the man before she leaned in to offer a kiss to Sophia. They chatted for a few moments before they moved on to another couple. Anna passed Cate a champagne flute along the way. She sipped at it as a dizzying array of names, faces, and peerage passed in front of her.

After another dance and three more introductions, they met Lord Mountbatten. The round-faced man with a thick, red, bulbous nose stared for several moments at Cate as they made polite conversation.

His portly wife eyed Cate up and down before passing along a snide "best wishes." They did not stay long with the couple before they moved on.

“That was one of the people you suspected may be connected to Jack’s disappearance, right?” Cate asked as they meandered around the room.

“Yes,” Marcus answered her.

Cate glanced back at him as they strode away. “I didn’t like him.”

“No one does,” Marcus assured her.

“Are the others here?”

“Yes, we have not met them yet, though we will.”

“I cannot believe how many people came!” Cate said as she glanced at the sea of faces, half of whom she had not met yet.

Marcus chuckled at the sentiment. “We are an important family in every social circle.”

They had two more conversations before they came upon Michael, Damien, and Celine.

“Hey, Cate!” Damien said. “You look beautiful.”

“Yes, you do, very,” Michael said.

“Blue is your color,” Celine said.

“Thank you. I feel quite out of place.”

“You don’t look it!” Damien said. “You’re a pro on the dance floor. Wow! Last time I danced at one of these things, I think I broke Celine’s toes.”

Cate chuckled before she wrapped her arm around Marcus’s and tapped his forearm with her other hand. “I think the accolades go to Marcus whose magic abilities apparently extend to making people look good on the dance floor.”

Celine’s lips curled into a smile and she shot Marcus a glance, raising her eyebrows.

“Have you met any of the people we’re supposed to be watching?” Cate inquired as she scanned the crowd.

“We’ve been keeping an eye on each of them. No tells so far,” Celine said.

“Oh, there goes Williams out of the room,” Damien said.

“I’m on it,” Michael answered, slipping past them and following the man.

“Come along, Catherine. We have more well-wishers to greet.”

Cate offered Celine and Damien a wave as Marcus led her away. “I’m glad they’re here to help. I can barely focus.”

“You’re doing fine. Everyone loves you. And the others have things well under control, wouldn’t you agree?”

“Yes, I would. I’m glad we checked in with them.”

“Has it settled your nerves?”

“Yes, it has. Thank you.”

They continued around the room, meeting more people than Cate could keep track of, including Lord Hanscomb and his wife. The gregarious man rambled on to Marcus about some business or other while his wife, Mary, inquired about the newly married couple’s travel plans.

They continued on around the room, sharing a brief conversation with Marquess Ivanov who traveled alone, explaining his wife would soon deliver their third child and remained at their country estate.

As they broke away, Cate inquired, “Do you think he nabbed Jack when he’s about to travel to the country for the birth of his child?”

“Doubtful, though I wouldn’t rule him out entirely.”

Cate glanced behind them, finding Michael had returned to the room. Michael’s presence indicated the man must have returned to the party. They had not yet met Sir William.

After four other conversations, they made it to the tall, dark-haired Sir William and his wife.

“Well, Duke Northcott,” Sir William said after introductions were made, “I suppose congratulations are in order.”

“You can do more than suppose, Williams, I am certain everyone in the room would agree I have outdone myself with Catherine.”

Sir William turned his beady, dark eyes toward Cate, narrowing them as he stared down his nose at her. “There is no denying she is lovely. Where did you say you were from, Catherine? Scotland?”

“Philadelphia,” Cate corrected.

“Oh, how foolish of me, yes. You’re American.”

Cate offered a polite smile.

“I don’t know why I thought you had some tie to Scotland. Do you?”

Cate swallowed hard, the implication unnerving, as she considered her response.

“She has a very important one, yes,” Marcus said. Cate glanced up at him, surprised he would admit her connection. “It is where we met.”

A smile spread across Cate’s face and she returned her gaze to Sir William.

“Quite an important tie then,” Lady Williams said with a giggle.

“Very,” Cate said with a smile.

They chatted a few more moments before Marcus excused them. He led Cate away toward the dance floor.

“I have shared you with the others enough,” he said as he pulled her closer.

“Do you think Sir William acted suspiciously?” Cate asked.

“Perhaps,” he answered.

“He kept asking about Scotland. Like he knew.”

“Perhaps the tale of how we met has already circulated.”

“Or perhaps he knows I’m the Countess of Dunhavenshire and he has Jack.”

Cate craned her neck to try to catch a glimpse of the man across the room. Marcus turned her the opposite way.

“What are you doing?” Cate inquired as she attempted to peer over his shoulder.

“Enjoying a dance with my new wife.”

“Very funny,” Cate said with a huff. “We have work to do.”

“The others can manage it. We’ve done our jobs.”

“How do you figure that?”

“We brought them all here,” Marcus said as he stared down at her.

“Still, we could—“

“Shh, Catherine. Let’s enjoy our moment, shall we?”

“Are you enjoying our fake moment?” Cate asked.

“Very much so,” he said as the dance ended and the dancers applauded.

Anna rejoined them, parading them around to a select few for second conversations. Within a few hours, the event began to wind down. As the first few guests filtered from the party, Cate chewed the inside of her lower lip. They’d learned little and soon the party would end. They’d be stuck again.

With each guest they said their goodnights to, Cate saw her chance of gaining information about Jack’s location slipping away.

A few guests still milled around the ballroom as the party wound down. Out of the corner of Cate’s eye, she caught movement toward the door. Michael and Damien hurried out of the room. Celine followed, making eye contact with Cate and signaling her to follow.

Cate grabbed Marcus’s arm and whispered the request in his ear.

“Duke Northcott,” a gentleman said as they left the dance floor, “I hoped to speak with you for a moment this evening. Might I borrow you with advanced apologies to your new bride?”

“Go on, dear,” Cate encouraged him.

She stepped away before he could protest, disappearing out the door where Celine had disappeared moments ago.

“What’s up?” she asked as she found the trio several steps away down the hall.

“We thought we saw Gianna,” Damien reported.

Cate’s head swiveled as she scanned the space. “Where?” she gasped.

“It was a fleeting glance,” Celine said, but we’re fairly sure we saw her slip into the ballroom, speak with Lord Mountbatten, and then leave.”

Cate continued to scan the area. “We should split up and look for her.”

“That’s almost always a terrible idea,” Damien said.

“He’s right,” Celine said with a nod. “We should at least go in pairs.”

“Celine and I will go that way,” Michael said, pointing down the hall. “You and Cate take that way.”

Cate nodded and she and Damien set off down the hall. They hurried down the hall, glancing into rooms and down other halls.

“How sure are you it was Gianna?” she asked, her breathing heavy as she dashed from door to door.

“It looked like her. Blonde, smart-alecky, confident.”

“That’s her, all right,” Cate said as she ground to a halt, spinning to consider which direction to go next. “Wait!”

“What is it, Cate?”

“That mirrored hall by the ballroom. A bunch of my visions were of that hall. I bet you it’s connected to Gianna.”

She grabbed Damien’s hand and tugged him back toward the ballroom, veering off to the large, elaborate hall. They wandered down it. Cate spun, searching for any sign of Gianna. She threw her arms out.

Cate pressed her palm to her forehead. “Nothing. Ugh! Where is she?”

“Let’s keep searching. This is a big place.”

Cate agreed with a nod and they set off down the hall, peering into rooms and winding into other hallways. They climbed the stairs to the next level.

Damien opened and closed doors as they trekked through the upstairs hallways. He pushed open the door to a sitting room. Candlelight glowed

from within. “Candles!” he whispered. “Maybe she’s in here. Stay here while I check it out.”

Damien slipped into the room, leaving the door slightly ajar. Cate peered in through the crack, trying to follow his movements. She lost sight of him as he moved further away. With a sigh, she leaned away from the door.

Movement further down the hall caught her eye. She twisted to face it, catching the back of a buxom blonde hurrying down the hall away from her.

“Damien!” Cate called. “She’s here!”

Gianna disappeared around the corner. “Damien!” Cate called again.

She bounced on her toes as she waited. With a huff and a wince, she glanced at the doors once more, then left them behind, hurrying after Gianna.

She dashed down the hall and rounded the corner. Empty. Cate’s chest heaved as she rushed down the hall in search of the woman. She pushed a few doors open, finding darkened spaces.

Her heart beat hard against her ribs as she worried she’d lost her only link to Jack. Cate rounded the corner. Her suite lay at the end of the hall. She hurried toward it, pushing through the door and into her sitting room.

Cate scanned the candlelit space. She hurried across the room and into her bedroom. Gianna strolled across the room, swinging her evening bag from the drawstrings.

“Hello, little mouse,” she said with a grin and an arched eyebrow.

CHAPTER 28



Cate narrowed her eyes at the buxom blonde. “Where’s Jack?”

Gianna sauntered past her vanity table, running her hand along the brush and mirror set. She grasped the atomizer and sprayed it in the air.

“My, aren’t we becoming spoiled by our new friend?”

Cate set her jaw. “Tell me where Jack is.”

Gianna set the perfume bottle down and stalked past Cate, bumping into her as she passed. “Oops!”

Cate grabbed her wrist as the woman smacked into her and spun her around. “Where is Jack?” she shouted. “We’ve played your game. Enough is enough! Tell me where he is.”

Gianna wrenched her arm away from Cate. “You little spoiled brat,” she spat. She pulled her arm back, closing her fingers into a fist. She swung, hitting Cate square in the jaw.

The force sent her stumbling backward and she toppled over, spilling onto the floor.

“Wow, Cate, you really should learn how to take a punch!” Gianna said with a harsh chuckle.

The doors to the room burst open and Gianna snapped her gaze in their direction. She hid behind the door as Damien rushed inside.

“Cate!” he shouted, racing toward her.

“No!” Cate said as Gianna slipped around the door and raced across the room. “She’s getting away.”

Damien hesitated for a moment before he turned to race after her. He returned in a moment, Celine and Michael in tow.

Damien knelt next to Cate. "What happened?"

"Gianna's out there!" Cate said, her voice shrill.

"She's gone," Michael reported. "We saw her slip from the room and disappear."

Cate's shoulders slumped.

"Cate, what happened?" Damien asked. "Is this a bruise?" He touched a red spot on her jaw.

Cate winced. "Yes, she punched me."

"What?" Damien said.

"What is going on here?" Marcus inquired as he stormed into the room.

"We saw Gianna. We went in search of her," Celine explained.

"And she clocked Cate then disappeared," Damien finished.

"She did what?" Marcus barked as he hurried to Cate. He pulled her to stand, cupping her face in his hands and studying her reddening jaw.

He offered an angered huff as his thumb rubbed her cheek. "Are you hurt?"

Cate grasped his hands and shook her head. "I'm okay. She just stunned me, that's all."

"When we spotted her, she was speaking with Lord Mountbatten," Celine said.

Marcus's focus remained on Cate. "Are you certain you are unharmed?"

"I am," Cate assured him. "We need to focus on Gianna. She disappeared and we have no new information."

"Untrue. We should follow up with Mountbatten if Gianna spoke with him," Marcus said.

Before anyone else spoke, Anna entered the room. She eyed the scene suspiciously. "What is going on here?"

"Merely wishing Catherine a good night," Marcus answered. "It has been a long evening and she is quite tired."

"Yes," Anna answered, "we should allow her to rest."

No one moved and Anna's posture stiffened. "Have I spoken unclearly?"

"Oh, right," Damien said. "Sorry. Good night, Cate. You looked really beautiful."

"Thank you, Damien," Cate said.

Celine and Michael echoed Damien's sentiments before they shuffled from the room.

Anna embraced Cate and kissed her cheek. "You were so lovely, and everyone adored you. Sleep well, dear."

Marcus turned to face Cate as his mother left. He lightly grasped her chin between his thumb and forefinger and tilted her face to study her jaw again. "You should not take such chances."

"I almost lost track of her. I thought we could get some information from her." Cate's eyes clouded with tears. "She didn't tell me anything, though."

"And she won't. She is goading you. You must stop falling for her antics."

Cate sighed. "I'm sorry." She brushed a tear away that slipped to her cheek.

"Your trust in my abilities is concerning," Marcus said.

She glanced up at him, a faltering smile crossing her lips. "Sorry," she whispered. "I'm just tired."

"Then I shall let you rest. And we shall scrutinize Lord Mountbatten tomorrow. I'm certain we'll find something of interest to lead us to Jack."

His use of Jack's real name did not escape her. She wrapped her fingers around his hand. "Okay. Good night."

"Are you certain you are all right?"

She nodded again. "Yes, I'm fine. Thank you."

Marcus kissed her cheek before he strode from the room. Cate collapsed onto the stool in front of the vanity with a deep sigh. She sank her chin into her palm before she raised her eyes to the mirror. She twisted her neck, staring at her jaw. Marcus had removed any trace of the blow. At least she wouldn't have a bruise.

Andrea entered moments later. Within an hour, Andrea had her prepared for bed. Weary from the evening, Cate shuffled across the bedroom as the door eased shut behind Andrea.

She scrubbed her face as she perched on the edge of the bed. With an exhausted sigh, she slid under the covers and eased into the pillows.

The night of her visions had come and gone. They seemed no closer to finding Jack. There had been no a-ha moment, no epiphany. Why had her mind focused on this event? What had been the important moment?

Her mind replayed the evening. A moment during her first dance stuck in her mind. Her forehead crinkled as a thought danced across her mind.

Before her mind could fully parse through it, something moved near Cate's leg. Cate propped herself up on her elbows and glanced down toward her feet.

Something tickled her leg near her ankle. Instinctively, she kicked her leg as she peeled the covers back.

Before she could uncover her calves, a sharp pain shot through her ankle. She gasped, throwing her head back as the intense pain narrowed her vision for a moment. Her ankle throbbed. A stinging burn shot up her leg.

Cate gulped in breaths until the pain intensified to a point she could not stand. She opened her mouth wide, a scream echoing throughout the room.

Tears streamed down her face as she gritted her teeth through the pain. She tried to kick off her covers, but the pain in her leg made the task difficult. Her right leg flicked at the duvet as her left leg lay like a dead weight.

Cate whimpered as the source of her pain revealed itself. A stout-bodied, pear-headed snake slithered its way up the sheets, its tongue flicking at her. Cate's eyes grew wide and her lower lip quivered as the snake's forked tongue snapped in and out of its mouth again.

The pain worsened, traveling into her thigh. She moaned in agony. The doors to her suite burst open and Marcus raced inside. "Catherine?"

He rushed to her bed, his eyes wide. With a grimace, he grasped the snake at the base of its neck. Moments later, its body went limp and he tossed it aside. The body smacked into the wall, sliding to the floor with a thud.

He cupped Cate's face in his hands. "Catherine? Did it bite you?"

Cate tried to nod, but her vision was blurring. Her eyes fluttered as she attempted to focus on him and keep them open.

"What happened?" Anna's voice called. "I heard a horrific scream."

"Catherine has been bitten by a venomous snake," Marcus said. His hands traveled down her calf to the puncture wounds on her ankle.

Anna rushed inside, her gaze falling on the discarded body. "Oh, no," she groaned. "We must remove as much of the poison as quickly as possible."

Cate shrieked in pain, tears streaming freely. Anna hurried to her side, stroking her hair. Marcus pressed his lips to the wound, drawing as much

poison from the wound as possible. It did little to ease the pain.

Cate's entire body burned with it. Every muscle, every fiber stung. Her vision clouded and narrowed. She gasped for breath. She clutched at Anna's hand, attempting to use it to anchor her to this world. Marcus spoke, but his voice was garbled.

The burning pain proved to be too much. She closed her eyes and slipped into the all-consuming blackness.

* * *

Garbled voices awoke Cate. Tinkling music filled the air. She gasped as she snapped her eyes open, glancing around her surroundings. Blackness surrounded her. She swam in a sea of nothing. Her limbs felt heavy and limp. Her body burned with pain.

The voices became clearer for a moment.

"...to her?" Damien's echoed.

"A snake bite," Anna explained. A cool, damp cloth was pressed against her forehead from nowhere.

"Will she be all right?" Damien squeaked.

Anna's garbled voice answered, becoming clearer toward the end. "... know. She is feverish."

"Damien?" Cate called to him. "Anna?"

Cate tried to stand but found herself unable to move. She struggled to crawl forward but made no progress.

The garbled voices continued before they faded away.

"No!" Cate called. "Don't go! Wait! Please don't leave me here."

* * *

Cate startled awake again, this time finding herself in a darkened version of the mirrored hallway. She scanned the space, catching sight of herself in the mirror. Cate crawled toward it and pressed a hand against it. She was trapped.

"Hello?" she called out, her voice reverberating in the space. Tinkling music played overhead. Pain in her ankle made her gasp. She sat back and

grabbed at her swollen ankle. A large black bruise sullied her skin. Two puncture wounds stung as she ran her fingers over them.

A cooling sensation crept across her ankle. Fingers caressed her hair. Voices sounded overhead, echoing in the large hall.

“...eat something,” Anna said.

“No,” Marcus answered.

“Marcus, you must—“

“Mother, please!”

“We are doing everything we can for her,” Anna said. “Yet her fever lingers.”

Air tickled her ear as Marcus’s voice whispered to her. “Come back, Catherine. You must come back to us.”

“Marcus!” she called. “I’m here!”

She stared upward, searching for any way out, but finding none.

* * *

Cate shot up to sit with a startled gasp. She shivered as coldness caused her skin to prickle with goosebumps.

Shouting had interrupted her sleep. She concentrated on the voices. Tinkling music still played in the background.

“Get her out of here!” Anna shouted.

“I would never harm her. I only wanted to help,” Celine answered.

Anna’s muddled voice yelled something.

“...ridiculous!” Damien shouted back.

“Yes, it’s crazy,” Michael added.

“This is not Celine’s fault,” Marcus answered.

“Are you certain?” Anna asked.

“Yes. We know who is responsible,” Marcus said. “It is rather a complicated tale.”

“We seem to have the time,” Anna said.

Fingers stroked her hair again and a cool sensation pressed against her burning hot forehead.

Marcus’s voice echoed in the dark space. “We should focus our energy on Catherine. She cannot die.”

CHAPTER 29



The familiar tune from the music box floated on the air. Cate's eyes fluttered open. With blurry vision, she slid her eyes around to try to identify her surroundings. Her body ached and tiredness coursed through her. Sweat beaded on her forehead and her nightgown, soaked with sweat, clung to her. She shivered as a chill passed over her.

After a few more blinks, her eyes focused. In the dim light, she recognized her bedroom suite at Rosenberg. She slid her gaze sideways. Marcus stood limned in the pale morning light as he stared out the window.

"Marcus," she squeaked, her voice weak and quiet.

Marcus spun to face her, hurrying to her side. "Catherine!" He rubbed her forehead with his thumb as he smiled at her, clutching her hand. "You are awake!"

"Hi," she breathed out with a weak smile.

"I worried I would never see those beautiful blue eyes again."

Anna stirred from her dozing in the chair next to the bed. She leapt forward, perching on the edge of her seat. "Catherine, thank heavens. How do you feel?"

"Tired," Cate answered.

Anna stroked her damp hair. "Her fever has broken." She eased the covers back, glancing underneath. "The swelling is down."

Anna settled the covers over her. "We should tend to the wound again and make you more comfortable. Marcus, will you see about some food for Catherine whilst I help situate her?"

“Of course, Mother,” Marcus said, his eyes never leaving Cate’s. He squeezed her hand and kissed her forehead before he left her bedside to attend to her meal.

After a change of nightgown and brushing of her hair, Anna settled Cate in bed.

“Feeling any better?”

“Yes,” Cate answered as she smoothed the covers over her legs. “Was I feverish?”

“Oh, yes, dear. Terribly. The cloths I used only lasted minutes before they were too hot to do any good.”

“From the bite?”

Anna nodded as she clutched Cate’s hand, her thumb rubbing it. “Yes. Marcus removed most of the poison, but what remained in your body made you deathly ill. We worried you may not recover.”

“I was that sick?”

“Yes, you were quite ill. Marcus has not left your side since the incident. He has not eaten nor slept he’s been so worried.”

Cate fluttered her eyelashes as she considered a response to the statement. Marcus’s arrival in the room interrupted her. He carried a tray of food, settling it on Cate’s lap.

“Thank you,” she said as she picked up her fork.

Anna patted her shoulder. “If you do not mind, I am going to step out for a moment and give you two some time together.”

Anna hurried from the room as Cate took a few bites of food. Marcus stroked her hair. “Are you feeling better?”

“I am, yes,” Cate said. “I cannot believe how sick I was.”

Any further conversation was interrupted by the door to the hall bursting open again.

“Cate!” Damien exclaimed as he pushed through. “Oh, man, it’s good to see you awake.”

She smiled at him as he eased into the chair next to her bed. “It’s good to be awake.”

“We were so worried about you.”

Michael and Celine trailed behind him. “I was just saying that I can’t believe how sick I was. What a terrible night. And now, nothing. Besides being a little worn out, I’m fine.”

Damien's brow crinkled and he shot a glance at Michael and Celine. "Night?" he said, flicking his gaze back to Cate.

"Yes," Cate answered after a bite of toast. She glanced around at each of them. "The snake bit me less than twelve hours ago. And now I'm fine."

"Uhhh—" Damien mumbled, his gaze darting around at the others again.

"What?" Cate inquired as the others in the room reacted oddly to her statement. "Isn't that what happened?"

"Not exactly," Damien said with a wince.

Cate scrunched her features. "How long was I sick?"

"Three days," Marcus answered.

"Three days!" Cate shouted, nearly knocking the breakfast tray from her lap. "Are you serious?"

Damien nodded and patted her arm. "You were *really* sick, Cate."

"There were a few times we didn't think you'd pull through," Celine said.

Cate's jaw hung agape and she lowered her eyes to her nearly empty breakfast plate. She licked her lips as she tried to formulate a response.

Damien patted her arm again. "But you're okay now. And we have some good news."

"Good news?" Cate asked, lifting her gaze to him.

"We found Jack," Michael answered.

Cate snapped her gaze to him, her jaw falling open again. She shoved the tray aside as she leaned forward. "You did? Where is he? Is he here?"

"No," Celine answered. "We know where he is, but we're still working out a plan to get him back."

"I assume my brush with death distracted you from that," Cate said with a sigh.

"Yes and no," Celine said. "While you were certainly a focus, the location they are using to hold Jack makes this more difficult."

"He is most certainly under guard," Marcus said.

"And getting him out will not be easy," Celine added.

"Because he's that heavily guarded?" Cate inquired.

"No, there's something else," Celine said, pulling her lower lip into a wince.

Damien lowered his eyes, scrunching his lips. Michael glanced away, crossing his arms over his chest. Celine shot a glance at Marcus.

"What is it? What aren't you telling me?"

Marcus pushed a lock of hair behind her ear. "You should rest, Catherine."

"What? No! What aren't you telling me?" She stared at Marcus, an insistent expression on her features. "We talked about this. Sharing information, remember?"

Silence fell over the group again. "She has the right to know," Damien said.

Marcus sighed at the statement. His lips parted, though he hesitated. Cate eyed him, awaiting the details.

He squeezed his lips shut and swallowed hard. "We believe based on the information we've received that Jack has temporalysis."

Cate sucked in a breath at the news.

"Quite a severe case," Marcus added.

Cate's shoulders slumped forward as she lowered her eyes, pondering the news.

"His condition will make it difficult to retrieve him."

Cate licked her lips as questions raced through her mind. "Because of the confusion he's experiencing?"

"No," Celine answered with a sigh. She flicked her gaze to Cate, a consoling expression on her features. "We don't think he's even conscious at this point."

A sob escaped Cate's lips and she clapped a hand over her mouth as tears clouded her vision. Marcus slipped a hand around her shoulders, rubbing them.

"Temporalysis can be fatal, right?" Cate questioned.

"Not always," Damien said.

"But Jack's case sounds pretty severe," Cate said. "What if we can't get to him in time? And even if we do, what if he can't be saved?"

"We'll get to him, Cate," Michael said.

Celine nodded. "And then we'll do our best to manage his symptoms. Millie was working on a few things when we left. We'll get her started on assessing his condition the second we return."

Damien grabbed Cate's hand and squeezed it. "It'll be okay, Cate."

Cate heaved in a few breaths, worry on her delicate features. "We need to get him as soon as possible."

"And we will," Michael said. "Why don't you get some rest and we'll go come up with a plan."

“I can help,” Cate insisted.

Marcus tightened a hand around her shoulder, holding her in place. “No, Catherine, you will rest. We very nearly lost you and I will not chance you taking a turn for the worse.”

“But—“

“Catherine, I will not argue over it. This is not up for discussion.”

Cate’s shoulders slumped and Damien patted her hand. “It’s okay, Cate. You rest and let us come up with something. We’ll tell you as soon as we have a plan. Deal?”

Cate sighed and slumped back toward the pillows. “Deal.”

Damien rose from his chair and stepped toward the foot of the bed. “Let’s get at it!”

“Get some rest, Cate,” Michael said as they stepped away.

Marcus lingered behind as they departed from the room. He flicked his gaze to her. “Are you all right?”

Cate nodded, not making eye contact with him.

He tipped her chin up with his finger. “Catherine.”

She raised her eyes to him. “I’m okay. I’m not happy about Jack being so sick, but there’s not much we can do about that but hope for the best.”

“Do you have the dragon’s blood? We can begin treating him the moment we get to him.”

Cate nodded and tugged open the drawer of the nightstand, pulling out the bag Dembe had given her.

As Marcus pulled the bag open, Cate shook her head and waved her hand. “You can take the whole thing. I don’t need it anymore.”

Marcus raised his eyebrows in question.

“I reached the point of my visions. I should be cured, right?”

“Yes, you are. What was the culmination?”

“The ball,” Cate said. “I thought it may have been connected to some clue about Jack but it wasn’t.”

Marcus’s forehead pinched as he considered her statement. Any further conversation was interrupted by Celine’s head popping through the door. “Marcus, are you coming?”

“Yes,” he called to her. He flicked his gaze to Cate. “Rest, Catherine.”

She nodded at him. Before he left the room, he wound the music box, setting it on her nightstand. Cate settled back into the pillows as Marcus strode away.

As the door eased shut, she buried her face in her hands. Her temporalysis had passed, but now it afflicted Jack. And in a far worse way. She slid down in the bed, resting her head against the pillows behind her.

She reached for the music box as it tinkled away and pulled it close to her, closing her eyes and listening to the tune. It did little to soothe her nerves. She set it on her night table and threw back the covers.

She swung her legs over the edge, sliding into her slippers and testing weight on her ankle. A slight ache shot up her leg but she could bear the weight. She stood and wandered over to the window, gazing out over the landscape.

With a sigh, she toddled around the room, her arms crossed over her chest. She ambled into the sitting room and sank onto the chaise, cupping her chin in her palm. She shook her head in frustration. She could not sit here even if she'd just survived a snake bite.

She pushed up to stand and stalked across the room, intent on finding her friends and joining the strategy session. She roamed through the halls in search of the others.

She pushed through a doorway, glancing around the space in search of them. Instead, she found a large library. Cate stared at the many books on the shelves, deciding to investigate before moving on. If she was relegated to staying in bed, at least she could read.

Cate breathed in the scent of the leather-bound volumes. Her fingertips ran along their spines as she studied the room. She approached one shelf and studied the titles. Her eyebrows pinched together as she read the titles. *Benson's Guide to Creatures. Basic Enchantments. Enchanted Objects and Their Uses.*

"Is this for real?" Cate whispered to herself.

She tugged a few volumes from the shelf and tottered to the large mahogany desk in front of the stained-glass window. The thick books thudded onto its polished top as she plopped onto the wooden chair.

A plume of dust billowed into the air as she tugged open the first volume, its leather binding creaking. She thumbed through the book, the pages fluttering past. She stopped at a random page and studied it.

The entry detailed information about vampires, their characteristics, strengths and weaknesses, and other information about the species. Cate scanned the information before flipping to another random page. She stared with wide eyes at the illustration of a crouched hairless creature with beady

eyes and triangular teeth. The heading, citing the name Gobgoyle, described the creature as amiable for the most part, though could become aggressive if provoked. It indicated the creatures were popular pets among the Dracopires.

“Dracopires,” Cate repeated as she thumbed through to the index. She traced her finger down the finely printed list and found the entry. After flipping to the appropriate page, Cate studied the entry, her eyes growing wider.

The illustration showed a hulking, beastly, bipedal creature with a long pointed tail, large wings, and horns poking from its human-like head. Cate swallowed hard as she scanned the description of the dragon-like vampire. Her forehead crinkled as she scanned the paragraph about their home. While a small colony lived in the mountains of Romania, most Dracopires lived in a realm called Sangmond.

“Sangmond?” Cate questioned.

She rose from her chair and wandered to the shelves, finding a book titled *Realms beyond Earth*. She slid the thick tome from the shelf and wandered back to her seat. After consulting the index, she thumbed to the appropriate page.

Her mind spun as she read about the other realm, dictated by a blood-red moon that rose and set like the sun. She blazed through the article before flipping to another. Page after page described strange and fantastic worlds beyond earth.

Cate pulled another book toward her and opened it, reading random entries before trying another book. She lost herself in the sea of new information. Book upon book, article upon article stunned her.

Before long, books littered the top of the large desk, each open to random pages. She studied a new one, tracing information back and forth between two books.

The creaking door across the room drew her attention away from her stack of research. Marcus stepped into the room, his brow furrowing at the scene. “Catherine? What are you doing in here?”

Slumped over the books, Cate glanced up at him, her jaw agape. “Is—is all this real?”

Marcus strode to the desk and studied the collection sprawled across the polished mahogany wood.

“My, my, Catherine, you’ve amassed quite a collection here.”

Cate glanced up at him for an answer to her question. He flicked his gaze toward her and nodded. "Yes, it is all fact."

Cate's eyes scanned the open tomes spread in front of her. She slow-blinked at them. "Wow," she said as she slouched back in the chair. "How do people not know?"

"It is well-guarded."

"Obviously," Cate answered. "This is astounding."

"Have you been here for long?"

"Since shortly after you left me. I found this room and I started with this book here." She dug the creature reference from under the pile. "And then I went to this one because they mentioned some sort of other world with Dragon-something-or-others that are also vampires."

"Dracopires," he said.

"Yes," Cate said, pointing to him. "That's it. And they lived in some other world. So, then I read about that. Then another world, and another."

"And then this book about enchantments. And this one about contacting something called an adjudicator."

"You read portions of all of these since this morning?"

"Well...yes," Cate answered. "And I've barely made a dent."

"And did you find it interesting?"

"I found it fascinating and astounding. My mind can barely keep up with all of this and I've barely scratched the surface."

"Your curiosity is admirable and quite refreshing." Marcus smiled down at her before he offered his hand. "Come with me."

Cate glanced at the books. "I promise it will be worth leaving your books behind for a moment."

She flicked her gaze to him and slipped her hand into his. He led her across the room to a bookshelf. His hand slid behind the decorative trim, pressing some unknown trigger. The bookshelf popped open and he tugged it backward, revealing a dark stairway.

After retrieving a lit candle, he grasped her hand and pulled her forward. They traveled down the stone steps, spilling into a large chamber.

Marcus left Cate at the base of the stairs and lit several wall sconces. As the room lit up, Cate's gaze flitted from one object to another, some on pedestals, others on shelves.

"What are these?" Cate asked.

“Enchanted objects, magical items, precious commodities. My father amassed a large collection of such items. I have added to it.”

Cate’s eyes cut to Marcus, before returning to the objects, some appearing mundane, others appearing magical. “What do they do?”

“It depends on the item,” Marcus answered. He led her to the mantle clock, ticking away the time on a shelf. “This can stop time for small amounts of time.”

He led her to a staff. “This can alter weather, specifically, it can draw lightning.”

He pulled a sheet off of a full-length mirror. “This allows the user to enter Mirror World.”

Cate twisted to glance at him before returning her gaze to her reflection. “What?”

“Mirror World. The world that exists beyond the mirror.”

“I’m not sure I understand.”

Marcus’s lips curled on the edges. “Hmm, you’ll have to do more reading. Haven’t you ever wondered what your reflection does when you are not there?”

“No, I thought my reflection was gone once I left.”

He smirked through the mirror at her. He uttered a few Latin words, then said, “Pull her from the mirror.”

“What do you mean?” Cate inquired.

He positioned Cate in front of the mirror. She stared at her reflection.

“Reach for her,” he said.

She cocked her head, twisting to glance at him with a furrowed brow. He nodded to her.

Cate stretched her arm toward the mirror. Instead of hitting cold glass, her hand melted into the mirror. She gasped and snapped it back.

“It’s all right, Catherine, it will not harm you. Grab her hand and pull her toward you.”

“What?” Cate asked with a chuckle.

“Go on,” he encouraged.

Cate swallowed hard and squared her shoulders. With a raise of her eyebrows, she pushed her hand into the mirror. Flesh touched hers and she closed her fingers around what she felt and tugged it toward her.

Her eyes widened as her hand emerged from the mirror. Another hand clasped hers. An arm emerged. Cate glanced behind her at Marcus.

“Keep going.”

Cate stepped backward and a mirror image of herself stepped out of the mirror. She stared at the doppelgänger, dropping its hand.

Marcus circled around her. “Are you impressed?”

“I’m... speechless,” Cate said.

“Say hello to her,” Marcus said.

Cate returned her gaze to her duplicate. “Hello,” she said with a wave.

“Hi, Cate,” the other Cate answered.

“Who are you?” Cate asked her.

“I am you. Well, I am your mirror image. I can walk and talk and do everything you do.”

Cate stared at the other version of herself. “Let’s put her back,” Marcus suggested.

He whispered in the other Cate’s ear. The doppelgänger spun on her heel and stepped back into the mirror, returning to the other world.

As he covered the mirror, Cate said, “It’s something like this that allows Gianna to time travel, right?”

“Yes. There are seven time travel conduits in the world. The Agency has two. I have one. The locations of the others are unknown.”

Cate approached a tiara on a pedestal. Its diamonds sparkled in the candlelight. “What does this one do?”

“Allows the wearer to view a window into Alterra.”

“What’s Alterra?”

“Another dimension where a different set of decisions have led to a different world.”

Cate crinkled her brow as she ran a finger along the jewels.

“Ask Damien about it. He has been to one.”

“Really?” Cate inquired.

“Yes, though I believe he found the experience rather frightening. Would you like to try it on?”

Cate shook her head. “No, not if what Damien saw terrified him.”

“You may see something you like.”

“Or hate. I’ll stick with this dimension, thanks.”

Marcus approached and stared down at her. “Are you happy with what you see in this dimension?”

CHAPTER 30



Cate swallowed hard as his dark eyes bore into hers. She avoided the question. “I will be happier when we’ve retrieved Jack. Was there any progress on that front?”

He offered her a half-smile. “We plan to propose a trade with them.”

“A trade?”

Marcus waved his hand around the well-stocked room. “One of these items for Jack.”

“Do you think they’ll go for it?” Cate inquired.

Marcus nodded. “Yes. Without these objects, their powers are limited. They will be interested. At least enough to take a meeting.”

Cate nodded and blew out a long breath. “I can’t wait until this is over.”

“Shall we return you to your bed to rest? Perhaps you’d like to take your books with you.”

Cate nodded as she glanced down at her ankle. “Yes, I think I may have overdone it.”

Marcus’s forehead crinkled with concern. “Are you in pain?”

“A little.” She winced as she tugged her nightgown and robe up, revealing her swollen ankle.

“Catherine,” he chided. “We must get you back into bed. I shall carry you.”

He reached for her.

“No,” she countered, waving a finger at him. “I can walk. I don’t need to be carried like a damsel in a gothic nov—“

Her words cut off as Marcus swept her off her feet, cradling her in his arms.

“This is unnecessary,” Cate argued as he climbed the spiraling stairs.

“I’ll be the judge of that.”

“Your judgment is impaired. I can walk.”

“Yet, you will not,” he insisted as they stepped into the library. “Push the bookcase closed, please.”

Cate swung the bookcase shut before he crossed to the desk. “And pick up the books you’d like to study.”

Cate grabbed the few she had been reading before he carried her through the halls and settled her in her bed. “Can I trust that you will stay here?”

“Can I trust that you will tell me when you hear anything about Jack?”

“Of course, I will. As long as I know I can find you here.”

“I will not move,” Cate promised as she flipped open her book on other realms. “I have a lot of learning to do.”

Anna arrived shortly after Cate settled into her reading. “How are you feeling, dear?” she inquired as she sank into the armchair.

“Much better,” Cate admitted.

“I see you’ve found some books to entertain you.” She glanced at a few of the titles Cate had spread across the bed. She cut her gaze to Cate, a surprised expression on her features. “I am surprised you are not asleep with this dry selection.” She shook her head at the books. “Did you allow Marcus to pick the books?”

Cate chuckled at the statement. “I did not. I selected them myself. I found them immensely interesting.”

“Hmm, what a unique individual you are, Catherine. It is obvious why Marcus married you.”

They chatted for a few more moments before a knock sounded at the door and Damien pushed his head in. “May I come in?”

“Yes,” Cate said, waving him inside.

“Just checking on the patient.”

“I’m doing well, thanks.”

“I’ll allow you two to visit,” Anna said, rising from the chair and patting Cate’s arm. “If you need anything just call.”

She strode from the room as Damien eased into the chair, perusing the selection of books. “Interesting stuff, huh?”

"I thought so. I'm not sure I fully comprehend the magnitude of what is in these books."

"It's crazy, that's for sure. Oh, *Benson's Guide to Creatures*. Alexander has this."

"Have you read it?"

"I've checked out a few entries, yeah."

Cate flicked her volume closed. "I heard you checked out more than entries in some of these. Marcus said you visited a place called Alterra?"

"I did. One of them. There are millions or something."

"He said it terrified you."

"Oh," Damien said with a chuckle. "Yeah, sort of. In this time band, Celine married Marcus and she turned into a real b— well, never mind. She was kind of scary."

Cate's eyebrows raised. "Really?"

Damien nodded. "Oh, yeah. She drew a guy to her with some kind of magnetic force and then turned him mute!"

"Wow." Cate ruminated on how the single different choice had resulted in an entirely different version of Celine.

"In the end, when she met Gray, she fell in love with him. I guess they're just meant to be together no matter what happens in the time band."

"Aww, that's kind of romantic. Though, I doubt Marcus appreciated that."

"Nope. Not at all."

Cate stared into space as she considered the reaction he may have had to such news. Any further conversation was interrupted by the arrival of Michael.

"Hey, we got something back from Mountbatten."

"You did?" Cate inquired, shifting the book off her lap.

Damien leapt from his seat. "What was it?"

"They're willing to play ball. Tonight. Eldinbury Castle."

Damien blew out a breath. "On their turf."

"Yeah, I don't like it," Michael said.

Marcus and Celine entered as Michael and Damien discussed the details. Cate studied Marcus's face, trying to read his reaction.

"I assume you already announced the news," he said to Michael.

"Yeah," Michael answered. "We were just discussing it."

"Going to them. Not great," Damien said.

“We have little choice,” Marcus answered.

Celine crossed her arms and shrugged. “He’s right, D. We need to play by their rules.”

“I don’t have to like it.”

Cate stared up at Marcus. “What do you think?”

“I think Celine is correct. Given Jack’s condition, we need to make the best play we can this evening as they govern.”

Cate bit her lower lip. “Damien’s right, too. It puts us in a bad position.”

“Jack’s condition, which is relatively unknown, but does not seem to be good, dictates our choices. It is not the best position to be in, but nonetheless, it is the one we are in. We must make the best move we can.”

Cate nodded, still chewing her lower lip. “I want to go.”

Marcus clasped his hands behind his back. “It may be best—”

Cate shot him a pleading glance. He scrunched his eyebrows. “Fine.”

“I think we should all go. We’re coming in at a disadvantage. Showing up en masse strengthens us, somewhat,” Michael argued.

“Yes, I think it would be best,” Marcus said.

Damien nodded. “Then we travel this evening to Eldinbury.”

Cate blew out a long breath as the plans were finalized. Soon she would be reunited with Jack and this nightmare would end. At least she hoped.

* * *

The carriage trundled along the lane toward Eldinbury Castle. Cate sat next to Marcus, trying not to fidget too much. She chewed her lower lip as her nerves reached fever pitch. She glanced across from her. Sandwiched between Michael and Damien, Celine drummed her fingers against her leg.

Damien offered Cate a supportive smile. “It’s almost over, Cate,” he said.

Marcus glanced at her before he slid his hand over hers. She turned hers upward and laced her fingers between his, drawing on him for support. She worried about what they’d find when they arrived. Would they accept the bargain for one of Marcus’s enchanted items? And would it matter? What condition would Jack be in? Could he be saved?

Questions raced through her mind faster than she could process them. She gave up trying to reason answers for each as the castle came into sight.

Her heart sped up, pounding against her ribs. Marcus squeezed her hand, sensing her apprehension through their shared connection.

The carriage slowed to a stop outside the entrance to the fortress castle. Cate's knees wobbled as Marcus helped her from the carriage. The five of them were shown into the foyer before they were paraded down a long hallway into a generously-sized office.

The portly Lord Mountbatten puffed a cigar behind his desk. Next to him, the shapely Gianna, perched on the mahogany wood, her legs dangling as she sipped a sherry.

As they filed into the room, Lord Mountbatten took another puff of his cigar before setting it in an ornate ashtray. He slowly rose from his chair as Gianna slipped to the floor, turning to face them with a cat-who-caught-the-canary smile. A necklace sporting a large gold key dangled from her neck.

"Well, Northcott, I never thought I'd see the day where you were willing to bargain for anything."

Marcus's set expression conveyed his displeasure with the entire situation. Cate swallowed hard, worried the plan may not come to fruition if the ruddy man continued to needle at Marcus.

"I am willing to do nothing until we have confirmed Mr. Reid's condition."

"He's alive," Gianna said.

"Can we see him?" Cate asked.

Amusement crossed Gianna's features and she leaned onto the polished desk. "The mouse speaks. I would allow a moment, but there really is no use."

"What's that mean?" Michael inquired.

"He is unconscious. And quite honestly, I am not certain how much of his mind remains intact." She flicked her haughty gaze to Cate. Cate swallowed the lump forming in her throat.

"Then I suppose we should get down to business before you destroy him entirely in your little game," Marcus answered.

"Make me an offer," Mountbatten said.

"The Crown of Alacon," Marcus said simply.

Gianna slid her eyes sideways, an amused grin playing on her features. The round man picked up his cigar and puffed it, blowing a circle out from his fat lips.

He flicked his gaze to Marcus. "No."

Gianna raised her eyebrows, her grin widening. Cate's heart dropped a little. Though perhaps he had made a low offer on the first round.

"The Mirror Bridge."

The man flicked his gaze to the desk, puckering his lips as he stroked a hand down his round belly. "No."

"Both," Marcus countered.

Cate swallowed hard as she awaited the response.

"Declined," he spat. "Have you come here to toy with me? I will let the man die, it makes no matter to me."

Cate's heart seized at the words.

"Though I do think it matters to the little mouse," Gianna said, making an exaggerated display of pouting.

Unflustered, Marcus continued. "I have an offer you cannot refuse."

Cate studied him, wondering what it was. What object in his secret artifact room did The Agency desire enough to trade for Jack?

"I doubt it. If it is another of your trinkets, I have plenty of my own. And I acquire new toys daily."

"It is not. And I guarantee you will accept it."

Gianna raised her eyebrows at the statement as did Lord Mountbatten. The man tapped ashes from his cigar, scattering them into the standing metal ash tray. "I'm thoroughly intrigued. Name your offer."

Marcus eyed the man for a moment before he uttered a single word. "Me."

CHAPTER 31



Cate's eyes went wide at Marcus's offer of himself for Jack. "What?" she gasped.

The others with her seemed as shocked as she was at the statement, none of them aware of his backup plan.

The delighted grin on Gianna's face could not be hidden. She shot a gleeful glance at Lord Mountbatten, who also failed to hide a satisfied grin.

"Accepted," he answered. "I never imagined I'd win both the objects of my desire."

"No!" Cate said.

"Return to your carriage, we shall deliver Reid to you," Mountbatten said.

Cate shook her head, her breath catching in her throat. "No," she repeated. She grabbed Marcus's arm, tugging on it.

"Oh, my, the little mouse is displeased!" Gianna giggled before turning serious. "Too bad. The deal is made. He is ours now."

"Catherine—" Marcus began when Gianna interrupted him.

"Get out. You're finished here."

Marcus eyed Lord Mountbatten. "A moment," he requested.

The man waved his hand, signaling for Marcus to proceed. Cate's breathing turned ragged as Marcus pushed her back several steps.

"Catherine, calm yourself. Once you return to Rosenberg, seek out Mother. She will know the best way to help Jack."

"Marcus, no, you can't do this," Cate begged, tears forming in her eyes.

“It is done. Take Jack home.”

Cate shook her head frantically as she clutched at his forearms. “No, this solves nothing. We’ve traded one problem for another.”

“It solves everything.”

“We’ll find another way,” Cate pleaded.

“Jack does not have that kind of time.”

“No,” Cate choked out. She glanced around Marcus. “I’ll give you Dunhaven. I will—“

Marcus wrapped his arm around her and eased her back a few steps. “No, you will not. The deal is made. This is over.”

Her lower lip trembled as she searched her mind for another solution. She pressed a palm to her forehead as she gasped out a breath. Gianna approached him with thick handcuffs.

“No,” Cate sobbed.

“Don’t worry, mouse, we’ll take Dunhaven, too, when we’re ready.”

Marcus pushed her toward Damien as a gleeful Gianna clasped the iron shackle around one of his wrists. “Take her.”

Damien wrapped his arms around Cate as tears spilled onto her cheeks. “No,” she sobbed.

“Come on, Cate. I’ve got you.”

Cate dug her heels in as Damien tried to guide her from the room. After a moment, he tugged her up and carried her into the hall as her feet kicked to find purchase.

“We can’t leave him here,” she cried as they stepped into the hall.

“I don’t think we have a choice,” Michael said as he wrapped an arm around her, too.

Cate’s lip trembled and her limbs felt weak as they led her to the waiting carriage. She climbed inside. Damien clamored in next to her, wrapping his arm around her and pulling her close as she sniffled.

“We can’t leave him,” she tried again.

Celine shook her head. “I’m not sure what we can do. To be honest, I’m still in shock.”

“You didn’t know either?” Cate asked.

“I didn’t. And I’m stunned that Marcus just sacrificed himself.”

Damien rubbed Cate’s arm as Celine admitted her surprise. Cate’s lips formed a grimace as she fought back tears.

“We’ll get back to Rosenberg, assess the situation with Jack, and come up with a plan,” Michael promised.

The doors to the castle opened, shining light from within. All eyes turned to the figures limned in light. Two men dragged another man between them. His feet trailed behind him as he hovered at their elbow level, his head lolling to his chest.

They tossed the man’s body forward. Jack hit the ground hard, sliding forward on the gravel in a heap.

“Jack!” Cate exclaimed as Damien and Michael leapt from the carriage. They dragged an unconscious Jack into the carriage.

His head lolled to the side as Cate and Celine helped tug him inside.

“Dragon’s blood,” Celine said as they hauled him onto a seat, propping him against the side.

Cate dug it from her pocket, pulling his lower lip down and placing a lozenge on his tongue. The bitter dragon’s blood drop produced no effect.

“Oh, Jack,” Cate moaned as she settled into the seat next to him. She grasped his hand and squeezed. “We’re here. And we’re going to get you help.”

The carriage bobbed its way away from the castle. Cate glanced back at the lights glowing within the windows. She resisted the urge to stop the carriage and go back. The second heartbeat in her chest beat steadily. As the castle shrank away from view, Cate returned her gaze to Jack. She hoped Anna could help. But she fretted over explaining where the woman’s son was when they returned.

* * *

The carriage slowed to a stop after the steep climb to Rosenberg Palace. Cate flew from the carriage in search of Anna while Michael and Damien unloaded Jack, shouldering him between them as they dragged him into the castle.

Cate hurried through the halls, bursting into a private sitting room where Anna read by candlelight.

“Come quickly, we need your help,” she gasped.

Anna snapped her book shut and followed Cate from the room. Cate led her to the foyer where Michael and Damien held a limp Jack.

Anna studied him before flicking her gaze to Cate. "What has happened to him? Do you know?"

"Severe temporalysis," Cate said. "We do not know much more than that."

"Follow me."

Anna led them up the stairs and down a hall, pushing into a bedroom and signaling them to place Jack on the bed. He flopped onto the bed, unmoving.

"He is not from this time," Celine explained as Anna hovered over him. "We must take him back to his original time period as soon as possible."

Anna ignored her for the moment. She tugged open Jack's eyelids, pressed a hand against his chest before she pressed her ear to it. She laid the back of her hand across his cheek.

"We've given him a dragon's blood lozenge," Cate said as she wrung her hands, watching the process.

Anna straightened and faced them. "He is dangerously close to being lost forever. And there is no way he can time travel tonight."

"Is there anything we can do?" Cate asked.

Anna nodded as she pushed past the group. "I can try a remedy. It will not cure him, but it may help stabilize him for travel to his time. We will not know until morning at the earliest."

Cate nodded as Anna reached the door. She twisted before she left the room. "By the way, where is Marcus?"

Cate's face fell and she bit her lower lip hard.

"There was an incident. Marcus stayed behind," Celine answered.

Anna arched an eyebrow at the statement.

"We needed to get Jack here as soon as possible," Michael said. "He told us to come straight here."

Anna's eyes fell onto Cate, who studied the floor as she held back her emotions. "I will prepare the remedy."

"Cate," Damien said as Anna left the room, "maybe you shouldn't be here."

"He's right. We can't afford for Anna to lose focus and you're still visibly upset over Marcus," Celine said.

"She has the right to know," Cate answered.

"No one's disagreeing with that," Michael said, "but maybe now's not the best time."

“Right, maybe once Jack’s stabilized,” Damien said.

“I can’t believe you’re suggesting we keep this from her.”

“To save Jack’s life,” Celine said. “Explaining what happened may be tricky. And we need her.”

Cate sucked in a breath. “All right. I won’t tell her yet. But we need to discuss what we’re going to do about this.”

Anna’s return interrupted further conversation. She bustled across the room, holding a smoking concoction. “Open his mouth,” she instructed.

Cate nodded and pulled down Jack’s lower lip.

“Prop his head up a bit and hold his nose.”

Anna poured a small amount of the green liquid into his mouth. After a gargled cough, it disappeared. She continued to trickle liquid in until the concoction was gone.

“Now we wait,” Anna said.

Cate perched on the edge of the bed, grasping Jack’s hand in hers.

“Do you have more dragon’s blood?” Anna asked.

“I do, yes,” Cate said. She pulled the sachet from her pocket.

“Give him another. We’ll keep a continuous dose for now.”

Cate nodded and slipped another lozenge onto Jack’s tongue. His chest rose and fell steadily, the only sign of life existent.

“And how are you, dear? How is your ankle?” Anna asked, stroking Cate’s hair.

Cate swallowed hard, pushing the idea of confessing everything to the woman from her mind. “Oh, I hadn’t even—”

Anna tugged up the hemline of her skirt. The swelling in Cate’s ankle had spread to her foot. In the chaos of the night, she had failed to notice the steady throbbing and deep ache.

“You’ve overdone it,” Anna said. “You should retire and rest. Get off your feet.”

“I—” Cate began, her voice cutting off as she tried to explain why she should stay with Jack. “I’d like to help you monitor him. I can put my foot up here.”

“You should be in bed, Catherine. You need proper rest. You’ve just recovered from a severe wound. You do not want to risk a relapse.”

Cate searched her mind for a rebuttal.

“Marcus will never forgive me if he returns and finds you ill again.”

Cate offered the woman a forced smile, trying to keep her lower lip from trembling. "You're right."

"I'll walk you down, Cate," Damien said.

Cate rose from the bed. "If anything changes with him—"

"I'll let you know, dear, I promise." Anna pulled Cate into an embrace, kissing her cheek. "Rest well, dear."

Cate nodded as she slipped her hand through the crook in Damien's arm. He led her from the room. "I know you hate to leave him, but it may be for the best. Not just with your ankle, but with the whole situation."

"I feel terrible not telling her."

"I know, but things will look different in the morning. Celine, Michael, and I will talk and see what we can come up with."

"What can you come up with?" Cate asked, emotion lacing her voice. "That place is a fortress. We couldn't get Jack out."

"Jack's illness put a damper on that," Damien said. "We'll figure something out."

They arrived at Cate's suite and said their good nights. Damien reiterated his promise to find a way. Cate nodded, though her mind questioned the oath.

She slogged into her suite, crossing the room and entering the bedroom. She sniffled and focused on the music box. Behind it, the purple rose stuck from inside the vase. Tears clouded her vision as she spotted it.

After crossing the room, she perched on the edge of her bed and wound the music box, holding it close to her chest. Her fingers caressed the purple bloom as she sniffled again.

"Your Grace?" Andrea's voice squeaked.

Cate wiped away her tears. "Oh, Andrea. I didn't hear you come in."

Andrea offered her a consoling glance. "Is everything all right?"

Cate nodded, squeezing her lips together as she fought back another wave of tears.

"Oh, poor dear," Andrea said, hurrying to her and stroking her hair. "What is it?"

Cate shook her head and wiped away the tears again. "I'm just tired."

Andrea smiled down at her. "Well, let's get you changed and into bed to rest."

Cate squeezed her hand and nodded. They set about the nightly tasks with Andrea tucking Cate into bed before she left. Cate wound the music

box again and set it on her night table. It tinkled away as she stared out at the moonlit sky.

Cate pressed her hand to her chest. The second heartbeat thudded next to her own. She squeezed her eyes closed, focusing on that heartbeat's rhythm. It lulled her to sleep despite her anguished thoughts.

CHAPTER 32



Cate shot up with a gasp. With labored breathing, she attempted to determine what had awoken her.

Another stabbing pain shot through her chest. She clutched at her nightgown as she hunched over. As she gulped in breaths, she realized what had startled her.

The second heartbeat, steady and strong when she had fallen asleep, now thudded rapidly, sometimes skipping beats.

Cate squeezed her eyes shut as pain shot through her again. Tears spilled onto her cheeks as the sharp pain stabbed at her.

She threw back the covers and swung her legs over the side of the bed. Her bare feet touched the cold floor. She padded across the room, tugging her nightgown over her head. She pulled on a dress and fastened it to the best of her ability, then slipped into her shoes and pulled a full-length, hooded cape around her.

Cate raced from the room and hurried through the halls. Pain shot through her chest again and she clutched at it as she descended the spiral staircase. She flung the front door open and fled into the warm summer night.

The gravel crunched under her feet as she sprinted to the stables. After slipping inside, she climbed to the rooms housed above, pounding at one of the doors.

A wide-eyed stable boy inched his door open. His aghast expression worsened as he spotted Cate. “Duchess Northcott?”

“Ready the horses. I need a carriage immediately.”

His head bobbed up and down in a panicked nod as he retreated into his room. He emerged moments later, still tugging on his jacket.

Cate followed him downstairs. “What can I do to help?”

“Oh, Your Grace, please—“

“This is an emergency. Time is of the essence. Now, what can I do to help?”

With the man’s instructions, they readied the two fastest horses and a small carriage. Cate climbed aboard as the man inquired about their destination.

“Eldinbury Castle,” Cate told him.

The man’s brow furrowed but he climbed to his perch. The carriage lurched as the horses tugged them forward.

Cate stared out at the moon as they trundled down from the mountain. She pressed her hand to her chest. The other heartbeat still thudded hard against her ribs. “I’m coming, Marcus,” she whispered.

Cate tapped her foot against the floor as the carriage crawled along. She willed it to move faster, particularly when the second heartbeat slowed as if weakened. She wondered as they rolled along if she should have woken the others. Though she couldn’t have endured a “wait until morning” lecture. They could not wait. Something was wrong. She could feel it. She could sense it. And she had to do something about it.

The castle lights appeared across the field. Cate knocked against the window and the carriage slowed to a stop. She flung the door open and leapt from the carriage.

“Your Grace?” the coachman said as he scrambled from his perch.

“We can’t approach the castle too closely. This is far enough. Wait here.”

“But Your Grace—“

“I’ll be fine. If I do not return by daybreak, go back to Rosenberg and fetch the Carlyles. Otherwise, wait for me here.”

The man nodded, looking unconvinced as Cate trudged across the field. She hid under the leaves of a large oak tree, lifting her eyes to view the castle looming over her. Few people moved around it at this time of night. Most of the windows were dark, though a few still glowed.

As she pondered how she’d gain entrance, a small door near the corner opened and two men popped out, strolling around the corner. Cate raced for

the door as it swung closed. She slipped inside, finding herself in a back servants' hallway.

Cate glanced up and down its length, finding it empty. She pressed against the wall, creeping down the hall. Her fingers scraped across the rough stone as she searched for a way down. A fortress castle like this one had to be designed with a dungeon. She only needed to find it.

An opening in the wall led to a stone stairway, spiraling downward. Light glowed at the bottom. Cate hesitated for a moment at the top, debating on whether or not to try it or continue on. Voices down the hall forced her decision. Two figures rounded the corner behind her. She hurried down the circular stairway to escape being spotted.

The stairway spilled into a hall leading to a large kitchen, cold and quiet at this time of night. Cate shook her head and retreated up the stone steps, hoping the individuals in the hall above her were gone.

Instead, voices echoed down the circular stairway. The two people who had turned into her hallway were descending the stairs and about to run into her. She spun and fled down the steps again and sprinted the length of the hall to the kitchen. She skidded to a halt, spinning in search of a hiding place.

As the voices floated down the hall toward her, she squeezed under the large prep table in the center of the room. She pulled her cloak tight around her, sucking in a deep breath that she held as two sets of legs appeared at the entrance.

They spoke in German, a language Cate did not understand. She pressed her lips together as they conversed about something she could not understand. The men approached the table, one on one side, one on the other. Cate shrank as far under as she could.

The sound of someone biting into an apple reached her. The conversation continued between bites of the apple. Loud laughter followed one statement before the men retreated, returning down the hallway from which they'd come.

Cate blew out the breath she'd been holding. She waited several more minutes before she crawled from under the table and rose to stand. She strained her ears for sounds of the men but heard none.

Cate inched down the hall and climbed up the stairs again. At the top, she glanced up and down the hall, finding no one.

She chose to return in the direction she'd come, bypassing the door and peeking around the corner. Another empty hallway. She slid around the corner and slinked down the hall.

Halfway down, she found another passage leading down. Dim light flickered at the bottom of the stairs.

With a deep inhale, Cate descended the stairs. She spilled into a small square room with an opening across from her. A man dozed in a corner next to it on the stone floor. Cate swallowed hard as she tiptoed past him and into the dark chamber beyond.

Iron barred cells made up both sides of the large room.

"Marcus?" Cate hissed. She hurried down the center path, glancing into each cell on either side. All empty.

Her heart sank as she reached the end. A dark opening in the middle led to another room. Cate crept into the darkened room. She paused as her eyes adjusted to the room, lit only by the moonlight shining through the small, barred windows near the ceiling.

Cate scanned the room. Across from her, she found a single iron door with a peek door near the top. She lifted her dress and cape and sprinted across the room. Her fingers closed around the metal pull and she swung the small door open on creaky hinges.

"Marcus," she whispered.

A figure rose from a stone bench, limned in the moonlight shining through the small window. "Catherine?"

He raced to the door, grasping the bars lining the peek hole with both hands. "Catherine, what are you doing here?"

"I couldn't leave you," Cate said. "I'm here to rescue you."

"This is far too dangerous. You must leave."

"What? No! I'm not leaving without you."

"Catherine—"

"No!" Cate insisted. She pressed a hand to her heart. "I could feel what they did to you. You can't stay here."

He sighed as he reached for her hand and squeezed it. "I'm sorry you experienced that. But, Catherine, this is impossible."

"Can't you use your magic unlock trick?"

"No," he answered. "This cell is a Wizard Holder. Locked with an enchantment. You would need the key."

Cate squeezed his hand and nodded. "I'll find it."

She tugged her hand away, but he kept a firm hold on it. "It is too risky."

"I saw keys when I entered. I'll try those."

She yanked her hand free, spun on her heel and sprinted back to the entrance where the man slept before Marcus could protest. Holding her breath, she stepped toward his sleeping form. Her fingers closed around the thick iron keyring. The keys jangled as she lifted them from the hook. She winced, glancing down at the man. He snorted in his sleep, his head rolling back and forth on the stone wall behind him.

Cate froze until he settled back into sleep, rhythmic breathing with light snoring indicating his status. She eased the keys from the wall hook and crept into the cell room, darting across and returning to Marcus's cell.

"Any of these?" she said, waving them.

Marcus scanned them. "No. The key is unique. Gold."

Her shoulders slumped. "Where would it be?"

"Catherine, you cannot traipse around searching for it. You must go."

Cate's brow furrowed and she scratched at her forehead as she tried to think through her problem.

"If Gianna finds you—"

Realization dawned and Cate pointed at Marcus. "That's it. Gianna. She has the key. She had it earlier. I'll find her and get it."

"Catherine, no!"

"I am not leaving here without you," Cate insisted. She dropped the other keys on the floor and hurried from the room, sneaking past the sleeping guard again and hurrying up the stairs. Her mind spun as she considered searching the rooms for Gianna. At this time of night, she was likely asleep. At least, Cate hoped she was.

She hurried through the empty, darkened halls, finding a back stair leading to the second floor. She wound around the halls, wondering which doors to try. One hallway contained sconces, still lit. Cate paused and wandered down that hall. It must be lived-in.

But which door was Gianna's? Or did this hall belong to Lord Mountbatten? A large set of double doors stood at the end of the wide hallway. Cate approached them, her fingers lingering on the wood. She pressed her ear to the door. No sounds came from within.

She leaned away, second-guessing trying the door. As she turned to leave, she caught a whiff of perfume. She flicked her gaze back to the door.

Gianna's perfume. Gianna's room.

Cate eased the door open and slipped into the room, covering her head with her hood. She scanned the space as she entered, finding a simply furnished sitting room. A doorway stood open across the space. Moonlight shone on a bed. A figure lay under the covers.

Cate tiptoed across the stone floor and hovered over the bed. Gianna's blonde hair sprawled on the pillow behind her. A gold chain lay around her neck. From it, a thick gold key rested on her chest.

Cate swallowed hard, biting her lower lip. She reached for her, her hand trembling. She wiggled her fingers, trying to steady it.

With a quiet exhale, she tried again. Her fingers caressed the cold metal. She gently grasped it, tugging it upward. She lifted the gold key higher, her breath catching in her throat as she considered how to ease it away from Gianna's neck. As the weight lifted from the woman's chest, Gianna's hand shot out, grasping Cate's wrist. The blonde's eyes snapped open and she stared up at a stunned Cate.

Her lips curled into a twisted smile. "Hello, little mouse."

CHAPTER 33



Cate tugged on the key again, but Gianna's grip was unyielding. She opened her fingers, dropped the key, and yanked against her iron grip again.

"Oh, I think not," Gianna said through gritted teeth.

She rose to sit as Cate struggled against her. "You can have a cell next to your dear husband."

Gianna stood and Cate finally wrestled free of her grip. She stumbled back several steps.

"What luck," Gianna said with a chortle as she stared at her. "We can torture you to force Marcus to do what we want." She sucked in a deep breath, a smile crossing her lips. "Oh, this will work so much better than torturing him directly. He'd break eventually, but this will be much faster. He's got quite a will, that one."

Cate scanned the room for something to help her. Gianna stalked toward her. Cate stumbled back. Her legs wobbled and her throat went dry.

"You can't escape, little mouse. And you're going to help us achieve so many things." Her lips curled again into a wicked grin. "And then I'm going to have the pleasure of finally killing you."

Cate swallowed hard as Gianna sauntered toward her. She continued backing away until her back hit a cold, stone wall.

"Nowhere to run, Cate," Gianna gloated. "First Jack, then Marcus, and now you. You've fallen like a house of cards and soon Dunhaven Castle will be ours."

“I don’t think so,” Cate answered through barred teeth. She swung at Gianna with a right hook.

Gianna threw her left arm up, blocking her punch with her forearm. With a quick twist, she grasped Cate’s wrist and wrenched it to the side at an awkward angle. Cate winced, holding in a groan.

Gianna cocked her head. “You’re going to have to try harder than that.”

Cate bent to the side as Gianna continued to contort her arm. Pain shot up to her shoulder. She tugged on her wrist as she shoved her shoulder into Gianna’s chest. She managed to wriggle free when Gianna stumbled back two steps.

Cate lifted her skirts and raced toward the door. Gianna grabbed her flying cape and yanked her backward. Cate pulled at the tie around her neck, unable to free herself from the garment. She fell backward into her attacker. Gianna wrapped her arm around Cate’s neck and another around her waist.

Cate tugged against the arm choking her. She gave up after a moment, instead, elbowing Gianna in the gut. The blonde blew out a sharp breath, relaxing her grip on Cate, allowing her to escape her grasp and dart away, spinning to face her adversary.

Cate’s chest heaved as she considered her next move. Her eyes focused on the key. The second heartbeat thudded in her chest. She had to retrieve it. She could not fail.

Cate set her jaw, widening her stance and curling her hands into fists. “I want that key.”

“Come and get it,” Gianna taunted.

With a shriek, Cate lunged at her, planting her shoulder against the woman’s ribs and driving her backward toward the wall. The two women collided into a hanging tapestry next to the bed. Dust billowed from the fabric. Gianna grunted as Cate slammed her into the hard wall before cocking her fist.

Cate pulled her arm back and swung forward. This time, she hit her target, striking Gianna on the cheek.

The woman’s head swiveled to the side as Cate landed the blow. Her shock lasted only seconds. She whipped her head back toward Cate, glowering at her. With one quick motion, she flung her arm toward Cate. The back of her hand cracked Cate across the face.

Cate stumbled sideways several steps. Her face stung from the impact. She rubbed at the stinging skin before she leapt at Gianna. Her hands wrapped around the woman's throat and squeezed.

Gianna barred her teeth, tugging at Cate's hands. She cocked her fist and struck Cate in the jaw. Cate yelped as she toppled to the floor, landing hard on her hip and palms.

Gianna snorted a laugh as she straightened. "I told you once before you need to learn how to take a punch, Cate."

Gianna stalked toward her as Cate crawled away on the floor, attempting to escape. Her attacker grabbed her ankle and tugged her backward. Cate's fingernails clawed into the floor, trying to stop her backward motion.

"Give up, little mouse. You've lost."

Cate fought against Gianna's grasp and clambered a foot forward, her fingers reaching in front of her.

"It's actually adorable watching you try to fight, but, honestly, dear, just give in."

Cate stretched forward, straining her muscles to eke out an extra inch. Gianna's foot pressed against Cate's backside, shoving her into the floor. Cate gritted her teeth as she lengthened her muscles to the point of pain, ignoring her aggressor's taunts.

Gianna leaned toward her, her voice a heated whisper. "Give up, Cate. You can commiserate with Marcus in a few short moments."

"I don't think so," Cate growled as her fingers touched cold metal. She closed them around the rim of the bowl. As she rolled onto her back, she swung the chamberpot she'd grasped seconds earlier. It struck Gianna square in the temple. The force drove the woman backward. As she teetered, attempting to regain balance, Cate scrambled to her feet, still holding the chamberpot.

Before Gianna recovered, Cate swung the heavy metal pot again. It banged into Gianna's head with a loud thud. The blow sent her careening toward the far wall. She slammed into a heavy wooden wardrobe, cracking her head on the opposite side. With a cry of pain, her eyes rolled back in her head and she slumped to the floor.

Cate's chest still heaved from the effort. She dropped the chamberpot at her side. It clanged against the stone blocks, rumbling to a stop a foot away from her.

Cate approached Gianna's limp form and pushed the woman onto her back with her foot. The gold key gleamed in the moonlight streaming into the windows. Cate leaned forward and snatched it, breaking the chain around her neck.

She puffed out a long breath as she eyed the heavy key. She closed her fingers around it before she lifted her skirts and hurried from the room. Gianna would not be down for long and she'd alert the entire castle to Cate's presence. She wouldn't have much time before a full-blown manhunt would be taking place.

Cate retraced her steps down to the main level, meeting no resistance. She snuck through the halls again in search of the stone stairway leading down to the dungeon cells. She located it with no trouble and hurried down the stairs, slowing toward the bottom.

The rhythmic sound of breathing met her as she crept down the last few stairs. The guard at the bottom still slept in the corner.

Cate pushed her shoulders back and sucked in a breath through her nose. She bit her lower lip as she inched across the room. The man snorted and wiped at his face as she hit the middle of the room.

She held her breath, freezing where she was and squeezing her eyes closed. She opened them a slit and flicked her gaze to the sleeping form. His head lolled to the opposite side and he sniffed, his chest rising high before he exhaled.

With her fingers spread and her arms stretched to each side, she waited another moment for him to settle back into sleep. After another moment, no rhythmic breathing filled the chamber. Instead, the guard gulped in a deep breath and squirmed.

Cate winced, wondering if she should make a run for Marcus's cell or retreat. Seconds later, the decision was made for her. The man fidgeted more, raising his arms overhead in a stretch.

Cate fled for the steps behind her, hurrying up several of them and out of sight. She pressed against the wall, hoping to remain unseen. The man's shadow spread across the floor as he rose from his seated position.

The shadow contorted, the arms flailing out in a large stretch. A loud yawn reverberated within the chamber, echoing up the stairs. Feet shuffled across the rough, gray stones making up the floor. After another few yawns and groans, the man's shadow disappeared.

Cate ducked to stare through the opening, catching the guard disappearing into the cell room. She slinked down the stairs and into the guard's chamber, pressing herself against the wall as she inched across the room.

A glance inside the moonlit room of cells showed the man meandering toward the back room and Marcus's cell. Cate darted through the doorway and scampered into a dark cell. The cell door issued a high-pitched squeal as she tugged it open. She winced, easing the door closed and retreating into a darkened corner. She pulled the hood of her cape as far over her head as possible.

A voice floated from the other room, the words indistinguishable at first.

"Been playing with the peek hole, have you?"

The man paused for a response, but Cate could not make it out.

"Doesn't matter. You won't be getting out of here anytime soon."

Cate held her breath, praying the man would retreat. After a few moments, keys jangled and then the man reappeared in the cell chamber. He shambled across the room, swinging the iron keys in his right hand. Whistling echoed throughout the room. He disappeared into the small square chamber outside.

Cate waited a few moments before she slipped from the cell, grimacing again at the creak of the hinges. She scurried across the room and into the back chamber. Her cape's hood fell backward as she raced across the small room.

Her fingers wrapped around the bars in the small window as she skidded to a stop, waving the gold key.

"I got it," she whispered breathlessly.

Marcus appeared at the door. "Quickly, use it."

Cate shoved the key into the lock and tried to turn it. It wiggled but would not turn.

"It's not working," she cried. She jiggled it again before struggling to turn the large key again, moaning as it stuck, unmoving.

"Is there an inscription on the key?" Marcus inquired.

"Ah," Cate stammered as she tugged the key from the lock and pulled it closer to her eyes, "I can't see in this light."

Marcus slid his hand between the bars. "Give it to me."

Cate nodded as she passed the key through to him and waited as he crossed toward the moonlight streaming through the window at the back of the cell. She pressed her hand against her forehead, her chest heaving as she gasped in breaths.

Marcus returned and stuck the key through the small window. "Aperiatur via," he said.

"Oh, that makes sense," Cate said. "Let the way be opened."

"You speak Latin?"

"Of course not," Cate said with a scoff, "but I can understand it."

She slipped the key into the lock and spoke the words. The key twisted and the lock clanked as it released. She tugged on the handle and the door swung open on squeaky hinges.

Marcus hurried out of the cell, pulling Cate into an embrace. She flung her arms around his neck with a sigh of relief.

"Thank you, Catherine," he whispered to her.

She pulled back, still wrapped in his arms. "We need to go quickly. I had a run-in with Gianna when I retrieved the key. I managed to knock her unconscious, but she'll alert everyone soon enough."

His lips curled into a slight smile at her statement.

"I don't think we'll make it past that guard, though."

Marcus tugged her closer to him. "I'd prefer to take a shortcut."

Cate opened her mouth to question his meaning when the world around her began to fade to black.

CHAPTER 34



For the seconds the blackness enveloped her, she wondered if she'd passed out or suffered another temporalysis attack.

A cool breeze caressed her cheek, and the rustling of leaves tickled her ears. Moonlight lit their surroundings, casting shadows across Marcus's chiseled features.

Cate glanced around, a surprised expression on her face. "How?"

"I used a location hop," Marcus explained. "The same thing I used when you suffered your temporalysis attack in Dunhaven."

Cate recalled being in the street one moment and in Marcus's home the next. However, she'd had a vision so she had not experienced the jump from one location to another in seconds.

"That was... odd," she replied, glancing up at him.

He stared down at her, his thumb caressing her cheek. "Catherine—"

A shout interrupted his statement, followed by sharp barks of several dogs.

"We must go," he said.

"I left the carriage on the road there," Cate answered, pointing past the large tree she'd hidden behind earlier.

Marcus followed her finger and nodded as he scooped her up into his arms.

"What are you doing? I can walk!"

"Your ankle is undoubtedly swollen after all your traipsing around the castle," he answered as he sprinted across the field toward the road.

“Besides, it is owed to me.”

“Owed to you?” she asked as they neared the road.

“My ego has been bruised by needing to be rescued. The least you can do is allow me to feel useful.”

The corners of Cate’s lips turned up in amusement. “All right, fair enough. Thank goodness you were here to carry me to the carriage.”

He smirked at her as they arrived at the road. The coachman scrambled to open the door as he set Cate down. She climbed inside and collapsed into the seat, her heart still pounding from the experience. Marcus followed on her heels, taking the seat next to her.

As the carriage lurched forward his hand found hers and squeezed. She smiled at him in the moonlight, returning the gesture. As they trundled away from the castle, she craned her neck to glance back at the imposing form of the fortress castle. It shrank from her view, the lights now blazing from most windows fading away behind them.

With a sigh, she collapsed back into her seat, letting her head rest against the back. Her eyes slid closed as the carriage rumbled along, rocking her to sleep.

* * *

Cate’s eyelids fluttered open. Bright morning sun shone in the blue sky, blinding her. She shielded her eyes against it, picking her head up from where it had fallen on Marcus’s shoulder.

“Sorry,” she breathed as she straightened and stretched.

The carriage slowed to a stop outside of the massive palace. The coachman leapt from his perch and swung the door open.

Marcus climbed from the carriage, offering Cate his hand as she followed him. She stared up at the castle, outlined by the cloudless azure sky. Her mind wondered what had happened inside in the hours she’d been gone. Had Jack improved? Could they finally return home?

The questions filled her mind as Marcus wrapped his hand around hers and led her toward the door. They stepped into the massive entryway.

Damien hurried down the stairs, slowing to a stop as he spotted Cate and Marcus. His jaw dropped open as he gripped the marble banister.

“Cate!” he exclaimed, before he scrambled down the remaining stairs, spilling onto the marble floor below. “You’re here!” His eyes flicked to Marcus. “And you are here, too.”

“Lovely to see you again, Damien,” Marcus said.

His gaze cut back to Cate. “Where have you been? Anna went to check on you earlier and found your bed empty. She checked a few places and couldn’t find you. She woke the entire house and had them searching for you.”

“Oh, sorry,” Cate said, her eyes darting between Damien and Marcus. She tapped her free hand against Marcus’s arm. “I went to get Marcus.”

“Alone?” Damien said, his voice raising an octave. “Cate! Are you serious?”

“I am,” she answered with a wince. “It couldn’t wait.”

He ran his fingers through his brown hair as he blew out a long breath and shook his head.

Michael appeared at the top of the other curving stairway. “Cate!”

“She went to get Marcus,” Damien reported, still sounding astounded.

“Alone?” Michael questioned. “You should have woken us.”

“I didn’t want to regroup and plan. There was no time.”

“There is no reason to continue to rehash this. It is finished. Thanks to Catherine, I am free. And we may now move forward with determining Jack’s status.”

“Right, Jack,” Damien said. “Uh, we should check on him. He was holding his own when we discovered you were missing. Celine is with him.”

Damien and Michael mounted the stairs. Cate followed until Marcus tugged her back. “We will be along in a moment,” he said to the other two.

“What?” Cate questioned as the others disappeared down the second-floor hall.

“You should not have come alone, Catherine. You do realize that.”

“What happened to the whole ‘no reason to rehash this’ sentiment?”

“There is not. Outside of the need to reiterate that you should not take such chances with your life. And the need to admonish the stablehand who assisted you in doing so.”

“Unnecessary,” Cate said with a shake of her head.

“I shall decide what is necessary.”

Cate wagged her finger at him. "Marcus, do not berate that poor man for doing what I demanded he do."

"You would do well to listen to your wife," Anna said as she descended the stairs.

They turned their attention to her as she approached them. She cradled his face in her hands. "Welcome home, Marcus."

"Thank you, Mother. Though all this fuss is unnecessary."

"Do not tell your mother what is necessary and what is not. I am not blind nor stupid. The incident so casually mentioned last night was far more troublesome than anyone was willing to admit. And I am pleased to have you back."

She turned to Cate and pulled her into an embrace. "And thank you, dear, for doing whatever you needed to do to return him."

Cate returned the gesture, whispering a "you're welcome" into the woman's ear.

"How is the man you are tending?" Marcus inquired as they pulled away from each other.

"Improved," Anna answered. Cate's heart leapt at the statement.

"We must return him to his own time as quickly as possible."

Anna nodded at the statement. "He is not quite ready for that yet, but I expect he will be soon. I shall see to him now."

"Good."

The sound of hoofbeats and a carriage sounded outside the door as Anna ascended the stairs. Cate's brow furrowed as worry consumed her. Had Gianna and Lord Mountbatten tracked them here? Were they coming for a showdown?

The door popped open and a man strode inside. Cate's knees wobbled and her jaw dropped open as she recognized Marcus Northcott. She glanced at the Marcus standing next to her in shock.

The other man approached, clasping his hands behind his back as he stopped.

The first Marcus smiled down at her. "Catherine, meet my 1810 counterpart."

"Hello, Catherine."

Cate's gaze flicked between the two identical men. "This is weird."

"You should go and check on Jack," Marcus said before turning to his newly arrived twin. "Come along, Marcus, we have much to discuss."

Cate stared after them as the two men disappeared into the nearby sitting room, her jaw still gaping open and her eyebrow arched. She stood in shock for a full minute after the doors closed behind them before she stumbled to the stairs and climbed up. She navigated to the room they'd placed Jack in hours ago and pushed open the door, peeking in.

Anna administered some form of medicine as she had earlier. Cate joined her on the opposite side of the bed. Jack's color had improved, no longer a shade of whitish-gray, he now appeared more like himself. She wrapped her fingers around his cold hand and squeezed in a silent display of solidarity.

"You said he's improved?" Cate questioned.

"Yes," Anna answered as she poured the last bits of the thick amber viscous liquid into Jack's mouth, "I think this last bit of serum should ready him to travel to his time."

Cate breathed out a sigh of relief as she nodded. "Good."

"He's been through quite an ordeal," Anna said, flicking her gaze to Cate. She dabbed at any serum clinging to Jack's still pale lips.

"Yes," Cate said. "Not just the temporalysis."

"Those people are terrible," Anna said, returning her eyes to her work.

Cate focused on Jack's face, his eyes still closed. A bruise on his cheek betrayed a small part of what he'd endured at their hands.

"I know," she murmured.

Anna's fingers wrapped around Cate's hand, pulling it away from Jack's. Cate glanced over at the woman.

"Thank you for going back for Marcus."

Cate forced a smile onto her lips, guilt washing over her for lying to the woman. "Of course. I wouldn't have left him there. I didn't want to leave him the first time."

"I know you didn't." Anna lowered her eyes for a moment before she flicked them to the door. "Some others do not care about him the way you do."

Cate began to shake her head. "That's not—"

"It is," Anna said, her eyes cutting back to Cate's. "Marcus is correct about you, Catherine. You are too kind. A quality we both find charming."

Cate lowered her eyes as color rushed into her cheeks. She wasn't certain how much longer she could keep the charade going. In particular, she worried her concern for Jack may cause an issue with Anna.

Thankfully, the doors opened, and Damien stuck his head inside. "How's he doing?"

Anna dropped Cate's hand, grabbing the bowl she'd set on the nightstand earlier. "Better. If the latest dose works as I expect, he should be ready to return to his time period within a few hours."

"Oh, good," Damien said, slipping into the room and approaching the bed.

"I warn you, he will not be cured of the temporalysis. Only stabilized enough to make a time travel trip."

Cate licked her lips as she pondered a response. Damien beat her to it. "We understand. We have a doctor ready to treat the temporalysis in his time period. We're hopeful the treatment will work."

"Thank you," Cate added, "for stabilizing him."

Anna offered them each a curt smile before excusing herself from the room, stating that she would check back in an hour.

The door clicked closed behind her and Cate sank onto the edge of the bed, taking Jack's hand in hers again.

"He's going to be okay, Cate," Damien assured her. "Millie thinks she's got something workable to tackle the temporalysis."

She stared at Jack, her head bobbing up and down at his statement. "I can't believe everything that's happened."

A hand fell on her shoulder and squeezed. "I know. But he's going to be okay. Millie's a fantastic doctor for all things supernatural. Trust me."

Cate patted his hand and flicked her gaze to him. She offered a weak smile before her eyes fell to Jack again. "Even outside of that. The time-hopping and The Agency. How cruel they are. How vicious and driven."

"They are not nice people. But things are looking up. We've got Jack back. Anna nearly has him ready to go home. This'll all be over soon."

Cate sucked in a deep breath as she considered his statement. She twisted her neck to glance at him again. "Also, there are two Marcuses downstairs." Her eyes searched his face for a glimmer of the shock still resonating through her.

Damien rubbed the back of his neck as he nodded. "Oh, right, yeah. His 1810 version is here. The one you've been traveling with is the one from our time."

Cate blinked at him as his lack of surprise registered with her. "Your lives are beyond interesting. Meeting a second Marcus was just bizarre."

Damien wiggled his eyebrows at her and grinned. "Tell me about it. It's even weirder when one of them hates you and one of them is supposed to be helping you."

Cate's forehead crinkled as she processed the statement. The confusion surrounding the supernatural world showed no signs of resolving itself anytime soon.

The doors burst open and Marcus strode in, interrupting any further musings on Cate's part. For a split second, she wondered which version of him stood in front of her.

"Has Mother administered another round of the serum?"

"Yes," Cate said, returning her attention to Jack. "She said he may be ready in a few hours."

"Excellent," he said. He lifted one of Jack's eyelids and studied his eye. "We should leave as soon as possible." He spun to face Damien. "Is the good doctor prepared to treat our patient?"

"Yeah, Millie's all ready. She should arrive right around when we do. She thinks the serum she fabricated will work."

"Then we should prepare to leave."

A new voice entered the conversation. "Surely Catherine does not need to undergo such a trip," Anna said.

Marcus clasped his hands behind his back, offering his mother a curt smile. "I would prefer to keep Catherine close after the incident last evening with The Agency."

"She will be safe at Rosenberg. After all she's been through, she needs rest, Marcus."

"Mother—" he began when Anna interrupted him.

"Marcus!" she said, her eyes widening. He squeezed his lips into a thin line, a sigh emerging from him.

Cate's eyes shot back and forth as the two argued. She rounded the bed and sidled next to Marcus, slipping her hand around his arm.

"Thank you for your concern, though I prefer to stay with Marcus." She arched an eyebrow before adding. "You never know when he may need me again."

Marcus's eyes slid sideways to gaze at her and he gave his head a slight shake. "I suppose I will never live that down, will I, dear?"

An amused grin crossed Cate's features and she shrugged. Anna smiled at the two of them and squeezed Cate's arm. "As long as it is what you

prefer, dear.”

“With that settled, when will Mr. Reid be ready to travel?”

Anna pushed past him toward the bed. “That is what I’m here to assess.” She leaned over Jack, pulling back his eyelids and laying her palm against his forehead and cheeks. She pressed an ear against his chest.

Marcus raised his eyebrows at her as she straightened.

Anna pursed her lips. “He is responding more slowly than I hoped.”

“Can he travel?”

Anna shrugged. “Possibly in several hours.”

“Can it be expedited?”

“No, Marcus, it cannot be,” Anna said, annoyance creeping into her voice. “Patience has never been your virtue, has it?”

“Returning him to his time is of the utmost importance.”

“And you shall. When he is stable enough to return.”

Cate watched the exchange between the two again before she interjected a question. “What is the consequence of returning too early with him?”

“He would not survive the trip,” Anna replied. “Time travel, while seemingly innocuous, can take an incredible toll. Temporalysis is merely one of those. Many go unnoticed, however, they exist nonetheless.”

“I understand the risks of time travel fully, Mother. Yet the importance of returning him to a time where he can be more aggressively treated—”

“It could kill him,” Anna retorted, interrupting his statement. “Aggressive treatment is useless if the man is dead.”

“And the risk will be lower in a few hours?” Cate inquired.

“Yes, it should be,” Anna assured her.

“Then we wait,” Cate said.

Marcus pressed his lips together with another slight shake of his head.

Anna patted his chest. “You are outnumbered, Marcus. Resign yourself.” She turned to Cate. “And you should get some rest. If you plan to follow Marcus to another time, you will need all your energy.”

Anna strode from the room, the situation resolved to her liking.

Damien headed for the door, too. “I’ll tell Michael and Celine we’ll be ready to leave in a few hours.”

Marcus stared down at Cate as silence fell over the room. He raised his eyebrows at her.

“What?” she questioned.

“I cannot believe you sided with my mother against me.”

Cate shrugged, puckering her lips. "She seems like a very knowledgeable woman. And her advice seemed prudent."

"Well, perhaps you should follow her prudent advice to rest."

"Perhaps I should. I do feel tired. The adrenaline is wearing off."

Marcus's eyes strayed down to her feet. "How is your ankle?"

"Strong enough to allow me to walk to my room, thank you."

"Are you certain? I'm sure Mother would scold me if I allowed you to gallivant through the halls on your injured ankle."

"Maybe we should keep it between us."

He motioned to the door. "Or perhaps I should call her and inquire after her knowledgeable opinion."

Cate shook her head but grinned in spite of herself. "You just want to win an argument against me by siding with your mother."

"It feels appropriate. Perhaps even cathartic."

Cate let her head loll to the side as she gave it another shake. She patted him on the chest. "See you later, Marcus."

He grasped her hand and squeezed. "I hope you get some rest. You deserve it."

He smiled at her as his thumb rubbed the back of her hand. She returned his expression before she slid her hand from his and left the room after one last glance at Jack's sleeping form.

Cate wandered through the halls to her bedroom suite. Her ankle offered a slight protest as she pushed the door shut behind her and leaned against it. Soon the nightmare would be over. Damien seemed certain their resident supernatural doctor would succeed in restoring Jack. He had yet to awaken from his temporalysis-induced coma. Would he ever?

CHAPTER 35



Cate shuffled through the room and collapsed onto the bed. She balled the pillow under her and buried her head in it. Despite her exhaustion, questions plagued her, and she found herself unable to sleep.

She rolled onto her back and stared out the window at the cloudless blue sky. What if Jack didn't respond to the treatment Anna had administered? Would they be stuck here? Could another treatment be attempted?

Questions continued to bombard her as she let her eyes slip down to her slightly swollen ankle. It had improved, however, it remained a painful reminder of only a part of the ordeal they had all endured in 1810.

She flicked her gaze back to the window, catching sight of the music box on the night table. She reached out and caressed the smooth wood. After winding it, she set it back on the table. The tinkling music filled the room. She rolled onto her side and stared at the tiny piano. Behind it, the purple rose glowed in the sunlight streaming through the window.

Cate smiled at the two objects. Perhaps the ordeal here had some positives, she mused as she drifted off to sleep.

* * *

Darkness surrounded her as she opened her eyes. The music box still played its tune, resounding through the darkness. Moonlight cast long shadows across the floor.

Cate pushed herself up to sit and stretched. She had slept longer than she'd expected. She hadn't expected to sleep at all, let alone until after sunset. The music must have soothed her.

She wondered about Jack's status. Would he be ready to travel yet? Could they finally return to their time?

The music continued to play. Cate recalled the number of times she'd used it to relax. An idea flitted across her mind. She had to act on it before they left 1810.

A quiet knock sounded across the room.

"Yes?" Cate called out.

A flickering flame appeared at the door and Andrea poked her head into the sitting room. "I didn't wake you, did I, Your Grace?"

"No, I was awake. Come in," Cate said as she swung her legs over the side of the bed.

"Duke Northcott told me of your daring rescue. How brave you are! You must have been exhausted. How are you feeling?" she asked as she entered the bedroom and began lighting candles.

Cate grabbed the music box from her nightstand and hurried to the desk near the window. "Fine. I managed some sleep."

"Good. Can I bring you anything? Tea, perhaps?"

"No, thank you. Is there any news on Jack?"

"Mr. Reid?" she asked, receiving a nod from Cate as she set the music box on the desk and sank into the chair. "I believe he has improved. The Dowager Duchess seemed pleased with the progress he'd made after the treatment."

Cate pulled a paper from within the center drawer and tore off a small scrap. "Oh, that's good."

"Are you certain there is nothing I can do for you, Your Grace?"

Cate dipped the quill into the ink, pausing before she withdrew it. "Actually, there is something. I must speak with Duke Northcott right away. Will you find him and send him here, please?"

Andrea nodded with a smile. "Of course, Your Grace. Right away. I know just where he is."

"Thank you," Cate said as Andrea hurried from the room. She withdrew the quill and scratched it across the paper she'd torn moments earlier.

Her eyes scanned the message as she blew on it to dry the ink. *You've always loved this.*

Cate lifted the small keyboard and slipped the note inside. She glanced out the window, catching the reflection of herself. It matched one of the visions she'd had during her illness. She had been confused when she'd seen it. Now she realized exactly what she needed to do.

The doors swung open moments later and she leapt to her feet.

Marcus strode across the room. "You summoned me, dear?"

"Yes," Cate said. "How is Jack?"

"Ready to travel."

"Good. Sorry, I didn't mean to sleep this long."

Marcus waved the apology away. "It allowed us time to give him an additional treatment and further stabilize him."

"So, he should survive the trip then?"

"Easily, yes. Are you ready for it?"

Cate shook her head. Marcus furrowed his brow, cocking his head at her reaction.

"There is something you need to do before we leave this time."

"Oh?" Marcus inquired.

Cate scooped the music box off the desk and stared at it for a moment. She flicked her gaze to Marcus's dark eyes and thrust the music box toward him. "You need to enchant this."

He raised his eyebrows as he stared down at the object. Cate jiggled it at him, encouraging him to take it.

His gaze met hers. "Do you understand now?"

Cate nodded as his earlier statements rang in her mind. "Yes. What I experienced with the music box was my doing. I asked you to enchant it because, without it, I wouldn't have trusted you. And without trusting you, we couldn't save Jack."

He slipped the music box from between her fingers. "I shall do as you ask."

"Thank you," Cate said.

"When I have completed it, I will collect you and we can return to our time."

He stepped toward the door, lingering before he entered the sitting room. He twisted to face her as he tapped the music box's underside with his fingers.

"You never told me the culmination of your temporalysis. What was it?"

Cate licked her lips as she considered the question. She remained uncertain, however, she had a sneaking suspicion of the pinnacle moment when she'd been cured. She opened her mouth to answer when a knock sounded and the door popped open.

"Your Grace?" Andrea called.

"Yes," Cate answered.

The woman entered the room. "Oh, I'm sorry, I wasn't aware you were still occupied. My apologies."

"Marcus was just leaving," Cate said, giving him a nod.

Marcus waved the piano in the air. "I shall return when the task is complete." He strode from the room, pulling the door shut behind him.

Andrea winced. "My apologies, Your Grace. I did not mean to interrupt."

"You didn't. We were finished."

"I understand you will be leaving later."

"Yes," Cate said. "Yes, we are."

Andrea clasped her hands together in front of her, squeezing them until they turned white. "Would you need me to travel with you?"

"Uh," Cate stammered as the realization hit her that Andrea may not have a place to go if she did not follow Cate. "I—"

Andrea waved her hand at Cate. "If you do not, please do not worry. Duke Northcott said he would make arrangements to return me to my time if you did not need me further." She let out a nervous chuckle. "Which I am most grateful for. I cannot imagine trying to find my way in 1810."

"Oh, I understand. And I would be most happy for you to travel with us. I'm certain with Jack's illness, we could use your assistance. Although I must warn you, we are from several decades in the future from when I met you."

Andrea arched an eyebrow, her mouth gaping open.

"If you prefer to return to your own time, I understand. The decision is yours."

"I would be most happy to travel with you, Your Grace. Though I am certain I have much to learn!"

A smile crept across Cate's face and she nodded. "Yes, I'd say you do."

Andrea pulled her lips back in a giddy grin, grasping Cate's hand and squeezing. "I must prepare for the journey! I am thrilled to continue to serve you!"

“I’m glad you’re excited and that you’re coming with us.”

“Is there anything I must prepare for you?”

“No, I think I have everything prepared. I’m just waiting for Duke Northcott to return.”

“Oh, there are some personal effects I would like to retrieve. May I or would you prefer I wait here?”

“No, not at all. Please get them.”

“Thank you, Your Grace. One of them is from my mother and I would be sorry to part with it.” She bobbed her head with another grin before she spun and hurried from the room, leaving Cate alone.

She wandered to the large window and gazed out over the landscape. She would miss the quiet solitude Rosenberg offered. Had it not been for Jack’s trouble, she may have enjoyed her stay.

She stared at the moonlit landscape for a few moments longer before she pulled away from it, wandering across the room and collapsing on the edge of the bed. Her fingers reached out to caress the petals of the purple rose.

Her mind wandered to their upcoming return. Would the doctor she’d yet to meet be able to cure Jack? What would happen if she couldn’t? One soft petal fell to the nightstand. She picked it up, her thumb caressing the petal.

How long did Jack have if he didn’t respond to the treatment? Would he ever awaken from the coma?

The opening of the door across the room interrupted any further questions. Marcus strode into the room, the music box in his hands.

Cate rose to her feet. “Is it done?”

“It is,” he said, sliding it back onto her nightstand. “And it shall be here in your room until you return or until I send it to you.”

Cate stared down at it with a smile, running a finger along the keyboard. Something about that fact comforted her.

“Ready?”

“No,” Cate answered. “I’m waiting for Andrea. She asked about going with us.”

“I left the decision to you when she inquired about it earlier.”

“She told me. I didn’t want to leave her behind. There’s something comforting about her presence.”

“I’m glad you like her,” he said. “And I’m certain she’s thrilled to follow you.”

The door burst open again and Andrea hurried across the room, breathless and clutching a brooch in her hand. “I’m ready.”

“We should proceed, then,” Marcus said. “Come along, Catherine.” He wrapped her hand around his arm and led her away. Andrea followed behind them as they wound through the halls to Jack’s room.

As they entered, they found Celine, Michael, and Damien waiting with a still unconscious Jack. Anna stood near his bed, checking his vital signs again.

“Is he still stable?” Marcus inquired.

“Yes. Improved a bit, actually. He should withstand the trip easily, though the temporalysis is another matter. The case is severe. I do not hold out much hope.”

Cate swallowed hard at the news.

“The doctor we have engaged in his time may have a treatment to reverse it.”

Anna raised her eyebrows. “Please let me know if it works. I would be most interested in this new treatment.”

“Of course, Mother,” Marcus promised. He turned to the others. “Are we ready?”

Nods answered his question. Anna stepped to Cate and wrapped her hands around Cate’s arms. “And I hope I shall see you again soon. Perhaps when Marcus reports on the treatment you could return with him. I shall miss you even though we only spent a small amount of time together.”

She tugged Cate closer into an embrace.

“I shall return her as soon as possible, Mother,” Marcus promised.

Cate pulled back and squeezed Anna’s hands. “I left the music box in my room for my next visit, which I hope is not far off.”

Anna smiled at the statement before returning her gaze to Marcus. She stood on her tiptoes to kiss his cheek. “Take care, dear. And take good care of Catherine.”

“I promise I will.”

After another kiss on the cheek and a final embrace of them both, Anna stepped out of the room. Marcus nodded to Damien and Michael.

“Celine, you will go first. Michael and Damien will follow with Jack. Then Catherine and Miss Evans and I will follow. We shall return in the

middle of the night several days from when we departed so we can re-enter Dunhaven Castle without any prying eyes.”

“That makes sense,” Cate said. “We’ll take him to the bedroom near my suite.”

Damien nodded as Celine pulled the bedding back. “Millie should arrive shortly after we do to assess him,” he said.

Damien and Michael lifted Jack from the bed, each of them shouldering his weight. His head sagged to his chest as they settled his weight between them.

Once they had him ready, Marcus began the process of opening the time portal. Andrea grasped Cate’s hand as the wind swirled around the room, blowing the curtains wildly. Cate patted it and tugged her closer.

When the portal opened, Celine disappeared into it. Michael and Damien dragged Jack between them, stepping into the blackness next. Cate glanced at Andrea before she pulled her toward the hole and stepped inside.

CHAPTER 36



They walked for a moment in the blackness before air tickled Cate's cheek. She blinked a few times before she glanced up at the waning crescent moon. Andrea stood at her side. The castle sprawled in front of them.

Cate spotted Celine ahead with Michael and Damien, who lumbered toward the front entrance, carrying Jack between them.

"Is this Dunhaven Castle, Your Grace?" Andrea inquired.

"Yes, it is. And my home." She patted Andrea's hand again. "I hope you'll love it here as much as I do. I have the perfect bedroom in mind for you."

Marcus stepped through the portal. It snapped shut behind him as he straightened his jacket. He smiled at Cate and offered her his arm. They strolled up the hill with Andrea trailing behind them, catching up to the others as they entered the foyer.

The darkened castle interior signaled they would not run into the others as they snaked through the halls.

"I'll show you the bedroom for Jack," Cate said in a low voice. She turned to Andrea and patted her hand. "And then I'll get you settled."

"No rush, Your Grace," the woman assured her.

Cate led the group upstairs, winding through the wide hallways to the one containing her bedroom. She pushed open the door to the room Jack usually occupied when staying at the castle and hurried to the four-poster

bed. She pulled back the thick, navy duvet and stepped aside to allow Michael and Damien to ease Jack into the bed.

He sank into the soft cotton sheets and pillows before Cate pulled the covers over him. “Thanks. I’d like to change and then I’ll stay with him.”

Celine dragged a chair across the room toward the bed. “I’ll sit with him until you get back.”

“Millie should be arriving any moment, too,” Damien said. “I’ll change and go downstairs to wait for her.”

“Make certain he has more dragon’s blood until the good doctor can examine him,” Marcus said.

Celine nodded, pulling open the pouch and sliding another lozenge into Jack’s mouth. Cate focused on his features for any sign of a reaction but found none. She sucked in a deep breath, trying not to become too distressed over the lack of reaction to the bitter substance.

Instead, she turned her attention to Andrea. “Come with me. I’ll show you your new room. And I’ll get you some clothes.”

“Thank you, Your Grace,” the woman said as she followed Cate. “And I can stay with Mr. Reid if needed at any time. Just say the word.”

They stepped into the hall and Cate continued toward the double doors marking her suite at the end. “Thank you, that’s very helpful.”

Before she reached them, she stepped to a set of doors on their left and pushed them both open. “I thought this would be appropriate. It’s very near to my room and has enough space to be comfortable.”

Andrea’s eyes widened as she stepped into the royal purple room. She swept her hand over the loveseat positioned in front of the wide fireplace before eyeing the matching chaise in front of the window. Through an open archway, a large bed with a satin duvet sat in the middle of the wall.

“Oh, Your Grace, are you certain? It is too much.”

“It isn’t,” Cate said with a chuckle. “I hope you’ll be comfortable here.”

Andrea spun to face her as she slid her fingers over the thick duvet. Her gaze floated around the room again before she answered with a broad smile. “How could I not be?”

Cate returned her expression as she flicked her gaze back to Cate’s eyes. “Should we get you changed, Your Grace?”

“O-Oh—” Cate stammered, ready to tell the woman it was unnecessary. She quickly changed her mind, realizing Andrea’s work should not be

minimized. “Yes. Let’s do that and then I’ll get you some pajamas and clothes for tomorrow.”

Cate led her to her bedroom suite. “Normally, there are two dogs running around in here, but with my absence, Molly, my housekeeper-in-training, or Mrs. Fraser, my housekeeper, must have them. You can meet them both tomorrow along with Mr. Fraser, my groundskeeper. I think you’ll get along well with everyone.”

“I look most forward to meeting them.”

“Oh,” Cate said, wincing a bit, “the relationship between Duke Northcott and I is a bit complicated. We... we’re not actually married. So, please don’t say anything to the others or refer to me as Your Grace.”

Andrea’s brow furrowed and she forced a smile onto her face. “I shall be sure to remain discreet. However, His Grace was very insistent that I use your proper title at all times.”

“Right, I’m sure that has to do with keeping up the appearance of us as a couple.”

Andrea forced another smile. “I will say nothing to your current staff.”

“I’m sorry this is so complicated. But thank you.”

Andrea smiled and nodded at her. Cate pulled her pajamas from a drawer. They chatted about the castle and its other occupants as Cate changed and gathered a selection of nightclothes and clothing for Andrea to use.

“We can order you some clothes tomorrow,” Cate said as she offloaded several items to the blonde. “Whatever you’d like. There’s a wonderful thing called the internet that allows you to buy almost anything you want and have it delivered straight to you!”

“Sounds fascinating, Your Grace. I look forward to learning about it and the fashions of this era. Are they very different from the fifties?”

“Yes, very! I hope you sleep well.”

“Thank you. I’m certain I will. What time shall I report to the servants’ area in the morning?”

Cate glanced at the clock on her night table. “It’s already two. I’d like you to get at least a few hours of sleep. And I would imagine I’ll spend the next few hours sitting with Jack, so there’s no rush.”

“Would seven suffice?”

“Yes, that would be fine, as long as you get enough rest.”

They wandered through the sitting room and Andrea swung the door open to the hall. "We can adjust the hours after things settle with Mr. Reid."

"Sounds great. I hope you sleep well."

Andrea made the short trip down to the hall to her room, disappearing behind the wooden doors. Cate continued past them to Jack's door. She peeked inside, finding Damien with a woman she'd never seen before. She assumed it must be the doctor he'd spoken of earlier.

Cate slipped inside and eased the door shut behind her.

Damien twisted to face her from his position at the end of the bed. "Hey, Cate. Millie made it."

The woman glanced at her over reading glasses, giving her a tight-lipped but warm smile with her bright red lips. She returned her attention to the clipboard in front of her and jotted another note before she stowed the pen under the clip and stepped toward Cate, sliding her glasses onto the top of her head.

She slicked a stray lock of dark brown hair that had escaped her low bun behind her ear before sticking her hand out toward Cate.

"Hi, I'm Dr. Amelia Gresham," she said in an efficient voice. "I don't believe we've met before, but I've heard about you."

Cate grasped the woman's hand. "I hope all good things. I'm Cate Kensie. Thank you for coming, Dr. Gresham."

"No trouble at all. Quite a fascinating case. And please, call me Millie."

Cate nodded at the statement before inquiring about Jack's status. "So, how is he? Do you think you can help him?"

"I believe so, yes. I've had several conversations with Duke Northcott regarding temporalysis and done extensive research. His condition is severe, however, he is quite stable which is a good thing. I can begin treatment immediately. I have already arranged for materials to be delivered within a few hours."

"So, you think he'll recover?"

"I have high hopes," she said with a grin.

Cate sucked in a nervous breath and smiled at her, still unconvinced but hopeful.

Damien squeezed her shoulders. "Millie's the best. If she's hopeful, you should be, too."

"I am. And very thankful for your help."

“I’d like to continue my assessment. You’re welcome to stay if you’d like,” Millie said, drawing the pen from her clipboard again.

“If you don’t mind me looking over your shoulder, I’d like to.”

“Not at all!” Millie tugged a stethoscope from around her neck and shoved the earpieces into her ears. She pressed the diaphragm on Jack’s chest after slipping it under his button-down shirt. With a nod, she let the stethoscope fall against her chest as she stood and jotted down a note.

“Strong heartbeat,” she said. “Excellent.”

She dug into a black doctor’s bag and pulled several instruments from within. Temperature, blood pressure, and pupil reactivity were checked and noted. Millie shined a light into Jack’s mouth before she felt for his pulse.

After tugging the covers back, she felt for a pulse in his feet. After a few more notes, Millie set down the clipboard and pulled off her glasses.

“All right, well, we are in good shape to begin. As soon as the equipment arrives, I will begin to monitor his brain activity along with continuously monitoring his heart rate and blood pressure. And then I will administer the new treatment. We’ll monitor him carefully and make adjustments as we see the results.”

She turned her attention to Cate. “Is there a space where I may set up some lab equipment?”

“Of course. Would you prefer a space upstairs near Jack?”

“That’s entirely up to you. Wherever is convenient.”

“Well, I can set you up in one of our larger bedroom suites. You should have plenty of room for your equipment.”

“That sounds excellent. I’m not certain how much sleep I’ll manage. At least not until the patient has improved. But it would be nice to have a bed for those quick naps.”

Cate admired the woman’s determination. “Let me show you there now.”

“Thank you. I can stow my luggage and then I’ll wait for my equipment downstairs. Damien, would you and Michael help me carry the equipment?”

“Definitely. No problem at all.”

Cate settled Millie into a large suite in the same wing, keeping her close to her patient but providing her space to spread out. She checked her timepiece as Michael, Millie, and Damien departed to await the equipment’s arrival.

At half-past six, Molly and the Frasers should be awake and in the kitchen. She'd swing by and give them the news before collecting Andrea to introduce her to the others. After sitting with Jack until the sun rose over the moors, she descended to the lower level and hurried to the kitchen. Her mind rambled through how she would broach the subject of Jack's return and his condition.

Any practiced conversation would likely never occur the way she imagined it, but ways to say the words continued to ricochet through her mind as she walked. Voices floated down the hall as Cate approached the kitchen.

She glanced inside from the doorway, finding Molly and Mrs. Fraser busy preparing a small breakfast for the three of them. Riley and Bailey milled around, searching the floor under the table for scraps. As Cate appeared in the doorway, the two pups scrambled to her.

"Lady Cate!" Mrs. Fraser greeted her. "You're back!"

Cate smiled and nodded as she crouched to pet the dogs. "Hello, boys. I missed you!" She ruffled their fur as Riley stood on his hind legs, licking her cheek. She stroked the white streak on his head, the image of holding a tiny puppy version of Riley in 1810 flashing in her mind. The oddity of the situation struck her again.

Molly's voice interrupted her ruminating. "Did you find anything?"

Cate's smile grew as she rose to stand, though she also held back tears. She nodded again. "We did." She paused for a moment and swallowed hard. "He's home."

Molly's jaw dropped and Mrs. Fraser collapsed into a chair at the table. "Are you serious?" Molly said, her voice an octave higher with excitement. "Oh my gosh, those friends of yours must be magic!"

A tear rolled onto Cate's cheek, and she laughed at Molly's enthusiasm and the truth in her statement. She flicked it away and gasped out, "Yes, I am. He's home."

"Lady Cate, that's wonderful news!" Molly said.

"Aye, I can't believe it, though I'm so pleased."

Cate licked her lips and sucked in a deep breath. "There is some bad news."

Mrs. Fraser glanced up sharply at her. "Is he hurt? Sick?"

Cate nodded again, wiping at another tear. "He's very sick. But we've brought a doctor well-versed in his condition to help him. She's confident

she can help him recover fully.”

“Well, that’s some good news. Where he is? Edinburgh? Glasgow? Inverness?” Mrs. Fraser inquired.

“He’s right here in the castle. The doctor is here. She’s having all her equipment sent here so she can treat him privately right at home.”

“Can we see him?” Molly asked.

“Yes, he’s upstairs in his usual bedroom.”

“We’ll go up as soon as we’ve made breakfast for the group.” Mrs. Fraser turned toward Molly and snapped her towel onto the dark wooden table. “Well, Miss Molly, let’s get to it. Our rescue party is likely hungry!”

“Oh, no, Mrs. Fraser,” Cate said, waving her hand, “I’m going to head into town and give Mr. Reid the news. I’ll bring him to the castle, and I’ll pick up some breakfast pastries at the bakery on my way back.”

“As much as I want to see young Jack, we have a house full of people to feed!” Mrs. Fraser said, climbing to her feet.

“No one expects breakfast with all this going on. And there are several new people in the house—” Cate began when a new voice interrupted her.

“Good morning. I hope you don’t mind that I’ve taken the liberty to find my way to the kitchen.”

Cate spun to find Andrea next to her, her hands clasped behind her back.

Cate squeezed her arm. “Oh, good morning, Andrea. Not at all.” She turned to Molly and Mrs. Fraser. “Molly, Mrs. Fraser, I’d like you to meet Andrea Evans. She was of great assistance to me as we searched for Jack. She’ll be joining the staff here, assisting me.”

“And I can help with some light housekeeping as needed. And, if you’d like, I could put together some oatmeal for everyone while you ladies visit with your friend.”

Mrs. Fraser’s brow knit, an expression Cate recognized as consternation. Molly licked her lips and straightened her shoulders. Cate held back a wince as she worried about the woman feeling displaced by Andrea’s arrival.

Andrea waved a hand in front of her. “I don’t mean to intrude on your kitchen, but under the circumstances, I can handle a bit of breakfast to allow you time to welcome Mr. Reid home.”

“Well—” Mrs. Fraser began.

“Really, no one needs to handle breakfast this morning. Let me bring it back with Jack’s grandfather. That will allow you both to see Jack.”

Andrea returned her hands behind her back and offered a slight smile, her chin lowering.

“Well, Lady Cate, if it’s all the same to you, with Miss Andrea’s help, we could probably whip up a batch of oatmeal *and* visit young Jack before you’re back with Stan,” Mrs. Fraser said.

Cate glanced between Mrs. Fraser, Molly, and Andrea. “That would be great if you three are fine with that.”

“We certainly are,” Molly said, settling into a more relaxed stance. “That’ll allow you to bring Mr. Reid back as quickly as possible. I’m sure he’d love to see Jack.”

Mrs. Fraser slung the tea towel over her shoulder. “And how many people are we now?”

Cate counted them in her mind before she answered. “Ten with our newest arrivals of Dr. Gresham and Andrea.”

“Did you count Stan?” Mrs. Fraser asked as she dug in the pantry.

“No,” Cate answered. “Eleven with him.”

“Oatmeal for eleven,” Mrs. Fraser announced, carrying a carton of oats and a few other items with her.

“Miss Andrea, I’ll put you in charge of creating a few bowls of toppings. You’ll find everything you need here in the pantry. I assume you are familiar with what to put out?”

“Are raisins, walnuts, brown sugar, and cinnamon appropriate?” Andrea inquired as she ducked into the pantry.

“That’s an excellent start.”

“I’ll put out some fresh fruit,” Molly said as she retrieved a large pot for Mrs. Fraser. “Andrea, you can find bowls in this cupboard and work at the table.”

“Thank you, Molly and Mrs. Fraser,” Andrea said as she carried an armful of items to the kitchen table.

“It seems like you ladies have this well in hand. I’ll head out.”

“Be careful, Lady Cate,” Mrs. Fraser said. “No speeding.”

“I promise,” Cate called over her shoulder as she departed.

Molly’s voice floated down the hall, bringing a smile to Cate’s face. “So, Andrea, where are you from originally?”

Cate climbed the stairs, finding a number of boxes littering the foyer floor. Michael and Damien shuttled the contents of each upstairs. Cate left them to their work, stepping through the front door into the cool, misty

morning air. She pulled her cardigan tighter around her as she hurried toward the garage, the gravel crunching under her feet as she went.

Within fifteen minutes, she eased the car to a stop in front of the elder Mr. Reid's cottage on the outskirts of town. Cate flung the car door open and rushed to his front door. She pounded against it.

A moment later, the older man pulled the door open, his eyebrows raising at the sight of her. "Lady Cate. What a lovely surprise. Come in."

Cate shook her head, refusing his invitation. "I came to get you and take you to the castle. We found Jack."

The man's jaw dropped, and his eyes widened. For the first time, Cate witnessed him at a loss for words. He finally managed to say, "You did? Is he..."

His words trailed off, leaving the implication in the air.

"He's sick but alive. We have a doctor treating him. A specialist."

The man hurried across the room as Cate spoke, grabbing a sweater and tugging it on before he pocketed a set of keys from a bowl on the entryway table. "What's he have?"

They hurried the short distance to the car. "Temporalysis. Time travel sickness," Cate explained. "I had it, too, but mine is gone. Jack's is worse. He was unconscious when we found him. Millie believes she can cure him. She's just started to treat him."

Stanley clicked his seatbelt into place and rubbed at his forehead. "I've never heard of such a thing."

"Neither had I until I had it. Thankfully, our friends from across the pond know about it."

Cate gunned the car toward the castle, making the short trip back.

"Has he woken up yet?" Stanley asked as she eased to a stop in front of the castle.

"No, not yet," Cate admitted as she led him through the door and up the main staircase. "Hopefully soon."

CHAPTER 37



Cate led Stanley through the halls to Jack's room. She found a flurry of activity inside as all forms of medical equipment now graced the room. Millie jotted notes on her clipboard and made adjustments to some of the machines.

Mr. Fraser stood behind Mrs. Fraser, who sat in an armchair, clutching one of Jack's hands. Molly perched on the edge of the bed, holding the other. Stanley circled around Cate, heading for the bed.

"Oh, Stan, here, take my seat," Mrs. Fraser offered, jumping from the chair.

"Oh, Jackie," the older man said as he sank into the chair and grasped his hand. "You look like hell."

"His vitals are strong," Millie responded after introducing herself to the newcomer.

"Aye," Mrs. Fraser said, patting Stanley on the shoulder. "And that's a good sign. He comes from strong Scottish stock. He'll pull through."

"There is every reason to be optimistic," Millie answered as she continued her note-taking.

Marcus swept into the room as Millie set the chart near Jack's feet. He strode to the bed and snapped up the clipboard, studying it. "Where are we, doctor?"

"I have just begun treatment. It will take several hours before we can assess any effect."

"And his vitals?"

“Strong.”

“Brain activity?”

“Minimal, but constant and consistent.”

Marcus scanned the paper, flipping through the several sheets before he set the clipboard down. “I shall check back in the coming hours.”

He spun on his heel and crossed the room to Cate. After a quick glance at the others in the room, he said, “I have several things I must attend to. I shall return as soon as possible. If you need me, call.” He pressed a paper into Cate’s hand before stepping around her.

Cate murmured thanks as he strode from the room.

“Wow, he’s intense,” Molly said from behind her.

Cate spun to face her and nodded with a chuckle.

“He’s very authoritative. Is he a doctor, too?”

“No,” Cate answered, “just a very knowledgeable man.”

“Apparently so,” Molly said as she studied the doctor across the room making adjustments to the equipment. “The way he barked orders at the doctor, I thought he was her supervisor.”

Cate offered another giggle. “Nope. He just likes to think he is.”

“But you trust him, right? And her?” Molly wiggled a finger at the brunette across the room.

“Yes,” Cate answered without hesitation. “She’s the best I know to deal with Jack’s illness.”

“She said she had extensive experience with his condition.”

“I can’t imagine many other people do,” Cate said.

“Yes, it sounded very rare. I’d never even heard of it. How did you find her?”

“Damien recommended her as a specialist in these types of rare conditions.”

“Thank goodness for him. Poor Jack. First, he goes missing, and now this. I hope the treatment works soon. I can’t wait to see those blue eyes again and hear one of his bad jokes.”

“Bad puns, you mean?”

Molly offered a quiet giggle and pointed a finger at Cate. “Yep, that’s exactly what I mean.”

They stood for another moment, staring at Jack’s comatose form. “Well,” Molly said after a moment, “I should get back to the kitchen. Poor Andrea has been down there alone for a while.”

“Oh, I can run down and check on her,” Cate offered.

“No, no, nonsense. Sit with Jack for a while. I’m sure you’d like to get off your feet.”

“I’m fine, Molly. How about if I walk down with you?”

“Sounds like a great compromise,” Molly said with a smile.

“Miss Molly!” Mrs. Fraser called to her. “Are you heading back?”

“We’re both heading down,” Molly answered. “You can stay here. I’ve got the cleanup under control.”

“We’ll just stay a bit longer.” Mrs. Fraser wrinkled her nose and discreetly tapped a finger toward Stanley. She mouthed “don’t want to leave him alone.”

Molly offered her a nod and a wink, sporting a thumbs up. She followed Cate into the hall and they strolled toward the main staircase.

“So,” Cate said as they rounded a corner, “what do you think of Andrea?”

“She seems great. A little backward, maybe. Very proper.” Molly giggled. “I hope she doesn’t flee from here thanks to us. Well, me. I can be a little overwhelming, I think. Particularly to a Brit.”

“I’m sure you didn’t frighten her off. She’s got a stomach for more than you realize.”

“Oh?” Molly questioned, her eyebrows raised as they descended the main staircase.

“We had quite an adventure finding Jack and she was a trooper all the way through.”

“You’ll have to tell us the story one day.” Molly patted Cate’s forearm as they hit the foyer floor. “Long, long after we’ve all recovered from this. I’m sure the experience isn’t something you want to relive.”

Cate forced a smile onto her face as they descended to the servants’ area. She swallowed hard, recalling the traumatic events, though there had been positive moments, too. “One day, I’ll tell you all about it. And I hope Andrea wasn’t too much of a surprise. I couldn’t leave her with nowhere to go.”

“Not at all. That’s just like you, Cate. We’ll make her feel really welcome.”

They stepped into the kitchen, finding Andrea sipping tea at the table.

“Sorry for the long wait,” Molly said as she scanned the kitchen.

“Not at all. I helped myself to a cuppa. I hope that’s all right.”

“Perfectly fine,” Molly said. She swiped a hand across the clean counter. “Did you clean the entire kitchen yourself?”

Andrea sipped at her tea before settling the cup into the saucer with a shake of her head. “I didn’t know where the tureen went, so I left it out.” She waved her finger at the object on the counter.

Molly wiggled her eyebrows at the woman, placing a hand on her hip. “Well, I certainly am impressed.”

Andrea offered a demure smile. “Thank you. I’m happy to assist as much as needed while Mr. Reid is ill in any capacity. How trying it must be for all of you.”

“Thanks for your help. We really appreciate it.”

“Andrea,” Cate said as their conversation wound down, “could I steal you away for a moment for another task?”

“Of course, Your—” Andrea cleared her throat as her words cut off and she pursed her lips. “You’re not stealing me at all. Just let me wash my teacup.”

“Oh, I’ll take care of that,” Molly offered, signaling her to hand the cup over.

“Thank you, Molly,” Andrea said.

“Thanks, Molly. I’ll check back in a bit and fill you in on Jack’s condition.”

“Thanks, Lady Cate!” Molly called as they left the room.

Cate led Andrea upstairs and to the library. She found Damien and Michael inside. Damien clacked away on his keyboard, while Michael scrolled through a legal document on his.

“Hey, Cate, how’s Jack?” Damien inquired.

“Millie started his treatment. Now we wait. May I ask a favor of you?”

Damien spun in his chair to face her fully. “Of course. What is it?”

“Could you introduce Andrea to some of our technology and maybe get her started with picking out some clothing?”

“Ahhh, I can definitely show her how to use a laptop. I’ll leave the shopping to Celine. She’s an expert.”

Cate chuckled at the statement. “Okay, thanks. Andrea, I’ll leave you here in very capable hands. Select anything you’d like and we’ll get the purchases squared away later.”

After settling Andrea with Damien, Cate returned to Jack’s room. Satisfied Cate would be staying for a while, the Frasers excused themselves.

Cate settled into a chair across the bed from Stanley.

The monitor in the room beeped in rhythm with Jack's heart rate, providing the only sound for several moments. Finally, Stanley spoke. "Thank you for bringing him home, lassie."

Cate's brow crinkled as she returned her gaze to Jack. "You're welcome. I hope this treatment works soon."

"You risked a lot to bring him back and no matter what happens, I appreciate that."

"Of course. Jack and I are a team. He took great care of me when I started to suffer from temporalysis. The least I could do was search for him when... those people took him."

Cate's lips formed a frown as she balled her hand into a fist.

"He's safe now, lassie. Thanks to you."

Cate bit her lower lip as she continued to stare at Jack. "But the monsters who did this to him are still out there."

"But they may think twice before they bother you again."

"Let's hope," Cate said.

They fell into silence, comforted by the constant beeping of the equipment and the rise and fall of Jack's chest. Millie flitted in and out of the room several times, reading monitors and jotting notes.

Cate stretched her legs before lunch, checking on Andrea and the others before returning to Jack's room. Molly delivered lunch to them and they continued to watch for any sign of improvement.

After setting her lunch tray aside, Cate slipped her hand around Jack's. "Come on, Jack," she whispered. "Time to wake up."

A hand slipped around her shoulder and squeezed. She twisted to find Marcus behind her. He smiled down at her as the door opened and Millie paraded into the room. She swept her reading glasses from the top of her head and slid them onto her nose. She grabbed her clipboard and approached the monitors, reading several displays and jotting things on the chart.

The crease between her eyebrows deepened as she read another screen. Her eyes narrowed at it before she puckered her lips and scribbled onto her paper.

"Well, doctor?" Marcus inquired, his hand never leaving Cate's shoulder.

Millie tore the glasses from their perch on her nose and spun to face them. She closed the arms and clutched them in one hand, the clipboard in the other. She squeezed the glasses as she pulsed them in the air.

“The news is not what I hoped.”

Cate swallowed hard, biting into her lower lip. She reached across the bed to grab Stanley’s hand. He wrapped both hands around hers and squeezed.

“Explain,” Marcus said.

“His brain activity has not increased at the rate I’d hoped.”

“Has it increased at all?” Cate asked.

“Minimally. Not enough to indicate a positive response to the treatment.”

Cate sucked in a deep breath, trying to steady her voice. “So, what does this mean? The treatment isn’t working? He won’t wake up?”

Millie raised her eyebrows. “No, but it means we may need to take another course of action.”

“Could the treatment just need more time to work? It’s only been a few hours,” Stanley said.

Millie shrugged her shoulders and cocked her head. “It could be.”

“But?” Cate prodded.

Before she continued, Millie sucked in a deep breath. “So far, his vitals have not regressed. His heart rate and blood pressure are still strong, for example.”

“That’s good news,” Stanley said.

Millie swung her head to the other side. “However, unless we can reverse the temporalysis, it is only a matter of time until they do.”

Cate fluttered her eyelashes as she processed the statement. “So, what you’re saying is if this treatment doesn’t begin working soon, he’ll not survive the temporalysis.”

“That is one outcome, yes.”

Stanley cleared his throat, his eyes turning glassy. The chair squeaked as he leaned forward, resting his elbow on the bed. “Are there others?”

“Yes, we have other options,” Millie said. “I would like your feedback on how to proceed as they all carry risks.”

“What are they?” Stanley asked.

“As I just mentioned, we can proceed with the current treatment. We have a certain window to increase his brain activity and begin to reverse the

temporalysis. If the treatment doesn't work in that time, we would not be able to cure him.

"The second option would be to try a completely new formulation. Again, if we miss the mark and the treatment does not work..." Millie's voice trailed off. She lifted her shoulders and pulled her lips back in a wince.

"Same outcome as the other," Stanley said, rubbing the scruff on his chin.

"Exactly. And the final option is to keep the same formula but increase its potency. This comes with the same risk of not working, though I believe this is our best chance of success."

"Then we should take that one," Cate said. "Right?"

Millie pursed her lips before she answered. "Well, this comes with a different risk."

"Which is?" Cate asked.

Millie inhaled deeply, licking her lips before she continued. "The increase in potency may cause other issues with his system. In short, it would take a physical toll. One that may leave a lasting effect if it does not kill him."

Cate's eyelashes fluttered as she considered their three options. She shot a glance to Stanley who still rubbed at his chin.

"Since each comes with a significant risk, I do not wish to make the decision for you," Millie added.

"How sure are you the last option will cause an issue?" Stanley inquired.

Millie squeezed her lips into a thin line before answering. "Almost one hundred percent certain. The increase in potency will take a toll. It also has the best chance of curing him, in my opinion, however, in doing so, it may cost him his life, or leave him permanently paralyzed."

Cate gasped, covering her mouth with a shaking hand. The grip on her shoulder tightened before a hand strafed across her back a few times.

Stanley shook his head. A tear spilled onto his cheek, and he flicked it away with a snuffle. "So, you say the best chance is the third option?"

"Yes," Millie answered. "We chose this formulation for a reason. However, to err on the side of caution, I purposely did not make it as potent as possible. We began with a lower dose to test if it could work. I would not recommend continuing. We have seen no improvement which suggests the

dosage is too low. And I would be loathed to change the formulation as, after careful research, this formulation optimizes the odds.”

“She is correct. The best option is to increase the dosage and monitor him carefully,” Marcus said.

Cate shot a glance at him before swallowing hard and flicking her gaze to Stanley. His eyes met hers. “What do you think, lassie?”

“I think we have to trust them to give Jack the best shot at recovering.”

“Aye, I believe you’re right.” His eyes rose to Millie’s. “Give him the increased dose.”

Millie gave an exaggerated nod and hurried from the room to prepare the new treatment.

Cate inhaled deeply and blew a long breath through her mouth. “I should tell the others.” She glanced at Stanley again. “I don’t want to leave you alone.”

Stanley wiped at his teary eyes. “Ah, I’m all right, lassie. Go on and tell them. They’ll be wondering.”

“I shall go with you,” Marcus said as she stood.

Cate nodded as she circled around him and hurried to the hall. She avoided eye contact with him as she stepped into the hall, her mind focusing on forcing her feet to move.

“Catherine—“ Marcus began as he followed her.

She continued as though she’d never heard him.

“Catherine,” he repeated, catching her arm.

“I just need to let them know,” she murmured, her voice shaky and her eyes focusing on the burgundy runner in the hall’s center.

“You need to take a moment to collect yourself.”

“I’m fine,” she insisted.

He tipped her chin up with his finger. She raised her eyes to his, her lower lip quivering into a frown as she stared into his dark eyes.

“Millie is an excellent doctor. You are doing her a disservice by doubting her.”

“I don’t doubt her—“ Cate began with a sob.

“Then Jack? Do you doubt his ability to fight through this?”

Cate sniffled. “No. But the odds—“

“Are not that bad,” he said. “The increased dosage will likely work.”

“But will it kill him in the process?”

“I trust the good doctor’s judgment. He may have a difficult reaction, but I believe he can survive it.”

Cate licked her lips as she processed his statement, focusing on a spot on the velvet-trimmed burgundy wallpaper. Her head bobbed in a slow nod after a moment and she sniffled, sucking in a shaky breath. “Okay. Okay.” She smoothed a lock of hair behind her ear. “I’ll trust Millie.”

Marcus pushed the other side of her hair behind her ear. “You should. I detest being wrong, so Jack must survive.”

A slight smile crossed her face and she squeezed his hand. “Thank you. Can you maybe stay in there with Stanley? I don’t want him to be alone.”

“Of course.”

They parted ways with Cate navigating as quickly as possible to the lowest level of the castle. She clung to the words Marcus said to her, repeating them over and over in her mind.

“He’s going to be fine. He’s going to survive,” she mumbled as she hopped down the stairs. Her eyebrows raised at the bottom. “Because Marcus hates being wrong.”

With a shrug and a roll of her eyes, she proceeded down the hall and knocked at the door jamb. Molly and Mrs. Fraser’s eyes snapped to her. Molly’s hand slowed as she rubbed a pot dry. Mrs. Fraser wiped her wet hands on her apron and rounded the counter.

“Lady Cate? Any news?”

Cate nodded. “Jack isn’t responding to the treatment like Dr. Gresham hoped.”

“Oh no,” Molly said, her shoulders slumping. “What does that mean?”

“It means the chance of his recovery is slimmer, but Dr. Gresham believes it still can happen. In order to give him the best chance, we need to change his dosage. It’s riskier, but the other options all mean he’d have less chance to recover.”

Mrs. Fraser slumped into a chair at the table with a sigh. “Oh, young Jack, you poor, poor man. How is Stan taking it?”

“He’s upset. But he’s keeping a stiff upper lip.”

Mrs. Fraser rose from her chair and hurried across the room, grabbing the kettle. “I’ll make him a nice, hot cuppa. That’ll strengthen his fortitude.”

Cate pulled the cookie tin down from a shelf. “I’m sure he’ll appreciate that. And a few shortbreads.”

Mrs. Fraser set the full kettle on the stove. “Got to keep up his strength!”

“Do you mind if we visit with Jack?” Molly asked.

“Please do. I think both he and Mr. Reid will appreciate that.”

Mrs. Fraser shooed them from the kitchen. “Go ahead up, you two. I’ll be right behind with the tea.”

Cate and Molly snaked through the halls to Jack’s room, joining Stanley and Marcus. Mr. and Mrs. Fraser arrived moments later.

Stanley sipped at his tea as Millie hurried into the room. She carried a liquid-filled pouch which she hung from an intravenous pole after removing the other nearly empty bag. She connected it to the IV line in Jack’s arm, adjusting it and the drip.

The serum slowly dripped into the line, slowly making its way into Jack’s system. She sighed as all eyes turned to Jack.

“Now, we wait.”

CHAPTER 38



The clock above the room's fireplace ticked the time away. Cate bit her thumbnail as she paced the floor at the foot of Jack's bed. Mr. and Mrs. Fraser sat in a pair of armchairs next to the bed. Stanley leaned his fists on the mattress, stretching after being in his armchair for hours. Molly perched on the bed next to him, rubbing his arm.

They'd finished dinner and the subsequent cleanup and gathered together to spend time with Jack as the accelerated treatment continued to seep into his system.

The tension grew with each passing moment as they waited to determine if the new treatment would work. As Cate spun to amble back across the room, a loud beeping sounded, followed by a series of high-pitched bleeps mixed with a lower tone. Cate froze, her head swinging toward the monitors. Numbers blinked, and red text blared across the screen.

Cate gasped, her heart skipping a beat. The door across the room flung open and Millie raced inside. She tapped a few buttons, silencing the machines before she snatched the clipboard from the nearby nightstand and flipped through pages as she flicked her gaze up to the monitors.

She jotted several notes before she made more adjustments to the machines. Marcus strode into the room as she stowed the pen in the clipboard. Damien followed behind him.

"Is it bad news?" Molly questioned.

Millie pursed her lips as she spun to face them, studying their faces before she answered. “Not really. We did anticipate that the higher dosage would take a toll on his body.”

“Is the treatment working?” Stanley asked.

“Yes, it appears so. Brain activity is increasing at a pace that I’m happy with.”

Cate bit her lower lip before she asked, “But will he survive the treatment?”

“That remains to be seen. We are beginning to see his brain activity increase, but we are also seeing signs of him beginning to struggle with the treatment.”

Damien tapped his chin with his finger. “Can we reduce the dosage since the higher dosage kicked-started the brain activity to make this easier on him?”

Millie shook her head. “I’m afraid lowering the dosage will result in him being stuck at this level.”

“So, we need to continue with the higher dosage despite the toll it may take,” Cate said with a sigh.

“Unfortunately, yes. If he can survive this treatment, he will recover fully. We’re at a critical stage right now. In the next twelve hours, he will either awaken or he will die.”

Faces fell at that. Cate wrapped her arms around her midriff as she bit into her lower lip again. The next twelve hours would be difficult for them all. Damien slipped his arm around her and she leaned into him.

“It’ll be okay,” he whispered to her.

Mrs. Fraser rose to stand, straightening her sweater. Tears shone in her eyes, but she firmed her jaw as she spoke. “I suppose we’ll all need a strong cuppa so we can keep vigil. He knows we’re here. We need to support him.”

“I’ll help you,” Molly said, unable to keep her tears in check. They flowed freely down her rosy skin.

They disappeared from the room. Cate patted Damien’s hand before she stalked to the chair Mrs. Fraser had occupied moments ago and sank into it. She grasped Jack’s hand and squeezed as she flicked her gaze to the monitors. Jack’s heart beat faster than it should and his blood pressure had risen significantly.

She eyed the liquid in the IV bag which remained half-full. Would Jack's system tolerate the rest of the treatment? Could he get through the second half of the liquid flowing into his veins?

"Doctor, a word," Marcus said, signaling Millie to step out of the room.

Cate's brow furrowed as they stepped into the hall. She rose, laying Jack's hand on the bedding, and crossed to the door.

"Cate," Damien said before she could pull the door open, "if you need anything, just ask. It's going to be a long night and we're all here for you. If you need a break, or someone to talk to, anything, just let us know."

"Thanks, Damien," Cate said. "I think what we all need the most right now is for Jack to wake up."

He pulled his lips into a thin line as he nodded at her. She excused herself, pulling the door open and slipping out. Marcus stood outside, his hands clasped behind his back as Millie hurried down the hallway toward her room.

"What was that about?" Cate asked as she sidled up to him.

"Just a discussion with the good doctor about the current situation."

"What does that mean? Is there something she isn't telling us?"

He twisted to face her. "No, she has been completely candid."

"Then why the secret conversation?"

"It was hardly secret, Catherine."

"Then tell me what you discussed."

"Merely a few strategies and suggestions to maximize his chances for survival."

Cate stared up at him, her brows knitting and her lip bobbing up and down as she attempted to formulate a question.

"I am not hiding anything from you, Catherine. We are merely preparing for the event that Jack may need some assistance in surviving the treatment."

Cate sighed and nodded. "I hate that we need to prepare for that."

Marcus offered her a slight smile. "But it is best that we do even if we do not need it."

"You're right," she said. Silence fell between them for a moment before Marcus squeezed her upper arms.

"Catherine, you must prepare for a difficult twelve hours."

"I know," Cate said, lowering her eyes to stare at a button on his jacket.

“A very difficult twelve hours. He will likely worsen before he improves.”

Cate blew out a long breath as she allowed the statement to sink in, girding herself for what may come before the sun rose. She hoped they could all withstand it. Especially Jack.

* * *

Cate gnawed on her lower lip. Already sore from her constant nervous biting and licking of her lips, she winced as she resumed pacing.

The clock on the mantle chimed the hour. Three in the morning. Three hours from the twelve-hour mark Millie gave them earlier. Jack remained comatose. His heart still beat far faster than it should and his blood pressure had risen again.

So far, though, he held his own. And the treatment had almost finished. Just a few more hours to pull through. No one had left the room except to retrieve another cup of tea.

As the echo of the clock’s chime finally died away, a new noise filled the air. One monitor emitted a horrid warning signal. Loud beeps followed.

Millie leapt to her feet and raced to the monitors.

“What is it?” Stanley asked, snapping his head toward the monitors.

“His heart is beating too fast. And his blood pressure is skyrocketing.”

Molly leapt from her perch on the edge of the bed and hurried back toward Cate. She flung her arms around Cate and pulled her close.

“Could everyone step back, please?” Millie asked as she leaned over Jack to check other vitals.

The Frasers and Stanley scurried backward, joining Cate and Molly. Mrs. Fraser wrapped her arm around Stanley’s shoulders as Mr. Fraser placed a hand on his back. They all stood in silence as the alarms continued to scream.

Marcus, Damien, Celine, and Michael hurried in moments later. Marcus strode toward the bed, seemingly unflustered.

“Doctor?” he prompted her as she fiddled with a syringe before sticking it into the IV tube and depressing the plunger.

“He’s experiencing an extremely difficult time with the treatment. His heart is racing and his blood pressure is rising far too high. I’ve

administered medication to try to counteract it.”

The machines continued to belt out their emergency signals. Millie filled another syringe with a shake of her head. “He’s not responding to the medication. I’ll try another round.”

She jabbed the needle into the connection and pushed the plunger. Cate held her breath, waiting for the monitors to stop their cacophony of noise. It did not happen.

“It is not working,” Millie said, breathlessly. “He’s crashing.”

She scurried to drag a crash cart toward the bed, revving up the machine in case it was needed. Jack’s body began to violently shake. His head lifted and slammed back into the pillow multiple times.

“Hold him down, he’s seizing,” Millie shouted over the din. Marcus steadied Jack’s shoulders, pressing them against the bed. His body continued to convulse.

“Oh no,” Molly cried, tears flowing freely as she clung to Cate. Cate wiped a tear from her cheek as she attempted to hold her emotions in check. Her wobbly knees made it difficult to stand.

Across the room, mayhem continued. Damien held Jack’s legs steady as Millie filled another syringe with a new medication, pushing it into Jack’s intravenous line. Within a few moments, Jack’s shuddering ceased, though his heart continued to race.

“The seizure has stopped, but his blood pressure is still far too high,” Millie reported.

The monitors continued to blare until only a single continuous beep emerged from it. Cate stared in horror at the flat line streaming across the screen.

CHAPTER 39



“*H*e’s flatlined,” Millie reported. “Charging.” She fiddled with the crash cart before grabbing the paddles and pressing them against Jack’s skin after tearing open his flannel shirt.

“Clear!” she shouted before she sent the electrical impulse through his body.

The single sound continued and no heartbeat spiked on the screen. Millie shook her head, turning a dial and giving the clear signal again. Jack’s chest leapt in the air as she shocked him a second time.

“Come on, Jackie, fight,” Stanley whispered, his fingers curling into fists as he willed his grandson to live.

No changes occurred despite the attempt. Millie swiped at a bead of sweat forming on her brow and tried a third time. Cate swallowed hard as she felt Molly’s shoulders shake with sobs when the monitors continued to indicate no heartbeat.

The doctor set the paddles to the side. Cate’s stomach dropped as she assumed the worst. The doctor had given up. Jack would not survive.

Millie shoved the crash cart aside and lunged toward the nightstand. She snatched a fat syringe from the wooden top and removed the tip protector. She pressed the plunger until liquid shot from the top of the thick needle.

Wrapping her fingers around the broad syringe in a fist-like hold, she aimed it at Jack’s chest. She lifted her arm, then swung it down, plunging the needle into his chest and depressing the plunger.

Within a moment, a rhythmic beeping filled the room. Regular spikes appeared on the screen again.

Millie breathed a sigh of relief as she wiped away another bead of sweat. "His heart rate is slowing and his blood pressure is lowering." She sucked in a deep breath and blew it out. "He will survive."

"Excellent work, doctor," Marcus said as exclamations of relief resounded in the room.

"Now we only need him to wake up," Mrs. Fraser said.

"I anticipate that will not be for several hours at least," Millie said. "Not only is his body recovering from the medication, but the latest trauma. I will continue to monitor him closely, but I believe we may be past the worst of it."

"Will he definitely wake up?" Molly asked.

"I cannot say with one hundred percent certainty, but his brain activity is promising."

"At least he'll live," Stanley said as he wandered back to his chair and collapsed into it. "And as long as he's alive, there's hope."

The group gathered around Jack's bed again, Molly still clung to Cate as she sniffled. No one left the room for the next several hours. Jack's monitors continued a steady rhythm until the sun crested the moors. Its red glow bathed the room in a bright orange light.

Cate's swollen and sore eyes threatened to close as she perched on the edge of the bed, clasping Jack's hand in hers. Molly retreated to the window seat, staring out over the morning landscape as she wrung her hands. Mrs. Fraser sat near Stanley, her hand squeezing his shoulder.

As the birds began to chirp outside the window, the pace of the beeps marking Jack's heartbeat quickened. Cate's stomach dropped and she stiffened, afraid he'd suffer another episode of his heart stopping or another seizure.

Millie hurried from across the room to check his monitors.

"What is it?" Cate inquired. "Another seizure?"

Millie shook her head and turned to face them. "No. He's waking up."

Cate's heart leapt and she turned her wide eyes toward Jack's face. Molly leapt to her feet, approaching the bed. After several more accelerated beeps, Jack's fingers twitched.

"Jackie," Stanley encouraged, "come on, Jackie. Open your eyes, laddie."

Jack's chest heaved in a few deep breaths before his eyelids fluttered open. He stared at the ceiling for a moment before he lowered his eyes to the group surrounding him. Cate offered him a teary-eyed smile as Stanley patted his hand.

"That a boy, Jackie."

Jack spent another moment silent, his eyes wandering from face to face. He swallowed hard and forced a weak smile on his face. "Am I..." His weak voice barely carried to the others. He cleared his throat and coughed.

"Easy," Millie said. "I know you want to communicate, but make sure you're ready."

He flicked his gaze to the doctor and nodded. "Water," he said in a hoarse voice.

Molly scrambled around the bed and filled a cup of water. Mrs. Fraser lifted it from her hands and carried it to the head of the bed. "I've got experience with this." She pressed the glass to his lips as he struggled to lift his head.

After a quick sip, he let his head collapse back into the pillow and sighed. "Am I at Dunhaven?"

"Aye, you are, laddie," Stanley said. "Lady Cate brought you home."

Jack's eyes cut to Cate and he pulled his lips back in another weak smile. She patted his hand and smiled at him.

"And not a moment too soon!" Millie said. "We haven't met yet, but I'm Dr. Amelia Gresham. Please call me Millie. I've been treating your condition. You've had a tough go of it, but I think you're on the upswing now."

Jack smiled and nodded at her. He glanced around the room again, spotting the familiar faces of Michael, Damien, and Celine across the room. He lifted a shaky hand to wave at them. Cate glanced back, noting Marcus's absence.

Damien waved back. "Good to see you awake, buddy," he called over.

"It's good to be awake," he croaked. "Seems like I have a lot of people to thank for this."

"There's no need to thank anyone," Cate said.

"Still," Jack said as he struggled to sit up, "I'm sure it was no easy feat."

"There's a lot to discuss, but only when you're feeling better," Cate said.

“And that will not be until after you’ve recovered a bit more,” Millie said as she jotted a few notes on his chart. “I’d like to do a full exam to assess your health. But it can wait for a few moments while you bask in the attention from your friends.”

“And bask I shall,” Jack said with a lopsided grin. The dark circles under his eyes betrayed his fatigue from the incident. And his pale skin suggested his recovery would not be immediate.

“Ah, Jackie, it’s good to hear your sense of humor wasn’t damaged in the trauma.”

Everyone chuckled. They chatted for a few moments before Andrea discreetly approached Cate. She whispered in her ear, “Your Grace, His Grace requested a word.”

Cate glanced at her and nodded before addressing everyone else. “Excuse me a moment.”

She stood and followed Andrea to the door, stepping into the hall as she glanced backward at the others. Molly slid into the seat she’d occupied, grasping Jack’s hand with a broad grin on her face as she told him how worried they’d been.

Cate stepped onto the thick runner and faced Marcus, who remained out of sight from the occupants in the room.

“Thank you,” Cate said before he began. “He’s awake. And it may be best he didn’t see you.”

Marcus nodded before he waved a manila envelope in the air. “I am sorry to interrupt your reunion, however, we have another problem.”

Cate raised her eyebrows. “Oh?”

Marcus handed the envelope to her, clasping his hands behind his back as she lifted the flap. She slid the papers out and scanned them, her brows knitting.

“You’ll want to pay particular attention to the marked passage.”

Cate flipped through the papers to a flagged section. She skimmed the text in the highlighted area, swallowing hard and pursing her lips. She flicked her eyes up to his face, her features a mask of confusion and shock.

“But this…” she stammered, glancing at the paper again. “This would mean…”

“You would lose Dunhaven Castle, yes.”

Cate’s features pinched. She glanced at her friends, gathered around Jack’s bed.

“And your friends will, too,” Marcus added. “Gianna will have no mercy when she rips the estate from you.”

“Then, this was all for naught.”

Marcus wiggled his eyebrows at her. “Not necessarily.”

Cate returned her gaze to him, the crease between her brows deepening as she tightened her grip on the papers in her hand.

“The situation is fixable. If you take bold and immediate action.”

Cate’s mind searched for the appropriate action to fix the issue facing her.

Marcus held his hand out toward her. “Trust me.”

Cate stared at the fingers reaching toward her, understanding in an instant his solution. Her stomach flip-flopped and her knees wobbled. Her gaze turned back to the scene in the room.

Molly clutched Jack’s hand, Stanley held his other. Mrs. Fraser listed the foods she’d be providing Jack to ensure his recovery went swimmingly. Mr. Fraser stood in silent support of his wife and friend.

Stanley remarked about his wish to join Jack for the lovely list of food he’d be receiving. Jack asked for shortbreads with every meal. Molly giggled at his terrible joke, though assured him after his brush with death, he could have all the cookies he wanted.

Her heart broke for them if the current paperwork stood. She pressed her lips into a fine line, gripping the papers tightly.

She wouldn’t let this happen. She would fight back. She would save Dunhaven Castle.

Cate flicked her gaze back to Marcus. With a hard swallow, she reached out and slipped her fingers into his hand. He offered her a sideways smirk as she took a step forward. A step toward fixing the problem. And toward an uncertain future.

* * *

THE END

TAKEN FROM DUNHAVEN CASTLE



A CATE KENSIE MYSTERY

CHAPTER 1



Everything was different now.

Cate traced a finger over the black print on the paper as though it would make the words more real. She squeezed her eyes shut, realizing those few sentences had altered her life.

Everything had changed when she read those words. Everything was different now.

Everything.

The moment she'd first seen the document flitted across her mind. The decisions she'd made after had been life-altering.

She blew out a long breath, stuffing the papers into a folder and flicking it closed. She tossed it onto the coffee table in front of her.

What's done is done.

She pursed her lips, studying the cold hearth in front of her as she pulled her legs up and nestled into the supple leather of the library's armchair.

She flicked her gaze to the other empty chair in the room, staring at it for a moment before she let her eyes slide closed.

Jack was alive. But the events they had set in motion when they'd traveled to 1942 couldn't be undone. And those events changed history. And her life.

Cate let her head fall back into the cushion behind her. A cold, wet nose nudged at her limp hand that dangled from the chair's arm.

She twisted her neck and glanced down at Riley. His feather-like tail wagged at her. The corners of her lips tugged upward as she ran her fingers

through his black-and-white fur. “Hey, buddy. I’m okay.”

Bailey wandered over as she spoke, staring up at her tentatively.

“I’m okay, guys, really. It’s all going to be okay.” She let the words sink in around her, desperately trying to believe them.

Cate pushed herself up to stand and snatched up the folder. She stalked to the fireplace and grabbed a stick lighter. With a click, a flame flared from the tip. She touched them to the corner of the manila container. Fire burst from it.

She tossed the burning papers into the fireplace. They curled as the edges blackened. With her arms wrapped around her, she sucked in another deep breath. She swallowed hard as she considered what she faced later this afternoon. Her palms turned sweaty, and her pulse sped as she contemplated how the events may play out.

Her phone chimed, interrupting her rambling mind. Cate checked the display, staring at the one-word text message on her lock screen.

Ready?

She rested her chin on the top of the device as thoughts flitted through her mind. Was she ready?

She bit her lower lip and typed a response. Her thumb hovered over the send button. She slid her eyes closed, sucking in a breath before she popped them open and pressed the arrow. The lone word floated up. She stared at the simple, three-letter answer.

Yes.

Was it true? Was she really prepared?

The door to the library swung open, cutting off any further contemplating on her part. Molly hurried inside. She tossed a strawberry blonde lock over her shoulder, offering Cate a broad smile.

“Hey, Lady Cate.”

“Hi,” Cate answered, twisting to eye her. She recognized the pleasant expression on Molly’s features. It hid the trepidation behind her pretty face.

Molly clasped her hands in front of her. “Just checking to see if anything else was needed before Mr. Smythe and Gayle arrive later today.”

Cate sucked in a deep breath and shook her head. “I don’t think so. We should be all set.”

Molly forced another grin as she nodded. “Okay. Are you certain they’re not staying? Mrs. Fraser is asking. She’s surprised they’re not. To be honest, so am I.”

Cate pressed her lips together, trying to offer a reassuring smile, but sure she wasn't pulling it off. "They aren't."

She let out a shaky breath, biting her lower lip to stop it from trembling. She blinked back the tears forming again.

Molly nodded, her grin fading. She studied the area rug, tilting her head as she drummed her fingers on the back of the armchair. "And neither has said anything about why they're coming?"

Cate shook her head in answer, unable to form words. Mr. Smythe had not told her the reason, but she knew it. She was afraid any verbal response may betray her lie.

"Well, I don't know how you feel about it, Lady Cate, but downstairs we are all in a tizzy. Everyone's nervous. I don't know how you're so calm." Molly flicked her gaze outside the window and shivered. "It sounds so ominous. Especially with him requesting us to be present."

"I'm sure it'll all be settled soon," Cate answered.

"Yeah, but how?" Molly fluttered her eyelids. "I'm sorry. It's not my place."

"No, Molly, it's okay. You should never feel like it's not your place. Dunhaven Castle is your home, too."

"I just can't imagine what this is, but I'm nervous."

Cate approached her friend and housekeeper-in-training, pulling her into an embrace. "It'll be okay, Molly. No matter what he says, no matter what comes next. It'll all be okay. We'll always have each other."

Molly squeezed her tightly before she pulled back. Tears shined in her eyes and stained her cheeks. "I'm sorry," she said, her voice breathy as she waved her hands at her face.

Cate rubbed her arms. "It's okay."

"No, no, it's not." Molly heaved a sigh. "It's just...it's been one thing after another. First Jack's disappearance, then his near-death, and now this."

"When it rains, it pours."

"Yeah," Molly said, wiping at her tears. "But it's poured for you, too. We should be supporting you and instead, I'm crying on your shoulder."

"It's okay, Molly," Cate assured her. "We support each other."

Molly licked her lips and nodded, sniffing before blowing out a steadying breath. "Right."

"Speaking of, I hear Jack's been pestering Mr. Fraser about going back to work."

“Oh, yes,” Molly said with a roll of her eyes and a chuckle. “Talking about trimming those hedges out back. He almost died less than two days ago. And he’s ready to trim trees.”

“Sounds like Jack,” Cate said with a laugh.

“We may need to tie him to the bed.”

The two women shared another giggle over the suggestion. “Well,” Molly said after a deep inhale, “I’ll leave you alone. Two hours to go.”

“Two hours,” Cate said. “I think I’ll take the dogs for a walk, and tire them out before the others arrive.”

“Enjoy, Lady Cate.” Molly offered her a final smile before she disappeared from the room.

Cate stared after her, hoping her words were true. “Everything’s going to be okay,” she murmured to herself.

With a glance over her shoulder, she called the dogs with her. They strolled around the property, basking in the warm late-spring air. She eyed the castle on the horizon as she sauntered back from the loch.

Dunhaven Castle. Her home. She had to protect it. She had no choice.

She quickened her step, nervous energy pushing her to hustle up the path. The dogs raced ahead of her, galloping into the kitchen as she pushed the door open.

“Well, hello, boys,” Mrs. Fraser greeted them.

Molly set out a plate of cookies in preparation for the arrival of their guests.

“And hello, Lady Cate,” Mrs. Fraser finished.

“Hello, Mrs. Fraser.”

The woman waved a finger in the air. “We’re almost ready. If I know Mr. Smythe, he will be on time. Not a moment late.”

“We can be sure of that,” Cate said with a nod.

Mrs. Fraser shifted a few teacups around on the tray before she clasped her hands in front of her.

“It’ll all be over soon, Mrs. Fraser.”

“The dreaded visit, you mean?” Jack asked as he and Mr. Fraser pushed into the kitchen.

“Yes,” Cate said with a nod. “And what are you doing out there? Aren’t you supposed to be taking it easy?”

“Dr. Gresham said I should be getting exercise, not laying around.”

“Trimming bushes is a little beyond exercise,” Cate said, wagging a finger at him.

“I trimmed nothing. I merely frowned at them as we strode past,” Jack assured her.

“Good. No trimming bushes until you’re cleared,” Cate warned. “I’m going to head up. They should be here in about ten minutes.”

Cate’s pulse quickened as she said the words.

“Mind if I walk you up, Lady Cate?” Jack asked.

“Not at all. Come on, boys, let’s head up to the library.”

They strode down the long hall, climbing the stairs to the main level as the dogs scampered up the stairs in front of them.

“You’re doing pretty well on these stairs,” Cate noted.

“I’m feeling much better,” Jack answered as they pushed into the hall.

“Good.”

“Cate—“

Cate stopped and shook her head. “Jack, you don’t need to say anything. You don’t need to thank me again.”

“I do. I wouldn’t be here if it wasn’t for you. There’s been so much going on, we’ve barely had the chance to discuss it. I miss my chair in the library.”

Cate smiled at him. “I’ve missed you being there. We’ll have plenty of time to talk after this meeting with Mr. Smythe.”

Jack puckered his lips, flicking his gaze down the hall. “I don’t like this. Something feels wrong.”

“I don’t like it either,” Cate answered, “but I don’t think we have much choice in the matter. Mr. Smythe insisted on the meeting, and he insisted it happen today.”

Jack stuck his hands on his hips. “Too much has taken place since 1942. This just reeks of something blindsiding us.”

“I know.” Cate pressed her lips into a thin line. “We’ll know soon enough, though. Try not to worry about it.”

Jack scoffed and crossed his arms. “Yeah, okay, right.”

“I’m serious. Jack, you nearly didn’t survive. Your heart stopped. I don’t want anything else to happen to you. You’ve got to take it easy.”

Jack flicked his gaze to the floor, sliding his eyes closed. He opened them and sucked in a deep breath, centering his focus on her. “I know. Thank heavens the doctor knew what to do.”

Cate fluttered her eyelashes, avoiding his stare for a moment before she nodded. "Yeah. Damien said she was the best."

"The best supernatural doctor. Doesn't seem like there would be much competition in that field."

Cate chuckled. "She may have a corner on the market. But her skills were impressive nonetheless."

"Aye, I suppose I do owe her my life."

Cate nodded at the statement as she squeezed his arm. "We all do."

Jack sucked in a sharp breath and stuck his hands on his hips. "Well, I suppose I'll let you go wait on pins and needles in the library."

"I'll call you as soon as they arrive."

"Thanks, Cate. See you soon."

They parted ways, and Cate returned to the library. She chewed her lower lip as she sank into the soft leather of the armchair. Nervous energy stopped her from settling. She studied the bookcases as her leg bobbed up and down.

She rolled her neck around and pulled her legs onto the chair to stop their constant movement. Instead, she drummed her fingers against the arm. Riley approached her again, staring up at her with his almond-shaped eyes.

"I know, Riley. I'm nervous, and you can tell. But it'll all be over soon." She patted his head, and he leapt onto his hind legs, pawing at her.

Cate scooped him up, nestling him in her arms like a baby as she rubbed his chest. He offered a wide yawn. "Looks like you are in desperate need of a nap, buddy. I wish I could nap through what's about to happen."

Riley relaxed in her arms, his eyes closing to slits. The crunch of gravel interrupted any rest on his part.

Cate glanced out the window. A cloud of dust billowed across the garden, indicative of someone driving up the driveway. Her heart thudded in her chest as she set Riley on the rug near the fireplace and strode from the room.

The squeal of a car's brakes pierced the air as Cate reached the front doors. She flung them open to find Mr. Smythe's sleek black rental rolling to a stop.

Cate forced a smile on her face as the passenger door popped open and Gayle emerged. "Hi, Gayle."

"Hello," Gayle said, her forehead crinkling as she tried to smile but worry clouded her face.

Cate peered over the top of the car and offered Mr. Smythe a greeting. His usually set features had an extra-dour tone to them. "Hi, Mr. Smythe."

The attorney forced the briefest of smiles onto his face as he buttoned his suit jacket before pulling his briefcase from the backseat.

"Come in. We'll meet in the library. Let me call everyone else."

Cate waved them toward the large room as she strode toward the servants' stairs. All four of her staff popped from the stairway. "They're here."

"We know," Molly said, worry pinched her forehead. "We've been standing at the top of the stairs for the last five minutes."

Cate squeezed her hand. "Well, let's go find out the reason behind this meeting."

Mrs. Fraser wrung her hands, blowing out a sharp breath. "Oh, Lady Cate..."

"It's okay, Mrs. Fraser. Let's see what Mr. Smythe has to say. There may be no reason to worry."

"All right," she said. Mr. Fraser wrapped his arm around his wife and led her down the hall.

Jack nodded at Cate and Molly to precede him down the hall.

They entered the library, finding seats as Cate took a post across the room, too nervous to sit.

Mr. Smythe tugged several folders from his well-polished briefcase before snapping it shut and sliding it next to the armchair.

He glanced up, his eyes scanning all of them before lowering to the paperwork perched on his knees. "Let me begin by apologizing for being presumptuous enough to invite the staff, though as this will ultimately affect them as well, I felt it important that they be present."

"Of course, Mr. Smythe," Cate answered, trying to firm her shaky voice. "Can you tell us what this is about?"

"Is there something wrong?" Mrs. Fraser questioned from the sofa across the room, her hands nearly white from gripping each other. Mr. Fraser patted her knee in a silent gesture of support.

Gayle offered the woman a contrite glance from the armchair Jack usually frequented.

Mr. Smythe swallowed hard, running a hand over the folder in his lap as he stared at it. "I am afraid there has been an egregious error made." He paused, his lip bobbing up and down but no sound emerged. "My firm..."

He paused again and shook his head. “I have made a mistake. There was an oversight. I do not know how it happened, but rest assured I am determined to investigate. To be frank, I cannot see how I missed this, but...”

Molly leaned forward, her lips parted as she waited for the news. “What is it?”

Jack leapt from his seat. “If it’s about the estate accounts, I’ve double-checked them—“

“It has nothing to do with the finances,” Mr. Smythe interrupted.

“Then what is it?” Molly asked.

Mr. Smythe studied their faces again, his features paler than usual and gaunt. He flicked his eyes downward again as he licked his lips and focused his attention on Cate.

“It seems you, Dr. Kensie, are not the rightful owner of Dunhaven Castle.”

CHAPTER 2



Cate's heart hammered as the words hung heavy in the air. Gasps rang out around her as she pressed a hand to her chest and swallowed hard.

"What?" Molly shrieked, leaping from her seat on the sofa's arm.

Jack plopped into his chair, his brow furrowing and his jaw gaping.

"But...y-you did a DNA test. You confirmed it," Molly gushed.

Mr. Smythe nodded. "There is no question that Dr. Kensie is a MacKenzie. We did confirm that through a DNA test. She is definitely the closest living relative. In fact, she is the only living relative left of the MacKenzie family."

"Then how could she not be the heir?"

Molly collapsed back onto the sofa's arm, pressing a hand to her forehead.

Jack shook his head. "This is insane. You searched for months, Mr. Smythe. You said she was the right one. We didn't know if anyone was left, and you found her. You assured us Dunhaven would carry on."

"Yes," Cate chimed in, clearing her throat, "when we spoke, you were sure the DNA test would confirm what you were already certain of and that there would be no challenges of any merit."

"Yes, I know, I..." Mr. Smythe slid his eyes closed, pressing his thin mouth into an even tighter line. "There was a codicil. Lady Gertrude added it to the will, and we..."

His voice trailed off, and he swallowed hard. Had the news not been so dire, Cate would have felt sorry for the man.

Mr. Smythe twisted his neck and cleared his throat. "That is, *I* was not aware of it."

"A codicil? What does that mean?" Molly questioned.

"It's an addendum to the original will," Gayle explained. "It modifies it in some way."

"And this addendum changes it so Cate isn't the heir?" Jack asked.

"More or less, yes," Mr. Smythe said.

"Well, what the hell does it say?" Jack asked, lunging forward in his seat. "Because the last we heard Lady Gertrude wanted this to go to family only. It was never to leave the MacKenzie family. So, if Cate's the only MacKenzie, and she's not the heir who the hell is it going to?"

The doors to the library swung open. A curvy blonde in a form-fitting, shin-length dress stood inside. The corners of her full lips curled up into a devilish grin. "That would be me."

Cate's heart skipped a beat as the familiar form of Gianna Caruso sashayed into the room, sticking a hand on her hip as she stopped next to Mr. Smythe's armchair.

"I have the matter well in hand, Ms. Caruso," he assured her with a sour expression on his face.

Gianna lifted a shoulder. "These people deserve answers, and we shall provide them."

"But...she's not a MacKenzie!" Mr. Fraser's quiet voice said.

"No, I am not. But I am, in fact, the rightful heir to this estate and everything in it. And I would like to be upfront about how this affects you."

"I'd like that," Mrs. Fraser said, lifting her chin. "I think we'd all like to know where we stand."

"Of course," Gianna said, her red lips twisting into a tighter grin. She paused, the smile broadening as she scanned all of their faces. "I want you all out by week's end."

"What?" Mrs. Fraser gasped.

"Dr. Kensie is no longer the owner of Dunhaven Castle. She is also no longer your employer. I am. And you are all fired."

Molly's jaw dropped open, and tears filled her eyes again. Jack wrapped an arm around her shoulders.

Cate shook her head at the scene. Her heart pounded as she fought to steady her breathing. Every impulse in her body pushed her to lunge through the air and throttle the woman responsible for so much damage.

From the deaths in 1942 to Jack's kidnapping and now this. Gianna Caruso had slashed and burned almost everything dear to her.

Across the room, Gianna continued twisting the knife. "And while we are at it, there is another matter to clear up. Mr. Smythe, would you care to explain it?"

William Smythe's pale skin turned gray as the color drained from his face. He arched an eyebrow as he began. "Any decisions Dr. Kensie has made over the course of her time at Dunhaven Castle—"

"Her illegal time at Dunhaven Castle," Gianna added, pulling one corner of her mouth back in a smirk as she settled her arms over her chest and stared at Cate.

Mr. Smythe fluttered his eyelids before pressing on. "Any decisions Dr. Kensie has made are null. That includes the gifting of the cottage to Charlie and Emily Fraser and..." His voice trailed off again, and he whipped a handkerchief from his pocket and used it to dab his forehead. "Any salaries paid to employees."

Molly's eyebrows knit, and she stared at him with an incredulous expression. "What?"

"You owe me your salaries back," Gianna said, flicking her gaze to the Frasers. "And you owe me your home."

"But surely..." Mrs. Fraser began, a hand pressed to her heart.

"Surely nothing. The cottage is my property. Now, I realize this is a shock—"

"A shock?" Molly squealed. "This is robbery."

Gianna's facial muscles twitched with annoyance. "I'll let that slide since you are upset. However—"

"No! I don't have the money. What do you expect me to do? I got paid. I bought stuff. It's gone! What I do have left is my life savings. I'd be bankrupt."

Gianna arched an eyebrow at the redhead. "I'm a reasonable woman. We can set up a payment plan if you cannot pay the lump sum."

Molly gasped as a tear rolled down her cheek. She started to shake her head, but it turned into a quiver. She pressed a shaking hand to her forehead.

Mrs. Fraser's wrinkles deepened as she wrung her hands and glanced at Mr. Fraser.

Cate slid her eyes closed as the chaos ensued. Her heart broke for her friends. The sudden appearance of Gianna was an unexpected twist. An unwanted nuisance that made her skin crawl. And threatened to ruin everything.

"I can't believe there isn't something we can do," Jack's voice said, bringing Cate back to the reality of the situation brewing around her.

"There is," Gianna said, poking a finger in the air, "you can get out. By week's end, or I will have to use force. Mr. Smythe can handle drawing up arrangements to repay the debts you incurred during the time I should have been in charge of the funds."

"Wait just a minute," Jack growled. "Lady Gertrude *never* wanted this to leave the family."

"And it is just that fear that forced her to write the codicil," Gianna said, crossing her arms.

Jack's nostrils flared, and he held a shaking hand toward the attorney. "Mr. Smythe, can you please explain how this happened? How did Lady Gertrude's desire for Dunhaven to remain in the family force her to add a codicil ensuring it did not?"

"Simple," Gianna began.

"I'm asking him, not you!" Jack shouted.

Cate stepped forward, placing a hand on his shoulder. "Easy, Jack. Let him explain."

Gianna offered him a smarmy smile. "Yes, easy, Jack. You wouldn't want to raise your blood pressure after your illness."

Jack's chest heaved as he gasped in breaths, his face an angry shade of red.

Mr. Smythe held up his hand. "Please, Ms. Caruso, allow me to explain. They deserve that much."

"A matter of opinion," Gianna said, "but proceed."

Mr. Smythe sucked in a deep breath. "Lady Gertrude became concerned that the next owner of Dunhaven Castle may face a situation similar to hers."

"Meaning what?" Jack asked.

"Meaning no clear heir. It was the concern that Dunhaven Castle could pass to someone outside of the family, someone unknown if the new heir had no family. And so, she added a codicil that if the next of kin was not

married at the time of inheritance, the property should pass to the Caruso Preservation Foundation, of which Ms. Caruso is the president.”

“So, Cate had to be married, or she could not inherit?” Jack questioned.

“Yes,” Mr. Smythe said with a nod.

“No, that can’t be legal,” Jack said, slicing through the air with his hand. “Cate’ll challenge it.”

“Yes,” Molly said, leaping to her feet and threading her arm through Cate’s. “Surely, this can’t stand up in court. It’s discrimination or something. Because she’s a single woman, she can’t inherit? That’s crazy! She’s the next-of-kin.”

“I assure you it is legal. It will stand up in a court of law. It can be enforced. As archaic as it may seem, this is a standard practice historically in wills.”

“I mean, this is the twenty-first century! How can a single woman be denied an inheritance based on her marital status?” Molly asked, shaking her head.

“Because Lady Gertrude wanted this place preserved. And Cate lacks the ability to do that,” Gianna said.

“This is crazy!” Jack said, flinging his hands in the air.

“It is,” Molly said. “Marriages can fall apart. It doesn’t guarantee a future.”

“But it does, in most instances, lead to children. And there is a stipulation about the duration of the marriage.” Mr. Smythe shook his head. “It’s a moot point since Dr. Kensie is and was single at the time of inheriting.”

Gianna raised her chin, a smirk on her face. “Which means Dunhaven Castle is mine.”

Mr. Smythe pressed his lips together. “Unfortunately, she is correct. And she does have the legal right to enforce you all to leave in a timely manner.”

“One week,” Gianna chimed in.

“That’s hardly reasonable,” Molly shot back.

“You don’t have that many things. I think you can manage it,” Gianna said.

“This is cruel,” Molly shouted as she jabbed a finger at the woman. “And heartless.”

“Perhaps some leniency could be arranged,” Mr. Smythe began, sliding his eyes sideways to Gianna.

Cate’s heart pounded in her chest again. She wiped her sweaty palms against her leggings and licked her lips. She cleared her throat and lifted her eyes to the group. “Will you excuse me for a moment?”

Molly wrapped her arm around Cate’s shoulder. “Cate—“

Cate squeezed Molly’s hand and offered her a slight smile. “No, I’m okay. I just...need one minute.”

“Of course, Cate,” Gayle said with a consoling smile.

Cate took a step toward the doors when Gianna stepped into her path. “Leave the timepiece. It comes to me, too. I wouldn’t want you absconding with any valuable heirlooms.”

Cate narrowed her eyes at the woman, her nose wrinkling and her lips settling into a frown.

“That’s ridiculous,” Jack said.

Cate lifted the pendant timepiece from around her neck. She held it out toward Mr. Smythe, dangling it from her fingers. “I trust this will be safe in your care until we can sort through this mess.”

Mr. Smythe accepted the proffered item with a remorseful and fleeting smile before placing it on the coffee table.

“Excuse me,” Cate said, skirting past Gianna and darting out the door. She pulled those closed behind her, collapsing against them as she blew out a long breath. She fluttered her eyelashes, glancing upward and blinking away her tears.

The sudden, unexpected appearance of Gianna made this all the more difficult for her. She fought to steady her breathing. She had to proceed. She had to fight for what was hers. And her staff’s. She shook her head at the greed displayed by the woman to require her staff to repay their salaries over the last year.

With a deep inhale, she forced herself down the hall and around the corner to the office. She strode to the file cabinet and tugged it open, digging through it for the documents she sought. She bypassed the green folder containing the copy of the will she’d signed for in Aberdeen. The copy had contained no such codicil. Could she fight it based on that?

She shook her head, pulling the next folder out of the drawer and slamming it shut. She spun on her heel and raised her chin. With the item pressed against her chest, she strode back to the library.

The scene inside remained tense. Jack sat next to Mrs. Fraser on the sofa, his leg bobbing up and down. His hand wrapped around Molly's who perched on the edge of the sofa's arm. She sniffled, biting her thumbnail. Mrs. Fraser and Mr. Fraser held hands, their faces stoic.

Cate swallowed hard and closed the doors behind her.

"Finished with your moment? I'd like to get moving on signing the paperwork," Gianna said as she circled around her to face Mr. Smythe.

"There's no need for that," Cate said.

"Cate," Jack began with a shake of his head.

"Don't give up, Lady Cate," Molly said.

"Not without a fight," Mrs. Fraser said.

Cate twisted to face them and nodded. "It's okay. We'll be okay." She returned her gaze to Mr. Smythe and thrust the folder toward him. "I think you'll find everything you need in here to verify that I am, indeed, the rightful heir to Dunhaven Castle."

Mr. Smythe's eyebrows squashed together as he slowly pulled the folder from Cate's hand. He shook his head, glancing down at it before returning his gaze to her. "Dr. Kensie, I'm not certain you understand. Unless this is a marriage certificate dated February 1, 2019, you are not the heir. You had to be married at the time of inheritance which is effectively Lady Gertrude's date of death."

Cate lifted her chin, swallowing again as her throat went dry. "As you'll see when you open that folder, I was, in fact, married on February 1, 2019. Actually, nearly five years before that in August 2014."

Mr. Smythe flicked the folder open, studying the contents.

"What?" Molly asked behind her. "You're married?"

Mr. Smythe lifted the certificate, his jaw agape and his eyebrow arching. "Apparently, yes. At least, you were. Are you still?"

"Yes," Cate said.

"No divorce? No separations?"

Cate shook her head before she stalked across the room, taking up her original post.

Mr. Smythe blinked as he stared at the paper, his shock apparent.

"I want that verified," Gianna spat.

Mr. Smythe continued to gawk at the sheet with pinched features. "Y-yes, of course. May I keep this?"

Cate nodded. "It's a copy."

“No!” Gianna shouted. “No, this is a lie. You are not and were not married in 2014.”

Cate stared at the woman with a blank expression.

Jack studied her, his features betraying his confusion. “You were married when you came here?”

“Yes,” Cate said, sliding her eyes to him.

“To who?” he burst.

“To me,” a new voice said from the doorway.

All eyes turned to the newcomer. Cate’s lips curled at the edges as she stared at her spouse of nearly six years. Silence fell over the room’s occupants as he strode into the room and spun to face them. “I do not believe I’ve met all of you formally, but I am Catherine’s husband, Duke Marcus Northcott.”

CHAPTER 3



Stunned faces stared at the newest arrival to the room before a few flicked to Cate. Mr. Smythe slow-blinked at the man, then glanced down at the certificate again.

Riley bounded across the room to Marcus who scooped him up and rubbed his head. “Hello, Riley.”

“Oh, please. You cannot be serious,” Gianna said.

Marcus strode across the room toward the brandy decanter. “I believe you will find all the paperwork in order to clear up this matter, Smythe.”

“You are married,” Mr. Smythe repeated, as though trying to cement the idea in his head.

“Cate, you’re married?” Molly questioned.

Marcus poured himself a brandy and spun to face them. “Yes. Since 2014. Turns out your Lady Cate is actually Duchess Cate.” He smiled at Cate, tipping her chin up. “Though you’ve never been much for titles, have you, dear?”

Cate smiled up at him and shook her head. “No.”

“I want this checked into,” Gianna said, crossing her arms. “Thoroughly.”

“Yes, we will, though this all looks to be in order,” Mr. Smythe answered, stowing the marriage certificate in the folder and sliding it into his briefcase along with the other.

“So, just to be clear, we’re not all out of jobs, homes, and being asked to repay our salaries,” Molly questioned.

“No, that is *not* the case,” Gianna said, her nostrils flaring.

“Assuming we can verify the marriage certificate and find no evidence of divorce or separation, yes,” Mr. Smythe said as he stood.

Marcus crossed the room and slid the pocket watch from the coffee table. “Thank you, Smythe. You’ll find nothing but a happy marriage.” He returned to Cate’s side and set his brandy on the drink cart before he draped the pendant around her neck. “I believe this is yours.”

Cate clutched the pocket watch in her hand and offered him a brief smile. “Thank you.”

Gianna’s lips curled into an expression of disdain. “You think you’ve won, but you haven’t. You should have given us Dunhaven when you had the chance.” She spun on her heel and stormed from the room.

Mr. Smythe rose from his seat. “I will be in touch. We will expedite this as much as possible.”

“Until the matter is resolved, that woman should be barred from this estate,” Marcus said. “She has upset the staff and Catherine.”

“Yes, of course,” Mr. Smythe said. “We will advise her—“

“Not good enough, Smythe. Tell her in no uncertain terms that Dunhaven Castle and its grounds are off-limits.”

Mr. Smythe pressed his lips together in a thin line as he nodded. “Yes, of course. If you will excuse me now, we will return to London posthaste to begin.”

“Mr. Smythe, are you certain you won’t stay?” Cate asked. “We’d be happy to have you for the night.”

“Oh—“ he said, smoothing his jacket.

“Really,” Cate said, “it’s no trouble and certainly more comfortable than a hotel. There are no trains back today.”

He snapped his gaze to Gayle before he nodded. “If it isn’t any trouble, that would be most appreciated.”

“It’s no trouble at all,” Cate said.

“Thank you, Lady...” Gayle pressed her lips together and offered Cate an apologetic smile. That is, thank you, Your Grace. *That* will take some getting used to.” She gave a small chuckle.

“Really, just Cate is always fine,” Cate insisted. “And we are happy to have you stay.”

“If you don’t mind, I’ll step out to make some calls to begin the validation process required by the codicil.” Mr. Smythe licked his lips and

fixed his gaze on Cate. “For what it’s worth, I am very sorry for this mess.”

“It’s okay, Mr. Smythe. And with any luck, it should be cleared up very soon.”

He bobbed his head at her before he strode from the room.

“Well,” Mrs. Fraser said, rising along with Mr. Fraser, “I can take you up to your room, Ms. Pearson.”

“If it’s my usual spot, I can find it with no trouble.”

“Yes, it is,” Mrs. Fraser answered with a nod.

“Then please don’t trouble yourself. I’ll find my way up.”

“I’ll send up a tray with your meal. Given the circumstances, Lady—” Mrs. Fraser stopped, fluttering her eyelashes. “Her Grace thought an informal dinner may be best.”

“Of course. Thank you.” Gayle offered them all a warm smile before she disappeared from the room.

Mrs. Fraser smoothed her dress and clasped her hands in front of her. Cate recognized the gesture. It betrayed how nervous Mrs. Fraser remained over the recent events. “Well, I suppose we should be returning to the kitchen to finish our preparations.”

Cate stepped forward and reached for Mrs. Fraser’s hands. She gave them a squeeze and offered her a smile. “It’s going to be okay, Mrs. Fraser. Mr. Smythe just needs to finish the verification on his end and everything will go back to normal.”

Mrs. Fraser glanced over her shoulder at Marcus before her gaze settled on Cate. “And normal or not, meals must still be prepared or we’ll all starve!”

Cate broadened her grin at her. “We wouldn’t want that.”

“I’ll send trays up for you both,” Mrs. Fraser said, offering a tentative glance at Marcus again.

“Oh,” Cate said, glancing at Marcus for a moment, “I would still like to eat dinner with you.”

“Oh, surely you—”

“I have several things to see to this evening. I will dine out,” Marcus said.

“Well, then we would be most happy to have you, Lady—” Mrs. Fraser closed her eyes, pursing her lips.

“Good,” Cate said. “And there’s no need to change how you address me. Lady Cate is perfectly fine.”

“But not proper,” Mrs. Fraser said, tugging her hand free and wagging a finger at her.

Cate gave the woman’s hand another squeeze and smiled.

Molly approached and pulled her into a hug. “We’ll talk later?”

“Yes,” Cate said. “Definitely.”

Mr. Fraser offered Cate a simple pat on her shoulder and a tight-lipped smile.

“Ah, do you mind if we discuss a few estate matters that may be changing given the news?” Jack inquired.

Cate nodded at him. “Yes, I think there are a few things that need to be addressed in the short term while we wait for this mess to clear up.”

Molly pinched Jack’s chin. “Don’t work too hard.”

“I’ll take it easy.”

The majority of her staff shuffled from the room, leaving Cate with Marcus and Jack. Jack pushed the doors shut behind the others before he spun to face them. He focused his gaze on Cate, his chest heaving out a deep sigh.

“Cate—“

She held up a hand, stopping his words. “Jack, please.”

“Please what? Please help?”

Marcus sipped at his brandy, offering Jack a stony glance over the rim of the glass. “Catherine hardly needs your help.”

Jack’s jaw tightened as he fixed his gaze on the man, nostrils flaring.

Cate sighed and held up a hand. “Marcus, please.”

Marcus clamped his mouth closed with a huff, busying himself with refilling his brandy and pouring another.

Cate flicked her gaze to Jack. “I can explain.”

“I sure as hell wish you would because I cannot understand *this*.” He flung his hand at Marcus.

The man handed the second brandy to Cate. She accepted the proffered glass, tapping her fingers against it as she stared into the amber liquid.

Jack pressed his hands against his forehead. “I mean, what the hell happened, Cate?”

“So much,” Cate breathed, her features pinching.

“Such as?” Jack inquired.

“Such as she focused her energy on rescuing you instead of saving Dunhaven Castle,” Marcus spat. “And this is the fallout of that decision.”

Jack's eyebrows shot up as he snapped his gaze at the man.

Cate pressed a palm to her forehead, sliding her eyes closed. "Marcus, can you give us a minute?"

Marcus studied her for a moment before setting his glass down. "Of course. We will speak later about the next steps."

Cate nodded as he strode from the room. He offered her a glance before he pulled the doors closed.

Jack ran his fingers through his hair as the latch clicked, blowing out a forceful sigh. "Now can you please tell me what the hell happened to result in *this*?" He gestured toward the closed doors.

"You were gone, Jack." Cate licked her lips, tears glistening in her eyes as she sank into Jack's usual armchair, her voice lowering to a whisper. "You were gone."

Jack perched on the edge of the chair she usually used. "I know. And I'm sorry."

Cate's features pinched, and she pressed her lips together. "You don't need to apologize. I'm not blaming you. I'm sure it was horrible for you. I can't begin to imagine what happened to you or what those people did to you. But on this end, you were gone."

"And you called him?"

Cate stared into the amber liquid, recalling the panicked moments when she realized Jack had been taken. "I called Damien."

She flicked her gaze up to Jack's face. "They brought Marcus."

Jack's brow furrowed, and he cocked his head. "Damien brought Marcus? Damien? The guy who hated this man the last time we saw him?"

Cate's forehead wrinkled, and she took a sip of her brandy. "Apparently, things in the supernatural world change a lot." Her lower lip bobbed up and down for a moment before she took another sip of the amber liquid.

"Apparently," Jack said, his eyebrows shooting up.

Cate blew out a breath as she considered her next words. She flicked her gaze to him. "He stepped up, Jack."

"He didn't kidnap you this time?"

"He saved my life. Multiple times. And yours."

Jack fluttered his eyelashes, his face betraying his lack of understanding.

"He traded himself for you."

Jack stared at her, unblinking.

Cate nodded at him. "Yes. He traded himself for you. You had temporalysis. You were dying. He traded himself for you. You are alive because of him."

Jack pressed his lips together, lowering his eyes to the area rug. "Sorry, I'm just having a difficult time picturing that man as selfless."

"I was shocked, too. But he did. And he endured a substantial amount of torture because of that."

Jack scoffed. "So he says."

"No," Cate said, slamming her glass down on the table. "Not says him. Says me."

Jack's shoulders slumped. "Cate, I'm not calling you a liar. But I think he's manipulative and—"

Cate shook her head, pressing her hand against her chest. "No. You don't understand, I..."

Jack flicked his eyebrows up as her voice trailed off. "Then help me understand. Because I don't."

"He did something to me—"

Jack leapt from his chair, pacing the floor. "I knew it."

"No, nothing bad."

"I'll believe that when you explain."

"I'm trying but...it's difficult. It's...odd."

Jack rolled his eyes. "Not surprising with him."

"When we were searching for you, Gianna tried to kill me. And she nearly succeeded. Marcus worried something would happen to me. He used some sort of magic to link us."

Jack froze, snapping his gaze to her. "Link you?"

"Yes," Cate said, pressing a hand to her heart again. "He cut my hand and his and mixed our blood. He could feel my heart beating inside his chest."

Jack sank into the armchair again, his features pinching as he tried to understand.

"And, despite me being human, I can feel his heartbeat in my chest, too."

Jack's surprised look turned incredulous. "What?"

"I have two heartbeats in my chest. My own and his. I can feel things that happen to him. Major things. Terrible things."

Jack flicked his gaze to the dark fireplace. "My God, Cate."

“That’s how I know they did horrible things to him. I felt them, Jack. He traded himself for you knowing he’d live through that. But he did it. He did it so you could live.”

Jack balanced his elbows on his thighs and shook his head. “I’m still having a hard time picturing this guy as selfless.”

“Hard time or not, he offered himself. Ask Damien, Michael, or Celine. They were all there when he did it. I was there. Damien had to carry me out of the room. And then when his heartbeat woke me up in the middle of the night...”

Cate’s features pinched as her voice trailed off.

Jack leapt from his seat and paced around the floor. “Why the hell would he do that do you? Why would he make you go through that? Are you sure it wasn’t a setup?”

Cate lifted a shoulder. “He didn’t know I would feel his heart. He was surprised. He thought only he would feel mine. But I did.” She pressed her hand against her chest again. “I do.”

“This is unbelievable,” he breathed, perching on the edge of the armchair again. “I was sick?”

“Dying,” Cate said. “You were unconscious by the time we found you, and you wouldn’t have survived for much longer.”

Jack’s features pinched. “I remember...I remember odd things happening. One minute it felt like I was here at Dunhaven. And the next...”

“You were back in some cell somewhere, right?”

Jack flicked his gaze to her and nodded. “Yes.”

“You had temporalysis. Like me, only more severe. We are assuming Gianna time-hopped you back to 1810, and that’s what caused it. Your case would have been fatal.

“Thanks to Dr. Gresham, it wasn’t.”

“Thanks to Anna Northcott, it wasn’t, *and* Dr. Gresham. And as much as you don’t want to hear this...Marcus.”

Jack slid his eyes shut as he heaved a sigh. He snapped them open again, focusing them on her. “I’m assuming they cured you, too?”

Cate shook her head. “No. Amelia was still working on the cure. But mine wasn’t as severe as yours.”

“Did you go comatose?”

“No. Marcus had a treatment that mitigated the symptoms. I still passed out a few times and had weird visions, but I always came to within a few

minutes.”

“So, do you still have it?”

Cate took another sip of her brandy before shaking her head. “Cured.”

“By Dr. Gresham?”

“No, mine ran its course.”

Jack jumped from the chair again. “Ran its course? How do you know? How can you tell? Cate, are you certain you’re not sick?”

“Yes. Marcus said I’m cured.”

Jack flung a hand in the air. “Oh, Marcus said. Well, then it must be true.”

Cate pursed her lips, her fingers tapping the side of her glass again.

“I’m sorry,” Jack said, spinning on his heel and wandering back across the room. “Did he at least give any proof?”

“He said the visions I kept having were of a moment in my future. Some pinnacle point of my life. And once that passed, if I hadn’t fallen into a coma or died yet, I’d survive.”

“And you experienced the moment? You lived through it?” Jack asked, sinking into the armchair again.

Cate nodded, lowering her eyes to what remained of her drink.

Jack shook his head, letting his chin rest in his palm. “What was it?”

“What?” Cate asked, flicking her gaze back to him.

“What was your moment?”

“Uhh, a ball at Rosenberg Palace.”

Jack’s features pinched.

“Marcus’s mother was...is...I think, a German Duchess. Rosenberg Palace is his maternal side’s home.”

“What happened at the ball that was so important to you?”

Cate flicked her eyes from his, her forehead crinkling. She sucked in a breath, her lips parted to answer when she shook her head and shrugged. “I-I-I think maybe the narrowing down of suspects as to who had you and where you may be held? I’m honestly not sure.” She forced a nervous smile on her face. “It’s all a blur that night.”

Jack narrowed his eyes at her. “Cate, did something happen?”

Cate swallowed hard, lowering her gaze to the coffee table.

“Cate?” Jack prodded.

She lifted a shoulder again. “After the ball, I got sick.”

“From the temporalysis?”

Cate shook her head, her features pinching as she recalled the painful experience. “Gianna put a poisonous snake in my bed. I...”

Jack lunged forward, his fingers clutching the arms of the chair. “What? Did it bite you?”

“Yes,” Cate answered, staring ahead, “and I was sick for three days.”

Tears filled her eyes. “I’m the reason you were so sick when we got to you, I think.”

“No, Cate, I’m certain that’s not true.”

“Damien said it wasn’t. He said they used the time to find you and assess how we’d plan to get you back, but...had I been awake maybe we would have gotten to you faster.”

“You can’t think like that, Cate.”

“But I do.”

“I’m sure for those three days you were pestering everyone for information while you recovered.”

Cate slid her eyes closed for a moment. “I wasn’t conscious.”

“Oh, Cate,” Jack said with a sigh. “That woman really did a number on us, didn’t she?”

“And she continues to be a thorn in our side,” Cate said, setting her glass on the table.

“I assume she’s behind this latest...situation.”

“The codicil? Yes. Marcus’s people caught it when we returned with you. He warned me they’d try something like this. You were just being used as a distraction.”

Jack chewed his lower lip as he shook his head.

“And to be clear, I did not do what I did just to keep the castle. I would have traded it for you.”

“No one thinks that, Cate. I don’t think that. They can’t take Dunhaven.”

“I know.”

Jack rubbed his lips before he shot a glance at Cate. “Just to be clear, you weren’t married when you first came here, right?”

The statement elicited a chuckle from Cate. “No.”

“Just checking. Your marriage certificate is dated 2014.”

Cate gave him a broad smile as she nodded. “Yeah. Two days ago, we went to 2014, got married, and came back.”

Jack let his head fall back onto the cushion behind him. He stared at the ceiling, sighing, before he picked up his head and stared at Cate. "I guess the only thing left to ask is what the hell do we do now?"

CHAPTER 4



Cate slumped in the chair as the question hung in the air. The enigma had plagued her since she'd read the codicil. Marcus had offered her a temporary solution, but it remained just that: temporary. They needed to fix this. To reset the clock. But she had no idea how to do that.

Cate flicked her gaze to Jack. "I'm not sure. I hate to say this, but I think we're going to have to rely on Marcus to take the lead."

Jack dropped his head into his hands. "Words I never wanted to hear."

"I'm sorry."

He raised his eyes to her. "It's not your fault. But I'm damned uncomfortable with this. I don't trust that man."

"Noted, but until we have this fixed and The Agency dealt with, we don't have a choice."

Jack clasped his hands, resting his chin against them.

"Sorry, Jack. But look on the bright side. This is only temporary."

"You sure about that?"

"Yes. We both saw him with Celine in 1792. I'm shocked he even offered to marry me, to begin with. It must be a huge inconvenience for him."

Jack studied her for a moment. "We both saw him with Celine, yes. But we both also saw Celine with him. She detests him."

"Not anymore," Cate answered. "They're practically civil. Even friendly."

Jack wiggled his eyebrows. "Talk about playing the long game, huh?"

Cate chuckled at the statement and slouched back in the chair. “Yep. So, like I said, I’m certain this is temporary, and he’ll want this ended as soon as possible. Maybe this is even designed to impress her in some way.”

“Thank goodness for small miracles.” Jack offered a laugh. “Impress your future wife by marrying another woman. What kind of world do we live in?”

“It gets stranger by the minute.” Cate furrowed her brows, squinting at him. “Did you know there are other universes where we make different choices that result in a different world?”

Jack stared ahead blankly for a moment. “Don’t say anything else. I can’t handle it.”

Cate grinned at him. He shot her a shocked glance. “Wait...are we in one of them?”

Cate chuckled again. “Not to my knowledge. I did not even want to glimpse into one when given the chance.”

“We really need to have a long conversation about what happened while I was gone once this mess is over.”

“Oh, definitely. I’m glad these chairs are comfortable because we’re going to be in them for a long, long time to go over everything that happened while you were gone.”

“In the meantime, I better let you have a few minutes to yourself. I’m certain the questions at dinner tonight are going to be brutal.”

Cate snickered at the statement as Jack rose from the chair. “I’ve definitely got some explaining to do.”

“I don’t envy you that,” Jack said. “See you soon.” He strolled to the doors and disappeared through them with a wave.

Cate slouched in the armchair, letting her head fall against the cushion behind her. With a long breath, she forced herself to her feet, calling the dogs after her. She trudged upstairs, threaded through the halls to her room, and closed herself inside.

She leaned back against the doors, letting the silence envelop her before she shuffled across to her chaise and sank onto it. She rested her head in her hands as the emotions building from the stressful day threatened to overwhelm her.

She pressed her lips together, tears welling in her eyes. A lump formed in her throat, and a sob escaped her. She buried her face in her hands.

A soft knocking sounded at the door as Riley nudged at her elbow. Cate sniffled, wiping at her cheeks. "Come in!"

"Your Grace?" Andrea said, poking her head in through the door. "Just checking to see how everything went."

"As expected, more or less."

Andrea slid through the small opening and eased the door shut behind her. She approached Cate, clasping her hands in front of her. "Would you like to talk about it?"

Cate glanced down at the area rug, sniffing again. "No, I'm fine, thank you."

Andrea offered her a consoling smile. "Why don't I brush your hair before dinner?"

"Oh, you don't—" Cate began before she sucked in a breath and nodded. "Yes, that would be great."

Andrea led her to the dressing table, and Cate sank onto the chair in front of it. Andrea slid the soft bristles through her long hair.

"Gianna showed up for the discussion," Cate said after a few swipes.

Andrea flicked her gaze to Cate's face through the mirror, arching an eyebrow. "Well, *that* wasn't expected, was it? You thought only Mr. Smythe and Gayle would come."

"Yes. And she made things quite uncomfortable."

"I can imagine. How trying for you."

Cate let her forearm slap onto the table, rattling the perfume bottle, music box, and comb. "Do you know she had the nerve to ask my staff to repay their salaries for the year I was here?"

Andrea froze mid-stroke. "No!"

Cate nodded at her. "Oh, yes, she did. She wants everything repaid to her. She was *kind* enough to offer them a payment plan if they couldn't return the funds in one lump sum. *And* she wanted the Frasers' cottage."

"That woman is a menace. Thank goodness you were prepared."

"Yes," Cate said, lowering her eyes to the piano-shaped music box. She propped it open, allowing the sound to soothe her. "I hope it works."

"I have no doubt it will," Andrea said with a reassuring smile.

Cate heaved a sigh, tearing her eyes from the music box to stare at Andrea through the mirror. "I don't put anything past Gianna and The Agency."

“His Grace will undoubtedly have prepared for everything,” the woman said, resuming her steady brushing.

Cate stared at the woman a moment longer, pondering if the statement would prove true. She certainly hoped so.

“There we are,” Andrea said as she gathered Cate’s hair behind her shoulders. “Would you like to change for dinner?”

“No, that’s not necessary. I’m dining in the kitchen tonight with you.”

“Oh, how lovely, Your Grace.” She hesitated a moment, biting into her lower lip before she added, “Will His Grace be joining us?”

Cate chuckled as she rose from the table. “No. I cannot imagine Marcus eating in my kitchen with the staff.”

Andrea giggled as Cate spun to face her. “If I may be so bold, Your Grace, neither can I.”

Cate pushed the music box closed and drummed her hands against her thighs. “Well, I guess we should head down.”

“Are you all right? I could have a tray sent up.”

“No, I think I’d better face the music. I’m sure everyone has questions. I just feel...it feels odd lying to them.”

“Does Mr. Reid know the truth?”

Cate nodded. “Yes, he does. I owed him that.”

“But the others do not.”

“No. And they cannot.”

“Of course.” Andrea wrapped her arm around Cate’s shoulders and led her to the door. “Don’t worry, Your Grace, if the questions become too uncomfortable, I will merely spill my soup and cause a scene.”

Cate smiled at her, flicking her gaze sideways as they strode through the door. “Thank you, Andrea. I can always count on you.”

They made their way to the kitchen below stairs with the dogs in tow. The sweet smell of cinnamon filled the room.

Cate wandered to her seat at the table as Mrs. Fraser pulled a steaming apple pie from the oven and set it on the stove.

“Looks like you’ve been busy,” Cate said, inhaling a deep breath of the delicious scent.

“Indeed, we have,” Molly said with a grin as she set a bowl of leafy green salad in the center of the table. “Figured we’d bake a celebratory pie now that we’re not all homeless and broke.”

Cate squashed her lips together and shook her head. "I am sorry about this."

Molly crinkled her forehead. "Sorry about what? It's not your fault."

"Nay, it isn't, Lady...oh," Mrs. Fraser said, tapping her cheek, "old habits, Your Grace. If it's anyone's fault it would be Mr. Smythe, but I cannae even blame him. He's usually ever so cautious."

"I can't believe something like this would slip past him," Mr. Fraser chimed in.

"I can't believe you're married!" Molly exclaimed, plopping into a seat across from Cate with a grin. "I'm glad. Not only because it's saving our collective rear ends but also for you."

Cate smiled at her. "Thank you."

"Now wait just a minute before we go congratulating her," Mrs. Fraser said as she set a loaded plate of stew in front of Cate. She studied Cate's face with narrowed eyes. "Are you happy?"

Cate smiled up at the woman. "Yes," she said with a nod.

Mrs. Fraser plopped into a seat. "All right, then, I suppose congratulations are in order. Though belated for nearly five years. What in the world has he been doing all this time?"

"Things," Cate said, concentrating on her plate. "We don't have the most traditional relationship."

Molly poked her fork toward Cate after popping a grape tomato into her mouth. "You know, I think I've seen him around campus a few times. He's just one of those men who make an impression. I had no idea you two were married."

"How did you meet?" Mrs. Fraser asked.

"Through friends," Cate answered, shaking the salt shaker with too much vigor.

"Well, even if he hasn't been here the entire time, he seems pretty devoted. I mean, the moment Jack went..." Molly slid her eyes sideways to Jack, the smile slipping from her features. She flicked her eyes back to Cate. "He came as soon as you needed him."

"He did, yes."

"And we are ever so grateful for that," Mrs. Fraser said with a curt nod.

Molly stabbed a carrot with her fork. "Plus, Riley seems to adore him."

The statement brought a smile to Cate's face as she pushed her stew around on her plate. "He does. There is a good reason for that."

Jack snapped his gaze up.

“Marcus gave me Riley. Riley is actually a pup from Marcus’s mother’s dog, Athena.”

“Really? Aww, that’s so sweet,” Molly said with a grin.

Jack narrowed his eyes at her, and she offered him a subtle nod to verify the truth of the statement.

“Yes. I really needed Riley after my parents died.”

“I’ll bet,” Molly said, reaching across the table to grab Cate’s hand.

“Well, we certainly are grateful to him for appearing today,” Mrs. Fraser said. “I hope Mr. Smythe can clear this matter up quickly so that horrid woman can go back to whatever foundation she has and worry about stealing someone else’s inheritance!”

Cate smiled at her as she scooped up a beef-soaked celery stalk. “My fingers are crossed.”

“As are mine. And my toes,” Mrs. Fraser said with a chuckle. “The nerve of that woman to act like Dunhaven doesn’t belong to you.”

“And ask us to pay back our salaries!” Molly exclaimed. “I mean, is she serious?”

Jack scoffed at the statement.

“I am so sorry she’s doing this,” Cate said again.

“It’s not your fault,” Mrs. Fraser insisted.

“Let’s hope it’s over soon enough.”

“Mr. Smythe is nothing but efficient, so with any luck, he’ll have this wrapped up, and we can get back to planning your first-year anniversary.”

Molly’s eyes went wide. “Oh my goodness!”

“What?” Mrs. Fraser questioned. “You dinnae forget, did you?”

“No, but...” Molly fluttered her eyelashes. “What do you think Mrs. Campbell will say when she finds out you’re married to a duke?”

Cate opened her mouth to answer, but no words came. She crinkled her forehead, trying to imagine Mrs. Campbell’s reaction to the news which would surely spread like wildfire through the town. Her eyebrows raised as her nose wrinkled. She slid her eyes closed. They really needed to fix this situation before she ended up at another 1810-like ball complete with blaring trumpets announcing their arrival. Her fork clattered to her plate.

“Oh, she’ll likely have the entire event planned around playing up that aspect,” Mrs. Fraser said, wagging her finger in the air. “The ninny will

become more of a thorn in your side than she already is. That's what'll happen."

"I'm certain His Grace would be most happy to celebrate Her Grace's one-year anniversary at Dunhaven," Andrea said with a smile.

Molly waggled her fork as she eyed Andrea. "So, do you actually work for him?"

"Yes," Andrea said as she raised her water glass to her lips.

"Oh, for how long?" Molly questioned.

"Long enough," Andrea said with a chuckle.

Cate drew in a long breath and licked her lips. "Let's hope this whole mess is cleared up before the anniversary party and plans can continue as they were. Happy or not, I'm sure Marcus has other things on his plate."

"Well, we'll take it one day at a time. But for now, let's have pie," Mrs. Fraser said, rising from her seat and gathering several plates.

"That sounds like an excellent plan," Molly said as she joined her.

The group shared the buttery, rich dessert before they broke up for the evening. With the dogs in tow, Cate dragged herself up the stairs, ready to stretch out in bed and try to forget the day.

She pushed into the downstairs hall, shuffling toward the main staircase. As she entered the foyer, her eyes snapped to the stairs where a figure leaned against the banister. Riley and Bailey growled. Cate stiffened, her heart thudding against her ribs.

"Hello, little mouse," Gianna said, her lips curling into a derisive smile.

CHAPTER 5



“*W*hat are you doing here?” Cate demanded, her muscles stiff and her pulse racing.

The woman crossed her arms and slowly sashayed toward Cate. “You’re full of surprises today. Married? To the Duke himself?” She paused, arching an eyebrow. “Well played, Cate. Though it won’t help.”

“Get out, Gianna.”

She positioned herself inches from Cate’s face, lowering her voice to a whisper. “You’re just staving off the inevitable. We’re going to win. And when we do, it’s going to leave you in ruins.”

The woman smacked into Cate as she stalked past her, knocking her back a step. She grabbed the doorknob and swung the front door open.

Cate glared after her. “Gianna,” she called as the woman stepped into the night air.

Gianna twisted to face her, her blonde hair swinging.

“I’ll never let you win.”

The corner of Gianna’s lips turned up on one side. “We’ll see.”

She spun on her heel and slammed the door. Cate jumped, squeezing her eyes closed as she allowed her heartbeat to slow.

“Catherine, is something wrong?”

The voice startled Cate into opening her eyes. She spun to find Marcus hurrying down the stairs.

Cate sighed, pressing a hand to her forehead. “Gianna was here.”

His eyes went wide, and he set his hands on her shoulders. “Are you all right?”

“Yes, I’m fine. She didn’t do anything to me outside of her usual threats.”

Marcus sighed, flicking his gaze to the floor. “We should go up and speak more privately.”

Cate nodded, and they climbed the stairs with the dogs trailing after them. “Our plan is going to work, right?”

“Yes, but it is only a short-term solution. The win will be short-lived as they will be quickly working a new angle,” he said as they reached the top of the stairs and continued through the hall.

Cate let her head fall back between her shoulder blades. Short-term solution, just as she suspected. How long before he tired of it? “We need to fix this.”

“I’m working on that.”

“How?” Cate asked.

Marcus studied her for a moment before stalking away from her. “It may be best—”

“Don’t do that,” Cate said.

He twisted to face her. “You do not even know what I’m about to say.”

“You’re about to say it may be best if I stay out of it. And I’m not going to do that. I will not be shut out of this fight.”

Marcus’s nostrils flared as he clasped his hands behind his back. “You are extremely stubborn.”

“Yes, I am,” Cate said, lifting her chin. “It’s one of those endearing things you can mention about why you married me.”

A smile played on his lips. “And how did the conversation go with your gardener regarding our recent yet not-so-recent nuptials?”

Cate’s shoulder slumped, and she heaved a sigh. “I don’t know what’s more maddening. Gianna showing up unannounced twice or you referring to Jack as my gardener.”

“If the shoe fits.”

“Except it doesn’t. He is not only my estate manager, but he is a very good friend. And he also is a very large part of protecting this estate.”

“And I assume not only will you not be shut out of the fight, but you will not allow him to be either.”

Cate cocked her head, smiling at him. “You are very bright.”

Marcus puckered his lips as he sucked in a breath. “Fine, though if he prevents us from doing what we need to do—“

“He won’t.”

“I’ll leave his management to you, entirely, dear.”

Cate crossed her arms, drumming her fingers on her forearm. “So, what are our next steps?”

“That remains to be seen, though I have my suspicions that we will be seeking another missing person.”

Cate slowed her steps, snapping her gaze at him. “Do you think she’ll come after someone else in the house like Molly? Or Jack again?”

“No, I believe The Agency may prefer your predecessor.”

“Gertrude?” Cate asked as they arrived outside of her bedroom.

“Yes. It’s obvious they’ve had contact with her. Hence, the codicil.”

Cate crinkled her forehead. “And you think they’re still in contact with her?”

“I think they will attempt to strong-arm her into changing her will to ensure you cannot inherit, though given her mindset, it will be an uphill battle.”

“Given her mindset?” Cate questioned.

“I can only assume they pressured her into changing the will though she found the idea of letting the estate go outside of the family to be less-than-favorable, hence the codicil. The Agency likely allowed it to slip believing it achieved their goal.”

Cate pressed her lips together, studying the thick red carpet under her feet. “And now that it doesn’t...” Her voice trailed off, and she chewed her lower lip.

“They’ll try several angles, I would imagine. One of which will be to pressure Gertrude MacKenzie further. By any means necessary.”

Cate flicked her eyes up to his and sighed. “And we both know what that means.”

The corners of Marcus’s lips turned up, and he rubbed her shoulders. “We’ll fix this.”

“Should we have done something else?” Cate asked. “Like stop them from taking her.”

“We would likely be unable to do that. I’m certain they had unfettered access to Gertrude already. All that remains is to locate her and stop them.”

“Won’t they just do it again?” Cate pressed a hand against her forehead as her muscles tensed. “This is a losing battle.”

“It is not.”

Cate pressed her lips together, steadying her breath as her emotions threatened to bubble over.

Marcus put his hands on her shoulders again. “Catherine, we will find a way.”

Cate nodded without making eye contact with him.

“Catherine,” he prodded, tilting her chin up with his finger, and raising his eyebrows as her eyes met his.

“Okay.”

“Your trust in me is most concerning.”

Cate crossed her arms, shrugging. “Sorry, I’ve just never faced anything like this before.”

“Which is why I wish you’d let me handle it, but you stubbornly refuse to allow me to do that.”

Cate’s lips tugged up at the corners, and she eyed Marcus. “I’m not going to do that. This is my problem—“

“*Our* problem, dear, we are married.”

Cate broadened her smile, a chuckle escaping her lips. “You really got the worse end of for better or worse, didn’t you?”

“I would not change a thing, Catherine. Now, get some rest. You’ll need it.”

Cate nodded. “Thank you.”

He stepped past her, and she pushed her door open, hurrying inside.

“Oh, Catherine,” he said, spinning to face her again.

“Yes?” she asked, leaning against the closed second door.

“They will not bang their heads against a brick wall.”

Cate crinkled her brow, pulling her chin back.

“The answer to your question of won’t they just do this again. They will not bang their heads against a brick wall. They’ll move on to another target. We just need to stay ahead of them as much as possible.”

Cate fluttered her eyelashes as she attempted to understand the statement. *Another target? When would this end?*

She flicked her gaze to Marcus’s dark eyes.

“Just like we did this time,” he added, brandishing his wedding band.

Cate forced a smile on her face and nodded. “Goodnight, Marcus.”

“Goodnight, Catherine.”

She stepped back and eased her door closed. With a sigh, she leaned against it. Fears raced across her mind faster than she could process them. Her face pinched as she worried about the future. She stared down at her ring finger as images of their rushed wedding danced across her mind.

“Trust me,” he’d said after she’d read the changed version of the will. He’d offered her his hand, and she’d accepted it.

They’d traveled to 2014. He’d somehow had everything prepared. A dress, a church, even flowers. Their wedding would appear legitimate to anyone outside looking in. There wouldn’t even be the question of a hurried ceremony.

Cate crossed the room and opened the lid of the piano music box. The lilting tune filled the air. She sucked in a deep breath as she pressed the box to her chest and shuffled to the bedroom. She set the music box on the nightstand and kicked her shoes off, sinking onto the edge of the bed with a sigh.

How long would the farce continue? How long before Marcus tired of the games and left her to fight The Agency on her own?

She pursed her lips and closed her eyes, letting the music push out all the worry. They would solve this and The Agency would move on to a new target. And Marcus would move on.

Everything would return to normal, she assured herself. The situation was only temporary.

“And exhausting,” she said as Riley tapped her knee with his paw.

“I’m tired, too, buddy,” Cate said, lifting him onto the bed as Bailey scrambled onto the bed himself. “Wow, you’re getting good at that, Bailey.”

The little dog wagged his pigtail before circling and plopping down. Riley cuddled next to him with a sigh, laying his head across his canine companion’s side.

“I really should change but I’m worn out. All that stress from Gianna did me in, boys.” She leaned against the pillow, pulling her feet up onto the bed. “I’ll go in just a few minutes.”

* * *

Random images flitted across Cate's mind. Her heart pounded as she raced through the halls of the castle. A scream split the silence, and she froze, gasping before she plowed forward again.

As she rounded a corner, the world melted around her.

Cate gasped in a breath, her eyes fluttering open. Tinkling music still filled the air in the lit room. Her forehead wrinkled, and she pushed herself up to sit.

Two sleeping dogs curled at the bottom of the bed. Cate shifted her gaze from them to her own legs. She still wore her clothes.

A glance at the clock told her she'd been asleep for hours. With a sigh, she forced herself off the bed and changed into her pajamas before she slipped under the sheets. The music box continued to play in the darkness.

She closed her eyes, and let the music wash over her. Her mind returned to the reason she'd awoken. A nightmare had pulled her from her slumber.

Her pulse quickened. Nightmare? Nightmares had been what had kicked off the entire chain of events that landed them where they were now.

Why was she still having them? Cate rolled onto her side, tugging the covers higher. Her heart skipped a beat. Had her temporalysis resurfaced?

She swallowed hard as she snuggled deeper into the pillow. Maybe it was just a normal nightmare. Probably prompted by Gianna's appearance today.

Yes, Cate thought to herself as she drifted back to sleep, *just a normal nightmare.*

When her eyes opened again, streaks of red painted the sky outside her window. She glanced at her clock and groaned, rolling onto her back.

Riley waddled up the bed, giving her a kiss on the cheek.

"Good morning, buddy," she said, stroking his head as he collapsed into her.

He yawned widely before snuggling his head into her arm.

"I feel the same way, Riley."

Bailey picked his head up and wagged his tail before letting it fall back down.

She lay in bed stroking Riley's soft fur for a few moments longer as random thoughts flitted through her mind. She wrinkled her nose as she recalled the nightmare she'd had. The thought drove her to rise.

"Okay, buddy, time to get up. We have to face the day, like it or not."

She wound the music box that had stopped playing at some point overnight and left it tinkling on her nightstand as she tugged on her robe and stretched.

She crossed the room and pulled open her door, finding Andrea waiting on the opposite side with her hands clasped in front of her.

“Good morning, Your Grace,” she said with a broad smile.

Cate stood to the side and motioned for Andrea to enter. “Good morning, Andrea. I’m sorry, I overslept.”

Andrea bustled past her, crossed into the bedroom, and tugged open a drawer to begin assembling Cate’s clothes. “Quite all right, Your Grace. I did not hear anyone stirring so I waited.”

“Sorry to have you standing out there.”

“It’s no problem at all,” Andrea said with a smile. “I’m so pleased to hear that you slept.”

“Yes, I did,” Cate said as she sank into the seat at her vanity. “I fell asleep in my clothes.”

“Oh, no. This is why you shouldn’t have dismissed me after dinner. I would have made sure you changed.”

Cate met her gaze through the mirror. “I know. But I survived, and look, I ended up in my pajamas anyway.”

Andrea brushed through Cate’s hair, an amused grin on her features. “Soon, you won’t even need me, Your Grace.”

“I used to change my own clothes once upon a time,” Cate said with a chuckle.

“But now you have me.”

Cate gave her a tight-lipped smile and a nod, staring down at the vanity top. She traced a scratch on it with her finger absentmindedly.

“Are you quite sure you slept well, Your Grace?”

Cate flicked her gaze up and nodded. “Yes. It’s just this tension. It’s killing me.”

“I’m certain it’s very nerve-wracking. I hope it’s over soon.”

“You and me both.”

Andrea finished with her hair and assisted Cate with her dressing, folding her pajamas and stowing them away before hanging up her robe.

They parted ways at the foyer doors, with Cate taking the dogs out and Andrea continuing downstairs. After their stroll around the castle, Cate pushed through the door into the kitchen.

“Good morning, Your Grace,” Mrs. Fraser said with a smile and waved a finger in the air. “I remembered this morning. See what a good night’s sleep will do for you?”

“Good morning, Mrs. Fraser,” Cate said, “though, again, the formality really isn’t needed.”

“Do you like Duchess Cate better?” Molly asked as she filled a bowl with brown sugar.

“I like just Cate. I hadn’t even gotten used to Lady Cate yet.”

“And the whole time you were holding out on us.” Molly winked at her.

“And this is why,” Cate said with a chuckle.

Molly wrinkled her nose in a silent giggle.

“Oh, Mr. Smythe requested a working breakfast in the library. He said it applies to Ms. Pearson, as well.”

“Oh? He really feels quite terrible about all this, I think. I do feel bad that he’s working over breakfast, though I’m surprised he’s not skipping the meal entirely and leaving to make the train.”

Mrs. Fraser wiped her hand against her apron as she set bowls on a tray. “There’s been a change of plans on that front, too. He’s asked to stay an extra day, possibly two.”

“Oh!” Cate exclaimed. “That’s perfectly fine. I hope he can enjoy a few days off.”

Molly froze, her jaw hanging open. “Ahhh, I didn’t get the impression he’d be taking any time off.”

Cate raised her eyebrows, sticking a hand on her hip as Jack entered with Mr. Fraser. Greetings were given before Cate drove the conversation back to Mr. Smythe’s change of plans.

“What gave you the impression Mr. Smythe is staying for work?”

Molly pressed her lips together and shot a glance at Mrs. Fraser.

The older woman finished transferring oatmeal into a server and set it on the tray. “He asked us all to be upstairs before breakfast for another announcement.”

Cate’s jaw flapped open. “*Another* announcement?”

“Mmm, that’s what he said,” Mrs. Fraser said with a nod.

“I’m not certain I can take another announcement,” Jack said, running his fingers through his hair.

“You and me both,” Cate said. “I suppose we should head up.”

Mrs. Fraser nodded, lifting a tray filled with bowls and utensils. "I suppose. I personally miss the days when announcements were *not* made."

Cate glanced around the kitchen in search of the tea and teacups. "Is there something I can carry?" Cate asked.

"Nay, you know better than that. If it's tea you're in search of, it's already upstairs. Your husband is an early riser, and he's been with Mr. Smythe for over an hour."

Cate sucked in a deep breath as she shuffled behind the women carrying their breakfast. She shot a nervous glance at Jack.

"You ready for this?" he whispered.

"I don't know. But stay after. We need to talk."

Jack nodded as they paraded up the stairs and to the library. Mr. Smythe sat with paperwork spread around him. Gayle tapped around on her laptop in the chair next to him. Marcus stared out the window in front of the desk, sipping his tea.

"Breakfast, everyone," Mrs. Fraser announced as she bustled through the doors.

"Thank you," Mr. Smythe said without glancing up from his papers.

Marcus flicked his gaze to them as they entered, his lips curling into a smile as Cate entered. "Good morning." He set his teacup in the saucer and slid it onto the desk. "Good morning, Catherine, did you sleep well?"

"Yes, thank you."

He clasped her shoulder and rubbed it. "Good. There is news. Sit down."

Cate took a seat on the sofa as Marcus strode across the room, pouring a cup of tea and adding sugar before passing it to her. She accepted the drink, sipping at it as she studied the attorney.

He tugged off his reading glasses and set the paperwork aside. "I am sorry to have called you all together again, but there is news. And, as this affects everyone, I felt it easiest to tell you all at once."

"Yes, of course, Mr. Smythe," Cate said. "What is it?"

"Has there been any progress on verifying the marriage?" Molly asked as she sank onto the arm of the sofa.

"Nothing is open yet in the States, but I will call the moment it is," Gayle said with a smile and a flutter of her eyelashes.

The woman's second gesture made Cate's heart skip a beat. Bad news loomed. She flicked her gaze to Marcus, who, as always, appeared

unflustered.

“What is the news, Mr. Smythe?” she asked.

Mr. Smythe pressed his lips into a thin line. “Assuming the marriage is verified, a new issue has cropped up.”

“Which is?” Cate inquired with raised eyebrows.

Mr. Smythe licked his lips, scanning the group. “Ms. Caruso is challenging the claim.”

“What?” Molly questioned.

“How?” Jack asked.

“Can she legally do that? We’ve met the terms of the codicil,” Cate said.

“She isn’t challenging the will,” Mr. Smythe said, “she’s challenging your marriage. She’s suing you for fraud.”

CHAPTER 6



Cate choked on her tea, sputtering a cough out as she lowered the teacup to the saucer. “Fraud?”

Marcus slid a hand onto Cate’s shoulder and squeezed.

“Whoa,” Molly shouted. “What? How?”

Mr. Smythe huffed out a sigh and shook his head. “She has managed to find an attorney willing to claim that your marriage is a sham. Preposterous, I know, however, they may convince a judge to take the case. Though even if they do, I would be surprised if it made it to trial.” He lowered his gaze, flicking his eyebrows up and cocking his head. “Though stranger things have happened.”

“How can she do this? On what basis?” Molly babbled.

Jack studied Mr. Smythe. “How likely is it that it *doesn’t* make it to trial?”

“That’s hard to say. I’m surprised any attorney would file this, though, some have no scruples.”

“This is insane,” Molly exclaimed, pacing the floor.

Cate grabbed her hand and squeezed it. She eased onto the sofa next to Cate, wrapping her arm around her.

“Mr. Smythe, can you explain what exactly she’s accusing us of?” Cate asked, patting Molly’s hand.

“Simply put, she claims your marriage is fraudulent. Designed only to collect the inheritance.”

Molly let her hand slap against her thigh. “How can that be? She was married five years before she inherited this place! How could she know?”

Mr. Smythe nodded at the statement. “The case could be made that she was aware of the familial connection, knew about the provision, and married to ensure her inheritance.”

“But I didn’t know,” Cate said while Molly exclaimed, “That’s ridiculous.”

Jack sighed, scrubbing his face with his hands.

“I’m merely suggesting how the other side may frame this. It’s my job to anticipate their next move and counter it.”

“So, what do we do?” Cate asked.

“Yeah, how can you prove they didn’t marry for money and that they really love each other?” Molly asked.

Cate shot Marcus an uncomfortable glance, heat rising in her cheeks. The corners of his lips turned up, and he squeezed her shoulder again.

Mr. Smythe slid several documents toward him and tapped his index finger against them. “We can make a strong case to ask for a dismissal.”

Molly crinkled her nose. “How?” She flicked her gaze to Cate. “Oh, sorry.”

“It’s fine. Molly makes a good point. How?”

“On top of the fact that you married nearly five years before your inheritance, we have several other things that play in our favor. We can make the case that your separate addresses were due strictly to your employment. And, of course, His Grace’s will can be used. We have not yet discussed your will and it would appear disingenuous to create it now, though we should deal with it after this matter has concluded.”

Cate scrunched her eyebrows. “I’m sorry, Marcus’s will?”

“Yes,” Mr. Smythe said, retrieving the papers he’d patted earlier and waving them. “In most instances of fraudulent marriages, assets are kept separately, however, since yours are not, we have a solid case that the union is legitimate.”

“What do you mean ours are not?” Cate inquired.

“Oh, my apologies, I assumed you were aware. Since one month following your nuptials, all estate assets are bequeathed to you and/or any children from your union, including...” He flipped through the document. “All monetary assets, which are substantial, the Stratfordshire estate, the

Wintervale country estate, the London townhouse, the Maine estate, the house in Martinique, and Rosenberg Palace.”

Cate’s eyelashes fluttered as he read the list. Jack slow-blinked before flicking a stunned gaze in Cate’s direction.

“Whoa,” Molly murmured, “that’s a lot of houses.”

“Right, of course,” Cate breathed out.

“Again, in situations where fraud is being committed, typically there is a separation of assets so that one party cannot benefit from the phony marriage. Or there is a pre-nuptial agreement in place to prevent the distribution of assets.”

“And no such agreement exists,” Marcus said. “Catherine and I wed for genuine reasons.”

Mr. Smythe nodded. “Which is why I believe we’ll have a solid rationale to request this claim be dismissed.”

“Right,” Cate said with a nod.

“What will happen if they don’t dismiss the case?” Jack inquired.

“There will be a trial and the judge will make a determination,” Mr. Smythe said.

“What are our chances in a trial?” Cate asked.

“Good, though I think we stand a good chance of avoiding that as well.”

“Does it matter that no one really knew about our marriage?” Cate questioned.

Mr. Smythe knit his brow. “No. Obviously, some people knew. We can ask them for statements to present if we need them. The other side may try to argue that the secrecy indicates deceit on your part, but a statement from the dowager Duchess should put that to rest.”

“Anna?” Cate asked, her eyebrows shooting up.

“Of course, dear. Mother would be happy to attest to our nuptials. You know how she feels about you.”

“The dowager Duchess is fond of her?” Mr. Smythe asked, clicking his pen and pressing it to the paper.

“Mother adores Catherine. And of course, she would be happy to provide the necessary documents to prove that our little Riley,” Marcus said, scooping up the small dog and stroking his fur, “was mothered by her beloved Athena and given to Catherine as a wedding present.”

“Excellent, yes, that is excellent. It’s those sorts of details that will make the authenticity of your union obvious.” Mr. Smythe scribbled a few notes

onto his legal pad before he clicked the pen again and stuffed it into his suit jacket pocket.

He gathered his notes and slid them into the briefcase. "If you don't mind, I will set up a temporary workspace in your office."

"Not at all."

Mrs. Fraser rose, adjusting her skirt and motioning to the oatmeal tureen. "And please take some breakfast. You'll need food to help with your work."

Gayle rose and smiled at the woman. "Thank you, Mrs. Fraser. I'll prepare food for both of us. Mr. Smythe, I will meet you in just a few moments."

He nodded at the petite blonde before scurrying from the room, already pressing his cell phone to his ear.

"I'll help you carry the meal, Gayle," Mrs. Fraser said, pouring more tea into their teacups and loading them onto a tray.

"Oh, thank you, that would be lovely."

Molly patted Cate's shoulder. "I should head downstairs and finish the breakfast clean up."

Cate rose as Molly did and offered her a hug. "Thanks, Molly."

"Stay strong, honey."

"Thank you," Cate said with a smile.

"You wanted me to stay?" Jack asked.

"Yes," Cate said with a nod. "If you have the time."

"I've got nothing but time. No one will let me do anything."

"Good," Cate said, raising her eyebrows. "You shouldn't be working yet."

"She's right. Better listen to the boss," Molly said with a grin.

"Guess I'll be down to sit around and steal cookies when we're finished. Better get some of those scotchies in the oven. They're my favorite. Don't tell Mrs. Fraser."

"I wouldn't dream of it. As far as she's concerned, you're a shortbread-or-die guy." Molly winked at him before she strode from the room with Mr. Fraser.

Jack smiled at her as she pulled the doors closed behind her.

Cate collapsed into the chair behind her, heaving a sigh as Marcus poured himself another cup of tea. He arched an eyebrow at her. "Drink your tea, Catherine."

Cate raised her gaze to him. "Don't tell me to drink my tea. We're being sued for committing fraud."

"Wrongfully."

Cate flicked her eyebrows up.

Marcus stirred milk into his tea. "We are being wrongfully sued."

Cate leapt from her seat. "Except we're not. We committed fraud. We didn't get married six years ago, we got married two days ago for the exclusive purpose of maintaining control of Dunhaven Castle."

"Yes, but only you, me, and the gardener know that."

Jack screwed up his face, snapping his gaze at Marcus. "Hey."

"He's not my gardener," Cate said through clenched teeth with her hands on her hips.

"My point, Catherine, is that to the rest of the world, we have not committed fraud. To the rest of the world, we have been happily married for nearly six years."

Cate rubbed at her temples, sucking in a deep breath. "What if we can't prove that?"

"We can. The burden lies on them. There is no way we could have known when Gertrude MacKenzie could die. If our marriage was fraudulent you'd likely not be named in my will as the sole beneficiary. There's the story about Riley. All the appropriate things are in place to assure a positive result."

Cate sank onto the sofa, blowing out a long breath. Her brow crinkled, and she glanced up at him. "Yeah, how is that working with Riley? How did he get to that pet store?"

Marcus rolled his eyes at her. "Honestly, Catherine. I took Riley to that store and paid the woman to sell him to you."

Cate arched an eyebrow. Jack shot her a glance, his features pinched.

"And when did you add me to your will?"

"One month after we wed. Have you not been paying attention, dear?"

Cate offered him an annoyed glance.

"What's the out?" Jack asked.

"Excuse me?" Marcus shot back.

"There has to be an out. Something that prevents her from actually claiming your estate in the event that something happens. I'm just trying to figure out what The Agency will throw out there next."

Marcus sipped his tea, stalking to the window and staring out at the rain that now steadily fell from the gray skies. "There is no such 'out' as you put it."

"So," Jack said, narrowing his eyes at the man as he tapped his chin, "if you were to drop over dead, Cate would inherit your entire estate?"

Marcus twisted to stare at him, arching an eyebrow. "You're cleverer than you look."

Cate shot Jack an unimpressed stare.

"I'm sorry, I'm a bit shocked is all," Jack said, flinging a hand in the air.

"I don't see why. It is, after all, my duty to ensure that in the event of my demise, my lovely wife is well taken care of."

"I suppose that makes it look legitimate," Cate said with a sigh, rising from the couch and stalking across the room. She rubbed a hand across her forehead. "Let's hope it works."

"It will work," Marcus assured her.

She nodded without speaking.

"Catherine," he said, approaching her, "it will work. You must stop fretting over the things we already have in hand."

She flicked her gaze to him. "Do we? We didn't expect to be sued for fraud."

"Yes, we did. I told you they would try multiple angles. This is a distraction. To stop you from tracking the source of the problem." He raised his eyebrows. "And it appears to be working."

"It isn't. But we have to deal with this unanticipated problem."

"It has been dealt with. And now we must focus on others."

Cate furrowed her brow as she slid her gaze to the window again.

"Focus, Catherine."

"Ease off. Give her a minute," Jack shouted from across the room. He stormed toward Cate, wrapping an arm around her. "Why don't you sit down, Cate?"

Marcus huffed out a breath as Jack spun her away from the window.

"This is why I suggested you not be involved. The Agency will not attack you on one level. They will throw a dozen things at you at once. They have the resources to do so. And if you cannot prioritize you will lose."

"That's enough!" Jack barked.

Cate wrapped her arms around her midriff and shook her head, pressing her lips into a thin line. "He's right."

"Cate—"

Cate cut her gaze to Jack. "No, he's right." Cate sucked in a deep breath and shifted her focus to Marcus. "Okay, what do we need to do?"

"You need to stop fretting over our marriage and allow the measures already in place to do their work. Then we need to attempt to track down Gertrude and remove her from The Agency's reach."

Cate licked her lips and nodded. "Right."

"And how exactly do you propose we do that?"

"By following the clues," Marcus said after another sip of his tea.

"Which means what, exactly? And how does this solve our problem?"

Marcus narrowed his eyes and stared at Jack before he cut his gaze to Cate. "Must we include him?"

"Now, just a minute—" Jack began, wagging a finger at Marcus.

Cate pressed a hand against his chest, stopping him.

"Yes, we must," Cate answered.

Marcus arched an eyebrow, his lips forming a frown.

"Humor me," she said.

With another sigh, he nodded. "Fine. Let me explain it as though you were a child. We must determine where The Agency is holding Gertrude. She could be anywhere."

"Or in any time," Cate added.

"Correct, Catherine. We must begin with the limited information we have and use it along with my considerable skills and resources to continue to track the woman until we find her. Once we do, we must convince her to restore the original will."

Jack wrinkled his nose, frowning at Marcus.

"So, the intention is to return things back to normal. Back to Cate not being married to you."

"The intention is to restore history to the original version as closely as possible," Marcus answered.

The two men glared at each other.

Cate held her hands in the air. "Okay, what clues do we have?"

Marcus tore his eyes away from Jack, fixing them on Cate. He slid his phone from his pocket and toggled on the display. "We have this man leaving the offices of Smythe, Smith, and Smithon in 2009."

Cate stared at the pixelated image on the screen. "So, we go to 2009."

Marcus shook his head. "This man is in the employ of this man." He flicked to another picture.

Cate stared at the smiling face of a middle-aged man. She narrowed her eyes at the picture, cocking her head.

"So, we find this guy? How?" Jack asked.

Cate pointed a finger at the display. "Didn't we see him at The Business Summit?"

Marcus's lips curled into a smile. "Very good, Catherine."

"Arnold Chapman, oil exec," Cate said.

Marcus raised his eyebrows. "Very impressive, dear. Yes. Arnold Chapman."

"So, he's our first lead," Cate said. "How can we get access to him?"

"Now, you're focused," he said with a wink.

"If we know when the fake will was planted, why not just intercept it?" Jack asked.

"Because that does little to solve the overall issue, doesn't it?" Marcus answered. "We need to determine if they have Gertrude and where. We'll start with Arnold Chapman."

"And where will we find him?" Cate pressed.

"I happen to know he's hosting a party on May 15, 1956, at his London home."

"When do we leave?" Cate asked.

Jack rubbed his chin. "We need time to plan. And time to drive to London."

Marcus squinted at him before sliding his eyes to Cate. "Must we take him?"

Cate cocked her head, tugging back one corner of her lips.

Marcus rolled his eyes with a disgusted sigh. "Fine."

"There's no way you're taking Cate to London without me," Jack said, crossing his arms.

"I assume you have an invitation to this party," Cate asked.

"Of course. For myself and my wife."

"Whoa, just a minute," Jack said.

Cate fluttered her eyelashes at Marcus. "Surely you can manage an invitation for your good friend, Jack."

Marcus pressed his lips into a thin line. "I am a warlock, Catherine, not a miracle worker."

Cate crossed her arms, eyeing him with an unimpressed stare.

He sighed, glancing at the rain falling from the skies. "I'm certain I will manage an invite for the gardener."

"He's not—"

Marcus held his hand up. "I know, I know."

Jack rubbed his chin. "That still doesn't solve the problem of driving. We'll need to go back, leaving time to drive, go to the party, investigate, and drive back. Now, we've done days in the past before, but we'll need to let everyone know we're unreachable for a few hours at least—"

"That's not necessary," Cate said with a shake of her head.

Jack furrowed his brow. "What do you mean? The party is in London."

"Marcus has the ability to open time portals that end up wherever we'd like whenever we'd like."

The confused expression on Jack's face morphed into astonishment. "So..." His lower lip bobbed up and down but no more words came out.

"We should talk about that because they're quite different than traveling through our time rips," Cate said.

"Obviously," Jack huffed out. "So, we'll only need the time for the party. We may be only gone for a few minutes then, right?"

Marcus groaned and rolled his eyes as he stalked away. "I'll leave you to explain this. We should leave as soon as possible."

"We'll be ready in a few minutes," Cate answered as he strode from the room. He offered her a nod and pulled the doors closed behind him.

Jack wandered across the room and collapsed into an armchair. He scrubbed his face with his hands. "This is insane."

Cate eased into the chair across from him. "And it's about to get crazier."

CHAPTER 7



Jack snapped his gaze to Cate. “What? Why?”
He let his head fall back onto the thick cushion behind him and covered his face. “Oh, maybe don’t tell me. I don’t want to know.”

Cate sucked in a breath, allowing him a moment to settle.

He uncovered his face, sliding his eyes to hers. “The fact that you took me up on that is more disturbing.”

Cate offered him an amused smile. “It’s not that bad. It’s just different.”

Jack blew out a long breath before he pursed his lips. “Okay, so...no more time differential?”

Cate shook her head with a tight-lipped smile. “No.”

“So, that’s worse, right? Now we will be missing for however long this party is, at least. That could be hours.”

With another head shake, Cate dismissed his concern. He crinkled his brow.

“Marcus can just return us to a few minutes after we left.”

Jack lowered his chin to his chest. “Seriously?”

“Yep,” Cate said, sucking in a deep breath. “The first time we traveled back to the 40s, we came back and I burst in here demanding to know how much progress Damien, Michael, and Celine had made. They looked at me like I was crazy. It had only been about five minutes since we’d left.”

“Wow,” Jack said, laying his head back on the cushion. “So, no more fifteen minutes to one, instead, just instantaneous return.”

Cate bobbed her head up and down. “Yep. We can now live multiple days in the span of just minutes.”

“Wonderful,” Jack groaned.

“There’s something else,” Cate said.

Jack rolled his head toward her. “I’m afraid to ask.”

“The time portals are quite different from ours, too. In addition to not being distorted—“

“And opening in any time *or* place,” Jack said, wagging a finger at her, “which is still weirding me out, by the way.”

“Right. In addition to those things...” Cate paused to suck in a deep breath and lick her lips. “When Marcus opens the portal, it’s a bit... turbulent.”

Jack’s eyebrows shot up. “Turbulent? Care to elaborate?”

Cate chewed her lower lip, eyeing him for a moment. “It starts small. But...when the portal begins to open, there’s a lot of wind and noise. A black hole expands until it’s large enough to step through.”

Jack slow-blinked. “A giant black hole with winds whipping. Sounds... wonderful.”

“It’s not so bad, but it can be nerve-wracking the first time it happens. Now, once the portal is open, and this is really important, when you go into the portal, do not stop walking until you come out on the other side.”

“Don’t stop walking. Why?”

“Because Marcus also enters the portal behind us. Once he steps out of the portal on the other side, it closes automatically. If it closes with you inside of it, you may get lost between times.”

“For how long?”

Cate crinkled her nose. “Possibly forever.”

Jack’s eyes slid closed. Cate reached out and grabbed his hand, squeezing it. His eyes popped open, and he returned the gesture. “What in the world have we gotten ourselves mixed up in?”

Cate patted his hand and smiled. “I know it’ll seem weird, but we’ll get through it. It’s not as bad as it seems, I promise.”

“Says you. I can’t believe you’ve done this before and were okay with it. You are definitely the braver one of us, Cate Kensie.”

“I was far from okay,” Cate said with a chuckle, “but I couldn’t let them have you. You didn’t deserve that.”

“It’s so bizarre.”

“You’ll get used to the portal.”

“Not that,” Jack said, leaning forward, still clutching Cate’s hand. “The whole thing about me being missing. I was here one minute and just gone the next. But people think I was gone for a week.”

“I know. When I found the newspaper, I couldn’t believe it. And no one else remembered you being here. Not even Stanley.”

“Thank goodness you did.”

Cate offered him a tight-lipped smile and a nod. “And as much as you don’t want to hear this, thank goodness for Marcus and his experience.”

“You’re right,” Jack said, slumping in the chair, “I don’t want to hear it.”

“I know it’s strange.”

“No. It’s more than strange. The last time I saw that guy he nabbed you from the castle and then put you in a...never mind. Never mind. Let’s focus on moving forward. I’m going to need all my sanity to get through this time portal stuff.”

“You get used to it. I’ve done it a dozen times at this point and look,” she said, waving her hands in the air, “I’m fine!”

“A dozen times?” Jack questioned.

Cate nodded. “1942, 1955, 1965, 2013, 1810, and of course, 2014.”

Jack batted his eyelashes at the list. “What?”

“We started in 1942 following Gianna. We went to 1955 where several Agency members were at a summit, then 1965 to warn my grandparents to leave. And by the way, I met my father when he was five.” She grinned and chuckled as she recalled the memory. “Then 2013, and then 1810 where we found you.”

“Why 2013? What’s the connection?”

The smile waned on Cate’s lips and she flicked her gaze to the floor. “Uh...”

“Cate?” Jack questioned, leaning forward and balancing his elbows on his knees.

“We followed Gianna around to multiple time periods in search of you. She...” Cate slicked a lock of hair behind her ear. “She said she’d tell us where you were if we went to 2013. She wanted...” Cate pressed her lips together, flexing her jaw as she kept her eyes trained on the area rug. “She wanted me to witness my parents’ fatal accident.”

Jack closed his eyes, shaking his head as he reached for her hand.

She grabbed it and squeezed it. "I'm okay."

"I'm sorry you had to go through that. And alone, nonetheless." He offered her a tight-lipped smile.

She snapped her gaze up to his face. "I wasn't alone."

"Cate, you may as well have been."

Cate shook her head, letting her gaze fall again. "No. Marcus was... kind and sympathetic."

"Two words I'd never have expected to hear associated with that guy."

"I know it seems weird, but...in that horrible moment, I was glad to have him there."

Jack heaved a sigh. "Well, I suppose we don't have much time to prepare."

"There's not much to prepare," Cate said.

"Well, I need to use the little time we have left to fret. I've lost a precious amount of time and I've got a lot to agonize over. The new time portals, working with the Duke..."

Cate chuckled as his voice trailed off. Before she could respond, the door burst open.

Marcus strode inside with Andrea in tow. "Has he been adequately prepared?"

Cate nodded as she rose to her feet. "Yes, he's aware of the new portal, what to expect, and how it works."

Marcus arched his eyebrows. "He knows the very important rule?"

Cate bobbed her head up and down, sliding her hand forward. "Straight through, don't stop until you reach the other side."

"Very good." Marcus glanced outside. "The weather is not suitable to leave from our usual spot."

"You mean you can't control that?" Cate asked.

He flicked his gaze to her, an amused smile playing on her lips. "I wouldn't want to show off. Perhaps another suitable spot?"

"The mausoleum?" Cate suggested with a shrug. "It's private and we can get there through the secret passage."

"Excellent suggestion. We should go now," Marcus said as he strode toward the door.

"Seriously? You're okay with going to the mausoleum with...him?" Jack thrust a finger toward him.

Cate glanced over her shoulder and nodded. "Yeah. It's okay. We've already been there together once before."

"After a minor tantrum, Catherine and I worked out our issues regarding that incident."

"It wasn't a tantrum," Cate said with a roll of her eyes as they stepped into the hall and crossed to the wall sconce that triggered the secret passage leading to the mausoleum.

"You raised your voice at me, and I believe you even stamped your foot," he said as she opened the passage.

They stepped inside with Andrea following them.

"Wait, is she going with us?" Jack asked, thumbing toward her.

"Yes, of course," Marcus answered, pushing the panel closed. "Catherine will need her ladies' maid."

"We should have brought a—" Jack began when Marcus conjured a fireball into existence. The ethereal blue light lit the passage, blinding Jack. "Flashlight."

"I come equipped with one," Marcus said as he pushed past Jack. "Come along."

Cate fluttered her eyelashes and shrugged as they fell in line behind Marcus.

Within minutes, they climbed the grade up to the secret entrance to the mausoleum. Damp air met them as they stepped into the crypt. Wind gusted outside already, blowing the rain around.

Thunder boomed overhead as Marcus spun to face them. "Are we ready?"

Jack glanced up, wincing. Cate wrapped an arm around his waist. "You'll be fine."

Marcus narrowed his eyes at them. "Catherine, you will go first—"

"No, Jack will go first, then Andrea, then me, then you."

Marcus puckered his lips and stared at her for a moment. "Fine. Mr. Reid, when I give you the word, straight through, understood?"

"Yes," Jack answered. Cate squeezed his shoulder as Marcus spun away from them, raising his hands in front of him. A trace of a breeze tickled their skin, and a tiny black dot appeared in front of him. It grew larger and the wind swelled.

Cate's hair blew wildly as the twinkling black hole gaped open.

"It's open!" Marcus shouted over the din.

“Go!” Cate said, pushing Jack forward. “Remember, no stopping!”

He nodded, squinting against the wind gusts. “See you on the other side.”

Cate smiled and waved him forward. He gave her one final glance before his chest expanded with a deep breath. He lifted his foot. It hovered in the air for a moment before he stepped forward, disappearing into the blackness. Andrea followed him.

Cate waited for a second after she disappeared before stepping into the darkness. She continued forward for a few steps before the blackness fell away.

Candlelight flickered in the small, windowless room as she stepped from the portal. Jack gaped around the space, his brow furrowed.

“Cate, thank God,” he said, racing toward her and pulling her into a hug. “That was...odd.”

“We made it. I told you it wouldn’t be that bad.”

“Bad enough,” Jack said, letting go of her. “Where are we?”

“London house,” Cate said as Marcus joined them.

“I see we’ve all made it,” he said, adjusting his suit jacket. “Good. We should dress immediately. We leave in an hour.”

“Right,” Cate said with a nod. She stepped to the wall and opened the panel accessing the hall.

Dembe awaited them, offering a bow as they stepped into the foyer. “Duke,” he said with another bow before he repeated the gesture to Cate. “Duchess.”

Cate smiled at him. “Hi, Dembe.”

“Good evening, Dembe. Is everything prepared?”

“Yes, Duke,” Dembe said with a nod.

“Excellent. Will you assist Mr. Reid with dressing for the evening?”

Jack waved his hand in the air. “Oh, I don’t need—“

Marcus twisted to face him, his eyebrow arched high.

“Thanks,” Jack said with a nod and a hard swallow. “I’d be glad for the help.”

“This way, Mr. Reid,” Dembe said, waving his hand toward the stairs.

“After you,” Jack said.

“Catherine, a moment,” Marcus said.

“I shall wait in your room, Your Grace,” Andrea said as she headed for the stairs.

Jack cleared his throat as he glanced between them before he grabbed the railing. With a huff, he followed Dembe.

Cate closed the gap between her and Marcus. "What's up?"

Marcus reached into his interior pocket and removed a velvet box. "Please wear this tonight."

Cate accepted the box, her eyes trained on it. "Is this the sapphire necklace?"

"Yes. We do not know what we will encounter. I'd like you to have the added protection."

"Okay, thanks," Cate said, smiling up at him. She pressed her lips together, not moving.

"Is there something you'd like to say?" he asked her.

She stared up at him through her eyelashes. "What about Jack?"

"I hardly think the necklace would suit him."

Cate pressed her lips together and shook her head. "You know what I mean."

"I will make every effort to ensure no harm comes to him."

Cate nodded, flicking her gaze down to the marble floor.

Marcus tipped her chin up. "I promise."

Cate offered him a tight-lipped smile. "Thank you."

She glanced over her shoulder at him as she strode toward the railing and climbed to the second floor, navigating to her bedroom and pushing inside. Andrea smoothed a sapphire evening gown across the bed.

"Ready, Your Grace?" she asked, straightening and clasping her hands in front of her.

"Yes," Cate said, handing off the jewelry case to her before she sat at the vanity.

"Your jewelry?"

"Yes," Cate said as Andrea approached.

"Is it a new piece?"

"No. My sapphire necklace."

Andrea offered her a coy smile through the mirror. "Oh, that's a lovely one."

"Yes, it is," Cate said as Andrea began to style her hair.

Within twenty minutes, Andrea had swept her hair into a style popular for the era, settling a tiara around the high bun. Cate rose from her chair to change.

“It’s a lovely dress, Your Grace,” Andrea said as she fastened the dress in the back. “You look beautiful in it. Blue is your color.”

“Thank you, Andrea.”

“It reminds me of the gown you wore to your wedding celebration in 1810.”

Cate studied her reflection in the mirror as memories of the ball flitted across her mind, bringing a smile to her face. “Yes, the color is similar.”

Andrea snapped open the jewelry case as Cate slipped into her shoes.

“Just a moment, I’ll fasten them.”

“I’ve got it,” Cate said, sinking onto the bed and lifting her foot. The folds of fabric made it impossible to reach her ankle easily. “Okay, I need your help.”

Andrea chuckled as she laid the sapphire necklace on the bed next to Cate and squatted to fasten the ankle straps of Cate’s heels. “You should know better, Your Grace. This is what ladies’ maids are for.”

“Yes, I really should by now.” Cate reached for the necklace next to her, her fingers caressing the blue gems. A shiver snaked down her spine, and she shuddered.

“Your Grace?” Andrea asked.

Her voice sounded miles away. Cate swallowed hard as she struggled to keep her eyes open. Her eyelids fluttered as images flitted across her mind faster than she could process them. She gasped in a breath and pressed her hands to her temples as pain shot across her forehead.

The pressure increased in her head before her eyes rolled back, and she collapsed backward onto the bed.

CHAPTER 8



“Your Grace?” Andrea’s voice called into the blackness. Warm hands tapped against Cate’s cheeks as she flicked her eyes open.

With a moan, she pinched her features and fluttered her eyelids, trying to focus. The room filled in around her. She lay on her back in her bedroom at the London house with Andrea’s concerned features hovering over her.

“Oh, Your Grace, thank heavens.” Andrea pressed a hand against her chest and heaved a sigh of relief. “Let me fetch His Grace.”

“No!” Cate exclaimed, reaching for Andrea’s hand and squeezing it. “No, please don’t tell him anything.”

“But Your Grace—”

“Please,” Cate said, pulling herself up to sit. “I’m fine. I just...I haven’t eaten at all today. I got lightheaded.”

Andrea stared at her for a moment, the concern still etched in her features. “I should fetch you something to eat, then.”

“No, really. I’m okay. I’m sure I’ll eat at the party.”

Andrea flicked her gaze to the floor, chewing her lower lip.

“Really, Andrea, I’m fine.” She glanced into the mirror and winced. “Oh, I’ve mussed the lovely job you did on my hair though. I’m sorry.”

“Not to worry, Your Grace, I can fix that easily.”

“Thank you,” Cate said as she pushed herself to stand.

Andrea grabbed her hand, steadying her. “Are you quite certain you feel all right?”

“Yes, I’m perfectly fine,” Cate answered, forcing a smile onto her face as she plopped onto the chair at the dressing table. Still clutched in her hands, the necklace clattered around the wooden top.

Cate uncurled her fingers, staring at the object. When she had temporalysis, it triggered her visions. Was it doing that again?

“Just set that down and I’ll fasten it the moment I finish with your hair.”

Cate dumped it on the table, pulling her fingers back with a frown before she quickly replaced it with a pleasant smile. “Thank you.”

Within minutes, Andrea had her hair perfected and had fastened the necklace around her neck. Cate stared at it for a moment, afraid to touch it. Although the contact of the gems against her skin did not trigger anything wooziness at the moment.

Cate bit her lower lip and stared into the blue gems for a moment.

Andrea’s voice pulled her back to reality. “Your Grace? Anything else?”

“Oh, no,” she said, plastering a smile on her lips.

Andrea offered her a nod. “I will meet you downstairs with your gloves and bag.”

“Thank you,” Cate called as Andrea ducked out the door. She spun to stare at the necklace again. First a nightmare, then another episode that seemed to be triggered by touching the sapphires. Her heart thudded against her ribs, and her stomach turned over. Something was amiss.

Her palms turned sweaty, and she wondered if another case of temporalysis may have infected her. Perhaps the last one never subsided. Her forehead pinched as she considered it. She shook her head, dismissing it from her mind. She had to get through this evening. She wouldn’t mention it to anyone before then.

She pushed herself up to stand, her legs weak when she stepped away from the vanity. She closed her eyes, sucking in a steadying breath before she pushed herself forward to the door and slipped into the hall.

The sound of another door closing drew her attention across the hall.

Jack emerged in a tuxedo. “Wow, that’s some dress.”

“Thank you,” she said with a smile.

His eyes landed on the ostentatious necklace, and he frowned. “Is that what I think it is?”

Cate glanced down before nodding. “Yeah.”

“You’ve got to be kidding me. Turn around, I’ll take it off.”

“No,” she said, waving the comment away, “it’s okay.”

“No, it’s not. If this is some kind of weird power trip for him—“

“It isn’t. The necklace has some sort of protective power.”

Jack screwed up his face.

“Apparently, Marcus gave it to me so that nothing would happen to me in the crypt.”

Jack wrinkled his lips into a disdain-filled frown. “I hate this.”

Cate eyed him for a moment before she grabbed his hand and squeezed.

“It’ll get better. I promise.”

Jack shook his head, avoiding her gaze.

“We’d better head down.”

“Right,” Jack said with a nod as they walked toward the stairs. “Let’s see if we can get the world back to normal so we can end this charade.”

Cate forced a smile onto her face before she picked up her skirts and descended to the first floor. Voices floated from the sitting room when she rounded the banister and stepped inside with Jack trailing behind her.

“Catherine, there you are. You look stunning,” Marcus said as she entered. He crossed to her and kissed her cheek.

“Thank you. Hello, Mr. Smythe,” she said to the other man in the room. “I don’t believe you’ve met our friend, Jack Reid. Jack, this is Charles Smythe.”

“Good evening, Your Grace,” he said with a nod of his head before he swallowed the last of his brandy and set the glass on the bar. He thrust his hand out toward Jack. “Reid? Scottish?”

“You know it,” Jack said with a grin as he pumped the man’s hand up and down.

“I know a few Reids from Dunhaven. Any relation?”

“No,” Marcus answered flatly.

Charles turned his head toward him with a nod. “I see. Well, I will messenger the paperwork to you tomorrow.”

“Good.”

Mr. Smythe offered them all a good night and strode from the room. Jack’s brow crinkled. “Was that...”

“William Smythe’s father, yes,” Cate said with a nod.

“The resemblance is uncanny,” Jack said with a flick of his eyebrows.

“I thought so, too.”

“Are we ready?” Marcus asked, setting down his brandy glass. “The car is waiting.”

“Yep,” Cate answered as they shuffled into the foyer where Dembe and Andrea awaited them with coats. “Do we know who else we may see at this event?”

“Undoubtedly several members of The Agency will be present. If we find no evidence within Mr. Chapman’s home, perhaps we’ll stumble upon another lead,” Marcus said as Dembe slid his overcoat on.

“Stumble upon? That doesn’t sound like you,” Cate answered, pulling her gloves on after Andrea secured her capelet.

Marcus offered her a smirk. “There are several key people I would like to engage in a discussion.”

Cate arched an eyebrow at him as she accepted her evening bag from Andrea. “*That* sounds like you. Do you think Gianna will be there?”

“If she’s gotten word you will be, I imagine she’ll put in an appearance.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means she loves to goad you. And she will not miss out on the opportunity to do so.”

“Wonderful,” Cate groaned with a roll of her eyes.

“Do not let her provoke you. She’s pushing you to make a mistake that she can capitalize on. Do not give her the opportunity.”

“Right,” she answered with a sigh, eyeing the swirls on the marble floor.

“Catherine,” Marcus said, tipping her chin up, “keep your wits about you.”

Cate nodded. “I will.”

“Shall we?” he asked as he offered his arm.

She smiled at him as she slid her arm through his, flicking her gaze to Jack. He stared at them, an expression of disbelief on his features.

“Jack? Are you okay?”

“Uhh, yeah,” he said, rubbing the back of his neck. “Yeah, ready. Let’s go find some clues.”

Cate smiled and nodded at him, reaching out to grab his hand and squeeze it before they strode into the spring night.

Cate slid into the backseat, gathering her skirts before the driver eased the door closed. Marcus entered next to her, leaving Jack in the front seat. The car eased away from the curb and snaked through the streets of London to the home of Arnold Chapman.

Cate stared up at the starry night sky as her fingers drummed the seat next to her. Her stomach jittered as the buildings rolled past her window.

Warm fingers wrapped around hers and squeezed. She cut her gaze to Marcus, and he offered her a smile. "Calm yourself, Catherine."

"I'm calm," she answered.

He arched an eyebrow at her. She pressed her lips together as she realized her pounding heart gave her away. Jack shot them a glance over his shoulder, his brow furrowing.

Cate sucked in a deep breath, trying to bring her heart rate back down. "There, see?" she asked as her heart returned to a normal rhythm.

The car slowed to a stop outside of a stately home. Marcus squeezed her hand again before he climbed from the car and circled it. He reached a hand inside to help her from the car as Jack stepped out, tugging at his collar.

Marcus scrunched his nose at Jack. "Stop fiddling with your collar like an ape."

"These are not the most comfortable things."

"You'll survive," Marcus shot back with a roll of his eyes.

Jack narrowed his eyes at the man. Cate stepped onto the pavement, and Jack offered his arm to her.

Marcus raised his eyebrows. "I think not, Mack."

"It's Jack, Pal."

Marcus frowned at him. "I am not your *pal*."

Jack inched closer. "Cate can make her choice."

"I'm not certain you will like the outcome of that," Marcus shot back.

Jack scoffed at the statement. "You don't know Cate Kensie."

Marcus stood taller, stepping closer to him. "*You* don't know Catherine Northcott."

Cate shook her head, stepping between them. "Enough. Let's go. We have work to do."

Marcus offered his arm as did Jack.

"This is ridiculous, Reid. It would look more than questionable for another man to escort her when her husband is available."

Jack puckered his lips. "It's your call, Cate. Whatever you're comfortable with."

Cate swallowed hard, flicking her gaze between them as heat rose into her cheeks. "Marcus is right. It would look odd and most of these people think we're married."

“We are married, dear.”

Jack hesitated for a moment before he nodded. “As long as you’re comfortable.”

Cate forced a smile as she slid her arm into the crook of Marcus’s. “I’m fine.”

They strode to the door, pushing into the din of the party inside. Guests circulated in the nearby sitting room, talking and laughing.

Marcus surveyed the scene before leading Cate toward Arnold Chapman who already approached them. Cate glanced over her shoulder at Jack. “Stay close.”

“Well, do my eyes deceive me, or is that Marcus Northcott I see,” Arnold said with a broad grin, thrusting his hand out. “And here I thought there was a misprint on my final guest list. To what do we owe the pleasure?”

“Normally I wouldn’t bother, but Catherine traveled with me, and I felt she deserved the night out.”

“Ah, yes, the lovely Catherine,” Arnold said, shifting his gaze to Cate. “A pleasure to see you again. I suppose we all owe you a debt of gratitude. After your marriage, the elusive Duke has become less elusive.”

“I’m happy to be of service on that front,” Cate said with a grin.

Arnold eyed Jack, his shoulders sliding down his back as an uncomfortable grin covered his face. “Have we met?”

“Jack Reid,” Marcus said, “a...friend.”

“Ah, you seem familiar,” Arnold said as they shook hands.

Jack swallowed hard and licked his lips.

Cate noticed the discomfort building on his features. “I’m sure you’ve met at some point before. Well, I’m certain you have other guests to speak to, and we should say hello to a few other friends.”

“Oh, before you go, my advanced apologies, Catherine, but I was hoping you, Marcus, might join us for a brief business discussion in about twenty minutes.”

Marcus scanned the crowd before his focus centered on Arnold. “I would hate to neglect Catherine. We had planned for an uninterrupted evening together.”

“I do understand. I would find it difficult to leave such a lovely woman, however, I do promise to keep it brief.”

Marcus narrowed his eyes at the man as he mulled it over.

Cate patted his arm. "Go, dear. I'll be fine. Jack will keep me company."

Marcus huffed out a breath. "Well, I suppose I cannot say no."

"Certainly not or you may find yourself in the guest room," Arnold said with a hearty chuckle.

"I shall see you shortly," Marcus said with a curt nod before they moved away. They said hello to a few others before Marcus handed Cate a champagne flute and guided her toward a corner. Jack trailed behind, his hands shoved in his pockets as he surveyed the crowd.

"Are you okay?" Cate asked as they settled near the window.

"Yeah," Jack said after a hard swallow.

"Are you sure? Do you recognize some of these people?"

"Yeah," Jack said, rubbing the back of his neck.

"It's okay. You're safe now."

Jack nodded.

"But you may not be," Marcus said. "Catherine, I am not at all certain I should leave you for this meeting."

Cate sipped her champagne, scanning the crowd. "We'll be okay. This is the best way for you to get information."

"I had planned to do that with you at my side."

"They'll be far more candid without me. You know that."

He huffed, puckering his lips. Cate glanced over his shoulder at the front door. Her posture stiffened, and she took a long sip of her champagne. "Great."

Marcus glanced over his shoulder at the buxom blonde sauntering into the room. He twisted back to face Cate. "Now I know I will not attend."

"What?" Cate asked, her eyes wide. "No, you have to go."

"Not with Gianna here."

"I'll be fine," Cate answered, flicking her gaze back to the woman who leaned far too close to the married Arnold Chapman, laying a hand on his chest as she snorted a giggle. "Ugh, she does not know the meaning of holding back?"

Marcus arched an eyebrow at Cate. "What?" she said, lifting a shoulder, "You know how I feel about her overly flirtatious nature."

"Yes, I do. And I know it drives you to make foolish decisions in an attempt to best her."

"I do not," Cate argued.

“Yes, you do. And after the physical fight with her in Germany, I would prefer not to leave you alone with her lurking around.”

“You fought with her?” Jack questioned.

“He’s making more of it than it was. Besides, she started it.”

Marcus shot a glance at Jack before returning his attention to Cate. “I am not. In a misguided attempt to retrieve me from a locked cell in Eldinbury Castle, Gianna assaulted her violently. And she has physically attacked her on more than one occasion.”

“Cate!” Jack hissed.

“It’s fine,” Cate said, her champagne swishing in the glass as she sliced her hand through the air. “I’m fine. Let’s stick to the plan. You go get your information. Jack and I will wait here.”

“Will you? Do you promise?” Marcus asked.

“I will be fine.”

Marcus cocked his head, sighing as he arched an eyebrow.

“Yes, I promise. I won’t go near her.”

Marcus glanced at Jack. “Make certain she does not.”

Jack nodded. “Of course.”

With a sour expression, Marcus heaved another sigh before he squeezed Cate’s arm and glanced at Jack. “Keep her safe.”

Cate scoffed before taking another sip of her champagne. “She is unreal.”

Jack followed the direction of her gaze as Marcus disappeared behind closed doors with a bevy of businessmen. Gianna threw her head back, laughing as a group of men surrounded her.

Cate jabbed a finger in her direction, the champagne quivering in her glass. “Do you know she tried to convince Marcus to leave me stranded in 1942 and go with her?”

She downed another long sip.

“Maybe we should move somewhere away from her. I don’t much like her either.”

Cate puckered her lips as she stared at the woman.

“Cate?”

“Better to keep her in our sights. She’s too dangerous to let slip away.”

“Right,” Jack said, tugging at his collar again. He stared at the woman again for a moment before he shifted his gaze to Cate. “This whole thing is too strange.”

Cate let her shoulders slump. "I'm sorry. It must be so hard for you to see her and these people again."

"And this whole Duke thing." Jack shifted his weight from foot to foot before he spun to face her. "Cate—"

"Well, well, well," Elliott Stevens said, a grin on his oval face as he closed the distance between them, "if it isn't the Duchess herself."

"Mr. Stevens," Cate said, raising her chin as she stepped between him and Jack.

"Out on the town without your illustrious Duke." His eyes shifted to Jack. "And with the infamous Mr. Reid." He clicked his tongue at her. "Whatever will your husband say?"

Cate narrowed her eyes at him. "Oh, he's here. He's in a meeting."

"Oh, yes," Elliott said, rocking on his heels, "I believe Gianna just stepped inside with them. I'm certain she can distract him from any... shenanigans on your part. Though it still surprises me that he allows this to go on. He doesn't seem the type to suffer playing second fiddle."

Cate heaved a sigh.

"Oh, I don't mean to drone on about personal matters when there is business to discuss."

"I already told you, Marcus is—"

Elliott flicked a hand in the air. "Oh, no, not with the Duke. With you, dear Duchess."

Cate flicked her eyebrows up.

"We're prepared to give you one more chance."

Cate crossed her arms, staring up at the man. "One more chance for what?"

"To hand over Dunhaven Castle before we destroy everything you love."

Cate shook her head at him. "This conversation is over." She stepped sideways, but he blocked her way.

"I wouldn't be so hasty," Elliott said.

Cate bounced back a step, firming her jaw. "I will not give you my home."

"Then you'll give us everything else including your life."

CHAPTER 9



Heat seared through Cate as the man left the threat hanging in the air.

“Watch it,” Jack hissed, pushing in front of Cate.

“Oh, I plan to,” Elliott said, shoving his hands into his pockets. “I plan to watch as we dismantle everything you love.”

Cate elbowed her way in front of Jack, her lips tugging into a grimace. “I will never let you take Dunhaven Castle.”

She grabbed Jack’s hand and tugged him away from the man as she stormed from the room. They ducked into a quiet hall. Cate collapsed back against the wall, blowing out a long breath.

“The nerve of that guy,” Jack said, fidgeting with his collar again.

“He was the same way when we met him in 1955 while searching for you.”

“What the hell have we gotten mixed up with?”

“Powerful and dangerous people,” Cate said, pressing a hand to her stomach. She snapped her gaze up to Jack. “We need to look for more information.”

Jack ran his hands through his hair. “I’m not sure that’s a good idea.”

“We need to get ahead of them any way we can, and we may never have an opportunity to search this house again.”

“I’m pretty sure this is exactly what the Duke told me not to let you do.”

“Since when do you follow Marcus’s advice?”

Jack puckered his lips, sticking his hands on his hips as he considered it.

“Come on, Jack,” Cate said.

“I don’t know, Cate. I’m not sure we should risk angering these people on their turf. Or angering your esteemed husband.”

“I will handle Marcus.”

Jack shook his head, throwing his hands in the air. “Fine.”

Cate nodded and grabbed his hand, leading him further down the hall and away from the party.

“I’m not sure which is more frightening. The fact that we may get caught by The Agency or the Duke. *Or* that you think you can handle it.”

“I can. He’s not an ogre.”

“He’s damned close,” Jack said as they peered around a corner.

“It’s clear, let’s go,” Cate said, picking up her dress and tiptoeing down the hall. “Try that door.”

Jack swung it open, peering inside. “Billiards room.”

Cate shook her head, continuing down the hall. She crossed to the opposite side and cracked a door open. She shook her head. “Nothing.”

They continued down the hall to the next door. Cate flung it open. Moonlit lit the large desk across the room.

A smile spread across Cate’s face. “Bingo.”

She switched on the light, hurrying to the mahogany desk and circling it. “Check the file cabinet.”

Cate pulled the drawers open on the left side of the desk, pawing through the items inside.

“What are we looking for?”

“Anything. Anything that may lead us to Gertrude or help us determine the other angles they’ll be working,” Cate said as she slid the middle drawer open. Pens rattled around as she swiped her hand inside, searching for any clues.

“I don’t see anything,” Jack said. “But I’m not sure I know what to look for.”

Cate slammed the center drawer shut and tugged open the top drawer on the right. “When we were at Gianna’s place in 1955, she had notes... photos...dates.”

“Photos?” Jack asked, freezing with his hand still stuffed in the top drawer.

Cate’s hand slowed as she pushed items around. Memories of the folder of Gianna’s research filled her mind. “Me.”

“What?” Jack questioned.

“The photos were of me. Me at Aberdeen. Me at Dunhaven. She’s been watching me for years.” Cate collapsed into the chair behind her, tears brimming in her eyes. “They killed my parents.”

Jack slammed the drawer closed and hurried across the room, sliding his hand around her. “Cate...”

A tear slid onto her cheek, and she wiped it away. She sucked in a breath and blinked back the rest of her tears with a sniffle. “I’m not letting them take anything else from us.”

She tugged open the bottom drawer and rifled through it. Her features pinched as she found nothing. “No!”

“Come on, Cate, let’s get out of here.”

Cate stared at the blotter on the desk. “Maybe if we—“

“No, there’s nothing here. We should go.”

Cate gripped the decorative edge, her knuckles turning white. She pressed her lips together in a thin line.

“Come on, Cate. There’s nothing here.”

Cate sucked in a breath and nodded. “You’re right. Let’s go.”

She rose from the chair, and they hurried from the office and down the hall. The din of the party reached their ears as they turned the corner and continued toward the foyer.

Cate glanced into the library. “Arnold Chapman is in there. Their meeting is over.”

She crossed to the sitting room and scanned the interior, finding Marcus where they’d been standing. She wound through the crowd toward him.

“Catherine, where have you been?” he asked as she approached.

“Sorry, we had to step out for a minute.”

He grabbed her hands in his. “Are you all right? Have you been crying?”

Cate nodded at him. “Yes, we’re fine.”

“I told you not to move.” He flicked his gaze to Jack. “Could you really not do what I asked for fifteen minutes?”

“Don’t blame this on him. Blame it on Elliott Stevens.”

Marcus refocused his attention on Cate. “What happened?” He shook his head. “Never mind. We’ll discuss it in the car. We are leaving.”

“Great idea,” Cate said. “I’ve had as much as I can take of this party.”

Marcus wrapped his hand around hers and led her toward the door. She grabbed hold of Jack's arm and tugged him along with them.

"Leaving so soon?" Gianna asked, stepping into their pathway. "The party's only just getting started."

"Stand aside, Gianna," Marcus said with a huff.

"Why? It appears you could use a fourth. You're a bit...unbalanced."

"We are leaving," Marcus said.

"The night is young. Jack, are you looking for a date?" Her lips curled into a smirky smile.

"Pass," Jack said, tugging at his sleeves with a grimace etched into his features.

Gianna pouted. "Boo. Well, looks like that leaves me with you." She slid her arms up Marcus's lapels.

Cate glared at the woman as Marcus wrapped one hand around one of hers and shoved it away. "For once, I agree with the Scot."

He tugged Cate closer and wrapped an arm around her waist. "It would be a terrible shame to downgrade when I'm already married to perfection."

Heat rose in Cate's cheeks as Gianna's features turned stony.

"Her supposed perfection may cost you everything, Marcus."

Marcus lifted a shoulder in a half-shrug. "I doubt it."

"We'll see," she snapped as Marcus led Cate past her.

Cate shook her head as she pulled on her capelet and stepped into the evening air, tugging at it. "She is something else."

Their car slid to a stop in front of the house. The driver popped out and raced around to open the door for Cate. She slid into the backseat with a huff.

"I certainly hope you got the information you hoped to find," Cate said as Marcus slipped into the car next to her.

"We can discuss it at home," he answered, "when you have cooled off. There is nothing further to do tonight."

"Cooled off?" Cate asked. "Are you kidding?"

Marcus slid his glance sideways to her as the driver pulled away. "I am not."

Cate crossed her arms, her foot tapping against the floor.

"You have every right to be outraged with her."

"I'm not outraged. I'm just..."

"Furious," he answered.

Cate pressed her lips together. "Okay, fine. Her behavior is outrageous."
"As are her threats."

Cate flung her hand out. "Yes, exactly. That's exactly what I mean."

Marcus's lips curled on the edges.

Cate wagged a finger at him. "Don't give me that look. Of course, I meant her threats. What else would I mean?"

Cate heaved a sigh, shaking her head. "First Elliott Stevens and now her."

The slight smile faded on his lips, and he twisted to face her more fully. "What? What happened with Elliott Stevens?"

"Nothing," Cate said, waving the question away before she pressed her hand to her forehead.

"Catherine—"

"He threatened her," Jack said, twisting to face them from the front seat.

Marcus's eyes went wide, and he flicked his gaze from Jack to Cate. "He what? What did he say to you?"

The car eased to a stop in front of Marcus's home. The driver hurried to open Cate's door. She climbed from the vehicle on her own and stomped to the house. She pushed through the front door, tossing her bag down and tugging off her gloves.

"What did he say, Catherine?" Marcus demanded as he stormed in behind her.

She tossed the gloves on the entry table before grabbing the edge, her biceps flexing as she slid her eyes shut.

Cate twisted to face him and Jack as he strode into the foyer. "He asked for Dunhaven Castle again."

"And he threatened to kill her."

Marcus snapped his gaze to Jack before he shifted his focus to Cate. "Is this true?"

Cate shook her head before she switched to a nod. "Not in so many words, but yes." She flicked her gaze up to his dark eyes. "Tell me you found something."

Marcus heaved a sigh. "This is becoming too dangerous."

"What?"

"You should not be involved. You are putting yourself directly in the line of fire. You shouldn't be exposed to these people."

Cate's jaw flapped open. "You don't get to make that decision."

“I feel I must. I have far more experience with them than you do.”

Cate stuck a hand on her hip. “Sidelining me at Dunhaven Castle doesn’t help to protect me at all.”

“Cate, for once, I think he may be right,” Jack chimed in.

“I can’t believe you two.”

Jack splayed his hands to the sides. “That man threatened you. He said you’d pay with your life. Maybe it’s best if we don’t push them while we sort this situation out.”

Cate clamped her jaw closed as she glared at them both. “I am *not* stepping out of this fight. It involves my family and my home.”

“Yes, but Catherine—“

Cate poked him in the chest. “Don’t you ‘but Catherine’ me. You wouldn’t be standing here right now if it weren’t for me. Remember that next time you decide it’s best for me to sit on my hands and do nothing.”

Marcus puckered his lips, his annoyance obvious.

Cate picked up her evening bag from the table and waved it toward them. “I’m going to bed. We can discuss in the morning.”

She spun on her heel and stormed up the steps to her bedroom. With a slam, she shoved the door closed and leaned against it.

“I assume the party did not go as planned, Your Grace?” Andrea inquired from her post near the vanity.

Cate heaved a sigh as she pulled herself away from the door and shuffled across the room. “You could say that.”

“Perhaps some sleep will help.”

Cate nodded as she plopped onto the bed. Andrea bent to unbuckle her shoes. Cate drummed her fingers on the bedspread.

“I’m sorry,” Andrea said as she tugged one shoe off. “I’m nearly finished with the shoes.”

“Oh, I’m not frustrated with you.”

Andrea glanced up with an arched eyebrow. “I understand. Would you like to talk about it?”

Cate sighed as she slid onto her feet, and Andrea unfastened her dress. “No.”

As Cate slid her pajama top on and buttoned it, she flung an arm out. “I just can’t believe after everything, he thinks it’s best for me to not be involved.”

Andrea offered her an apologetic smile as she hung the dress.

“You know, I went to Eldinbury Castle for him. But he thinks I shouldn’t be able to go to a party because someone may say something mean to me.” Cate plopped on the vanity chair after tugging on her pajama pants.

Andrea pulled the tiara from her hair and set it aside. “I’m certain His Grace only wishes to protect you.”

Cate flicked her gaze to Andrea through the mirror as she dismantled her hair. “Yeah, sure.”

Andrea met her gaze. “He is quite protective of you.”

“He likes to win.”

“He likes to be certain you are safe,” she answered as Cate’s hair tumbled past her shoulders.

Cate blew out a sigh. “Gianna put an appearance tonight. *And* she threw herself at both Jack and Marcus.”

Andrea offered a knowing glance as she slid the brush through Cate’s hair. “That explains both of your consternation.”

Cate’s shoulders slumped, and she shook her head. “I don’t understand why she has such an easy time provoking such a reaction from me.”

“Because she is threatening everything dear to you. She has the upper hand because you care whereas she does not.”

Cate studied the woman through the mirror. “You’re right.”

Andrea smiled at her as she set the brush down. “Of course, I am. Which is why you so enjoy my service.”

Cate rose and pulled the woman into a hug. “Yes, it is.”

“Do you think you will be able to sleep?”

“I think so. Despite the time change and all the excitement, my adrenaline is gone and I’m exhausted.”

Andrea pulled back with a nod. “Oh, your necklace. Let me remove it.”

“Oh, could you leave it?” Cate ran her hands over the jewels. “I’ll get it, but I’d like to keep it with me.”

“Of course, Your Grace. Sleep well.”

“Thank you,” Cate said with a slight smile as she pulled her robe tighter around her and fastened it.

Andrea squeezed Cate’s hand before she slipped from the room, easing the door shut behind her. Cate wandered to the full-length mirror, sliding the robe collar open and eyeing the sapphires around her neck.

A knock sounded, drawing her attention away from the gems. Cate tugged the collar closed and inched the door open, staring through the crack.

“Hey, Cate,” Jack whispered. “You okay?”

Cate swung the door open wider and motioned for him to enter. “Yeah, I’m okay. How are you?”

Jack stuck his hands on his hips, still in his tuxedo. His bowtie hung undone around his neck. “Nervous.”

Cate sighed, pressing her lips together. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry to put you through facing them tonight—“

“It’s not that.”

Cate studied him for a moment. “Then what?”

“Do you think you may have painted a bigger target on our backs by marrying him?”

Cate arched an eyebrow. “I think if I hadn’t married him, we would have already lost. So target or not, Marcus Northcott is the only thing standing between The Agency and Dunhaven Castle.”

Jack crossed his arms, bobbing his head up and down. “I don’t believe that. I think you’re just as big a part of this fight as he is.”

“I’m glad you realize that.”

Jack closed the distance between them, reaching out to squeeze her shoulders. “I’ve always realized that, Cate. Like it or not, I’m not sure we can escape this and leave it up to someone else entirely.”

“No, we can’t. But after what happened to you, if you don’t want to be involved, I get it.”

He offered her a half smile. “No chance, Cate. We’re in this together.”

Cate patted his hand and smiled.

“Besides, I trust you a hell of a lot more than I trust him.”

“We’ll get through this,” she promised. “Try to get some sleep.”

Jack let his gaze roam around the room. “I hope I can. I’m not certain I’m comfortable sleeping in his house.”

Cate raised her chin, offering him an amused grin. “Technically, it’s also *my* house. So, if it bothers you too much, you can remind yourself of that.”

“Oh, right,” Jack said, smacking a palm to his forehead. “You get all seven hundred houses including this one if something happens to him.”

“Yep,” she said with a giggle.

Jack smiled down at her. “Good night, Cate.”

“Good night. Hope you sleep,” she called as he slipped into the hall and pulled the door shut.

She sucked in a deep breath, shuffling around the bed and collapsing on the edge. She opened the lid of the music box, letting her eyes slide shut as tinkling music filled the air.

A knock interrupted her ruminating. She closed the music box as she rose before heading for the door. She pulled it open, expecting to find Jack unable to sleep.

“Did you even try to sle—“ she began until she recognized Marcus. “Oh, sorry, thought you were Jack.”

Marcus arched an eyebrow at her as she motioned for him to enter. “Mr. Reid visiting my wife in her bedroom at this hour. Should I be concerned?”

“Very funny,” Cate said.

“Did I hear your music box?”

“Yes,” Cate said with a nod. “I find it very relaxing. I really need to thank your mother for it again.”

“She will be thrilled that you enjoy it.”

They stood for a moment in silence before Cate spoke again. “If you’ve come to try to talk me into staying out of this again—“

“No, I haven’t,” Marcus said, clasping his hands behind his back.

“Good.”

“I only wish to give you the option in the event that you’d prefer to exercise it.” He studied her in the soft light. “I worry about you, Catherine.”

“You don’t have to.”

“Of course I do. It is the duty of a husband.”

She flicked her eyes up to him with a wry expression.

“I’m serious, Catherine,” he said, sliding a lock of hair behind her ear. “These people are not kind. I do not wish to subject you to the depths they will sink to.”

“I think I’ve subjected myself,” she said, shambling across the room and opening the music box.

“That may be, but I will do everything in my power to shield you from any hostility if you prefer it.”

Cate twisted to face him, knitting her brows. She studied him for a moment, her gaze settling on his dark eyes. “As easy as it would be to say yes, I can’t. This is my fight.”

Marcus reached for her hand, threading his fingers through hers. "Our fight."

Cate stared down at their clasped hands. "Right."

She raised her eyes to his, offering him a coy smile. "You need me to save you when you get captured."

"I will never live that down, will I?"

"No," she said with a chuckle. "But seriously...we're in this together."

"Together," he repeated, squeezing her hand. He studied her for a moment. "Will you be able to sleep?"

"I think so," Cate said, pulling her hand from his and shuffling to the bed. She collapsed onto it with a sigh. "Interacting with Gianna is exhausting. And that's not an invitation for you to shield me from harm."

"As long as you are committed, I will not question your involvement again. But I will not apologize for protecting you."

"I am. Together. We have each other's backs."

"Always," he answered with a slight smile. "Try not to let her upset you. She isn't worth it."

Cate offered him a curt nod.

"Good night, Catherine."

"Good night."

Marcus offered her one last smile before he strode from the room.

Cate let her shoulders slump, blowing out a long breath before she peeled off her robe and tossed it at the foot of the bed. She kicked her slippers off and crawled between the sheets.

With another long exhale, she stretched out on the comfortable mattress. She let her eyes slide shut as the music played.

Her mind went over the events of the evening, recalling first the conversation with Elliott Stevens, then the one with Gianna. As details raced by a new image replaced the one from the party.

Cate ran through the halls of Dunhaven Castle as a scream split the air. The image startled her, causing her to gasp and vault upright. She sucked in another breath as her eyebrows pinched together. *Did she have another case of temporalysis?*

CHAPTER 10



Cate stared up at the ceiling as the music played. Light streamed through the window, announcing the new day. Worry coursed through her as the events of the past few days wandered through her mind.

The Agency proved to be as dangerous as Marcus said, but another issue weighed more heavily on her mind. Her nightmares and visions had resumed. The last time she'd had a similar experience, temporalysis had been the cause. An illness that could have killed her. Did she have it again?

Cate squeezed her eyes closed, her features pinching as she fought back tears. She should tell someone. She should tell Marcus.

Her gaze slid sideways to the piano-shaped music box. She narrowed her eyes at the drawer pull of the nightstand. She tugged it open, and searched the inside, hoping to find a Dragon's blood lozenge.

She found nothing useful. With a sigh, she collapsed back into her pillow. Her fingers found the necklace still around her neck. She unclasped it, laying it on the nightstand.

A knock sounded at the door and Andrea peeked inside. "Your Grace?"

"I'm up, come in."

"Good morning. Did you sleep well?"

"Well enough," Cate answered as she slid her feet into her slippers. She dressed for the day. As Andrea put the finishing touches on her hairstyle, she chewed her lower lip.

"All finished, Your Grace. Is there anything else?"

“Actually, yes. Could I ask you to ask Dembe for something? But I need you to be discreet.”

“You mean, no one should know. Not even His Grace?”

Cate spun to face her. “Yes. I’m sorry. It won’t be for long, and I hate to put you in this position...”

“Say no more, Your Grace. I am happy to help with anything you need. What is it?”

Cate licked her lips, her eyebrows pinching. “Can you find out if Dembe has any Dragon’s blood lozenges?”

Andrea arched an eyebrow before returning her face to a neutral expression. “Yes, of course, Your Grace. Leave it with me.”

Cate grabbed her hand and squeezed. “Thank you, Andrea. I’m so sorry to do this. And, please, don’t worry. I’m being cautious is all.”

“Of course.” Andrea nodded as she clasped her hands in front of her before she spun on her heel and disappeared into the hall.

Cate drummed her fingers against the thick wooden top of the vanity. If she could get the Dragon’s blood she could buy herself some time.

Cate pressed her lips together and sucked in a breath. “Please get them, Andrea,” she whispered as she stood and crossed the room. She stepped into the hall, glancing at Jack’s door and wondering if he slept.

She hastened down the stairs and into the dining room. Jack and Marcus leapt from their seats as she entered.

“Good morning, Catherine,” Marcus said as she crossed to the table. He picked up a purple rose from her place setting and offered it to her.

She accepted it, smiling up at him. “Are these—”

“From Rosenberg, yes. I recall you enjoyed the last one I gave you. So, I had these flown in for you.”

Cate studied the bouquet in the center of the table as she sniffed the single rose. “Thank you.”

She eased into her chair as Marcus pushed it in behind her. “So,” she said, setting the rose aside, “what information did you get last night? Jack and I found nothing.”

Marcus froze as he returned to his seat. “What do you mean found nothing?”

She picked up her fork and draped her napkin across her lap as Dembe set a plate in front of her. “Thank you, Dembe. We searched the office and found nothing.”

“You did what?” Marcus asked with his teacup halfway to his lips.

“We searched the office. I thought maybe we could find a clue like we did at Gianna’s.” Cate poked her fork toward Marcus. “We should try her place again.”

“Because that turned out so well the last time,” Marcus answered. “You should not have searched the office. I thought we agreed you would not slink about.” He shot a disapproving glance at Jack.

“Don’t blame Jack,” Cate said as she slathered jam onto her toast. “It was my idea.”

Marcus fidgeted in his chair. “Of course, it was.”

“Anyway, we didn’t find anything. So, I hope you came up with something in your meeting.” She glanced over at Jack’s full plate. “You’re not eating?”

Jack frowned down at the food as though he didn’t trust it.

Marcus took a sip of his tea. “I tried to tell him Dembe is an excellent cook. It did very little to convince him. The meeting produced a few leads we may follow up on. However, it will take a bit of work.”

“What leads?” Jack inquired finally picking up his fork.

“The Agency has inducted several new members. Their properties would make an excellent location to hide a newly acquired asset.”

“Asset?” Jack questioned after a sip of his juice.

“Gertrude,” Cate concluded.

“Right.”

“Where are the properties?” Cate asked.

“That is where the work comes in. I could not solicit the information without an investment in their group. I have called Charles Smythe to discuss it, and I have Stefano doing some legwork.”

Cate sipped her tea, puckering her lips as she set the cup in the saucer. “You shouldn’t invest with them.”

“I would prefer not to financially tie myself to The Agency, but I do not see a way around it. It is the quickest way to find the locations.”

Cate stared at the purple roses in the vase, her brow furrowing. “I know how we can get the locations.”

“What?” Marcus asked as she slid the teacup and saucer onto the lace tablecloth. She held up a finger as she stood and tossed her napkin onto the chair. She hurried around the corner into the foyer and approached the

phone. With the receiver cradled between her neck and shoulder, she waited to be connected after making her request.

Jack and Marcus followed her into the space as someone picked up the line on the opposite end.

“Hi! This is Catherine Northcott. I’m in town and was wondering if you may be available for lunch...Yes, I’m free today...That sounds perfect. I’ll see you then.”

Cate replaced the receiver in the cradle and spun to face them. “Done.”

Marcus narrowed his eyes at her. “Well done, Catherine.”

“Someone want to fill me in on what just happened?” Jack asked.

“Last year, Catherine befriended one of the secretaries of a man involved with some members of The Agency. The woman is privy to much of the sensitive information handled by them including their properties.” Marcus turned back to Cate. “At least I assume you called Ginger Fallinger.”

“I did,” Cate said with a smile and a nod.

“And this Ginger woman will tell you why?” Jack asked.

Cate lifted a shoulder as she searched for the words.

“Catherine and Ginger like to drink several martinis in one sitting which I’m sure helps loosen Ginger’s lips.”

“You’d think if she’s working for The Agency, they’d want her to be more trustworthy.”

“I may have allowed her to believe me to be a wronged woman which helped with her loose lips.”

Jack pressed his lips together as he tried to hide a laugh.

“A clever ruse, though disingenuous,” Marcus said. “Well, where are you lunching? We should make plans to accompany you.”

The smile faded from Cate’s face, and she shook her head. “No. You can’t go. Ginger will never talk with you two around.”

“You cannot go alone,” Marcus argued.

“And I can’t go with you.”

“We’ll have to follow you. Hide behind the fake plant at the restaurant or something,” Jack said.

Marcus blinked several times as he shifted his gaze to Jack. “I don’t hide behind fake plants.”

Jack shrugged. “You will now if you want to keep an eye on her without blowing her cover.”

“He’s right,” Cate said, “although...”

“What is it, Cate?”

“Are you sure you two can handle this without killing each other?”

Marcus scoffed. “I am in no danger of being killed. He couldn’t even maim me.”

Cate stared at him for a moment. “Let me rephrase. Are you sure you can handle this without killing Jack?”

Marcus sucked in a deep breath. “Of course.”

Cate raised her eyebrows. “Jack, are you sure you can handle this without driving Marcus to kill you?”

“I’ll do my best.”

“Great,” Cate said. “We have a few hours before lunch. Maybe we should go to Gianna’s apartment.”

“I am not certain that is wise.”

“We found information there last time.”

Marcus wagged a finger at her. “We found the information she wanted us to find. I am not certain it is helpful.”

“Humor me. It can’t hurt.”

Marcus sucked in a breath and nodded. “Fine.”

“All right. Let me just get my bag.”

She hurried up the stairs, clinging to the thick wooden railing as she paused for a second. A clammy sweat made her dress stick to her back. She blew out a breath and resumed her journey up the stairs.

She pushed into her room, crossed to the bed, and collapsed on the edge. The door opened a moment later and Andrea slipped inside. She offered Cate an eager smile, dangling a small sachet from her fingers.

Cate leapt up, her eyes wide. “You got them.”

“I did.”

“Did Dembe agree to stay quiet about it?” Cate asked as she opened the pouch and fished out one of the drops.

“I asked him to remain mum about it. He did not disagree, though he advised this matter be brought to His Grace’s attention.”

Cate nodded as she winced from the bitter taste of the Dragon’s blood on her tongue. She stuffed the pouch in her purse. “Yes, I don’t plan on keeping it from him for long. Just long enough to make some progress on this situation.”

Cate spun, nearly running into Andrea.

“Your Grace, are you certain you are all right? Perhaps it’s wise to confide in His Grace sooner rather than later.”

Cate’s shoulders slumped as the words sank into her mind. Her lower lip bobbed up and down and her forehead pinched. “Yes, I know, I just...I’m not even sure it’s what I think it is, and we really need to get this information.”

Andrea pressed her lips together and nodded. “Perhaps, though, he can assess it better and put your mind at ease.”

Cate flicked her gaze to the floor as her mind went in the opposite direction. *Perhaps he can put the final nail in my coffin.* “I’ll tell him soon, I promise.”

“Of course, Your Grace. And I shall say nothing further about it.”

“It’s okay, Andrea. I know you’re trying to help. And you’re right. I shouldn’t hide it. I just...need some time.”

Andrea nodded and squeezed Cate’s arm. “Be safe, Your Grace.”

“Thank you.”

Cate hurried from the room and down the stairs. “Ready.”

Marcus narrowed his eyes at her, cocking his head. “Are you certain?”

“Yep,” Cate said, doing her best to hide the lozenge and her reaction to its bitter taste.

He stared at her for another moment before he nodded and motioned for her to precede him to the door. Cate sucked in a breath as she stepped into the bright sunshine of the spring morning.

Within minutes the car eased to a stop outside Gianna’s posh apartment building. Cate stared up at it, recalling their last experience there. Pictures of her with red Xs across her face danced through her mind. What would they find this time?

Cate climbed from the car, slipping her arm into Marcus’s as they approached a figure leaning against the side of the building.

He straightened, bowing as they closed the gap between them. “Have you done as I asked?”

Stefano nodded. “Yes. The apartment is clear, and she has not returned. Hello, Duchess.” He eyed Jack. “Did you find a new stray?”

“This is Jack Reid,” Cate said.

Stefano’s bushy eyebrows shot up. “Oh! The Scot that you didn’t want to find.”

Jack pulled his chin back to his chest, his eyebrows raising.

Marcus scowled at him. "That's not exactly what I said. Come along, we should not dally."

He tugged Cate along with him, leaving Stefano at this post. They entered the building, navigating to Gianna's apartment. With a flick of his wrist, Marcus unlocked the door and motioned for Cate to enter.

She sucked in a deep breath as she entered the lion's den. She grabbed Jack's hand as he crossed the threshold. "You okay?"

"Yeah, I'm good. You?"

She forced a smile onto her face and nodded. "Yep."

She pointed down the hall. "The last time we found evidence it was in the office."

Jack nodded as he stared around the posh space. "I'll check out the living room."

Cate took a step toward the office when Marcus tugged on her elbow. "Catherine, perhaps I should go first. The last evidence we found was quite disturbing."

She glanced over her shoulder as they wandered to the office. "Thank you, but I'm okay."

They stepped into the space. Her muscles tensed as memories of her previous experience here flitted across her mind again. She paused while another fleeting thought crossed her brain. With a sharp breath, she sucked harder on the dragon's blood lozenge and pushed herself to the desk.

She rifled through the folders on the top, wondering if she'd find more pictures of herself. Marcus slipped his hand onto her shoulder as he flicked open a folder and studied the contents.

"Anything interesting?" she asked while she shuffled to another folder.

"Not really, you?"

Cate lifted the folder closer as she flipped through the contents. "I don't know."

Marcus pressed closer to her, peering over her shoulder. He snatched one of the images from the folder.

"Who is this?" Cate asked, staring at the blonde in the photo.

"I don't know."

Cate flipped over the picture, searching for any other information. "Another victim?"

"Perhaps," Marcus said, folding the photo he held and shoving it into his pocket.

Cate eyed him. "You're taking that?"

"It may prove useful."

Cate searched through the other folders, finding nothing useful.

"Doesn't look like we're finding a clue this time."

"Which may be a good thing."

"It's not," Cate said, dropping the last folder she searched. "We need a break."

"The last time we found a clue here it led to an extremely painful moment for you."

Cate pressed her lips together as she heaved a sigh.

"Though she underestimated you," he said, sliding a lock of hair behind her ear. "She underestimated your strength."

Cate smiled up at him. The sound of a throat clearing interrupted their conversation. Cate stepped back, shooting a glance at the door. "Nothing in here."

"Nothing out there either."

Cate grimaced and shook her head. "So much for that. Let's hope Ginger can help."

Marcus nodded, motioning for Cate to precede him around the desk. She took a step past him when the world around her melted for a moment. Random images of Dunhaven Castle's darkened halls fluttered through her mind.

She sucked in a gasp, grasping onto Marcus to steady herself.

"Catherine?" he asked, holding her from falling.

"Sorry," she said, licking her lips and sucking a breath in. "Lost my footing."

He arched an eyebrow.

She shrugged. "I tripped."

"Have you twisted your ankle?"

Cate pressed her lips together, waving a finger in the air. "No. I do *not* need to be carried."

"I shall be the decider of that," Marcus called after her as she stalked from the room.

Jack furrowed his brow when she passed him. "He has a real penchant for carrying me around like a damsel in a gothic novel."

She stepped into the hall, passing the open bedroom door. A whiff of Gianna's overpowering perfume floated past her nostrils. A blinding set of

images spun through her brain.

The world swirled along with the memory-like pictures. The walls melted, and her vision blurred before she pitched forward.

CHAPTER 11



Images sped through her mind faster than she could process. They settled into what seemed like a memory. She ran through the halls of Dunhaven Castle again. A scream sounded as she rounded a corner in a hall not currently used. Her stomach turned, and her heart pounded as she hurried toward her unknown destination.

She wrapped her hands around the doorknob. Before she could open it, the image faded away, replaced by blackness.

Cate's eyelids fluttered open, and she sucked in a sharp gasp. Two concerned faces hovered over her.

"Catherine," Marcus said, stroking her hair, "how do you feel?"

She crinkled her brow as she glanced around the room. "Fine."

Jack squeezed her hand. "Are you certain, Cate? You just passed out."

"I'm sure." Her lips tugged downward in a grimace. "Am I in Gianna's bed?"

"Yeah," Jack answered, nodding his head toward Marcus. "He carried you in."

Cate winced as she tried to push up to sitting. "I'm not surprised."

Marcus prevented her from rising. "You were unconscious. This was an obvious case for carrying you."

"I'm fine. Let me sit up."

"We have yet to assess that," Marcus answered.

"I hate to be a pain here, but I'm not comfortable laying in Gianna's bed. I'm perfectly fine."

Marcus arched an eyebrow at her. "Then explain your sudden fainting spell."

Cate tugged her lips into a grimace as she shrugged. "I—"

"Don't say you didn't eat enough because you had a healthy breakfast courtesy of Dembe," Marcus said, feeling her forehead.

"Maybe I ate too much," Cate suggested.

Marcus offered her an unimpressed stare. "Very funny, Catherine. Your pulse is slowing, though your heart was racing only moments ago."

"I'm fine. It was racing because I fainted, that's it."

"But what caused you to faint?" Marcus questioned.

Jack squeezed her hand. "For once, he has a point, Cate."

Cate flopped back into the pillows with a sigh. "I'm not liking the agreement between you two."

Marcus raised his eyebrows at her. "Well, that is simply too bad. We have—"

"Is that the time?" Cate gasped, swiping the clock off Gianna's nightstand.

"I have heard nothing from Stefano, so there is no need to panic."

"Yes, there is a need to panic," Cate said, pushing herself up to sit and trying to swing her legs over the bed's edge. "I'm going to be late for my lunch with Ginger."

"You are not going to your lunch with Ginger," Marcus answered.

"Yes, I am," Cate said as she pushed herself against the mattress in an attempt to stand.

"No, you are not," Marcus answered, pressing her back onto the bed.

Cate smacked a hand against the bedspread. "I'm not sick!"

"We have not determined that yet. We should go home and assess your condition."

Cate wrinkled her nose. "I'm not going home and being put to bed with a hot toddy like a Victorian housewife. I have important business with Ginger, and I'm determined to do my part."

"I said nothing about a toddy, though that could be arranged."

"It's not necessary. Now, let's go."

"Cate, maybe we should go back to the house," Jack said, clapping a hand on her shoulder.

Cate pressed her hands to her temples. "This is ridiculous. I'm fine. There is no reason to go back to the house and every reason to go to the

restaurant. We'll discuss this all when we get home. And if I collapse at the restaurant, I'm certain you'll race in and carry me from the building."

"This is not a joke, Catherine. You collapsed."

"And scared the hell of out of us, Cate," Jack added.

Cate sucked in a deep breath, flicking her gaze to the floor. "I know. And I think I know what's causing it. And it's definitely something we can discuss as soon as I get this information from Ginger."

Marcus stared at her with a gaping jaw. "You know what's causing it?"

She flicked her gaze up to him before lowering it to the floor again. "I think so."

"And?" he prompted when she didn't continue.

"And we can discuss it when we're home. Getting this information is vital. It could make the difference between success and failure." Cate flicked her gaze to his dark eyes again. "Please. This can keep, I promise."

"Tell me what you think it is," Marcus prodded.

Cate pressed her lips together, shaking her head. She sucked in a deep breath and flicked her gaze up to him. "I think it's temporalysis again."

"What?" Jack gasped, skirting the bed and kneeling in front of Cate. "Cate! This can't keep. It can be fatal."

Marcus narrowed his eyes at her. "Do you have—"

"Dragon's blood," Cate answered. "Yes, I got it from Dembe this morning. And I've used it."

Marcus heaved a sigh. "I shall need to speak to him about that."

"Don't punish Dembe for my choices," Cate said, pushing herself to stand. "I asked both Andrea and him to keep it a secret for a short time."

"Because of the lunch with Ginger."

Cate nodded at him.

"All right, Catherine. We shall discuss this further when we arrive home. But you are free to go to your lunch."

"Thanks for your permission," Cate said, patting his chest.

"If you feel ill—"

"I'll signal you. Though I hope to get through this. I'll use the dragon's blood." She pulled her purse open, retrieved another lozenge, and popped it in her mouth. "Let's go, we're going to be late."

"Cate," Jack said as they strode from the room, "are you sure this is a good idea? Temporalysis almost killed me."

"I know. But it didn't kill me the last time, and this is exactly like it was the last time."

"That doesn't mean it won't kill you this time," he answered.

"You don't know that," Cate said. "Maybe temporalysis is always non-fatal for me. We have no idea."

Jack glanced over his shoulder at Marcus. "Can it kill her?"

"If it is temporalysis, yes," Marcus answered. "Temporalysis can always be fatal. Surviving it once does not make you immune to fatalities."

"So, you can contract it more than once?" Jack asked as they slipped into the hall.

"Yes," Marcus answered.

Jack grabbed her arm and squeezed. "Cate, please, let's go back to the house and talk about this. We shouldn't dally. I nearly died from this."

Cate headed for the stairs. "I'm not going to die in the next two hours."

"You don't know that," Jack said as he hurried down the stairs after her. He pressed a hand to his forehead and shook his head. "Cate, please, reconsider this. It's not going to matter if we find Gertrude, and you're dead."

Cate pushed into the spring air, sucking in a deep breath. "I don't think two hours is going to make a difference, and maybe we can make some progress on this."

Jack stared at Marcus as he strode onto the sidewalk from the building. "Do you want to maybe weigh in here? I can't believe you're going to let her do this."

Marcus flicked his eyebrows up as he glanced between them. "I can't force her to do anything. She has her own mind."

The corner of Cate's lips turned up, and she cut her gaze to Jack.

Jack screwed up his face. "You're kidding. You carry her around like a doll, and you tell me not to let her get in trouble."

Marcus waved his finger in the air as they strode to the car. "I take excellent care of Catherine. I protect her from harm as much as possible. But that does not mean I control her."

"Unbelievable," Jack said, flinging his arms out as he shuffled to the car and tugged the passenger door open. "The one time I need you to go all medieval on her plans and you refuse to do it." He slammed the door shut with a sigh before he twisted to face them. "Are you hoping she dies?"

Marcus shot him a surprised glance. "Certainly not. Catherine's well-being is of the utmost importance to me."

"So, you're going to let her go to lunch with someone from The Agency while she's dying so we can get a lead that may give us nothing while we delay her treatment for a potentially deadly disease? Smart."

"Ginger is hardly dangerous. I have my dragon's blood. And we're only delaying any other treatment for a few hours," Cate argued as the car wound through the streets of London toward the restaurant.

"I concur with Catherine. Believe me, if I felt she was in any danger, I would have argued the case myself."

"How about simply not allowing her to be this reckless?"

"Allowing me?" Cate cried.

"She is not a child, Mack. I cannot allow or disallow her to do things."

"Jack," he growled through clenched teeth.

"Rest assured, Mr. Reid, if I thought she would do herself any harm, I would have done whatever it took to convince her not to pursue the gambit with Ginger."

Cate snapped her gaze to him. "You wouldn't have carried me off like in a Victorian novel, though, right?"

"If circumstances warranted it," Marcus said as the car rolled to a stop outside the restaurant. "Have a nice lunch, dear."

Cate slid from the vehicle after the driver opened her door. She poked her head back inside, flicking her gaze between the two of them. "Behave. Both of you. And don't come charging in and dragging me off unless my death is imminent."

She slammed the door shut and hastened to the entrance of the restaurant. The doorman pulled the door open for her, and she slipped inside. The maitre d' greeted her with a pleasant smile.

"Hi," Cate said with a smile. "Catherine Northcott. I'm meeting with—"

"Cate! Yoo-hoo!" Ginger waved from inside the restaurant. "I'm here."

Cate pointed at the bubbly blonde. "Found her."

"Ah, yes, Miss Fallinger," the man said with a wrinkled nose. He led her to the table, spinning to face her as they arrived. "May I take your coat?"

"Yes," Cate said, peeling the light jacket off and passing it over.

"Well, don't look at her like that, guv," Ginger said with a coy smile at the man. "She's a duchess you know?"

The man blinked his eyes at Cate as she settled in the chair. "Yes, Duke Northcott is my husband."

The man arched an eyebrow. "My apologies, Your Grace. Had I known--"

"You can make it up to her by bringing us two martinis to start," Ginger said.

"Right away," he answered, hurrying away with her coat in hand.

Ginger frowned at him as he scurried away. "Lousy sod. He's never nice to the mistresses."

"I'll bet he thought I was one."

"But you're not. And you're a whole duchess, too. That gave him a shock." Ginger stared after him for a moment more before she flicked her gaze to Cate, sliding an arm across the table to clasp her hand. "It's good to see you, Cate Catherine Northcott."

Cate squeezed her hand and smiled. "It's good to see you, too."

"And what have you been up to? Did you get your shopping spree?"

"I did," Cate answered, flicking her gaze to a plant that rustled nearby before she cleared her throat.

"Uh-oh. Tell me he did it again."

"No," Cate answered. "Nothing but good behavior."

Ginger arched an eyebrow over her expertly made-up eye. "Really? Are you sure?"

Cate clammed up as their martinis were delivered, studying the menu for a moment. Ginger picked her glass up and raised it to Cate. "To good times with the duchess."

Cate retrieved her glass, clinking it against Ginger's before taking a sip.

"Now, back to it. Are you certain? Because, let me tell you, Cate, once a cheater, always a cheater. I know. I'm a mistress. They tell their wives all the time that it's over and it never is. The first bad day at the office, or investment gone wrong, and there they are right back at your door looking for comfort."

The leaves of the plant rustled again. Cate did her best to ignore it, licking her lips as she set the menu aside. "I have no reason to suspect--"

Ginger wagged a finger at her. "Oh, that's the time he's doing it. When you don't suspect. Let me guess. Everything's going along swimmingly at home. He's being overly nice. Helpful even."

Cate cocked her head. "It's like you can see into our marriage."

The leaves shook hard as she spoke.

Ginger took another sip of her martini. "You've got troubles, Cate. He's bouncing around with a mistress again. Mark my words."

Cate sipped at her drink. "You may be right." She furrowed her brow, but the appearance of their waiter prevented any further conversation. After placing their order, Cate sipped her martini again.

"Now, let's talk about more pleasant things like how big the necklace will be this time when he finally admits his nefarious ways."

Cate chuckled at her as Ginger waved for another two martinis. "That diamond necklace you were wearing the day we met was a dandy, Cate Catherine. I can't imagine what he'll give you this time."

"Well," Cate said as she finished her martini and handed the empty glass to the waiter as he replaced it with a fresh one, "that's something I was hoping you could help with."

Ginger flicked her eyebrows up as she studied Cate over the rim of her glass. "I vote rubies this time. No, no, sapphires. They'd look so beautiful with your eyes."

Cate waved the comment away. "I have sapphires."

"Oh, I bet they're dazzling."

"If you think the diamonds were incredible, you should see the sapphires."

"I may have to," Ginger said with a wink. "Okay, sapphires are out. So, rubies it is."

Cate leaned closer, tilting her head. "Actually, I was thinking something a bit different."

The corners of Ginger's lips turned up, and she leaned closer, arching an eyebrow. "Do tell."

Cate licked her lips as the waiter placed hot dishes in front of them. Cate poked at her chicken with her fork as she formed her request in her mind.

"You were saying?" Ginger asked as she stabbed a piece of pasta.

"I have a bit of money set aside. My own. Not his."

Ginger, chewed the pasta slowly, jabbing a fork at Cate. "No, sweetheart, you don't want to spend that on rubies. You spend *his* money on the rubies, and you keep that money for a rainy day."

"Well, that's the thing. I do want to keep it for a rainy day, but..."

Ginger sipped her martini, raising an eyebrow. "But?"

“I’d like to have more of it for a rainy day if you know what I mean.”

“Oh,” Ginger said, her chin raising higher, “you want to invest.”

“Yes,” Cate said, “I knew you’d understand. And I want to do it myself. Not with his investment people, I don’t trust them.”

“Oh, I understand. I’ve seen some of mine put their wives’ money in low-growth deliberately. Why?” Ginger leaned closer, lowering her voice. “She can’t leave him that way.”

“Right,” Cate said with a nod and another sip of her martini. “I want to make my own way.”

“Oh, I’m not certain he’s going to let you do that. The royalty is notorious for not wanting any scandal.”

“Then maybe my investment will be a good reason for there not to be any more strife.”

“So, you think having enough to leave him will keep him in line?”

Cate lifted a shoulder. “It can’t hurt.”

Ginger puckered her lips as she cradled the martini against her chest.

Cate slid her arm across the white linen tablecloth and grabbed Ginger’s other hand. “Please, Ginger? I really want to stand on my own two feet and be proud of something.”

Ginger eyed her for a moment before she twisted her arm and grabbed hold of Cate’s hand. She squeezed it as a smile spread across her face. “I’d be happy to help you.”

Cate broke into a smile. “Thank you.”

“What did you need? Typical investments made by some of the bigwigs in Arnie’s office?”

“Actually,” Cate said, “Marcus was in a meeting with some of Mr. Chapman’s people last night. He mentioned something about newly acquired properties. He was considering investing, but he’s still deciding. I’d like to beat him to the punch.”

“Steal the investment right out from under him, huh?”

Cate raised her chin and nodded. “Yes. Though...”

“You’re afraid?”

Cate winced, setting her fork on the plate. “I don’t want to do anything foolish. I’m afraid Marcus may say I’ve jumped in without thinking if he finds out. I’d like to do a little research first.”

“You want to see the locations and make sure they’re worth it?” Ginger asked.

“Yes. But Marcus won’t tell me anything about them.”

Ginger’s lips curled up. “Don’t worry your pretty little head about that, love. I’ve got you covered.”

Cate returned the gesture, picking up her martini and raising it toward Ginger.

With a giggle, Ginger lifted her glass and clinked it against Cate’s. They finished their meal making light conversation about their lives. As Cate paid the bill at her own insistence, Ginger scrawled the addresses of the Chapman group’s newly acquired properties on a cocktail napkin.

She slid it across the table toward Cate. “These are the ones that just came in during the last two months. Check them out and if you have *any* questions, you call me.”

Cate smiled down at the napkin before she slid it into her purse. “Thank you, Ginger. It was good to see you. I’ll be in touch.”

They said their goodbyes, exchanging a hug before Ginger offered her a wave and tottered off. Jack and Marcus circled around the large plant as Ginger disappeared through the door.

Cate pulled the address list from her purse and handed it to Marcus.

He perused it before pocketing it. “Well done, Catherine.”

“Now, can we please discuss this temporalysis thing?” Jack asked.

“Yes, I think we should,” Cate said with a deep sigh. “Because I think I’m getting worse.”

CHAPTER 12



Cate licked her lips, drumming her fingers against the seat of the car as they made their way home. The chicken she'd had for lunch threatened to reappear as worry over her condition consumed her. This time seemed worse. She worried it would be fatal.

Warm fingers slid around her hand, stopping their nervous movement. She glanced at Marcus who smiled at her.

She forced a smile onto her face as tears threatened. If she died, what would happen to Dunhaven Castle? Would it go to him? Would that spell disaster for her friends?

He squeezed her hand, sensing her apprehension. The car slowed to a stop outside the house. Cate climbed from inside, and they entered the house. They settled in the living room.

Jack collapsed onto the couch next to Cate, puffing out a sigh as he let his head drop into his hands. "Okay, can we finally address the temporalysis situation here before something terrible happens?"

"Yes, I think we should," Cate said with a shake of her head, her voice rising as panic laced it. "The dragon's blood doesn't seem to be working at all. The last time it helped with the symptoms, but this time it's not and I'm afraid—"

"Stop there," Marcus said, offering her a brandy. "Go back to the beginning and tell me what has been happening."

Cate grabbed the proffered beverage as Jack rubbed her shoulders. She took a sip, trying to steady her shaking hands.

“Take a breath, Catherine. There is no reason to panic,” Marcus said, squeezing her shoulder.

Cate pursed her lips, sliding her eyes closed and sucking in a slow breath.

She opened her eyes, flicking her gaze up to Marcus.

“Ready?”

Cate nodded and took another sip of the brandy.

“From the beginning.”

Cate sucked in a breath, crinkling her brow. “Wait, the beginning beginning, like the start of the original temporalysis, or the start of this one?”

“This one for now.”

“Okay. Uh, it started the night Mr. Smythe made his announcement. I had a nightmare, very similar to what happened during the last bout of temporalysis.”

“About?” Marcus asked as he poured himself a brandy.

“I was running through the halls of Dunhaven Castle. Someone screamed. I woke up.”

Jack leapt from his seat, pacing the floor. “Bah, it’s the same damned thing as it was last time.”

“Let her finish,” Marcus said. “I assume this was not an isolated incident?”

“No, it wasn’t.”

“But it’s the same as last time. This started with nightmares.” Jack jabbed a finger toward Marcus. “Nightmares of you chasing her all over the castle.”

Marcus poured another brandy and held it out. “Try a sip for your nerves.”

“I don’t need a drink. I need everything back to normal. I need Cate not sick. Again. I need—“

“Take the drink, Mr. Reid. And let us finish our discussion.”

Jack flicked his gaze to Cate. She gave him a nod. He grabbed the drink from Marcus’s outstretched hand and took a sip, collapsing onto the couch next to her again.

“Continue, dear.”

“Umm, I chalked the nightmare up to the stress of seeing Gianna, but...” Cate heaved a sigh. “I’m having the visions again.”

“Of?” Marcus asked.

Cate lifted her shoulders. “I’m not sure,” she said, her features pinching as she spoke, “they go so fast, I can’t make them out. Sometimes it’s the hall, sometimes it’s other things. Last night before the party, I passed out as Andrea was buckling my shoes.”

Her breathing turned ragged, and tears formed in her eyes. “It’s the same as last time. It feels like memories, but it’s not.”

Cate pressed her lips together into a thin line as she held back the emotions welling inside her. Jack rubbed his hand across her shoulders again as he let out a sharp breath.

“And this happened earlier today while at Gianna’s? This is the reason you fainted?”

Cate nodded as she sipped her brandy. “More visions. And a few almost came through at the restaurant. Now, I’ve had the dragon’s blood. Two lozenges since I got them this morning but it’s doing nothing to stop any of this.”

Marcus nodded as he sauntered to the front window and stared through it.

“Oh, Cate, why didn’t you say something last night?” Jack asked.

“I didn’t think it was anything. I just wanted to get the information at the party and today I thought the dragon’s blood would help. I was going to tell you. I just wanted to get more information first.”

Marcus sipped his drink before he spun to face them. “Tell me about the last time.”

“Umm,” Cate began.

Jack leapt from his seat poking a finger at the man. “The last time started with nightmares of her being chased through the castle by you.”

Marcus flicked his gaze to Jack then returned it to Cate. “And then?”

“No,” Cate said with a shake of her head. “It started with the hole in the library.”

Marcus’s eyebrows raised, prompting her to continue.

“I kept dreaming about a gaping hole in the library. I saw myself in clothing from the late 1700s. And I kept hearing a warning.”

“And you found a passage there, correct?” Marcus asked.

“Yes,” Cate answered with a nod. “In the spot it always appeared at in my nightmare.”

“And did you have waking visions during that time?”

“No,” Cate said. “I only had those later. After we met. Before that, I had dreams about you. Then we met. And then I had more dreams about you. Everything shifted to the dreams about the ball. That’s when I started getting the visions.”

“And that is when you started losing time. Wandering the castle, seeming to be in a different era.”

“Yes,” Cate answered.

“You did not have that before this?”

“The wandering? No, just recently.”

“And are you suffering from the same now or just the visions and dreams?”

Cate crinkled her brow. “Just the visions and dreams so far. They are fairly frequent, but so far, at least to my knowledge, no roaming around.”

Marcus sipped his drink again, narrowing his eyes. Jack eased onto the couch, sliding an arm around Cate’s shoulders.

Cate set her empty glass on the coffee table. “So, do I have temporalysis again? Am I going to get this every time I time travel now?”

Marcus heaved a sigh. “No, I don’t believe you have temporalysis.”

Cate flopped back against the thick cushions. “Great. What weird thing do I have this time and how deadly is it?”

Marcus finished his brandy and set the glass on the bar. “I am fairly certain I know, but I would like Mother to consult on your condition.”

“Whoa, wait a minute,” Jack said, leaping from his seat again, “we’re not going anywhere until we get some answers. Cate could be dying.”

“I doubt it, though providing answers is exactly why we should visit my mother. Besides, she would love to see you, Catherine.”

“You doubt it? What if you’re wrong?”

Marcus lifted his shoulders. “It’s a sensation I’m not familiar with since I am never wrong.”

“You’re a real piece of work, you know that? I’m not willing to risk Cate’s life—“

“Neither am I,” Marcus growled with a curled lip.

“Stop it. Both of you. There is something far more important going on here,” Cate said. “We need to follow up on those addresses.”

Jack shot her a shocked glance. “Cate, we need to follow up on your illness which, by the way, no matter what the genius over here says sounds a hell of a lot like temporalysis.”

Cate bit her lower lip, flicking her gaze to Marcus as she rose to stand. "We need to find Gertrude before this gets any worse."

"Stefano can follow up—"

"No!" Cate said, balling her hands into fists. "I want to follow up."

"Fine. We'll do that first."

Jack scoffed, tossing his arms overhead. "You're joking! You're going to put this off to search these properties first?" He pressed his palms together, shaking them at Cate. "Cate, please, don't be so reckless. I nearly died from this. I know what it's like. You shouldn't ignore it."

"I'm not." She slid her gaze to Marcus. "I'm not dying, right?"

Marcus set his dark eyes on her. "No, I'm quite certain you are not. I would *never* risk your life, dear."

"That's good enough for me," she said with a nod. "Let's go."

Jack stuck his hands on his hips and shook his head. "I wish you'd reconsider."

"As much as I would love to see Anna again, we need a clue to Gertrude's location before she slips away from us entirely. We can't risk it, Jack."

"We can't risk your life either, Cate. I understand the current situation leaves something to be desired, but we've won for the moment. Maybe we should let it go."

"For the moment are the key words in that sentence," Marcus said as they made their way to the foyer. "The Agency is always seeking to find a new path forward. Any time we waste gives them an advantage. And while Catherine's condition is important, it can be dealt with after we find a path forward."

Cate pushed through the front door. Dark clouds sailed past, blocking out the sun. She hurried to the car, ducking inside as large raindrops pelted the sidewalk.

"So, can I stop taking these?" she asked, waving the pouch of dragon's blood lozenges in the air as Marcus slid in next to her.

"Yes, they will do nothing."

"Good," Cate said while stuffing them back in her purse. "I hate the taste of them."

Marcus passed along the first address and within half an hour they'd arrived outside of the apartment building.

“The address said Penthouse C,” Cate said as she stared up at the posh building.

“Seems like it may be a logical place to keep her,” Jack answered, studying the facade with his hands shoved into his pockets.

“Let’s hope we get lucky on the first try.”

They strode to the door where a doorman stood, his hands clasped in front of him. He stared down his nose at them, arching an eyebrow. “Visiting someone?”

“I’m considering buying Penthouse C,” Marcus answered.

“Then you should get in touch with the Chapman group. They are handling the property.”

“I’d prefer to see it prior to making an inquiry with them.”

The doorman rocked on his toes. “Sorry, mate, viewings are only by appointment with the Chapman group.”

Marcus offered him an unimpressed stare. He lifted his hand when Cate batted it down. “Hi, I’m sorry. Ginger Fallinger told us to stop by. She said it wouldn’t be a problem.”

The doorman raised his eyebrows, adjusting his cap. “You know Ginger?”

“Yes,” Cate answered. “She’s a friend. She passed along the address and told me to stop by if I’d like to see it.”

“Oh, well, I’m so sorry to disappoint, but I don’t have the keys, you see.”

“Oh,” Cate said, pressing her fingers against her forehead. “I do.” She patted her purse. “Silly of me. I forgot to say earlier.”

“Ginger gave you a set?”

“Well, she let me borrow a set to look around. I’ll return them when I see her later for dinner at the club.”

“Right, well, if Ginger said it’s okay, I guess it’s okay. Go on up.” He tugged the door open and motioned for them to enter.

“Thank you,” Cate said as they filed past him through the door and pressed the button for the elevator in the lobby.

“Good going, Cate,” Jack whispered as they waited.

Marcus flicked his eyebrows up. “I could have handled it.”

“We didn’t need anyone passing out from your weird sleep-touch thing,” Cate retorted.

The doors whooshed open, and they stepped inside. “There’s only one problem,” Jack said as he pressed the button for the top floor. “We don’t actually have the keys.”

Marcus closed his eyes and shook his head. “You really are not all that bright, are you?”

“Look, mate—“

“I am not your mate,” Marcus answered.

“Marcus can unlock the door the same way he did at Gianna’s,” Cate said, standing between them as the car continued its upward journey.

Jack furrowed his brow, scratching his head. “I thought the door was just unlocked.”

“Why would Gianna leave her door unlocked?”

Jack shrugged. “I don’t know. Felt invincible because of her ties to The Agency?”

Marcus clicked his tongue as Cate patted his arm.

“He’s new to magic.”

“Obviously.”

The doors opened, and Marcus led them from the elevator, finding apartment C. With a flick of his wrist, he pushed the door open. An empty flat lay beyond it. Cate stepped inside, her heels echoing off the hardwood flooring.

“Do you think they moved her?” she asked, her voice echoing in the empty space.

“It’s possible. Though it’s also entirely possible that she has never been here.”

Cate scanned the space again, bobbing her head up and down. “Okay, well, I guess we should have a look around.”

“I’ll go with you, Cate,” Jack said, sliding his arm around her shoulders.

“Okay. We’ll check the bedrooms.”

Marcus nodded as he studied the empty bookcase.

Cate led Jack down a hall and entered the last door. She strode across the room and tugged open the closet door, searching the inside for any clues.

“Nothing,” she said as Jack emerged from another door across the space leading to an en-suite bathroom.

“Me either.”

“Let’s try the room across the hall.”

Jack nodded, and they hurried to the second bedroom. "I don't know how you can be so calm, Cate," he said as he swept a hand across the empty shelf in the closet, sending a spray of dust into the air.

"What do you mean?" she asked, spinning to face him after checking the corners.

"I mean all of this. Magic. Him." Jack pressed his lips together as his features pinched. "Your illness."

Cate shrugged as they crossed the hall to another bedroom. "As hard as this is for you to hear, I trust him."

She tugged open the closet door, and, upon finding it empty, pushed it shut, finding Jack on the other side.

"You can't be serious."

"I am."

"Do you really trust him or are you just going along with him because he's saying what you want to hear?"

Cate studied him for a moment. "He's not saying what I want to hear."

"How do you know? You wanted to look for clues. He says you're fine. How can you put your life in his hands, Cate?"

Cate shuffled around the room in search of anything that may be a link to Gertrude. She came to a stop before answering, sucking in a deep breath. "Because my life has been in his hands multiple times already, and he's come through every time."

She did a final scan of the space. "There's nothing here. Should we try the last door?"

Jack didn't answer for a moment, staring at her. "Did he put a spell on you?"

Cate burst into laughter. "What?"

"I'm serious, Cate. Did he put some sort of magical spell on you?"

"No," she said with another chuckle before her smile faded. "At least, I don't think so."

"So, you don't know," Jack answered, wagging a finger at her as she strode from the room.

"I do know. Mostly."

"Mostly?"

Cate switched on the light in the windowless room across the hall, finding a small bathroom. "He didn't, okay?"

"How can you be so sure?"

Cate glanced up at him, one shoulder rising toward her ear as she wrinkled her nose and prepared to answer. "Jack, I—"

"Catherine?" Marcus's voice called from the living room.

"Coming!" she answered. "We should go. We have three more locations to check."

She smiled at him and squeezed his hand before tugging him toward the door.

"Did you find anything?" she asked as she stepped into the square living room again.

"Nothing. There is no sign anyone has been here in the past several months since The Agency acquired it."

Cate frowned as she took a final look around the space. "Oh well. On to the next."

Marcus nodded as he placed his hand against her back and guided her toward the door. Voices sounded in the hall. Cate froze as a woman cackled before murmuring something to the man who had just spoken.

Her eyes went wide, and she snapped her gaze to Marcus. "That's Gianna! And it sounds like she's coming here!"

Cate bit into her lower lip as she realized they were trapped.

CHAPTER 13



Marcus pulled her closer to him. “We’ll location hop to the car.”
“No,” Cate answered with a shake of her head, “we may overhear something crucial.”

“We need to hide,” Jack hissed. “Before they catch us.”

Keys jangled outside the door as Gianna’s voice became louder.

“Bedroom closet,” Cate said, tiptoeing into the hall and hurrying to the master bedroom. She raced across the room and flung the door open. She stepped inside with Marcus and spun to find Jack grimacing on the outside.

“I’ll go to the other one.”

“No, Jack! There’s no time. You’ll get caught. Come on, there’s room.” She waved him inside and pulled the door shut behind them.

“This is not at all how I hoped the day would turn out,” Jack whispered as the sounds of the door opening reached their ears.

Marcus slid his arm around Cate, pulling her closer to him. Jack frowned as she slipped her arm around his waist and leaned into him, knitting her brows as she concentrated on the conversation floating their way.

“Love the bookcases,” Gianna said.

“I thought you would,” Arnold Chapman’s voice answered her.

Footsteps approached their location, stopping every so often. Cate’s heart pounded against her ribs as Gianna’s high heels clicked closer and closer.

Marcus tightened his grip on her when Arnold's voice echoed off the walls of the master bedroom. "What do you think?"

"Mmmm, it's roomy."

"You could do it up any way you'd like."

Silence met the statement for a moment before Arnold spoke again. "And look at that view."

"But I like my old flat."

"Then keep that, too. Whatever you want, Gigi."

Cate rolled her eyes. High-heeled footsteps shuffled across the room, sounding on the tiled bathroom floor before clicking back onto the hardwood.

"I don't know, Arnie. Perhaps the closet space can convince me."

Footsteps closed in on their location. Cate tightened her grip on Marcus as her heart pounded harder.

"Now, there's no need for that. I assure you it's adequate."

A giggle resounded as a thud jiggled the closet door. "Arnie," Gianna said with a chuckle.

"What?"

Another thud against the door. "You are insatiable."

"You're kidding me," Cate hissed.

Arnold's voice turned breathy. "I think you should take this flat. Think of all the new memories we can create here."

Cate wrinkled her nose at the statement as the sounds of lips smacking filled the air.

"All right, you've convinced me."

"Good. Let's properly christen the place, then, shall we?"

Cate grimaced, shaking her head. "Oh, gross."

"Perhaps we should leave," Marcus whispered in her ear.

Cate glanced up to answer when the conversation outside the closet changed.

"Just a moment. Let's save celebrating for the appropriate time."

"Appropriate time?" Arnold asked.

"My plan hasn't quite come off yet," Gianna said. Footsteps clicked away from the door.

Cate held a finger in the air, pressing her lips together as she listened.

"You're on track though, aren't you?"

“I’ve got some new tricks up my sleeve,” Gianna answered. “I’m still working everything out, but this could be our ticket.”

“And what of your nemesis?”

A sigh sounded and more high-heeled footsteps plodded across the room. “Cate Kensie is not my nemesis. Merely a thorn in my side.”

“Quite the thorn, apparently.”

“How that unalluring dimwit managed to convince a man like Marcus Northcott to marry her is beyond me.”

Cate’s jaw dropped open, and she stuck a hand on her hip.

“Yet she has. So, what is your play?”

Cate dipped her head forward, straining for the answer.

“I’m still working it all out. But as long as she continues to chase her tail looking for her benefactor and drag Northcott along with her, I have the advantage. I just need a bit more time to work out all the details.”

“Can you string her along for that long?”

“I think so. She’s rather stuck, isn’t she? She has to find Gertrude. Which gives me time to move forward with my next plan.”

“I won’t press you for details...yet. Though, what if the esteemed duchess gives up the chase? I assume you have her benefactor hidden quite well.”

“She won’t. I’ll slip her a clue to keep her on the trail.”

“And what if she finds the old biddy?”

Cate clamped her jaw closed, shaking her head.

“Let her. I’ve found a much more delicious angle to work that is guaranteed to bring us Dunhaven Castle.”

“I like the sound of that,” Arnold said before more lip-smacking replaced their conversation. A giddy moan escaped Gianna. “I like the sound of that even more.”

The couple giggled for a bit more before the sounds of kissing replaced their laughter.

“Time to go,” Cate said as Jack grimaced.

“I think we’re pretty stuck,” Jack whispered as the sound of a body smacking against the wall echoed.

“You really are ignorant,” Marcus huffed as he pulled Cate close to him.

“Don’t leave Jack,” she warned.

Marcus pressed his lips together as he reached for Jack’s hand. Jack pulled his back, screwing up his face.

“Give him your hand,” Cate said as another moan cut through the air. “Quickly.”

Jack eyed him suspiciously as he held out his hand. Marcus grabbed it and the dark room faded away, replaced by an overcast day.

Cate glanced around, finding their car on the side street they’d parked on earlier. “Thank goodness you got us out of there. I couldn’t take much more of that.”

Jack stood unmoving as his gaze slid around. He swallowed hard, wiping at his pale face. “What the hell just happened.”

“Location hop,” Cate and Marcus said simultaneously as they headed for the vehicle.

“What?” Jack questioned, hurrying after them.

“A location hop. Marcus can move from one location to another instantly. And lucky for us and our ears, he can take us with him.”

“That was rather disturbing,” Jack said with another gulp.

“I know,” Cate answered as they slipped into the car. “Gianna and her shenanigans with any man who will look her way was something I never hoped to have first-hand knowledge of.”

Jack slid into the front seat and twisted to face her. “I meant the location hop.”

“Oh,” Cate answered, crinkling her brow.

“One minute we were in a closet. The next we were on the street. I’m not certain I’ve fully recovered.”

“I am no amateur, Mr. Reid. But if you prefer, I will gladly leave you behind the next time Catherine and I make a hasty exit.”

Jack glared at him.

“I’m sure Jack appreciates your unique talent. Just give him a chance to take it all in.”

The car merged into traffic and headed for the next location on the list.

“I hope we find something at one of these places. I did not like that conversation at all. What other things is she pursuing?” Cate asked.

“I’m afraid to find out.”

“She’s already kidnapped you, so it must be something else. But what? What guarantees her Dunhaven Castle? Especially if she doesn’t care if we find Gertrude?”

Cate stared at her lap as she tried to parse through the meaning in her mind. “And what clue is she going to feed us? How long is she going to

have us following these leads around?”

“Until her next plan comes to fruition,” Marcus answered.

“Which is what?” Cate asked again with a sigh.

“I don’t know,” Jack said, scrubbing his face, “but I hate this.”

“Buck up, Reid. The Agency is not an easily surmountable enemy. This battle will rage for quite some time.”

Jack shook his head before letting it fall into his hands. “I hope we can withstand it.”

“Look to Catherine for a shining example. She has already spent time fighting them on your behalf. She has nearly died on your behalf. And now she leads the charge to save Gertrude MacKenzie from their clutches even as they move on to a new target.”

Jack twisted to face them, his features pinching.

“So, dig deep and find your backbone. You’ll need it. And Catherine will need your support.”

“As long as we protect Dunhaven Castle and everyone in it, it doesn’t matter how long it goes on,” Cate said as she squeezed Marcus’s hand.

Marcus kept his eyes trained on Jack as he tugged Cate’s hand closer to him, patting it.

“We need to find a clue before Gianna leaks it to us. We need to give her less time for her plan than she wants.”

“Excellent, Catherine. We should strive to keep them as off-balance as they try to make you.”

“Easier said than done, I think,” Jack answered. “How can we make that happen?”

“By looking for some sort of evidence and not worrying about things we don’t need to worry about right now. We have to prioritize,” Cate said.

“And we must trust each other,” Marcus said, threading his fingers through Cate’s.

“Right,” Cate said with a nod. Both backseat passengers turned their gazes to Jack.

He paused for a moment before poking a finger toward his chest. “Oh, me? I trust you, Cate.”

Marcus flicked his eyebrows up.

Jack switched his gaze between them. “Is that good enough?”

“It would be really good if you trusted both of us,” Cate said. “We need to be a united front.”

Jack frowned, his eyes sliding toward Marcus. "Okay."

"Okay, what?" Marcus asked.

Jack narrowed his eyes at the man. "I...trust...Cate and so by extension I...we are a united front."

"I think that's the best he can do right now," Cate said, patting Marcus's hand. "We'll take it. As long as we're all on the same side, we're good."

Marcus offered Jack a smirk as he clasped Cate's hand in both of his. Jack spun in his seat, blowing out a breath as he faced forward.

Cate cocked her head at his behavior. "Are you okay, Jack?"

"Oh, I'm just swell."

Cate fluttered her eyelashes as she stared at the back of his head. "I know the location hop is odd at first—"

"To say the least. I just location hopped with a guy who...never mind," Jack said, throwing his hands in the air. "We're all on the same side."

"That's right. And it's a good thing because we need everyone to figure this out."

"Let's hope there is a clue at this property," Jack said as the car rolled to a stop.

Cate stared up at the house. "Looks promising."

They stepped out of the car as thunder rumbled overhead. Cate hurried up the walk behind Marcus, pelted by large drops of rain falling from the overcast skies.

Marcus opened the door, allowing her to enter first before he stepped inside behind her. Jack brought up the rear, closing the door behind them.

They glanced around the empty space. Cate toggled the light switch on, but nothing bloomed to life. "No power."

Light sparked to life as Marcus conjured a fireball, leaving it floating above his hand. "Come along, Catherine. I shall accompany you this time."

Cate shook her head. "We should stick together. With no light, we could miss something." She flicked her gaze to Marcus. "Besides, we shouldn't leave him alone. The Agency has come after him once. We can't afford a second time."

"You are correct, dear. Come along, Reid. Keep your eyes open for any signs of the former mistress of Dunhaven."

Jack shuffled behind them into the room on their right. Cate stepped to the window, staring out of it for a moment as she tried to picture Gertrude

here. An ache settled between her shoulders, and she wiggled them to relieve the pain.

By the time they worked their way through the downstairs, her temples throbbed. She lagged a step behind Marcus as they climbed up the stairs to the next floor.

Rain pelted the window at the top of the stairs.

“Catherine?” Marcus questioned as they reached the top. She stared out at the drops running down the glass.

“Cate?” Jack asked, his voice dull and echoing.

Thunder boomed overhead as images flashed through her mind. Her eyelashes fluttered. She turned, stalking ahead toward a bedroom at the back of the house. She hovered in the doorway as lightning lit the space.

Cate wandered into the middle of the room and stood for a breath before she spun in a slow circle. Her gaze fell to the floor. She took a few steps forward and dropped to her knees.

“Cate!” Jack shouted, racing toward her. “Are you hurt?”

Cate’s fingers dug into the thick mauve carpet. She pulled up her hand. A gold chain dangled from her index finger.

She tilted her head, studying the medallion on the chain. “G.M.,” she read.

“Gertrude MacKenzie,” Jack breathed.

“She was here,” Cate said, breaking into a grin. “She was here.”

Marcus lifted the charm and studied it. “Excellent work, Catherine.”

“Too bad she isn’t still here,” Jack said.

“No, they moved her when we arrived, I’d bet. But to where?” Cate questioned. She wrapped her fingers around the bracelet as she sat on her haunches. Images shot through her mind again.

She blinked her eyes as they flitted past. Thunder rumbled again.

“Catherine?”

“It’s happening again,” she said, her voice strained.

Marcus extinguished the fireball, dropping to a knee at her side and rubbing her back. “Breathe, Catherine.”

Cate’s features pinched as the pressure in her temples increased. She squeezed her eyes closed, grasping at the sides of her head. A tear rolled down her cheek. Her fists unfurled into shaky hands, and the bracelet fell to the carpet below.

Cate gasped in a sharp breath as her mind cleared in an instant. She braced herself against the rug with a hand as she tried to steady her breathing.

“Easy, Catherine. Tell me what just happened.”

“Images. Lots of them. They just come in a rush, and it’s painful. My head feels like it’s going to explode.”

Marcus rubbed her back as she blew out a long breath and sat back on her haunches. Jack sighed and shook his head.

“All right,” Marcus said with another rub of her back, “I think it’s time we pay a visit to Mother. I don’t think this can wait any longer.”

She licked her lips, clutching his forearm as she cut her gaze to him. Her features pinched again as she fought back the emotion bubbling inside her. “Am I going to be okay?”

“Yes, dear, you are. I promise,” he said, stroking her hair.

Cate nodded, climbing to her feet. Her knees wobbled, and she kept a firm hold of both men. Her stomach turned over. A lump formed in her throat. She tried to cling to Marcus’s words, but she worried he’d underestimated her illness.

Not temporalysis, her mind repeated. But if not that, then what? And would she survive it?

CHAPTER 14



Cate's fingernails dug into the palms of her hands until they hurt. Rain pelted the car roof as she stared out the water-streaked window. She'd fought to keep her heart rate steady, and her hands from shaking, but the latest attack had rattled her.

More severe than the others, the intensity of the experience left her drained. She struggled to keep her eyes open as weariness wore her down.

She couldn't imagine an outcome where things turned out okay. Temporalysis could be fatal. And based on the severity of what she experienced now versus her previous illness, she couldn't fathom surviving this one.

Perhaps Marcus's mother had some sort of cure. She'd helped Jack, stabilized him when he almost died from temporalysis. Perhaps she could do something similar for her.

She wrung her hands in her lap as worry built. Warm fingers wrapped around her hand and tugged it away from the other. She offered Marcus a fleeting smile before she returned her gaze to the rain falling.

They arrived at the house, and Cate slid from the car, struggling to make it up the walk as tiredness coursed through her.

"I think you should rest before we go," Marcus said as they pushed into the foyer.

"Rest? Are you serious?" Jack questioned. "We should go right away. She's getting worse."

"A nap will not harm her. She is exhausted. This is wearing on her."

Cate heaved a sigh as she listened to the argument. An ache lodged itself between her shoulders again.

"It's fine," she said. "I'm going to lie down. We'll go as soon as I wake up."

"Of course, dear."

Cate waved to acknowledge the comment as she tugged herself up the stairs, clinging to the banister to avoid stumbling. She shambled to her room and collapsed on the bed. Her eyes closed as voices floated from downstairs. They grew more distant as she dozed off.

She startled awake, her eyes fluttering open to find only darkness. She rolled onto her side, scanning the room. A sigh of relief escaped her as she recognized her bedroom in the London townhouse.

She glanced at the clock, her eyes going wide. It read after eleven. She glanced out the window at the starry sky. Her features pinched as she hurried off the bed and scrambled down to the first floor.

Marcus read in the wingbacked chair near the fireplace. He glanced up from his book as she raced into the room, breathless from her dash. "I slept longer than I hoped. I'm sorry."

He closed his book and rose from his chair, approaching the drink cart. "How do you feel?"

"Fine. No nightmares. I'm sorry—"

"Catherine..." He squeezed her shoulder, passing off a brandy. "It's all right."

She sipped at it. "I really didn't mean to sleep this long. Where is Jack?"

"Asleep. I told him to rest, and for once he listened. Only after I assured him that we would wake him before we departed."

"I'm surprised he believed you," Cate said before taking another sip of the drink and settling back into the cushions behind her.

"As am I. Perhaps we should leave—"

"No," Cate said with a shake of her head, "absolutely not."

Marcus pressed his lips together. "Fine."

Cate let her head fall back against the pillow. "I'm worried."

"I know," Marcus said. "After we consult with Mother, I think things will become clearer."

"Can't you give me a hint?"

"I would prefer not to misspeak. And Mother is the best to assess your condition."

Cate chewed her lower lip before taking another sip of the brandy.

"You will be fine, Catherine. Mother can help."

Cate nodded without glancing at him. She stared at her shimmering reflection in the amber liquid.

He hovered over her, and his finger traced her jawline, tipping her chin up. "Trust me."

She offered him a fleeting smile. "I do. Mostly."

"Mostly?" he asked with a coy grin. "I will have to do something about that. That is the biggest obstacle we face at the moment."

She chuckled, and the corners of her lips turned up despite herself.

Marcus poured himself another brandy. "Stefano checked the other two locations and found nothing. I thought you may want to know."

Cate sighed, shaking her head. "So, we're stuck again. So much for getting a step ahead of Ravishing Rita."

"Who?"

"Oh, Gianna. I nicknamed her Ravishing Rita when we met her in 1942. She couldn't keep her hands off Jack. Although, I never thought she'd actually nab him."

"Gianna will do anything she can to unnerve you," Marcus said, settling on the couch next to her.

"She seems to enjoy it."

"I'm certain she does. She loves to push your buttons. Don't let her."

Cate stared up at him through her eyelashes, clutching the brandy glass to her chest. "Easier said than done."

"Why does she bother you so?"

Cate let her head roll to the side. "Oh, let me count the ways."

Marcus arched an eyebrow at her.

"Seriously? You want me to name them?"

"I want you to stop allowing her to goad you. And to do that, you must understand why she does."

"She's a...she's awful," Cate said with a glance at him. "She's overly flirtatious. She uses her looks to get ahead. She takes pleasure in hurting other people. Especially me. The way she twisted the knife with everyone at Dunhaven was truly disgusting."

"She is jealous."

"Right. I'm sure she is."

Marcus sipped at his brandy. "I assure you she is."

“Oh, right,” Cate said, wagging a finger in the air, “you’re right. She would so love to woo you to her side and be a duchess.”

“That will never happen. Though your excellent match is hardly the only source of her jealousy.”

Cate fluttered her eyelashes as she considered the statement. “Right again. My husband and my castle.”

Marcus slid a lock of hair behind her ear. “And many other things.”

Cate twisted to face him.

“She can’t hold a candle to you, Catherine, and she knows that.”

Cate’s forehead pinched as she stared into his dark eyes, contemplating the statement.

“Cate!” Jack’s voice called from the entrance. “You’re up.”

Cate sucked in a breath, turning away from him to find Jack stumbling into the room, his hair mussed and his clothes wrinkled.

“Perfect timing, Mr. Reid,” Marcus grumbled with a sigh as he rose to stand.

“I woke up a little bit ago. I hadn’t planned to sleep that long. I guess the experience at the abandoned house wore on me more than I thought.”

Jack collapsed onto the cushion where Marcus had sat a moment ago. “I’ll bet. Do we have to wait until the morning to get answers?”

“No. We should go now. I’m certain Catherine would like to have this settled.”

“You are correct,” Cate answered, climbing from the couch. She finished her brandy and set the glass on the bar.

Jack rose, too. “Is she coming here or are we going to her?”

“We will go to Rosenberg. I think the atmosphere there will be conducive to setting Catherine’s nerves at ease.”

Cate set her hands on her hips. “Answers will be conducive to setting Catherine’s nerves. Please say Germany isn’t too far for a location hop because I don’t think I can stand several hours on a plane in the 1950s.”

“Of course not, dear. I am no amateur.” He held out his hand, and Cate grabbed it.

“Mr. Reid,” Marcus said, holding out his other hand.

Jack blew out a sharp breath. “Another jumpy thing. Just one minute we’re here, and the next we’re in Germany?”

Marcus stared at him, unblinking. “That is the plan.”

Jack's lips form an O as he exhaled again. "Okay, right. Sure. Yes. Just..." He let out another breath, nodding his head. "Just one minute. I just..."

Jack bent over, steadying himself against his legs.

Marcus heaved a sigh, slipping his arm around Cate's waist as they waited.

"Sorry," he said, waving a hand in the air while still bent over.

"It's okay, Jack. Take your time."

"Is he always this much of a coward?" Marcus asked her.

"Hey, listen—" Jack said straightening.

"He doesn't like time travel either. Even the tame kind without the scary portal."

Jack held a hand in the air. "No, I don't. I don't, in general, like things that go against the natural grain of things like going to another time where you could kill your father or talk to yourself or instantaneously traveling from one location to another one thousands of miles away by some unknown means."

"The means are very known. Location hops are quite standard...for those capable, anyway."

"Well, they're not standard for me," Jack said as he straightened.

"Unsurprising. Have you collected yourself yet? I'm certain Catherine would like to get her answers sooner rather than later."

Jack stretched his neck, then shook his head. "No, but I'm ready."

Cate grabbed his hand and smiled. "It'll be okay. Marcus is an expert."

Jack grimaced as he grabbed the man's hand. "Right."

Marcus tightened his grasp around Cate and the room faded from her view, replaced by the foyer of Rosenberg Castle.

"There, made it, see?" Cate said, clapping Jack on the shoulder.

Jack scanned the space. "Yeah. I guess we did."

"There is no guessing about it, Mr. Reid. Welcome to Rosenberg Palace. Why don't you go into the sitting room, dear, and I'll wake Mother? Unless you'd prefer your room."

Cate squeezed his arm. "Sitting room is fine. Thanks. Please apologize ahead of time for waking her in the middle of the night."

She threaded her arm through Jack's and pulled him toward the large sitting room off the foyer. She pushed inside and led him to the sofa.

“I’m not sure I should sit. But I’m also not sure I can stand. These location hops are...unnerving.”

“I know,” Cate said, patting his arm. “Take a seat in the armchair. I’m sure this entire situation is wearing on you given your recent temporalysis.”

“No more wearing than your current situation. Whatever that may be.” He sank into the chair and shook his head, clasping his hands until his knuckles turned white. “Oh, Cate, I hope he knows what he’s talking about.”

Cate bit her lower lip, considering her answer when the door popped open across the room. Marcus strode in with Anna hurrying behind him in a dressing gown.

“Catherine,” she said, rushing over with her red robe flying behind her. She pulled Cate into an embrace, “how lovely to see you.”

Anna leaned away from her, brushing a lock of hair from Cate’s face. “Marcus says you’re having some difficulties.”

“A little,” Cate answered with a nod. “We’re hoping you can help.”

“Of course, dear. Let me ring for tea.” She glanced at Jack who stood near the armchair, her muscles stiffening. “Oh, Mr. Reid, how lovely to see you. You are looking quite a bit better than when I saw you last.”

“I’m feeling quite a bit better. And I understand some of that has to do with your excellent care of me. Thank you for that.”

“You’re welcome.” Anna offered him a curt nod as she led Cate to the sofa and eased her to sit. “Marcus, ring for tea.”

“Oh, really, it’s fine,” Cate said. “No need to wake the household.”

“There is every need, dear,” Anna said, patting her hand. “Now, tell me what is happening with you.”

“Well, as you know when I was here last, I had temporalysis.”

“I remember, yes. It passed if I recall.”

“I thought it did, however...”

Anna squeezed her hands as the housekeeper rushed in still in her dressing gown. “Oh, Mrs. Higgins. Tea right away, please.”

The woman nodded and scurried from the room. Anna returned her gaze to Cate. “Continue, dear.”

“The nightmares and visions have started again.”

Anna narrowed her eyes at Cate.

“Tell her from the start,” Marcus said as he settled into the chair next to Jack.

“The first start or the second start?” Cate asked.

“The first. Leave nothing out.”

“Okay,” Cate said, blowing out a long breath before starting. “I started having nightmares and visions about a passage in my library. I had them for a while before we found the secret passage there. Then...” She licked her lips, flicking her gaze to her hands. “Dreams about Marcus. After I met him, I began having visions of the ball.”

“Your wedding ball,” Anna clarified.

“Yes,” Cate said with a nod, “and that’s when I started wandering the castle, losing time, confusing where I was.”

“That ended after the ball, correct?”

Cate swallowed hard. “Right, no more wandering around, but...I’m having dreams and visions again.”

“Of?”

Cate’s features pinched. “I’m not sure. It’s random images. Sometimes I can’t make anything out. They’re painful. Crippling, at times.”

“I see,” Anna answered, flicking her gaze to Marcus. “And you assessed this?”

“Yes. But I wanted your opinion as you have first-hand experience with this.”

“Quite right,” Anna said. She placed a hand against Cate’s cheek before moving it to her forehead. She cupped Cate’s face in her hands and stared into her eyes.

Anna held a finger up, rising and kissing Cate’s forehead. “Wait here.”

The housekeeper bustled in with the tea, sliding the tray onto the coffee table.

“Thank you,” Marcus said, dismissing her.

He poured a cup and passed it to Cate. Cate stirred in her sugar and sipped at the beverage, fidgeting in her seat.

“Almost, dear,” Marcus said, rubbing a finger against her cheek.

She gave him a tight-lipped smile, taking another sip of tea as her leg bobbed up and down.

Jack poured himself a cup of tea and sank into the chair. He took one sip before he slid the saucer onto the table and leaned forward, balancing his elbows on his bobbling legs.

The doors to the room opened again and Anna hurried in with a glass case containing a floating purple rose. Cate’s eyes went wide as she stared

at it. Anna slid it onto the coffee table before she tugged Cate's teacup and saucer from her hands, setting them aside.

"I'm certain you recognize this," she said.

"One of the roses from your garden," Cate said.

"Not just any rose," Anna said as she lifted the glass. "The rose Marcus gave you before your ball on your first visit here. I had it preserved for you."

Heat rushed into Cate's cheeks as she shot a nervous glance at Jack, fluttering her eyelashes.

"Now, what I want you to do is touch the petals with your fingertips. You may need to use both hands. Give it a few seconds, and tell me what happens."

"Oh, uh, okay." Cate swallowed hard, staring at the floating rose. She slid her eyes sideways toward Anna, wondering what reaction the woman expected. She shot a glance at Marcus who poured a cup of tea, adding milk and sugar before passing it to his mother. He offered Cate an encouraging nod and smile.

Cate sucked in a breath and stretched her shaking hands forward.

Anna rubbed Cate's back. "Relax, dear."

Cate swallowed hard and let the fingers of both hands caress the rose petals. As her skin touched the silky softness, images flooded her mind, appearing and disappearing faster than she could process. She gasped, pulling her fingers away and cutting her gaze to Anna.

"Tell me what happened?" Anna prompted.

"Images again. Lots of them. I let go before it became painful."

The woman's lips curled on the edges, and she replaced the glass cover on the rose. "As I suspected."

Cate's crinkled her forehead. "What is it? What's wrong with me? Do you know?"

Anna sipped her tea, raising her eyebrows at Marcus. "Would you prefer to tell her?"

Cate's stomach turned over as she wondered what ailment afflicted her this time. Would it prove deadly?

CHAPTER 15



“*I* defer to you, Mother,” Marcus said. “I am certain you will deliver the news in the best way for Catherine.”

Anna slid her saucer onto the table and twisted to face Cate. She grasped her hands and smiled at her.

Tears shone in Cate’s eyes, and her forehead pinched. “What is it? Just tell me straight out. Tell me what it is and how long I have.”

“How long you have? Oh, darling.” Anna caressed her cheek. “You’re not dying.”

Cate blinked back her tears. “I’m not?”

“No, of course not.”

“You mean it’s not temporalysis or something similar?”

Anna shook her head, smiling at Cate. “No, you’re not ill.”

Cate scrunched her eyebrows tighter. “Then what is wrong with me?”

“Nothing is *wrong* with you, Catherine. But you are having these experiences for a reason.”

“Which is?” Jack prompted.

Anna’s smile broadened. “You are clairvoyant.”

Cate stared at her for a moment, unsure she’d heard correctly. “I’m what?”

“Clairvoyant,” Anna said. She let go of Cate’s hands and retrieved her teacup, sipping the warm liquid.

“Clairvoyant? Like a...fortune teller?”

Anna chuckled, shooting a glance at Marcus who smirked at the question. "Oh, I do love her, Marcus. No, dear, not like a charlatan with a crystal ball or a deck of cards. You are a true clairvoyant. You can see the future."

"See the future?" Cate shook her head. "No, I—I can't see the future."

"I assure you that you can, my darling."

"But...the visions and the nightmares...they were part of my temporalysis."

Anna shook her head, sliding the saucer onto the coffee table again. "No. Only the time losses and wandering were symptoms of the temporalysis. The dreams and visions are part of your gift."

"But..." Cate's scrunched up her face, blinking rapidly as she tried to make sense of it.

"I assure you that's what it is. You are not ill. Nothing is wrong with you. You are a clairvoyant. I know because I'm also somewhat of a clairvoyant myself."

"How did this happen to me? I've never had this before."

"You've never had it or you've never noticed it?" Anna asked.

Cate retrieved her teacup, staring into the amber liquid. "No, I've never had this."

"Think hard, Catherine. You may not have noticed it. Or you may have written it off."

"I have *never* had anything like this. It's crippling. These images flash across my mind faster than I can process. That's never happened to me."

"Maybe not. Your gift is stronger now. But you likely have had premonitions and dreams before."

Cate swallowed hard, heat washing through her body. "I dreamt about my parents dying before it happened."

"Yes, that's it. See? Clairvoyant." Anna wagged a finger at her before clasping her hands and circling them around her knees.

Cate pressed a hand against her forehead as she balanced the saucer in the other. "I don't understand any of this."

"And that is why I brought you to Mother," Marcus said. "She can help you."

"Yes, of course, dear. You need to learn how to process this."

"Obviously," Cate said. "I can't even begin to fathom how to wrap my head around this."

“Oh, no, no,” Anna said with a chuckle, patting Cate’s hand, “you misunderstand. You need to learn how to handle the images. How to make sense of them. And most importantly, how to ensure they are not crippling.”

Cate sat motionless at the news.

“But I think this information is enough for today,” Anna said. “You need to rest.”

“Oh, no, I just woke up shortly before we came here. I’m fine.”

“You need to let this sink in. And you need to sleep. You should do that more easily now that you know you are not sick.” Anna smiled at her, rubbing her cheek. Her eyebrows shot up. “Oh, of course, you’re worried about another nightmare. I have a solution for that. I’ll make you a sleeping draught that will ensure you sleep soundly without any disturbances.”

Cate nodded, her lips still parted as she tried to form words but found none. “Y-yes,” she finally stammered, “that would be appreciated.”

“It’s all right, Catherine,” Anna said as she rose. “Try to relax.”

Cate scooted back on the sofa, drumming her fingers on the cushion. Marcus joined her, pushing a lock of hair behind her ear. “You see? I told you that you were not ill.”

She shifted her gaze to him. “I’m not sure this is an improvement. It’s worse than the temporalysis.”

“It is not. And it is quite useful. Do not worry, dear, Mother will help you control it.” Marcus took her hand in his and squeezed.

She nodded and offered him a tight-lipped smile. “Right. Okay. Yes. You’re right. This is better than temporalysis. I’m not dying. I only feel like I am at times.”

“And Mother will help you temper that.”

“Right. Okay. Yes.” She slid her eyes closed and drew in a deep breath. “I’m fine. It’s fine. I’ll be fine.”

“I’m not sure I will be fine. I don’t think I can recover from any of this.” Jack’s leg bobbed up and down frantically. “The portals and the location thingy and now this? Cate Kensie can see the future?” His jaw gaped, and he blinked hard.

“Maybe Anna should give you a sleeping draught, too,” Cate said.

Marcus rolled his eyes as he rubbed Cate’s shoulders. “You are far too needy, Reid. I’m certain you’ll be fine.”

Anna bustled back inside with a small vial of liquid. She dumped it into Cate’s teacup and poured more steaming tea before dropping sugar cubes

into it and stirring. "Drink this. It will help you sleep soundly, and we'll talk more tomorrow."

She passed the teacup to Cate. With a smile, Cate accepted it and sipped at the sweet liquid.

"I have assured Catherine that you will assist her in controlling her visions."

"Yes, of course. Do not worry, dear, we will make sure they are not as crippling. I promise."

"Thank you," Cate said as she finished the tea. "

"Now, you should go to bed. The draught will not take long to work. Marcus, you did not arrange for her ladies' maid to be here."

"My apologies, Mother, we came rather hastily."

Anna clicked her tongue. "That is no excuse. You should have planned ahead. No matter, I will help you, Catherine."

"It's not necessary, thank you. I can manage." Cate stood, her legs wobbly from the experience and the quick-acting sleeping potion. She glanced at Marcus. "You'll see to Jack?"

"Of course."

Cate smiled at him and took a step toward the door, one weak knee giving way as she stepped. Marcus leapt from his seat to steady her.

"Oh, that is fast-acting," she murmured, rubbing at her forehead.

He scooped her into his arms. "I shall return for you, Reid."

He carried her into the foyer and up the wide staircase as Cate shook her head.

"You will find any excuse to carry me around, won't you?"

Marcus smiled at her and winked as he climbed the stairs. "I asked Mother to make it extra strong just so I could carry you."

"I wouldn't put it past you," she said with a yawn. "Though this time I am rather grateful. Whatever is in this stuff is incredibly strong."

"I have no doubt Mother made certain it was strong enough to suppress any visions that may creep into your sleep."

"I hope you're right. I hope it's enough to let my mind wrap around this. I never imagined this was what I'd hear."

"And what did you think you would hear?" he asked as he strode past the statues lining the hall.

"Some weird illness that would slowly kill me. Or at least make life very uncomfortable until I survived it."

Marcus smiled at her as he strode toward the double doors of her room.

“Wait, I’ll get the handle.”

“Unnecessary, Catherine,” Marcus answered. As the doors blew open in front of them, he wiggled his eyebrows at her.

“Showoff,” she said with a coy smile.

He set her down inside, careful not to remove his hand until she was steady. “Are you certain you are all right?”

Cate yawned and nodded. “Yes, thank you.”

“Good night, dear. Sleep well.”

He stepped from the room, and she closed the doors behind him, leaning against them before she pulled her weary body away from them. She shuffled across the room, wondering if she could find her centuries-old nightgown.

As she approached the bed, she spotted a nightgown and robe laid out. The corners of her lips turned up. The housekeeper must have laid it out for her.

After changing, she slipped between the sheets, collapsing back against the pillows. Her tired eyes slid closed, and she relaxed into sleep.

When her eyelids fluttered open, bright sunshine streamed through the large window. She stretched and smiled at the sunny morning. She’d slept soundly with no nightmares.

A knock sounded at her door. “Come in!” she called.

“Your Grace, you’re awake,” Andrea said as she strode across the sitting room toward her.

“Andrea,” Cate said with a broad smile, spinning to face her. “How did you get here?”

“His Grace fetched me last night. I’ll ring for breakfast and set your clothes out for the day. We can dress whenever you’re ready.”

“I’m ready,” Cate said, taking a seat at the vanity.

“I didn’t want to interrupt your viewing of the garden.”

Andrea fixed her hair and helped her change before another knock sounded.

“That must be your breakfast,” Andrea said, rushing across the room to the door. She pulled it open, offering a quick courtesy. “Oh, good morning.”

Anna bustled into the room with the tray. “Good morning, Andrea. Good morning, Catherine. I took it upon myself to wrangle the tray from the maid and bring it.”

“Oh, thank you,” Cate said as she settled at the table in the sitting room. “You didn’t have to do that.”

“In truth, I wished to check on you. Did you sleep well?”

“Yes,” Cate answered. “No disturbances. Would you like to join me for tea?”

“Excellent. Ah, no dear, I just wanted to be certain you slept. I’m going to take in the gardens, but we will begin your training this afternoon.”

“All right,” Cate said with a nod. “Is Marcus up?”

“Out already,” Anna said with a flick of her hand. “Though he assures me he will not be long. He is following up on something to do with a recent discovery you made. He said you’d know what that means.”

“Oh, yes, I understand. Thank you.”

“Of course, dear. Try to relax and we’ll begin later.”

Cate slathered jam onto her toast. “Actually, I hoped to do some reading on my condition.”

“A wonderful idea. You are quite clever. It is no wonder Marcus adores you.”

Cate swallowed hard as heat rose in her cheeks. Anna patted Cate’s shoulder, leaning down to kiss her forehead. Andrea curtsied as Anna strode from the room before she approached Cate.

“Is there anything else you need, Your Grace?”

“Yes, do you happen to know where Jack is?”

“I believe Mr. Reid is several halls over in the bachelor’s wing.”

“Of course. Would you mind waiting and showing me the way?”

“Not at all,” Andrea said. Cate hurried to finish her breakfast, popping the last piece of toast into her mouth and standing as she wiped her mouth. “Ready.”

Andrea led her through the halls of the enormous castle, leading her to a single door tucked at the end of an obscure hall. Cate thanked her and sent her on her way before she knocked on the door.

Jack yanked it open a second later. “Oh, Cate, thank goodness. I had no idea where to find you. I’ve been worried.”

“I’m fine. I slept well. Did you get any sleep?”

“A little. Not much. I tried knocking on all of the doors in this hall, but nothing. I tried again this morning, too. Where is your room?”

“Oh, it’s across the castle,” Cate said, pointing in the general direction.

Jack stared in the direction of her finger. “Why would they put us so far apart?”

“Ahhh,” Cate said with a wince.

“What?”

“I assume Anna put you quite far away from me because I’m—“

Jack let his head fall back between his shoulders. “Married to her son. Right. Wow, she’s trusting.”

Cate lifted a shoulder. “She’s very protective of Marcus. I was on my way to the library. Would you like to come with me?”

“Beats staying here in my hole. Unless we’ll upset Mama Northcott.”

“I’m sure she’ll be fine. She’s in the garden.”

Cate looped her arm through Jack’s after he pulled his door closed and led him down the hall. He gaped around as they traversed the halls. “I thought Dunhaven was sprawling, but this...”

“Is massive,” Cate finished for him with a chuckle. “Yes. I know. My bedroom alone makes mine at Dunhaven look shabby.”

Jack sucked in a breath as they rounded a corner. “I guess we should talk about what I’m desperately trying to avoid talking about.”

“My odd new gift?”

“Not sure I consider it a gift when it knocks you to your knees from the pain.”

Cate arched an eyebrow as she approached a set of ornate double doors. “I’m really interested to see what Anna has to say about it this afternoon.”

She twisted the knobs on the doors and pushed them into the room. “Until then, I was going to do a little research.”

Jack strode into the library and scanned the space. “You really think you’ll find a passage in the encyclopedia.”

“I’m hopeful,” Cate said, scanning the titles.

“I wasn’t serious, Cate.”

Cate snapped her gaze to him as she ran her finger along the books. “I was.”

Jack scrunched his nose at her.

She stared at him for a moment before she waved him toward another shelf. “Look at these titles.” She tugged them off the shelf one by one, stacking them in his arms. “Enchanted Objects and Their Uses, Basic Enchantments, Benson’s Guides to Creatures.”

Cate grabbed his book-laden arm and led him to the desk under the stained glass window. She tugged the top book from his stack and plopped it onto the desk. Dust swirled in the air as she thumbed through the book, finding the appropriate entry.

“Here. Look.” She pointed toward a specific entry with an illustration next to it.

“Gobgoyle,” Jack read, shooting her a brief glance before he read from the page, “A hairless, quadruped known for his characteristic triangular-shaped teeth and marble-like eyes. They are a popular pet among Dracopires.”

Cate waved a finger in the air. “Which begs the natural question, what is a Dracopire?”

“There’s nothing natural about that question, Cate.”

Cate ignored him, flipping through to another passage. “Dracopires. Dragon-like vampires, some of which live in Romania. Surprise!” She offered him an amused stare. “But most of which live in Sangmond. So, then you wonder, what is Sangmond?”

“Not really,” Jack murmured as Cate hurried across the room, pulling another book from the shelf and delivering it to Jack.

“Realms Beyond Earth describes it as another realm dictated by a blood-red moon that rises and sets like the sun.” She handed it off to Jack, fanning the pages. “And there are hundreds of these. Look!”

Jack collapsed into the armchair opposite the desk. “I’m not sure how much more my brain can handle.”

“And this entire library is filled with volumes like this. And don’t even get me started on what’s downstairs.”

Jack snapped his gaze to her. “What’s downstairs?” he whispered.

“Tons of magical stuff,” Cate said with a grin as she returned to perusing the shelves. “A mirror that lets you pull your mirror image out of it.”

“No,” Jack said with a shake of his head. “No, no more. I officially can’t handle anymore.”

“Wild, right?”

“Wild is not the word, Cate. This is...insanity.”

“We should have known, right?” Cate said, tugging a tome from the shelf and continuing to scan the titles.

Jack paged through the volume on his lap. “I don’t know how we could have known any of this.”

Cate shot him a glance over her shoulder. “Come on. Time travel existed and only at Dunhaven? We really had a narrow view of the world.”

Jack studied her as she pulled another book from the shelf and carried them to the desk. “I think you’re actually enjoying this.”

“Enjoying what?” Cate asked as she paged through the book.

“All this. The new worlds, the odd creatures.”

Cate scanned the entry she found. “It’s fascinating.”

“I will never understand how your mind works, Cate Kensie.”

Cate offered him a smile before she returned to her book. She scanned the entry about the wide range of clairvoyants. Some only experienced feelings while others had vivid images of the future. Other psychics ranged in between, often their response depending on the severity of the situation.

While clairvoyants could experience any range of visions about the future, many of them centered around negative events such as deaths or other severe traumas.

Cate read the words again, her finger tracing the word negative. She stared into space as a shiver snaked down her spine. On what negative event did her mind dwell?

CHAPTER 16



Cate's features pinched as she squeezed her eyes closed. She stretched her mind to recall something from the visions she had. Something that would offer her a clue to what her mind wanted to show her.

"That face looks very worried, dear," Marcus said.

Cate snapped her eyes open to find him in the doorway.

"Are we learning?" he asked as he strode toward her.

"Yes," she answered. "I thought I might find some information on my condition here."

He leaned over the book, perusing the entry. "And what did you find that gave you such a distressed expression?"

Cate licked her lips and flipped the book closed. "Nothing."

"That's quite a bit of nothing to give you such a perturbed look, dear."

She tugged one corner of her lip back. "Did you find anything this morning? Your mother said you were out chasing down a lead."

"Nothing of promise," Marcus answered.

Cate's shoulders slumped, and she banged a fist against the desk's top. "We're not doing very well."

"We will persevere and triumph, Catherine."

She flicked her gaze up to him, pinching her eyebrows together. "I hope so."

"Perhaps a walk in the garden before you begin with Mother."

She sucked in a deep breath and nodded. "Yes. I think I need some air. Jack, wait until you see the roses."

Marcus sighed as he followed Cate from the room. "Come along, Mr. Reid. It seems you are invited, too."

They spent the time before lunch in the garden. Their meal was a quiet affair with stilted conversation as Cate's apprehension grew over her upcoming training session with Anna. What would she see? And how would she withstand it?

The meal ended with the servants carrying away all of the dishes. Cate traced the outline of her napkin, trying to control her heart rate.

Anna rose from her chair. "Come along, Catherine. Let's begin. If you gentlemen will excuse us, we have much work to do."

"I'll come with you," Marcus said as he stood.

"No, you will not."

"But Mother—"

"No, you will not." Anna wagged her finger at him. "Catherine needs space."

"She should not be alone."

"And she will not be," Anna answered, raising her chin. "I will be with her."

"But—" Marcus tried again.

Anna's eyes widened. "I said no. No means no. Perhaps a game of billiards or chess for you two whilst Catherine and I do our work."

Marcus puckered his lips, his displeasure obvious.

"Do not give me that face, Marcus. I will not stand for it. Kiss your wife goodbye and wish her luck."

"Yes, Mother," Marcus said with a sigh. He bent toward Cate, rubbing her shoulder while he kissed her cheek. "Good luck, dear."

"Thank you," she answered, sounding meeker than she'd hoped.

"Come along, Mr. Reid. We have a date with a billiard table."

"That sounds...worse than I expected," Jack murmured as he rose. "Good luck, Cate."

Cate smiled at him, offering a nod in silent thanks as her heart skipped a beat and her stomach turned over.

"Go," Anna said, shooing them away.

Cate swallowed hard as they left the room. Anna turned her focus to Cate, offering her a tight-lipped smile. "Come along, Catherine."

Cate forced a fleeting smile onto her lips as she rose, trying to hide her shaky hands.

Anna grasped them and squeezed. "There is no need to be nervous, dear. I understand how stressful this can be, particularly with your physical symptoms, but that is what we aim to temper."

Cate tried to smile, but her features pinched, and her lips quivered. She bit the lower one to stop the trembling.

Anna cupped her face in her hands. "Oh, darling, what is it?"

"It's less the physical symptoms and more..." She flicked her teary gaze away from Anna as she blinked them away.

"What, dear?"

"What is it that I'm seeing? The book said it's usually negative."

"The book?" Anna asked.

"I went to the library this morning, and I read about my condition."

Anna clicked her tongue. "I knew I shouldn't have left you alone. You're too clever for your own good, Catherine."

"I'm sorry. But I can't stop wondering what terrible event my mind is trying to show me."

"They're not all terrible."

"But most of them are," Cate said, her voice catching in her throat.

"Let's try to focus on teaching you how to make these less painful and debilitating first, shall we? And then we'll worry about what you see, and how we can use it to stop any tragedies."

Cate furrowed her brow, her lips forming a pout. "Stop them?"

"Yes, dear. We're shown things for a reason."

"So, we can avoid them?"

"Sometimes," Anna answered. "Or at the very least, we can prepare and minimize the damage."

Cate slid her shoulders down her back and raised her chin, pressing her lips together. "Okay. Let's do this."

Anna patted her cheek, smiling at her before she led her from the dining room. "We'll go to your bedroom. A space where you are comfortable. It will help."

They navigated through the castle's halls, pushing into the sapphire bedroom. Anna locked the doors behind them for privacy.

Cate wrung her hands, swallowing hard as she hovered in the space.

"Sit down," Anna said, motioning to the chaise. "And lay back. Try to relax."

Cate let her head rest against the thick cushion as Anna tugged a chair over toward her. "Now, your visions, the ones you have when you're awake...is there a trigger?"

"Umm," Cate murmured, "it seems to be random."

"Think harder, Catherine, because this can help you prepare for them. Talk through them with me."

Cate licked her lips, trying to recall the instances when she'd had the debilitating visions. "The first waking one I had was when I was dressing for a party. I picked up the sapphire necklace and experienced one. Another was in Gianna's apartment. And the third was in an abandoned house where we found Gertrude's bracelet. Oh, Gertrude is a relative."

Anna patted her hand. "I know. All right, were the visions always the same?"

"I don't know. They go by so fast, and my head hurts so much that I can't be certain."

"What does your gut say?"

Cate pressed her lips together. "That they were different. The one in the abandoned house felt different. Emotionally. I had a different response."

"So, they are of two different things most likely. Let's try to work on the one in the abandoned house. Given the other triggers, I'm afraid those may be more disturbing for you."

"Maybe we should start with those."

"No, you are still learning. You need to be able to access these and process them."

Cate's forehead pinched as she patted her stomach.

"Trust me, Catherine."

She offered a nod without making eye contact.

"Do you know why the visions are painful?" Anna asked.

Cate flicked her gaze to the woman and shook her head.

"Because you are correct. They are often of negative things. And because of that, your body fights them. Viciously, at times. Your mind wants you to see these things but a part of you is resisting them."

"Like an instinctual reaction to protect yourself from harm."

"Yes, exactly."

"So, how do I avoid that?"

"You must be open to them."

Cate barked out a harsh laugh. "I'm not sure I want to be."

Anna wagged a finger at her. "And that is why they hurt."

"Will I ever see anything good?"

"Yes, you may. I think you did last night with the rose."

Cate puckered her lips as she studied her feet. "Can we start with that one instead?"

Anna smiled down at her. "I'd rather start with something a bit more painful because conjuring happy future events will not teach you very much."

"Darn," Cate said with a wrinkle of her nose.

"I would very much like to help you with this. And I'm not doing it to be cruel. I want to be sure you don't suffer more than you have to."

Cate grabbed her hand and squeezed. "I know. Thank you."

"If it becomes too much, we'll try with a happy *zerinnerung*."

Cate snapped her gaze to the woman's face. "What?"

"*Zerinnerung*. It means future memory."

"Future memory," Cate repeated. "How odd, yet how right the description sounds."

"Let's get started." Anna shoved her hand into her pocket and pulled out an object. She dangled the gold bracelet from her fingers. "This seems to be a trigger for you."

"And you want me to touch it and see if I get a future memory."

Anna pulled it away, tilting her head. "Not just yet. I want you to prepare for it. Acknowledge that it may be painful. We cannot spare ourselves all the pain, but we can avoid much of it. If we're prepared, it is not as jarring."

"Right, okay." Cate stared up at the ceiling, trying to keep her breathing calm. "Okay, I'm ready, let me try."

"No, you are not," Anna argued.

Cate screwed up her face.

Anna's eyes traveled down to Cate's feet. They stuck off the chaise, pointing straight up in the air as she clenched her leg muscles.

"You're tense."

"I'm preparing," Cate argued.

"You're bracing. Which is a fear reaction. A fight or flight response and your body is preparing to do both."

"Fight and flight?" Cate asked.

Anna nodded. "Fight by causing you intense pain to prevent you from adequately understanding or responding to the images you're shown. And, if necessary, flight. You will pass out. We don't want either."

"Okay. Relax."

"Deep breaths. Think of happy things."

Cate closed her eyes, sucking in deep breaths as she tried to force herself to relax. She pictured Dunhaven Castle's library. Two furry pups lounged near the roaring fireplace. She lounged in her favorite armchair.

Cate licked her lips and flicked her eyes open. "Okay. Happy thoughts." She waved for the bracelet.

Anna arched an eyebrow, holding the bracelet out to her. Cate licked her lips as she reached for it. Her breathing turned ragged, and her hands began to shake as she reached for the bracelet.

"Sorry," she said, pulling her hand back.

"It's perfectly fine, Catherine. Take your time."

"The moment I reach for it all my happy thoughts disappear."

Anna smiled at her, setting the bracelet on the side table. "That's normal. You're anticipating the terrible side effects. And that in itself is what exacerbates them somewhat."

"Only somewhat?" Cate asked with a chuckle.

"The visions will never be easy. But you can make them less taxing."

"By envisioning my happy place," Cate said.

Anna lifted her shoulders and fluttered her eyelashes. "Not exactly. But this is a first step. Catherine, you must understand, this will take quite a bit of work to learn to manage. You *can* do it. But it will not happen immediately."

Cate bit into her lower lip. "Patience is not my virtue."

Anna chuckled at her statement. "I understand, particularly when it comes to something like this. No one would *want* to experience this pain. And if I could take it away and teach you to manage this in one afternoon, I would."

Cate sucked in a deep breath, patting her abdomen as she tried to relax. "Can I ask how this step helps?"

"What do you mean?" Anna crinkled her brow.

"Well, I can't always anticipate when I'm going to have one of these. So, I wouldn't be able to think of my happy place or somewhere I feel safe

before one occurs. They just sneak up on me. So, how would I use this to help?"

Anna pressed her lips together and nodded. "I understand. This will *not* help you with the ones we can't anticipate. What it will help you with is learning how to process the images by lessening the pain for those we can anticipate."

Cate furrowed her brow, her eyes falling on the gold bracelet. "So, in other words, instead of having them race across my mind faster than I can process them, I'll be learning to actually see them."

"Right, yes. Everything is jumbled right now because your mind is fighting against it. And because of the physical symptoms, it's really battling these visions. If you can control your physical reaction, we can make headway in processing these. And if you learn to process them, you can master receiving them without much suffering on your part."

"Not much suffering sounds excellent," Cate said, shooting her a smile. "Okay, I'm going to try again."

"Whenever you're ready."

Cate sucked in a deep breath and licked her lips. She squeezed her eyes closed, bringing her cozy vision of Dunhaven Castle to the forefront of her mind.

She slid her eyes open to slits and reached for the bracelet. Her fingers touched the cold metal of the monogrammed charm. A jolt shot through her body as images sped across her mind. Her temples ached and her muscles tensed as she struggled to make sense of the visions.

She fought to keep her hands on the metal for as long as she could. The comfy image of the library became lost in the fray. She struggled to keep her eyes open.

The pain became blinding, and the world closed in around her.

CHAPTER 17



Cate's eyelids fluttered open. Anna smiled down at her as she pressed a cool cloth against her forehead.

Cate fidgeted on the chaise. "That didn't go as well as I hoped."

"I did not expect you to accomplish it on your first attempt." Anna dunked the rag again and wrung it out before placing it on Cate's forehead again. "How is your headache?"

"Dulled," Cate answered. "I can try again."

"Don't rush it. Take time to recover from this one."

Cate shimmied up. "I can do it. I—"

"Catherine," Anna said, pushing Cate's shoulders back into the chaise, "do not rush. If you try again too soon, you'll only set yourself up for failure."

Cate settled back into the chaise with a sigh.

She let her eyes slide closed as she waited for the tension in her temples to release. After a few minutes, she opened her eyes. "Okay, I'm feeling a bit better now."

"A bit or better?"

Cate sucked in a breath. "Better. No headache. My stomach has settled."

"All right. Try again whenever you feel ready. Relax. Happy thoughts."

Cate closed her eyes again, conjuring her image of the dogs in the library. She snapped her eyes open, trying to hold on to the memory as she reached for the bracelet. The touch of the metal shoved the snug thought aside, replacing it with pain and nonsensical images.

She dropped the bracelet before she passed out, blowing out a long breath.

“All right, better,” Anna answered. “Lay back.”

“Better because I dropped the bracelet,” Cate answered.

“Still progress.”

“Debatable,” Cate said as Anna pressed the cloth against her forehead.

After a few moments of resting, Cate stopped Anna from pressing the cloth against her forehead again. “I’m ready to try again.”

“All right. Find your safe place,” Anna said, dropping the cloth in the basin and settling back in the chair.

She brought her safe place into her mind again and reached for the bracelet. Her fingers brushed across the metal and the attack began. A cry escaped her, both from pain and frustration. She dropped the bracelet and flung herself back onto the chaise, blowing out a breath.

“All right, darling, it’s all right,” Anna said, pressing the cloth against her.

“It’s not,” Cate cried.

“Yes, it is.

“I’m not getting any better at this.”

Anna pulled the cloth away and submerged it in the water. “You have tried three times. Mastery can take years. Don’t be so hard on yourself.”

Cate pushed herself straighter, blocking Anna’s arm before she could place the cloth on her head again. “I’m going to try again.”

“No,” Anna argued.

“Yes,” Cate said, her jaw clenched.

“Catherine, you must wait before you try again. You’re tired and weak from the last attempt. Rest.”

Cate collapsed back onto the cushion, squeezing her hands into fists.

Anna patted her tight fists. “This is not resting.”

Cate puffed out a sigh.

“Allow yourself to be cared for, Catherine. You do not need to take this all on yourself. You are not alone. I am here. Marcus is here.”

Cate unfurled her hands, flicking her gaze to Anna. “Thank you.”

Anna smiled down at her. “Of course. Now, I think that is enough for today.”

“No, I’d like to try again. Maybe more than once. I can do it. I want to make some progress.”

Anna grabbed her hand and patted it. "I know you do, dear, but I think—"

"No," Cate interrupted, "I want to try."

Anna sucked in a breath, arching an eyebrow before she nodded. "All right. Whenever you're ready."

Cate nodded and sucked in a breath as she prepared herself. She reached for the bracelet. Memories rushed into her mind, and she dropped the jewelry piece.

"All ri—"

"No, again," Cate said, grabbing the gold chain. Pain shot from temple to temple. She held on to the charm this time, forcing herself to focus. The images shot around her brain. She fought to control them as the pain forced itself further into her mind. If she could even make sense of one vision, she'd have made progress.

She bit into her lower lip until she tasted blood, refusing to drop the charm. Her limbs trembled with torment as her nerves burned. Tears welled in her eyes as the agony intensified.

"Let go, Catherine," Anna encouraged her.

She clung to the bracelet until tears rolled down her cheeks. Anna pried her fingers back. The visions ceased as she removed the charm from Cate's touch, setting it aside.

Cate's shoulders shook as she continued to cry. Anna shifted in her seat, perching on the edge of the chaise and pulling Cate into her arms.

"Shh, Catherine. It's all right."

The door unlatched across the room. "What's happened?" Marcus asked.

Anna waved him over. "She was a bit overzealous with her attempts. And you should not be unlocking doors with your magic tricks." She lowered her voice as he sank onto the edge of the chaise. "But I'm pleased you did."

Cate leaned away as she sniffled and wiped at her tears. "I'm fine."

Marcus pulled her into his arms. "You are not."

Cate relaxed against him, laying her head on his shoulder.

"She pushed herself a bit too hard. She is stubborn."

"Yes, I know," Marcus answered.

Cate's muscles relaxed, and the tension released in her temples. She pushed back, wiping at her cheeks again. "I am not. I wanted to make some

progress.”

“You did make progress, darling,” Anna said with a rub of her back. “Tomorrow, we’ll try again. You will learn how to manage this, I promise.”

Cate sniffled again and nodded. “Thank you.”

Anna stroked her hair. Suddenly, she froze. “Oh, Mr. Reid, I didn’t see you there.”

“Just wanted to see how Cate was.”

Cate twisted to find him hovering inside the door. “Oh, Jack, I’m fine. Come in.”

“Actually,” Anna said, hurrying away, “she needs a bit of rest. We’ll leave you alone. Mr. Reid, have you seen our gardens? I think you’ll find them quite lovely. I understand you do a bit of gardening yourself.”

“Oh,” Cate said, her brow furrowing as Anna spirited him from the room, “but—“

“Leave it, Catherine. You will not convince Mother to bring him back.”

“He’s probably upset,” Cate answered, still staring at the now-closed door.

“So are you. Stop worrying about him and start worrying about yourself.”

Cate faced him, fluttering her eyelashes. “I’m fine.”

“You are definitely not.”

“I am,” Cate insisted. “My heart is beating normally. You should know that.”

“It is now. It wasn’t moments ago. It felt as though it was ready to burst.”

Cate sighed, clasping her hands in her lap. “This isn’t exactly easy. It’s a lot harder than I expected, actually.”

“What did you expect?”

Cate shrugged, staring up into his dark eyes. “Magic.”

The corners of his lips curled up, and she giggled. “Sorry, I couldn’t help myself.”

“Magic is not as simple as you may expect.”

“You certainly make it look easy,” she said, flopping back on the chaise.

He pressed her hand against his chest. “I am glad you think so. How are you feeling?”

Cate sucked in a deep breath. “Tired. I think the adrenaline is wearing off, and I’m realizing your mother was right.”

“She usually is,” Marcus said with a smirk. “You should rest.”

“No, I’ll never sleep tonight,” Cate said, pushing herself up to sit.

“I think Mother will handle that for you. I’m certain she will not want you to experience any dreams during the night. It robs you of your strength.”

“And I’m going to need that.” She glanced back toward the door. “Maybe a walk in the garden.”

“Are you going to the garden for you or for him?”

Cate snapped her gaze back to him. “Both.”

Marcus flexed his jaw with a huff. “At least you are honest.”

“He’s in another time, in a foreign country, and he’s worried about me.”

Marcus rose to stand, offering her his hand. “As am I.”

“I’m fine.” Cate lifted a shoulder. “And I find the garden relaxing.”

“Come along. At the risk of Mother scolding me, I will take you to the garden.”

Cate smiled up at him as she slid her hand into his and stood. “Thank you.”

“Of course. I cannot say no to you,” he said as he wrapped her arm around his and patted her hand.

“Don’t worry. I’ll tell her it was my fault if you get scolded.”

“It will not matter,” Marcus answered, leading her from her bedroom into the hall, “she will blame me.”

They strolled into the bright sunshine of the garden. Down the path, Anna pointed out a flowering plant with tiny pink buds.

She caught sight of them, her head tilting and her eyebrows shooting high. “What’s this?”

“It’s my fault,” Cate answered. “I twisted his arm into bringing me. I needed some fresh air, and I love the garden.”

Anna shot Marcus a glance before she returned her gaze to Cate. She felt her cheek, then her forehead, and finally her pulse. “Are you tired?”

“Yes,” Cate said with a nod, “but I’m well enough to take a brief stroll.”

“Make certain it is brief. You need your rest. You have been through a trying experience.”

“I plan to rest after dinner,” Cate answered before she turned to Jack. “How are you enjoying the gardens?”

“Oh, they’re lovely. Are you sure you’re okay?”

“I’m fine. Let me show you the roses.” She grabbed his hand and tugged him toward the bush near the overlook. She pointed out the tiny purple buds.

“Cate, are you sure you’re okay? I was worried sick.”

“I’m fine,” Cate assured him. “Really.”

Jack crinkled his brow, staring into the distance.

“Jack, I’m fine. This is just...very new. And I’m not making much progress with it.”

“What happened?”

Cate shifted her weight, pressing her lips together. “Anna gave me the bracelet. Every time I touch it, I get these visions. But I can’t make any sense of them.”

“And she hasn’t been able to help you control them?”

“She says the first thing I need to do is learn to experience the ones I expect without pain. And then we can work on slowing them down and deciphering them.”

“But you can’t.”

“Not so far. I’ve been trying to channel my happy memories but the minute I touch that bracelet, they all go right out of the window.” She fluttered her hand in the air.

Jack sucked in a deep breath, shaking his head. “I don’t know how you do it. I wouldn’t want any parts of this.”

“I have to. I have to figure this out before it destroys me. I hope to make some progress tomorrow.”

“Cate—”

“I think that’s enough for you, my dear,” Anna said as she tugged Marcus toward them. “Marcus, take her back to her room to rest. And I think you should eat there tonight.”

“Oh, I can—” Cate began.

“You will not,” Anna said. “You must rest.”

Cate pressed her lips together. “All right, but I’d like to grab the references from the library. I can’t sleep all evening.”

“Fine. As long as you don’t stress yourself,” Anna said.

“I promise.”

“I’ll walk you up, Cate,” Jack said with a nod.

“Oh, but we haven’t finished our tour,” Anna said with a gracious smile at him, cutting between him and Cate and slipping her hand through his

arm. "Come along, Mr. Reid."

Jack glanced over his shoulder as Anna led him away. Cate offered him a shrug and a wave.

"Ready?" Marcus asked as she turned back to face him.

"I'd better be before I get scolded," Cate said. "Did you get a tongue-lashing for bringing me down?"

"Nothing I couldn't handle. Though I will take you straight to your room and retrieve the book for you to avoid another."

"I can make it to the library," Cate said as they pushed back into the castle.

"You could and then I could carry you to your room or you could walk to your room and I can bring you the book."

Cate shook her head at him. "Fine, you can bring me the book."

"Are you certain? You know how I love to carry you about."

Cate rolled her eyes as a chuckle escaped her. They navigated through the halls to the sapphire bedroom. Cate pushed inside with a promise to rest as Marcus left to retrieve her book.

She stalked further into the room, blowing out a long breath. The trip to the garden had been more taxing than she was willing to admit. She craved stretching out in bed.

She drummed her hands against her thighs as she waited for Marcus to return. Her eyes fell onto the fine gold chain laying on the table.

Odd how such a tiny object could cause so much pain. She stalked toward it, staring down at it. Her hand trembled as she reached toward it again.

She snapped her hand back as the door clicked open behind her. "Your book, dear."

Cate spun to face him, accepting the thick tome. "Thank you."

"Do you need anything else?"

"Tea would be nice," she said. "And can you send Andrea?"

"Of course, dear," Marcus said. "I'll visit you later."

Cate smiled and nodded as he strode from the room. She flicked a gaze back to the bracelet before she left it behind in favor of staring out the window at the garden below. Anna continued to roam around with Jack.

Cate chuckled at the scene. Andrea arrived a moment later. Cate happily changed into her pajamas and settled in her bed with a warm cup of tea. Her mind wandered to her friends at Dunhaven. Their lives were almost frozen

in time. Worried about their jobs and their home, they had no clue Cate and crew had left to try to solve the issue.

She traced the outline of the book next to her. She had to solve it. They deserved better than to be used as pawns in Gianna's game. She tugged open the tome, searching for the entry on clairvoyance.

She struggled to focus on the words written on the page. Her mind wandered to her experience earlier this afternoon. Would she ever master these visions, or would they always defeat her? Would they always remain just beyond her grasp, warning her of something she'd never know?

Cate tossed the book to the side and threw back the covers. She slid her feet into her slippers and shuffled into the sitting room. She stared down at the bracelet on the side table.

Memories of her previous painful experience flashed across her mind. But it did not stop her from reaching toward it. Her fingers wrapped around the thin chain, and she rubbed the charm. Her fingernails traced the grooves of the monogram.

Her eyelashes fluttered as images began to flood into her mind. Pain throbbed at her temples as she fought to control the images and focus on something.

Her knees began to weaken, and she wobbled on her feet, stumbling forward. Her breathing turned raspy. She struggled to stay upright. A groan escaped her lips as the pain reached a fever pitch.

Cate unraveled her fingers, trying to drop the bracelet, but it tangled around her thumb. She shook her hand in a desperate attempt to free herself of the images, but she couldn't. She flailed her arm, but her vision began to close to a pinpoint.

She pitched forward, smacking her head off the edge of the side table before she collapsed to the floor.

CHAPTER 18



“Catherine?” Marcus’s voice echoed in her head. “Catherine, open your eyes.”

“What’s happened?” Anna asked.

“I found her collapsed with the bracelet in her hand. She appears to have hit her head.”

Footsteps scrambled into the room. “What can I do?” Andrea asked, breathless and panicked.

“Fetch a basin of water and a cloth. She’s still bleeding,” Anna answered.

Cate tried to force her eyes open, to tell them she was okay, but she couldn’t. Her eyelids stuck closed as though glued. Her limbs would not respond. And she couldn’t find her voice.

Warm fingers pressed against her wrist. “Her pulse is strong.”

“Her heartbeat is normal,” Marcus informed her.

“Good. With that prolonged exposure, she is likely exhausted. She will wake, darling. We must be patient.”

Footsteps sounded again. “Ah, thank you, Andrea.”

“May I stay?” Andrea asked.

Anna answered, “Yes, I’m certain she’d want you here.”

Cool, damp fabric pressed against her forehead, gently wiping at the skin. It stung, but her muscles were too weak to wince.

Warm fingers threaded through hers. “Please wake up, Your Grace,” Andrea squeaked.

Cate tried to squeeze her hand but found it impossible.

A finger traced the wound on her head, making it tingle.

"Cate?" Jack's voice exclaimed. "What the hell happened to her?"

"Calm down, Mr. Reid," Anna said. "She's fine. Merely exhausted."

"She doesn't look fine. She looks half-dead."

"Please stop your shouting," Anna answered.

"Will someone please tell me what happened to her?" Jack asked.

Anna heaved a sigh as the cloth pressed against her skin again. "She picked up the bracelet again. She must have held onto it for too long. She collapsed and hit her head."

"Oh, no," Jack groaned. "She needs a doctor."

"She will be fine," Anna argued.

"You don't know that," Jack shouted back. "And I'll be damned if I'm going to stand here, and let you two take care of her."

"Now, Mr. Reid, that is quite enough," Anna said, her voice turning heated. "I will not tolerate you speaking to me or my son that way. He is Catherine's husband, and I am her mother-in-law. There is no one more appropriate to care for her than those who love her."

Jack scoffed at the statement. "Oh, please."

"That is quite enough, Reid," Marcus said. "You can remain here only because Catherine would want you, but if you do not stop hurling accusations I shall remove you myself."

Silence pervaded the room for several seconds.

"Stay back and out of the way," Anna said. "I am less forgiving than my son."

What a nightmare, Cate thought. If I could only open my eyes.

Noises faded away as Cate drifted in and out of consciousness.

"...been hours. She needs a doctor," Jack said.

"What did I tell you, Mr. Reid? If you could not control yourself, I would ask you to leave."

"She hit her head. She could have a concussion."

Anna said, "She does not. She is perfectly healthy, merely exhausted."

"You don't know that," Jack responded.

"I do," Anna said. "I am quite experienced at this. She is perfectly fine. I would never risk Catherine's health."

"I've had enough of this," Jack answered.

A scuffle sounded, and her bed jiggled.

“Stop this right now,” Anna shouted. “Mr. Reid, if you cannot control yourself, I shall ask you to leave.”

“Oh, I’m not leaving her alone with you. No way.”

“Then keep your mouth shut,” Anna answered. A warm hand wrapped around hers. “You take your time coming back to us, Catherine. You get all the rest you need.”

“This is ridiculous,” Jack murmured.

Cate tried to force her eyes open but found the task impossible. *I’m okay, Jack.* Her lips would not form the words.

“Marcus,” Anna’s voice said a moment later, “open her music box.”

The tinkling music filled the air a moment later. Her muscles reacted to it, relaxing more until she drifted away.

When her senses returned, the music still played. *The music.* Perhaps that was the key. Maybe the music could help her focus on the images her mind tried to send her. It helped her through temporalysis.

First, though, she had to wake up. She had to open her eyes. She tried to force them open again.

“How long do you plan on waiting until you realize she’s not waking up?” Jack asked.

“Mr. Reid, how many times must I ask you not to interfere?”

“Enough,” Marcus snapped, “we are all here for Catherine. We—“

Cate flexed her fingers.

“What is it, Marcus?” Anna asked.

“She is waking. She squeezed my hand.” Fingers caressed her hair. “Catherine, can you open your eyes?”

Cate fought to force them open. Her blurry vision cleared a few seconds later.

“There she is,” Anna said, patting her hand. She shot a glance at Jack who stood near the end of the bed with Andrea.

“I’m here,” Cate whispered. “I’ve been here.”

She tried to push herself up, but Anna and Marcus stopped her.

“Easy, Catherine,” Anna said, “you are still weak.”

Cate swallowed hard as she settled back into the pillows. “I couldn’t let go of the bracelet. It got stuck.”

“Why did you try it again?”

“I don’t know,” Cate admitted. “I just—thought I could make progress but it got tangled around my thumb.”

“The prolonged exposure has exhausted you,” Anna said. “You must rest. Do you feel strong enough to eat a little?”

“Yes,” Cate said with a nod.

“I shall arrange it. Marcus, stay with her.”

“I will do it,” Andrea offered. “It’s so wonderful to see you awake, Your Grace.”

“Thank you, Andrea.”

The blonde bobbed her head up and down before she spun on a heel and disappeared from the room.

“How do you feel, Cate?” Jack asked.

Anna flexed her jaw, her annoyance with him clear. Cate shifted her gaze from her mother-in-law to Jack. “I’m just a bit tired.”

“Are you sure? You hit your head.”

Cate raised a leaden arm, her muscles aching, and rubbed her forehead.

Marcus stroked the spot she’d smacked. “There is no scar.”

“Thanks,” she said.

“Cate, you should get checked out by a doctor.”

“I’m fine,” she said. “Just tired from the experience. I’m sure after some sleep, I’ll be able to try—”

“No,” Anna said with a shake of her head. “No more for at least a day.”

“No,” Cate said, shoving at the bed to try to sit straighter. “I can do it.”

Anna raised her eyebrows. “I am the expert here. And I say you cannot.”

“For once, I agree with her,” Jack said.

“Well, I do not,” Cate said with a shake of her head. She flicked her gaze to Marcus. “Do you want to help out here?”

“Mother knows best.”

Cate huffed. “This isn’t fair. You’re ganging up on me.”

“We will make progress, dear,” Anna said. “I promise. But no more with the bracelet for now.”

Cate heaved another sigh as Andrea returned with a tray of food.

“All right,” Anna said as Cate polished off the meal, “now it is time for you to sleep.”

She rose from the chair, shooing Andrea and Jack back. “Time for us to leave. Marcus, if anything should change with her condition, you will let me know immediately.”

Jack shook his head. “I’m staying, too.”

“That is highly inappropriate, Mr. Reid. Catherine needs her rest. She does not need you hovering over her.”

Jack shook his head, wagging a finger in the air. “I’m not—“

“Okay, okay, that’s enough,” Cate said. All eyes turned to her. “I’m perfectly fine. You’re all very kind to worry so much, but I’m okay. Have any of you eaten dinner?”

“There is no need for you to worry about that,” Anna answered.

“I’ll take that as a no. Why don’t you eat, and Jack can stay with me and then switch.”

Marcus stroked her hair. “There is no need for that, dear, I can stay.”

Cate grabbed his hand and squeezed. “Go have dinner with your mother. Jack can wait with me, and then you can watch me sleep all night.”

Marcus heaved a sigh and narrowed his eyes at Jack. “Fine. Come along, Mother, we shall eat quickly.”

Anna arched an eyebrow and snapped her gaze to Jack. “Notify me if anything happens. And do not under any circumstances let her touch that bracelet.”

Jack held his hands up in silent acquiescence. “Come along, Marcus.”

“I shall stay, Your Grace.”

“No, Andrea, please go eat,” Cate said, waving her away.

“Are you certain?”

Cate nodded and smiled at her, sending her along her way.

Jack settled into one of the chairs near the bed with a sigh as the others slipped out of the room. He puffed out his cheeks and scrubbed his face with his hands before he focused on Cate.

“I thought we lost you.”

“Nope, still here. Although, I’m starting to think this room is cursed,” Cate said as she shifted around in the bed.

“Are you okay? Anything hurt?”

“No, nothing. I can’t believe I cracked my head. That hurt. But it’s fine now.”

“Cate, I think we need to get out of here. I don’t like this.”

Cate crinkled her brow and shook her head. “I’m kidding. It’s not cursed.”

“Well, I’m not. The moment something happened to you those two closed ranks. They would barely let me anywhere near you.”

Cate sucked in a breath, flicking her gaze to her lap. “I heard.”

Jack arched an eyebrow.

"I was conscious for much of the time. I could hear you. I just couldn't open my eyes or speak. Or move. I fell asleep for a little bit, but I heard most of it."

"Then you know what I'm talking about."

Cate tilted her head, grabbing his hand. "They're just trying to help."

"Help? Cate!" Jack exclaimed, leaning forward toward her. "You hit your head, and they swept it under the rug. They didn't want to do a damn thing. You could have been hurt."

"That's not true. They're not inexperienced. And remember Marcus can feel my heartbeat."

Jack pulled his hand away, flicking his gaze out the window and flexing his jaw. "Cate..."

"Jack," she said, grabbing his hand again. She softened her voice. "Jack..."

He fluttered his eyelashes, snapping his gaze to her.

"Anna is very protective. When I was in a coma from the snake bite, she accused Celine of poisoning me. Which is ridiculous," Cate said with a shrug. "But still...she is extremely protective."

Jack heaved a sigh. "I don't like it."

"I don't imagine you do. This is a tricky situation, though."

"Tricky isn't the word," Jack grouched. "I hate this."

"I'm sorry," Cate said with a squeeze of his hand.

"It's not your fault. You did what you had to do to save Dunhaven Castle. And you know, I'd rather these two than The Agency."

Cate smiled at him. "Me too." She eased back into the pillows and shook her head. "Anna is going to be so disappointed when Marcus and I divorce at the end of all of this."

"She doesn't know?"

Cate shook her head. "No. She thinks we've been married since 1810."

"Ho," Jack hooted with a half-grin. "Two centuries of marriage, and then it all falls apart."

Cate giggled as she shimmied lower in the bed, letting her head rest on the pillow. "And then he goes back to Celine. Oh, the horror."

"What? She didn't like Celine?"

Cate rolled her eyes, sucking in a breath as she shook her head. "Uh, in a word, no."

“Really? The very alluring Marquis’s daughter was not up to Anna’s standards?”

“Not in the slightest. She told me during our first conversation that Celine was, and I’m quoting here, a most disappointing choice.”

“Wow,” Jack said, dropping his chin to his chest. “No wonder she hates me. I’m just a gardener.”

“You’re hardly just a gardener,” Cate said.

“Yeah, well I’m not sure old Marc told her that.”

Cate chuckled, slapping a palm against her face. “Call him that to his face and see what happens.”

“Pass. I have no desire to live my life as a toad.”

“A toad?” she said, laughing harder. “You think he’d be that kind?”

“Maybe I’d be a slug.”

Cate burst into laughter as did Jack. They chuckled together for a few minutes until the door burst open and Marcus entered. His eyebrows raised high as he witnessed the scene. “How are you feeling, dear?”

“Much better,” Cate said with a final laugh.

“It seems Mr. Reid is doing an excellent job at entertaining you.”

Cate smiled at him and nodded. “As always. Thank you, Jack.”

“Is the show finished?”

Jack flicked his gaze between them before he stood. “If you’re feeling okay, Cate, I’ll go eat.”

“I’m feeling fine. Really, I don’t need a babysitter. Neither of you needs to stay.”

“I will be the judge of that,” Marcus said as he settled into the seat Jack vacated.

“Are you sure you’re all right?” Jack asked, squeezing her foot through the blanket.

“I’m sure. Have a good dinner.”

“Mind if I check back before I go to bed?”

“Not at all,” Cate answered as Marcus answered, “No.”

Cate snapped her gaze to him. “Marcus, he can stop by.”

“You may be asleep,” he answered.

“Then you can tell him that.”

“All right, dear. Please stop by on your way to retire,” Marcus grumbled.

Jack smiled at Cate and mouthed the word “slug” before he turned to leave.

Cate hid a smile as he strode from the room. Marcus arched an eyebrow as he stared after him. He spun back to face Cate as Jack slipped from the room.

“And what funny jokes did Mr. Reid have that lightened your spirits so?”

“Nothing,” Cate said as she adjusted her covers.

“A secret. Should I be worried?”

Cate offered him a coy glance. “No, though your mother sure was.”

“Mother is extremely protective of you.”

“And you.”

Marcus cocked his head. “What did he tell you?”

“He didn’t tell me anything. I could hear most of what went on.”

“Then you know Mother said nothing out of bounds.”

“I know,” Cate said, tracing the edge of her blanket. “But Jack is extremely off balance. This is not normal for him. He’s scared. He doesn’t understand.”

Marcus puckered his lips, crossing his arms. Cate reached for his hand, lacing her fingers through his. “I know you don’t like him. I’m pretty sure the feeling is mutual at the moment. But you have the upper hand in this situation and that’s what terrifies him.”

Marcus narrowed his eyes at her.

“You understand so much more of this world than he does. He’s running to catch up. Even I understand more than he does after our experience finding him. He’s still learning to trust you, but every other second he learns something new and terrifying and he’s struggling to keep up.”

“I suppose I can understand how it may be difficult for his feeble mind to comprehend.”

Cate tugged one corner of her lips back, glancing at him through her eyelashes. “Be nice.”

Marcus heaved a sigh, squeezing her hand. “You know I would never harm him, Catherine.”

“I know that. But he doesn’t yet.”

Marcus smiled at her. “I’m glad you know it. And that is all that matters to me.”

Cate slouched further down the bed. “Does that include not turning him into a slug?”

Marcus flicked his eyebrows up, puckering his lips as he considered it. “Tempting as it may be, no, I would not.”

“Good,” Cate answered with a sigh of relief. She snapped her gaze to him. “Wait, can you actually do that?”

Marcus narrowed his eyes at her with a coy grin. “I must keep some mystery about me, Catherine. I wouldn’t want you to become bored with me.”

Cate shook her head at him.

“And now I think it’s time for you to sleep.”

“I am tired. But I’m fine. You don’t need to stay. I am perfectly capable of sleeping on my own.”

“That is my call to make, and I am perfectly happy to watch you sleep so that I may be here should you need anything.” Marcus switched off the light, plunging the room into darkness. Moonlight shone through the window, illuminating some of the room as Cate settled back into the pillows.

Within moments she drifted off to sleep. When Cate snapped her eyes open, the room remained dark. “Marcus?” she called into the darkness, wondering what happened to the moonlight.

She turned on the light, finding the chair he’d sat in earlier empty. He must have gone to bed, convinced she was okay.

She shivered, rubbing her arms after she switched off the light again. A breeze tickled her skin as she settled back into the pillows.

With a start, she flicked the light on again, glancing around the room. Everything seemed normal. Cate crinkled her brow, clicking the light off. Just as she settled back into her pillows again, a shiver snaked down her spine.

She turned the light on again, searching her bed for a serpent. She found nothing. As she settled the covers over her again, movement caught her eye.

A cloaked figure stepped out from behind the wardrobe and stalked toward her. Cate’s heart pounded as she stared at the person.

The figure tossed her hood back. Gianna smirked at her as she sauntered closer. “Hello, Cate.”

“What are you doing here?” Cate demanded.

She swung her legs over the bed and attempted to stand. Gianna raced around the corner and shoved her down to the mattress.

“Marcus!” Cate called.

“He can’t hear you.”

Cate pressed her hand against her chest. “He’ll know.”

One corner of Gianna’s lips tugged back. “I hope he does. We’re going to take everything from you, Cate.” She leaned closer, whispering in Cate’s ear. “Everything.”

“I won’t let you,” Cate said through clenched teeth.

Gianna grabbed a pillow, squeezing it between her hands. “You won’t be able to stop me.”

She pressed the pillow over Cate’s face and smashed her against the bed.

CHAPTER 19



Cate startled awake, flailing her arms as she cried out.
“Catherine?” Marcus asked, leaping to his feet.

Cate gasped, her heart pounding. She squinted against the light as he flicked it on. She searched the room, her eyes darting around wildly.

“Catherine, what is it?” he asked, slicking a wayward lock of her hair behind her ear.

“I...Gianna...she...” Cate heaved a deep breath. “It was a dream.”

“Just a dream or a vision?”

Cate crinkled her brow. “No, a nightmare, I think. She was here. She was...”

“She is not here. You are safe.”

Cate grabbed his hand as she steadied her breathing. She slid her eyes closed, slowly sucking in a breath. Marcus wrapped his arms around her as he sank onto the bed next to her. She clung to him as her fear dissipated.

She pushed away from him a few moments later. “I’m okay.”

“Are you certain?”

“Yes. I really wish I hadn’t met her.”

“But then we never would have reconnected, and I’m certain you’d agree that was a high point.”

Cate chuckled as she settled back in her pillows. “Certainly the high point of the situation.”

“Has Jack checked in?”

“Yes, dear, hours ago. It’s nearly morning.”

“Was I asleep?”

“Soundly. I sent him on his way to bed. I did not turn him into a slug.”

Cate laughed at his statement before she sobered. “Oh, Jack!” She snapped her gaze to Marcus. “We need to check on him. What if it wasn’t a dream? What if I misinterpreted it, and it was a warning? She said she’d take everything from me. What if she took Jack again?”

“Calm yourself, Catherine. I’m certain he is fine. Rosenberg is a veritable fortress.”

Cate tossed her covers back. “And one where I was bitten by a poisonous snake.”

“While it was open for a party. I’m certain no one could have entered.”

“I want to be more certain,” Cate said, pulling her robe around her.

“All right,” Marcus said with a sigh as he rose.

Cate slid her slippers on and stood. “Please don’t make me stay here alone.”

“Certainly not. I am not letting you out of my sight.”

Cate nodded, grabbing his hand and dragging him forward. They navigated the distance to Jack’s room.

Cate pressed an ear against the door, knocking lightly. “I don’t hear anything.”

She banged against it again, shifting her weight from foot to foot. With a shake of her head, she grabbed the knob and twisted it. It didn’t budge. “It’s locked. Why would it be locked?”

Cate flung her hand toward it. “Open it.”

“Catherine, I—“

“Open it.”

Marcus sucked in a breath and flicked his eyebrows up. “Fine.”

With a flick of his wrist, he unlocked the door and pushed it into the room. Cate crept into the dark room. “Where are the lights?”

“On the left wall. Wait!” He pointed a finger forward. Cate followed the line of his finger. A lump poked up the covers in the bed, limned in moonlight.

Cate crept forward, craning her neck to stare down at him. Jack lay on his side, sleeping soundly. She waited, counting his breaths. She blew out a sigh of relief.

“Satisfied, dear?” Marcus whispered as he wrapped an arm around her shoulders.

“Yes,” she said, leaning a head against his shoulder as she patted his hand. Her brow crinkled. “Why was his door locked?”

“I’m certain he had his reasons.”

“What reasons? Why lock the door?”

“I do not know, but I do not believe we should debate it here.”

Cate stared down at him. “Was he afraid of something?”

“Catherine, it does not matter. He is fine. Let’s get you back to bed.”

“I’m just curious. I—“

“Whoa!” Jack shouted, drawing her attention from Marcus.

“Jack,” Cate said.

Jack tugged the covers up to his chin. “What the hell is happening?”

“I had a bad dream. I wanted to check on you.”

Jack’s eyes slid to Marcus. “And him?”

“I was worried about you. We came to check on you together. And good thing, you locked your door. Why did you lock your door?”

Jack pressed his lips together, his eyes lingering on Marcus. “This is pretty close to the exact scenario I imagined when I decided to lock it.”

Cate collapsed on the edge of the bed. “Very funny. Are you sure you’re okay?”

Jack swallowed hard, lowering the covers with a nod. “Yes. I’m sure. I’m fine, Cate. I’m okay. How are you feeling? Have you gotten any sleep?”

Cate bobbed her head up and down. “Yes. Until I had that stupid nightmare. Don’t worry, it wasn’t a vision. Just a regular old nightmare.”

“Are you sure?”

“I am. If you’re sure you’re okay, I’ll head back and try to get more rest. I just wanted to check on you.” Cate grabbed his hand and squeezed.

“Maybe I should come back with you. I can stay—“

“That will not be necessary,” Marcus informed him, patting Cate’s shoulder. “I will be with her.”

“That’s not comforting.”

“I am not concerned about your comfort,” Marcus retorted.

Jack pushed back his covers. “Which is why I should go with you.”

“No,” Marcus said flatly.

Cate patted Jack’s hand. “No, you need your rest, too. It’s fine.” She stood and pulled his covers up over him.

“Cate—“

Cate pressed her hand against his again. "It's fine, Jack. I'm perfectly safe with Marcus."

Jack narrowed his eyes as he glanced up at the man. "If you're sure you feel comfortable."

"Absolutely," Cate said with a reassuring smile.

"Would you mind giving us a minute?" Jack asked Marcus.

"I would," he answered.

"Marcus," Cate said with a tilt of her head, "give us a minute."

Marcus puckered his lips, studying her. He traced the line of her jaw. "Do not be long. You need your rest."

She nodded in response as he strode from the room, twisting to give them one last look over his shoulder before he stepped into the hall.

"Cate..." Jack started, taking her hand.

She collapsed onto the edge of the bed. "I'm fine, Jack."

"Are you really? Are you sure it wasn't a vision?"

"Yes, because those make me tired, but I don't feel that tired. I just wanted to be sure."

Jack licked his lips, blowing out a sigh as he slumped back into his pillows. "And what about the rest?"

Cate crinkled her brow. "The rest of what?"

Jack nudged his head toward the door. "Him?"

"Marcus?"

Jack nodded at her question.

"He's fine. I feel safe with him."

Jack stared at her for a moment, studying her face. "Okay, as long as you're comfortable."

"He won't let anything happen to me," Cate said as she rose to stand. "Oh, and he promised not to turn you into a slug."

Jack's eyes went wide. "You told him?"

"No, I didn't tell him exactly. He promised he'd never hurt you. I felt it was prudent to ask if that included turning you into a slug."

"And he said he couldn't. That's a relief."

"Well, he didn't say he couldn't, just that he wouldn't."

Jack stared at her with a blank expression. "I don't know if I like this new world we live in."

Cate giggled at him. "You'll get used to it. Just like you did with time travel. Good night, Jack."

She shuffled across the room as he called after her, "I'm still not used to time travel!"

She spun, chuckling again. "Good night, Jack."

"Good night, Cate."

Cate waved as she slipped through his door into the hall.

Marcus pulled himself from leaning against the wall. "Have you settled his nerves?"

Cate slipped her arm into his and pulled him down the hall. "Yes."

"Wonderful."

"You could give him a break, you know? He's—"

"Struggling to keep up, I know. Though it is my duty to worry about you first. You, too, are struggling."

They turned the corner on the long walk back to her suite. "I'm not. We spent a lot of time together rescuing him. I'm way more used to this than he is."

Marcus stopped, turning her to face him. "You are still acclimating to this world and your new condition. And you are Gianna's main target."

Cate opened her mouth to respond, but he pressed a finger to her lips, silencing her.

"I understand your urge to protect him, but you must allow me to worry about you."

Her lips tugged up at the corners as she stared up at him. "I guess I can let you do that."

"Good," he said, flicking his eyebrows up. "Now, perhaps you'll allow me to carry you back to your room."

"No," Cate said, wagging her finger at him. "I can walk."

"But you're allowing me to worry about you."

"Worry, not carry. Those two letters at the start make a *big* difference."

Marcus chuckled at her as they pushed into her room.

"See, I made it," she said with a grin as she doffed her robe and climbed into bed. "I walked all that way on my own. Amazing."

"Yes, it is," Marcus said as she slouched down and pulled the covers over her. "You are an incredible woman, Catherine."

"Mmm-hmm," she said as he settled into the chair next to her bed. "Absolutely astounding. The real astonishing bit was the way I put one foot in front of the other over and over until we got here."

“That is not what I meant, and you know it. But it’s time for you to rest.”

Cate smiled at him as he turned off the light. She settled back in her pillows, letting the smile play on her lips until she drifted off to sleep.

When her eyes opened again, light streamed into the room from the large window. She squinted against it as she searched the chair for Marcus. Instead, she found Anna in his place.

“Good morning, Catherine,” she said with a smile, patting her hand. “You probably expected Marcus and I am a poor substitute, but I sent him away early this morning.”

“Oh,” Cate said as she pushed up to sit, “certainly not a poor substitute. And I am glad you sent him, hopefully, to rest. He stayed all night.”

“I know. He does worry over you so. Though I can see why.”

Cate smiled at her, feeling heat rise into her cheeks. The thought of Anna’s upset at their inevitable divorce raced across her mind. She licked her lips, searching her mind for conversation.

“The truth is I wanted to try something. I know Marcus would object, but I’m hoping you’re game.”

Cate flicked her gaze to the woman. “What is it?”

She offered her an amused smile and held a finger up before she hurried from the room. She returned with the purple rose.

“This should elicit a similar reaction as the bracelet, however, the future memory should be quite pleasant, I think. I thought we could try that and see how it goes. It should be a bit less taxing. What do you think?”

Cate stared at the purple rose floating in the case before she flicked her gaze to Anna. “I think I’m glad you sent Marcus away.”

Anna chuckled as she slid the glass case onto the night table and eased into the chair. “There is no rush to try. Whenever you are ready, though perhaps after your breakfast.”

Cate nodded in agreement, flinging off her covers.

“Oh, no, no, you remain abed. I shall ring for it.”

“That’s nonsense, I’m—“

“Recovering and hoping to try again today. Do not waste your energy traversing the halls for a meal that can be delivered to you.”

Cate tugged the covers over her as Anna pulled the cord on the wall. “Marcus tells me your search for your ancestor took you to London.”

“Yes, it did,” Cate said, tracing the edge of her blanket.

“And how did you find the London home?”

“It’s lovely and very convenient.”

“I always thought it rather a bore. Possibly because Marcus’s father typically left me there to do business. I do hope that isn’t the case with you. I have warned him not to neglect you.”

“He doesn’t,” Cate assured her as Andrea arrived with a breakfast tray.

“Shall I wait for you to dress, Your Grace?”

“No, no, Andrea, we’ll manage,” Anna said, shooing her away.

“And Marcus tells me you haven’t yet been to Stratfordshire or Wintervale.”

Cate scooped up a spoonful of porridge. “No.”

Anna propped her head on her chin, staring into space. “How odd.”

“I’m certain it’s because we’ve been so busy—“

Anna waved a hand in the air, cutting off her answer. “There is no excuse. You really should view the properties at the very least so that you may begin making the changes you’d like to make it your home.”

Cate shook her head. “Oh—“

“Do not be shy, Catherine, my son has a fortune and it should be devoted to making you happy. Make all the changes you’d like so you are happy there. It is your home now.”

“Homes,” Cate said with a shrug as she scooped up more of the porridge.

“Yes, dear, homes. Of which we have acquired many over the years. And they are all yours now. This palace included. I really should ask if there are any changes—“

Cate grabbed her hand. “No. That is where I draw the line. This is your home. I wouldn’t change a thing.”

Anna’s shoulders slumped as she wrapped Cate’s hand in both of hers. Tears shone in her eyes. “Oh, Catherine, Marcus could not have selected better in a wife.”

Cate flicked her gaze to her bowl, pushing around the porridge.

“I don’t mean to embarrass you, dear, but...” She heaved a sigh. “Well, I feel we have dodged a bullet. His near marriage to that...*woman* would have ruined him.”

Cate forced a smile onto her face. “I’m sure—“

“Oh, please, you do not need to be gracious.” She patted Cate’s arm. “Admit it, Catherine, you are far better.”

The smile on Cate's face broadened. "I'm not sure about that, but I am glad you think so."

"I know so. Now," she said, lifting the tray from Cate's lap, "let's get you dressed."

Cate climbed from her bed, trying to shake off the guilt building inside her over the previous conversation. She pushed it aside as they moved on to other topics.

When they finished, Cate's eyes fell on the rose across the room. "Would it be okay if we tried now?"

"If you're feeling up to it, dear, yes. Why don't you lay back in your bed and try to relax? Remember these will still be taxing, but I hope not as taxing."

Cate nodded, reaching for her music box. "I had an idea in the middle of the night, too." She lifted the box in the air, opening the top before she set it down on the night table. "I thought this may relax me. It helped so much during my temporalysis."

"Oh, I'm so glad you enjoy that little box."

"I cherish it," Cate answered as she settled into her pillows.

"Let me know when you're ready, dear, and I'll give you the rose."

Cate shimmied, trying to find a comfortable spot as she focused on the music. "How do you know these memories will be positive?"

"I do not know for certain, but since this object represents a positive moment for you in the past *and* you reacted to it once before, I believe this will show you positive future moments."

Cate nodded, recalling the moment when she'd received the rose from Marcus in the garden below. The memory brought a smile to her face. She sucked in a breath and flicked her gaze to Anna. "I'm ready."

Anna slid the glass off and set it aside. She retrieved the rose from where it floated and passed it to Cate. "Remember, still taxing so don't push too far."

"Right," Cate said with a curt bob of her head. Her heart beat faster as she reached toward the rose. She blew out a controlled breath, focusing on the music and the memory of the rose. Her fingers caressed the petals. Visions whipped across her mind in a blinding blur.

Her breathing turned ragged as she struggled to focus. Tension built at her temples. She fought against it, desperate to make some progress. The

music tinkled in the background as her mind wrestled with the future memories.

“Catherine?” Anna questioned.

“Wait,” she breathed. Her eyelids fluttered before sliding closed, and her forehead crinkled. She forced her heart rate slower and her breathing steadier. Her mind converged on one crystal clear image.

She sucked in a breath as she pulled her fingers away from the rose and flicked her gaze to Anna. “It worked.”

CHAPTER 20



“It worked,” Cate repeated as she pinched her eyebrows together. The future memory danced across her mind.

Anna clapped her hands together with a grin. “Catherine! That’s wonderful! And you could see the memory clearly?”

Cate matched her expression. “I did. Yes, crystal clear. Like I was standing right there.”

“That is wonderful. Excellent progress.”

Cate bit her lower lip as she reflected on the future memory she’d seen. Her forehead crinkled. “Are they real?”

Anna tilted her head. “What do you mean?”

“Are the future memories definitely going to happen?”

“Oh, yes.”

“No way to avoid them?”

Anna narrowed her eyes at Cate. “I’m growing concerned this happy future memory was not quite so happy.”

Cate chuckled. “Oh, no, it seemed very happy, but...I’m just curious to know how sure they are. Could my brain create something that won’t happen? Has that ever happened to you? I want to know more for the bad ones.”

“Oh, yes. Can your brain mislead you? Yes, certainly, but that’s usually due to misreading the information you’re given. You’re fed things not to avoid them but to prepare to handle them in the best way possible. However, perhaps you witness your friend crying and interpret it as your

friend being harmed when really she is crying happy tears because she is with child.”

Cate sucked in a breath as she considered it. “I see. Okay. I’m ready to try the bracelet.”

“Catherine! You can’t.”

“I can. I succeeded.”

“Once. You succeeded once. You need more practice and more patience.”

“But—“

The door to her suite burst open, and Marcus strode inside. “Good morning, Catherine. What does Mother have you doing that has your heart rate up?” He kissed her cheek before leaning on the bed to await her response.

“We are practicing,” Anna said, waving the rose at him before she returned it to its glass case.

“And?” Marcus asked, directing the question to Cate.

“And it worked!” she exclaimed with a grin. She flicked her gaze up to him and raised her shoulders.

Marcus arched an eyebrow at her, smiling. “Excellent work, dear.”

Anna patted her hand. “She did so well. And so quickly. You are an excellent pupil, Catherine.”

“I want to try the bracelet again, but—“

“No,” Marcus and Anna said simultaneously.

Cate’s shoulders slumped as she flicked her gaze between them. “This is ridiculous. I made progress.”

“And you are still learning. You managed to make sense of a happy future memory. The bracelet will be very different,” Anna said.

“I will never learn how to tame the bad ones if I don’t try.”

Anna grabbed Cate’s hand and rubbed it as she shifted her gaze to Marcus. “Oh, Marcus, I do like her.”

“As do I.”

Cate tapped her foot in the air as she puckered her lips. “I appreciate how much you both like me, but I still think I should try the bracelet.”

“Tell you what, dear. You try the rose again in a bit. If you can easily focus on another future memory, I’ll let you try the bracelet this evening.” She held up a finger. “Just once.”

Cate tugged back one corner of her lips and crinkled her nose.

“Mother is right.”

“As I always am,” Anna said, raising her eyebrows and smiling as a knock sounded at the door. “Come in.” She snapped her gaze to Cate. “Oh, I’m sorry, dear.”

“It’s fine,” Cate said as Andrea popped her head in.

“Your Grace? Just checking in to make sure you managed everything this morning.”

“Yes, I’m fine, Andrea, thank you.”

Andrea smiled and nodded, sliding her eyes sideways. “Also, Mr. Reid is here inquiring after you.”

“We’re busy,” Marcus answered as Cate said, “Send him in.”

Marcus huffed out a breath and nodded at Andrea.

Andrea smiled at them before she stepped back. Jack strode in a moment later. “Good morning, everyone,” he said, his eyes darting around at the three of them. “Cate, how are you feeling?”

“Very well, thank you. We’re making progress with my visions.”

Jack flicked his eyebrows up. “Really? Did you see anything about Gertrude?”

Cate shook her head. “No, we’re working on another angle that’s less painful.”

Anna tightened her fingers around Cate’s hand. “We must be careful to not overtax her.”

“Yeah, definitely,” Jack said, sliding his hands into his pockets. “That sounds like a good plan.”

He sucked in a breath and nodded, his head bobbing up and down over and over.

“Would you mind taking a walk with me to the garden? I could use some fresh air,” Cate said.

A grin spread across Jack’s face. “Of course.”

Cate nodded and swung her legs off the bed. She patted Anna’s hand. “We’ll try again when I get back?”

“Of course, dear.”

“I’ll go with you,” Marcus said as Cate rose from the mattress.

“Actually, darling, if you wouldn’t mind staying, I’d like a word with you,” Anna said.

Marcus pressed his lips together into a thin line as Cate slid her hand around Jack’s arm. “Fine.”

“We won’t be long,” Cate assured him. They left her suite behind and navigated the halls to the door leading to the garden. Cate squinted as she stepped into the bright sunshine, shielding her eyes as they wandered through the spring blooms.

“Glad I stopped by when I did,” Jack said.

“Sorry to have kept you in the dark. When I woke up Anna was already there, and she wanted to try my visions with a different object, and—“

“You don’t need to apologize, Cate. I know you’re just doing what you have to. But I’m glad I came when I did to rescue you.”

Cate sniffed at the purple rose buds. “Oh, I didn’t need to be rescued. They’re taking excellent care of me.”

Jack furrowed his brow. “Oh, I thought...you seemed like you wanted to get out of there.”

Cate sucked in a breath. “It has been a little uncomfortable.”

“I knew it,” Jack said, shifting his gaze out over the landscape. “As beautiful as this place is, we need to get out of here.”

Cate fingered the delicate petals of the blooming buds. “No, we’re so close to making progress.”

“Cate, progress doesn’t matter if you’re—“

“I’m not. It’s not what you think.”

He gazed sideways at her. “Care to explain?”

Cate slid her eyes closed, her features pinching. She licked her lips before she fluttered her eyes open. She wandered to the stone wall circling the mountaintop garden and stared out over the rolling hills. “This is not going to end well.”

Jack rubbed her shoulders. “I’m sure we can figure this out. We’ll get the will fixed.”

“No, not the will.” Cate rolled her head to the side. “Anna wants to know when I’m going to start redecorating the houses. She’s shocked that I haven’t been to Havershire or whatever shire it is Marcus owns and the other one and the other one. And if I want changes at the palace to tell her.”

She covered her face with her hands as she sighed. “I’m certain that’s what they’re talking about now. She’s going to be so disappointed when she finds out the truth.”

“Why does it matter?”

“I actually like Anna. I don’t want her hurt in this charade.”

Jack wiggled his eyebrows, shifting his gaze to the landscape again. “Hopefully, it’ll all be over soon and you won’t have to worry about it anymore.”

Cate sucked in a deep breath and nodded. “With any luck. I made some progress with the visions. But no one will let me try the bracelet again. It must have something to do with Gertrude.”

“But you saw something, right?”

Cate nodded, avoiding his gaze.

“What?”

“What?” she asked.

“What did you see?”

“Oh, um, nothing to do with Gertrude. Nothing to do with anything. It was fleeting, but I could center on it. But I used the rose which brought a happy future memory.”

“Future memory?”

Cate bobbed her head up and down. “That’s what they are called. The visions. And they do feel like memories. It’s weird. Anyway, I saw something obscure that doesn’t help us at all. And no one will let me touch the bracelet.”

Jack rubbed her shoulders again. “What do you think everyone’s doing at home?”

Cate stared out at the bright blue sky as the fluffy white clouds floated across it. “It’s kind of weird because the answer is nothing, right?”

“What?” Jack asked, his hand freezing on her shoulder.

“Well, think about it. We’re here, living through days, but...Marcus will return us to almost exactly the moment we left. Only moments will have passed. So...at home, our friends are frozen in time.”

Jack scrubbed at his face. “This is...weird. So, okay, how does this work? What if we fix all this? What if we fix the will? What happens when we get back?”

“Everything will be different.”

Jack remained silent, rubbing his chin as he considered the statement. “Is that what happened when I went missing?”

“Yeah,” Cate said with a nod. “I went to the library and you were gone but for everyone else, you’d be gone for a week. So, if we fix things, we’ll go back and Mr. Smythe will be really confused about what’s happened. No one will know why the will is different.”

“But we’ll remember.”

“We’ll remember,” Cate said. “Nothing will have changed for us. But everything will have changed for everyone else in the house.”

Jack sighed, resting his chin in his palm as he balanced his elbow against his other arm. “I hope I can survive all this. It’s just getting weirder and weirder.”

Cate chuckled at him. “I mean, at least we can fix things, right? And then we’ll just need to explain why things changed. Oh, maybe we can update the will after the last one with the codicil removed. That would fix it. I think.”

“Right,” Jack said, bobbing his head up and down. “Wait, couldn’t you have brought me back early and stopped everyone from remembering I was missing?”

“We returned with you after we went searching. I guess we could have returned with you around when you disappeared, but...” Cate crinkled her brow. “Then there may have been two of you.”

Jack’s eyes went wide. “Two of me? That’s...” He took a few breaths, his mouth hanging open. “So, I could, in theory, talk to myself.”

“You could tell yourself how dashing you are. Or make bad puns to yourself,” Cate said.

“Or make excellent puns,” Jack pointed out.

“Either. Both.”

Jack rubbed his chin again. “Can I ask you something?”

“Sure.”

“Have you...talked to yourself?”

Cate shook her head. “No. I’ve never talked to myself, but I saw myself with you in 1942.”

Jack’s head slid forward as he stared at her. “You saw...yourself.”

“Yeah. I saw myself with you. I wanted to grab you back then but it was the wrong you. The right you was with Gianna. It’s really confusing, but yes, I saw myself.”

“Did you see you?”

“No, the other me didn’t see me.”

“Whew,” Jack said, rubbing his forehead. “Good thing. Or else the universe may have blown up.”

Cate screwed up her face and chuckled. “What?”

“The universe will explode. It’s like a basic tenant of time travel.”

“I’m not sure that’s true.”

“I think it is. In Back to the Future, the lady couldn’t handle seeing her older self. She passed out.”

“I was only two days older.”

“Still...” Jack said with a shrug.

“It’s not a problem. Believe me.”

Jack wagged his finger at her. “You don’t know that, Cate. And as a Reid, I’m going to pull the safety card on this one and say just don’t do it.”

“But it’s fine. Really, I promise.”

“You can’t know.”

“But I do. In 1810, Marcus had an 1810 counterpart.”

Jack’s eyes went wide, and his jaw fell open again. “No. His eyes floated to the castle. Two Dukes?”

“Yep. And they talk to each other. They tell each other things. Like the future and what they should do.”

Jack stared down at the ground, kicking the gravel around on the path. “I can’t believe I’m going to say this, but...I’m kind of glad I was unconscious for that.”

Cate pressed her lips together and shook her head as she playfully patted his arm. “Well, I am not. You were really sick. I would have preferred you to have been fully conscious.”

“I wouldn’t have stayed that way after I saw that,” Jack answered.

Cate sucked in a breath. “Anyway, I guess we’ll find out how things happen this time. If anyone ever lets me touch that bracelet.”

“You’re way braver than I am, Cate,” Jack said. “I don’t think I could do what you’re doing. Scratch that. I know I couldn’t do it.”

“Yes, you could. You could do it for Dunhaven. For Molly, for the Frasers, for me.”

“I think you’re way braver than me.”

Cate shifted her gaze to the palace’s wall. “I guess we should head back.”

“Yes, I’m sure Mama Northcott is pacing the halls because you’ve spent far too long away from her darling baby boy.”

Cate giggled as they strolled back toward the door.

“You know, I never know what to call her. But I have a feeling if I called her Anna she’d faint dead away.”

“Technically, you should call her Your Grace. She’s the mother of a Duke.”

“Technically, I should call you Your Grace. You’re the wife of a Duke. Though it sounds so strange when that girl says it. Andrea, is it?”

Cate nodded as they pushed into the castle’s hall. “Yes. Andrea. And Cate is just fine.”

“You’ve never been one for titles,” Jack said in his best Marcus voice.

Cate pressed her lips together as she suppressed another giggle.

“And are you certain you don’t prefer Catherine?”

Cate shot him a sideways glance. “Yes, I’m sure. You’re going to get yourself in trouble with your joking.”

They wound through the halls to her bedroom suite. Cate pushed inside, finding the room empty. “No one’s here.”

Jack scanned the space before he slipped inside. “At the risk of being beheaded, I’ll come in.”

“They’re not going to behead you.”

“You don’t know that,” Jack said with a wag of his finger. “They must still be discussing all those renovations you’re going to do at the house in Stratfordshire. Or perhaps the Mayberry estate. Or maybe the London home. And when you’ll have tea with the Queen.” Jack waved a finger in the air as he did his best Queen voice.

Cate shook her head as she giggled. “I’m glad the temporalysis has not dampened your sense of humor.”

“Mrs. Campbell is going to be thrilled if you stay married through your one-year anniversary.”

Cate sighed and sank onto her chaise. “I’m not certain what I dread more. Mrs. Campbell’s one-year extravaganza—“

“Don’t forget The Presidents’ Ball right on its heels.”

“Right, and that, or touching that bracelet again.” Cate slid her eyes sideways to the gold chain on the side table.

“The bracelet would win for me.”

“I think it wins for me too.” Cate stared at it before she glanced around the room. “And no one is here to stop me so...” She reached for the chain when Jack smacked her hand back.

“I’m here to stop you.”

Cate snapped her gaze to him, her jaw hanging open. “Jack!”

“No, Cate. I’m not going to be turned into a frog because I let you pick that thing up.”

“No one is turning anyone into a frog. And if you don’t let me try, we’ll never find out if I can do this. No one will let me try it.”

“Well, you’re not doing it on my watch. No way. I’m not going to let you do and get the wrath of the Northcotts while you lay unconscious. I had enough of that last night, and I didn’t even do anything.”

“Okay, fine. I’ll wait until you leave.”

Jack plopped into the armchair and flung his hands out. “Looks like you’ll have a long wait. Because I’m not leaving.”

Cate threw herself back onto the chaise, letting her body go limp. “Ugh. We’ll never solve this.”

Jack drummed his fingers on the arm of the chair. “I’ll win favor with those Northcotts yet.”

She poked a finger at him. “You should be worried about winning favor with me. I’m the MacKenzie.”

“And I’m the Reid. I’m supposed to protect you. Always.”

“Well, you are, by letting me pick this up, searching for information about Gertrude or whatever is happening with The Agency and defeating them!”

Jack wrinkled his nose. “Stop trying to convince me. I am not going to be the reason you’re unconscious in the bed.”

“You wouldn’t be. I’m the one doing this. I know what I’m doing. And I was able to make progress this morning. My music box helps. I’m going to try that when I touch the bracelet and see if it works.”

“And what if it doesn’t? What am I supposed to do, just let you lay there unconscious until one of those two wander back in and say, ‘Oh, hi, Cate’s unconscious, don’t know when she’ll wake up.’”

“No, of course not. Hopefully, I won’t be unconscious. I only passed out last night because the stupid chain got caught on my thumb.”

Jack pursed his lips and clasped his hands in front of him, avoiding her gaze.

“Jack, you can monitor it. Pull it off me if I struggle too much. But let me try.”

He slid his eyes closed and puckered his lips. “Damn it, Cate. If you get me turned into a dog, I’m going to bite you.”

“Deal. You can bite me if Marcus turns you into a dog. Until then, grab that bracelet, and let’s go.”

Jack slid the jewelry piece off the table with a shake of his head as Cate hurried into the bedroom. She opened the lid of the music box before she stretched out on the bed.

“Okay, I need to prepare to touch that. I’ll let you know when I’m ready. Lay it in my hand. It’ll be taxing on me, but don’t pull it away too quickly.”

Jack huffed out a sigh, sliding his eyes closed. “Oh, Cate. I’m nervous.”

“Don’t be. It’ll be all right.”

“I really hope so.”

Cate squeezed his hand and settled back into the pillows. She closed her eyes, letting the music wash over her. She steadied her breathing. She opened her eyes, staring at the bracelet. Her heart skipped a beat as she stared at it.

She shifted her gaze to the purple rose in its case next to the piano music box. The memory of receiving them along with her earlier future memory settled in her mind.

“Okay,” she whispered. “Give me the bracelet.”

With her eyes trained on the two gifts and the music playing, the metal, warm from Jack’s skin, slid across her skin. She struggled to keep her eyes focused as memories raced through her mind. Tension twisted at her temples. Pain began to build. She winced.

“Cate?” Jack asked, leaping from his seat and hovering over her.

“Wait,” she squeaked.

She gritted her teeth as she struggled to process the blur.

“Cate!”

“Wait,” she said again. Her breathing turned ragged.

“That’s it, I’m taking it,” Jack said. He whipped the bracelet from her hand as she collapsed backward.

Exhausted, she struggled to suck in breaths. The doors to her suite burst open and Marcus raced in, followed by Anna.

“What’s happened? What have you done?” he shouted at Jack.

“She wanted to try the bracelet. I—“

“She what? And you let her?”

“I’m fine,” Cate whispered.

Marcus grabbed her hand, stroking her hair. Anna pushed past Jack, squeezing Cate’s other hand in hers.

“I’m fine,” she repeated. “And I think I know where Gertrude is.”

CHAPTER 21



“Cate, are you serious?” Jack asked from the foot of her bed. “You know where she is.”

Cate struggled to push herself up. She made it as far as her elbows before Anna and Marcus stopped her.

“Easy, Catherine,” Anna said.

“I’m fine, really. And I managed to get some clarity in my future memory that may help us.”

“What did you see?” Jack asked, earning a glare from both mother and son.

“I saw a...house or something. It looked abandoned. I saw Gertrude there. She was...” Cate’s features pinched. “Tied to a chair. It was dark. Ummm—”

“All right, easy, Catherine,” Marcus said. “Take your time. There’s no need to rush.”

Cate struggled to sit up further. “There is. She’s trapped there. We can solve this. We can—”

“Do you know the exact location?” Marcus asked.

Cate collapsed back into the pillows. “No.”

“Then we have more work to do.”

Cate covered her face with her hands.

Anna pulled them away, squeezing them in hers. “It’s all right, Catherine. This is incredible progress. I’m amazed.”

Cate sighed. “It’s not enough progress.”

“It’s plenty,” Marcus said.

“And each time you try, you’ll get better. And you’ll get more information,” Anna said.

Cate nodded and waved at Jack for the bracelet. “Okay, I’ll try again now.”

“No,” Anna and Marcus said simultaneously.

Anna shook her head. “You can’t try again this quickly.”

“Yes, I can.”

“You’re going to overtax yourself. You’re still unsure, and you’re going to hurt yourself,” Anna answered. “You don’t want to end up like you did last night.”

Cate’s shoulders slumped again.

“Maybe they’re right, Cate,” Jack said, squeezing her toes.

“Now, you’re all ganging up on me,” Cate said with an amused eye roll. “Fine, fine. Since everyone agrees, I’ll wait.”

Anna pulled a blanket over Cate’s legs and tucked it around her.

Cate thrashed her head back and forth. “I feel like an invalid. I’m not sick. I’m perfectly fine.”

Anna fussed more with the cover. “If you want to try again soon, you should not tax yourself now. In the meantime, perhaps you can recall more details from what you saw.”

“You’re right.” Cate slid her eyes closed, trying to pull up as many details as she could from what she’d seen. After a moment, she clicked her tongue, pounding her fists on the bed. “It’s all fuzzy now. It was so clear in my mind when I saw it.”

“That’s perfectly normal, Catherine. Until you can still speak whilst you have the visions, they will be vivid, then quickly fade. It is your body’s way of protecting itself.”

“I don’t need to be protected from this. It’s so frustrating.” Cate patted the bed on either side of her. “You all don’t need to stay. I’m perfectly fine.”

“There is nowhere I’d rather be, dear,” Marcus said as he stroked her hair again.

“Me too,” Jack said with a nod. Marcus shot him an annoyed glance as he dragged another chair from the sitting room and plopped into it.

“Thank you all. I’m sorry this is going so slowly.”

“There is no need to apologize,” Anna said with a pat on her arm.

Cate puckered her lips as she bided her time to try again. "Did you say I'd be able to talk during these visions eventually?"

"Oh, yes. You should see them with just a tiny amount of pain and discomfort. You'll be able to speak while they occur. That should make them easier to decipher, although, as I mentioned, it can be incredibly tricky to attempt to pinpoint meaning."

"I have a feeling this one is fairly easy to pinpoint. It seems I'm seeing the place where Gertrude is being held captive by The Agency."

"And now we'll work to get more details on where that is. Are you ready to try again?"

"Mother," Marcus began, "are you certain it isn't too soon?"

Anna shot him a glance with her eyebrows raised. "Are you questioning me?"

"Of course not. Merely suggesting we err on the side of caution."

"I believe Catherine would like to try, and she won't rest until she does. So, she's not getting adequate rest anyway."

Cate pulled herself up to sit straighter, bobbing her head up and down. "I would very much like to try again."

"Mr. Reid, do you have the bracelet?" Anna waved her hand toward Jack.

Jack shifted around in his seat. "Uh, I'm kind of on his side on this one." He poked a finger toward Marcus.

"His timing is nothing short of amazing," Marcus murmured.

"Well, I think he makes a good point. I think it's too soon."

"And I say it's not," Anna answered.

Cate offered him a stunned glance. "I'm with Anna. And I'm the person experiencing it so my opinion outweighs everyone. Hand over the bracelet, Jack."

Jack eyed Marcus who glanced at him over his shoulder. "Don't look at me, Mr. Reid. We are outnumbered."

Jack pressed his lips together and shook his head as he dug the bracelet out of his pocket. "Can't believe this."

"Please keep your commentary to a minimum, Mr. Reid. While I appreciate your worry for your friend, I have things perfectly under control," Anna said as she accepted the bracelet dangling from Jack's fingers. "Catherine, whenever you are ready."

Cate nodded. "Okay, just give me a minute."

“Take your time,” Anna said with a nod.

Marcus wrapped his hand around Cate’s as she settled back into the pillows, allowing the music to relax her. She closed her eyes, letting her mind recall her happy moments at Rosenberg Palace as she’d done before and the seemingly happy future moment she’d witnessed when she touched the rose.

She pressed her lips together, preparing for the onslaught of painful images. Her heart skipped a beat, and she forced it to settle into a normal rhythm. With her palm open, she opened her eyes and slid them to Anna. “Ready.”

“Good luck,” Anna whispered as she dropped the bracelet into Cate’s hand.

The metal hit her skin, cool to the touch this time, and the images began to rush through her mind. She fought to slow them, the pain building already.

She tried to speak as they floated past, but she found herself unable to make a sound. The tension built at her temples. Tears formed in her eyes as the visions showed no signs of slowing down.

“No,” she cried as she dropped the bracelet on the bed. She blew out a shaky breath as a tear slid down her cheek.

“It’s all right, Catherine,” Marcus said, rubbing her arm.

“I didn’t get anything this time. I got more *last* time. I’m going backward.”

Anna scooped up the bracelet and set it aside. “You’re not. These setbacks are normal. You’re pushing yourself instead of letting them come to you. You are forcing things, and that is making this all the harder.”

Cate heaved a sigh. “I just want to get more information.”

“There are other angles we can try that don’t involve your clairvoyance,” Marcus said.

“Like what? An exhaustive search of all The Agency’s properties in every time period?” Cate slapped a hand against her face.

“That was rather a dramatic way to put it, but yes,” Marcus answered.

“I’m game. I can help. Just tell me what to do,” Jack said, rubbing his hands together.

Anna sat back in the chair, furrowing her brow.

Marcus rose from his seat. “Their properties are extensive. It will take us days to comb through them and select potential locations to scout.”

“Wait, wait, wait,” Anna said, waving a hand in the air. She cocked her head, licking her lips and narrowing her eyes.

“What is it, Mother?”

“Surely, you can’t want Cate to try again, can you?”

“I can do it,” Cate answered.

“No. Not with the bracelet. But perhaps we can glean some additional details from the one clear memory she’s had.”

Cate bit into her lower lip, her features pinching. “Oh, but I can’t remember anything else. I’m sorry.”

“Yes, I know you said it’s hazy now, but...what if we hypnotized you?” Anna asked.

Marcus cocked his head, flicking his eyebrows up. “Excellent idea, Mother. Perhaps that can help us narrow the search.”

“I’m not sure I can be hypnotized,” Cate answered.

“What makes you say that?” Anna asked.

“Well,” Cate answered, tracing the blanket’s edge, “I tried it once and it didn’t work.”

“When?” Marcus asked.

“When I had temporalysis, I—“

“Who performed it?” he interrupted.

“Ahhhh...” Cate stammered, avoiding eye contact with everyone.

Jack cleared his throat and waved a hand in the air. “Me. I tried it.”

Marcus heaved a sigh. “Well, that explains it. User error. Mother is quite adept at it. I assure you she will have no issues achieving the hypnotic state with you.”

Cate fluttered her eyelashes and blew out a long breath. “All right. Well, I’m willing to try. Will the memories hurt like they do when I touch the bracelet?”

“They may be frightening to you, but I am hoping they are not painful. Though hypnosis is not a standard technique for these situations, so we’ll be feeling our way through.”

“Wait,” Jack said, “are you saying you have no idea what this will do to her?”

Marcus shot him an irked glance. “That’s not exactly what she said, Reid.”

“This is a controlled experiment. We can end it at any time,” Anna added.

“I’d rather try this than the bracelet again. I mean, I’ll try either, but this seems less taxing.”

“Then that is what we will do,” Anna said with a smile and a pat on Cate’s arm. She waved at the window before she removed a pendant necklace from around her neck. “Marcus, close the drapes. Now, Catherine, lay back and try to relax. Focus on my pendant. Notice how it sparkles despite the dim light.

“Try to take deep breaths and feel your body relaxing. It’s melting into the bed. You’re beginning to feel very relaxed. Your eyes feel heavy as do your limbs. Your eyelids are starting to close.

“I’m going to count backward from three to one. When I reach one, you will be completely relaxed and asleep.”

Cate’s eyelids struggled to stay open as she stared at the pendant. Anna rolled it between her thumb and forefinger. It sparkled and glowed in the low light. Her limbs sank into the soft bedding, and her eyes slid closed.

She floated in darkness until Anna’s voice spoke again. “Catherine, are you relaxed?”

“Yes,” she answered.

“Where are you?”

“Nowhere,” Cate answered as she spun in the black room.

“I’d like you to find a place where you feel safe. Where you feel happy.”

Cate pinched her eyebrows together as she searched the darkness. Light pierced through it, and she moved toward the bright beam. She made out the outline of a partially open door. Cate grabbed the handle and tugged it open.

Her lips turned up at the corners as she recognized the future memory she’d seen earlier. She walked into it, embracing it fully as she closed out the blackness.

“Have you found one, Catherine?” Anna asked.

“Yes.”

“Good. If you feel any pain or become frightened, I want you to return here. Do you understand?”

“Yes,” Cate said as her smile broadened.

“All right, Catherine. Now, I want you to search your mind to find the vision you saw earlier. The vision of Gertrude.”

Cate’s forehead creased. “No.”

“I know you want to stay where you are, but I need you to find Gertrude. I need you to describe what you see when you find that vision.”

Cate nodded, allowing the room to slip away from her. Images raced past her in the darkness.

“Have you found it?” Anna’s voice echoed.

“No,” she cried.

“Calm down, Catherine. You’re fine.”

Cate squeezed her eyes closed as images whizzed past her. “I can’t make sense of anything. It’s all moving too fast.”

“Find the image you saw before. You recalled it after touching the bracelet. Find that image.”

“I’m trying, but I can’t.” Cate pressed her fingers against her temples as she searched the buzzing visions for anything familiar. Voices floated around, the spoken words unintelligible. Her head swam as her senses overloaded.

“Catherine, go back...” Anna’s voice trailed off, too soft for her to distinguish.

Cate wrapped her arms around her as she struggled to find a way forward. Nonsensical images surrounded her, voices overlapped, and a musty scent filled her nostrils.

In an instant, everything stopped. She found herself alone in the dark again. “Anna?” she called.

No one answered her. “Marcus?” Her voice echoed in the nothingness but no one responded.

“Jack?” she squeaked. “Anyone?”

Cate tightened her arms around her abdomen as she sank to sit. She stared into the blackness surrounding her. She was lost. And alone. And she had no idea how to find her way out.

CHAPTER 22



Cate shivered, rubbing her arms and letting her head fall back between her shoulder blades. She struggled to keep her heartbeat steady as she sat alone in the darkness.

“You can’t sit here, Cate. You have to move,” she said to herself. “You have to find a way out.”

She rose to stand and spun in a slow circle. She slid her eyes closed and forced her mind to recall the safe memory she’d created earlier. When she opened her eyes, she spotted the light ahead of her.

Her lips turned up at the corners. Perhaps if she went back there, she could hear Anna again, and she could get out. She took a step toward it but stopped. If she went there, she may never be able to return for the information she sought.

She shook her head and turned away from the glowing light. She forced herself to move further into the darkness.

After a few steps, the light flickered behind her. Cate twisted to glance over her shoulder. It flashed again before it burned out, plunging her further into blackness.

She pressed her lips together and stretched her hands out in front of her. She moved forward until she bumped into something. It screeched, and she stumbled back a step before she lunged toward it. Her fingertips explored the object.

A smooth surface with ornate edges. Cate used it to guide her steps forward. Muffled noises boomed overhead. She closed her eyes, trying to

make sense of them.

“Voices,” she whispered. She crept further forward. A man and a woman conversed, though she couldn’t make out any of their words.

She continued forward. Her fingers scraped along a wall. She traced the edge of the picture frame molding.

“I’m inside a house.”

She pushed herself forward, using the wall as her guide. She reached a corner and rounded it. Light glowed at the end. Her heart skipped a beat as she spotted it. She hurried forward toward it. The voices grew louder though she still couldn’t make sense of them.

Cate tiptoed toward the doors, peering inside through the crack. Her pulse quickened. “Gertrude!”

Cate flung the door open and hurried into the space. Voices continued to babble from nowhere. She hurried toward the figure slumped in the chair. The woman’s chin rested against her chest with her eyes closed.

Cate reached for her wrist, bound to the chair’s arm. Her hand went through the woman. Cate rose and stumbled back with a gasp.

“It’s not real. She’s not here.”

Cate straightened and spun, taking in the room. “This is the room I saw. Abandoned. Large. Yellow walls. Parquet floors. Tray ceiling. Large windows.”

The couple spoke again. Cate struggled to make out the words, but she could not. She memorized as many details of the room as she could.

“Anna?” she called.

“Catherine? I’m here. We’re here. Catherine, you need to go to your safe place.”

“Okay,” Cate answered.

She took a step toward the door when the voices started again. They babbled on with nonsense. “No,” Cate said, shaking her head.

“Catherine, what’s wrong? Talk to me.”

“Someone’s talking. But I can’t understand it.”

“That’s okay, Catherine. Do not worry about that. Just come back to us,” Marcus said.

Cate nodded and took another step to the door. “Okay.”

The hairs on the back of her neck stood up, and her skin turned to gooseflesh. A shiver snaked down her spine. A low moan sounded behind her. She spun to glance at Gertrude.

“Gertrude?”

The woman moaned again. Cate took a step back toward her. “Gertrude?”

She took one more tentative step when Gertrude’s head snapped up. Her muscles strained against the shackles around her legs and the handcuffs around her wrists. Cate stared into her wide crystal blue eyes, so similar to her own.

The woman’s gaunt face showed extreme shock. “Gertrude, it’s okay. I’m Cate. I—“

“Cinderella,” the woman said, her voice strained and hoarse.

Cate froze, her forehead pinching at the word. “What?”

“Cinderella,” she repeated before she slumped in her chair.

Cate rushed forward toward her, kneeling in front of her. “Gertrude?”

With her eyes closed and her chin against her chest, Cate could solicit no further responses from her.

She rose, her features still pinched as she considered the strange event.

“Catherine?” Marcus called to her.

“I’m here. I’m coming back.”

After one final glance over her shoulder, she hurried from the room and crept through the blackness until she found the other glowing doorway. She pushed inside, feeling the warmth of the future memory surrounding her. “I’m here.”

Anna’s voice echoed overhead. “Good, Catherine. You are safe?”

“Yes.”

“All right, dear. I’m going to wake you. I will count backward and when I reach one and snap my fingers, you will awaken and feel refreshed. Ready?”

“Yes.”

The countdown sounded as Cate smiled at the happy memory. Anna’s fingers snapped, and the vision faded.

Cate fluttered her eyelashes open. Three concerned faces stared back at her.

Marcus stroked her hair. “Welcome back, dear.”

Anna settled back in the chair with a sigh. “You scared us.”

“Are you okay, Cate?” Jack asked.

“I’m fine. I just...I lost track of you. I heard you but when I tried to access the vision, everything went haywire.”

“I told you to go back to your happy moment, but then we heard nothing from you for quite a while,” Anna answered.

“Your voice cut off, and I was trapped.”

“You were quiet for way too long, Cate,” Jack said, grabbing her foot and shaking it. “And then you were murmuring, but we couldn’t understand much of it.”

Anna grabbed her hand and patted it. “I heard you call out for me, and then you seemed responsive again.”

“I found the vision. I saw it again. I saw Gertrude. I saw the room. I memorized as much as I could. It’s definitely in a house of some kind. A big house. Old. Abandoned. Yellow walls. Parquet floors. Tray ceiling. Large windows.”

“Could you see anything outside of the windows that could tell us where it was?” Jack asked.

Cate shook her head. “No.” She flicked her gaze to Marcus, wrapping her fingers around his arm and squeezing. “We need to find her. She’s not well.”

“We will, dear. With the information you have, we’ll look for houses controlled by The Agency. It will take a while to comb through the records.” He straightened and flicked his gaze to Jack. “Come along, Reid, let’s—“

“I’m coming, too.” Cate pushed herself to sit, swinging her legs over the edge of the bed.

“No,” Marcus answered as Anna grabbed her arm to pull her back.

“You’ve just been through an ordeal, Catherine.”

“And Gertrude is going through a worse one. I’m not going to sit idly by resting from my tiny inconvenience while The Agency has her.”

Marcus hesitated, glancing at his mother before he returned his gaze to Cate. She tilted her head, staring at him with a pout. “Marcus—“

“I will bring the property list here,” he answered. “We will all take part in the search. Come with me, Reid, you can carry the files back.”

“Thank you,” Cate said, easing back into her pillows. Marcus strode from the room with Jack in tow.

“You are quite the fighter, aren’t you, Catherine?”

“I hope so. We need this issue solved.”

“I understand. When one of us is hurt, we must do all we can. I feel the same about my family. You included.”

Cate licked her lips, avoiding Anna's gaze. She likely wouldn't feel that way when they resolved this issue and she and Marcus split.

She raised her eyes to Anna's. She had to say something. To prepare her. It wasn't fair for the woman to assume their marriage was anything but a sham. Marcus had offered her a solution to save Dunhaven Castle from The Agency. He'd want his life back soon enough. She should be prepared.

Anna patted her hand again, stopping any statement on her part. "When you went to Eldinbury Castle in the middle of the night for Marcus, you revealed the depths of your strength. And I'm sorry to say, dear, but I think you will need that strength for this fight with The Agency."

Cate recalled the scene with Gianna when she asked her friends to repay their salaries to her. "They are terrible."

Anna offered her a tight-lipped smile. "Yes, I know. However, you and Marcus make an incredible team. You always support each other. And that is what will get you through this."

Cate swallowed hard again. "The thing is—"

"I know it sounds hollow, darling, but it's true. Marcus simply adores you, as do I. And we will both get you through this, difficult as it may be. We will stick together. Like family does."

Cate's features pinched. She opened her mouth to speak again when the doors opened. Jack hauled several folders overflowing with papers. He crossed to the bed and plopped them on the corner.

Marcus picked up one, thicker than an encyclopedia. "German holdings. Mother, this may be a good file for you to go over. You likely know many of these properties."

"Of course, dear," Anna said, accepting the folder.

He passed another thick folder to Jack who sank into the chair at the bottom of the bed and flicked it open. His eyes went wide. "They own *all* of this?"

"Indeed," Marcus said. "Their network is vast."

Jack wiggled his eyebrows as he fluttered his eyelids. "This will take more than a few days."

"We will mark anything that is not industrial and go from there," Marcus said, passing a folder to Cate before he eased into a chair with one of his own.

Several more remained stacked near Cate's feet. She stared at them before flicking open her own. The spreadsheet in front of her contained at

least thirty properties per page. She shuffled through, finding similar content on the rest of the pages. “There are hundreds of these. Maybe thousands.”

“This will take time,” Marcus answered.

“They have more houses than you, Marcus.”

“Than us, dear,” he said with a wink.

Cate sighed. “My information isn’t going to help us at all. This list isn’t going to tell me that it has a yellow room with big windows.”

“That’s not true, Catherine,” Marcus said. “We know it’s not an industrial property or anything similar to it. We can rule out many of these.”

Cate shuffled through her papers again and scoffed. “And still have thousands of properties to check.”

Marcus shifted his gaze from his paper to her face. “We will find her, Catherine. I promise.”

Cate let her shoulders drop, and she nodded. “Okay.”

Jack caught her gaze, offering a tight-lipped smile before returning to his list.

Cate settled in, grabbing a pen and scanning the first page. She placed checkmarks near any property listed as residential. By the end of the first page, she had fifteen checks. Fifteen places to check on just the first page alone.

She flipped to the next page and ran the tip of her pen down the list, checking properties. After five pages, she tossed her pen down with a sigh. “Okay, I think I should try the bracelet again. Maybe I can get more details about this property.”

“You do not need to do that. And we have no guarantees that it will help us,” Marcus said.

“He’s right,” Anna agreed.

Cate heaved a sigh. “I’ve done five pages of this folder. And I have over fifty checkmarks already. At this rate, we’ll each have hundreds of places to check. We’ll never be able to check all of these.”

“There is nothing wrong with identifying properties before we try another angle,” Marcus said.

Cate puckered her lips, sucking in a deep breath before she picked up her pen and continued with her list.

She checked off a few more properties before she flipped to the next page. Her eyes glazed over as she hit page ten.

“I could use some tea,” Anna said, rising from her chair and ringing the bell. The servants delivered it shortly after.

“How are you feeling, Catherine?” Anna asked as she checked off a few more properties while balancing her tea in one hand.

“Well enough to try that bracelet again.”

Anna chuckled at her. “Perhaps after the tea.”

“Sounds like a plan. I should be up to only one hundred and fifty properties to check then with hundreds of pages left to go.” Cate took another sip of her tea as she scanned another page. She made a few checkmarks and turned the sheet over on the finished pile.

She browsed the first few properties on the page before she paused. She crinkled her brow and flipped back to the previous sheet. She searched it for the property that gave her pause.

The tip of the pen tapped it as she slid it down the page. Her heart skipped a beat as she stared at the property description. Why did this property draw her attention?

Cinderella Chateau. Cate furrowed her brow. Was it the whimsical name that drew her?

Something niggled at her. Heat washed over her as the memory of her experience during hypnosis flitted through her mind. Gertrude had said Cinderella. Cate glanced at the title on the folder’s tab. *French Assets*.

French. She’d heard people speaking in the background of her vision. They were speaking French. Gertrude had said Cinderella twice. This property fit.

She slid her saucer and teacup onto her nightstand. “I think I found something.”

“What is it, dear?” Anna asked.

“The thousandth checkmark?” Jack joked.

“No. The place we should start, I think.”

“Where and why?” Marcus asked.

“Cinderella Chateau. It fits, but more than that, in my vision, I heard people talking but I couldn’t understand them. I realize now that they were speaking French.”

“Based on that perhaps we should focus on the French properties. But why this one?” Marcus asked.

“Just before I left the vision to come back, Gertrude spoke to me. She said one word. I didn’t remember it until I saw this description. She said

Cinderella. She said it twice. I didn't know why she said it but seeing the name of this property, I think it may have been a clue."

Marcus studied the location. "It is remote enough. Abandoned for quite some time. It is an excellent possibility."

"Should we check it?" Cate asked.

"Yes, I believe so. It cannot hurt. Mother, would you mind continuing your work while Catherine and I—"

"And I," Jack added.

Marcus narrowed his eyes at him. "Perhaps you could assist Mother—"

"No, I think I'm best served going to the fairy tale chateau. No offense," he said, waving a hand at Anna.

"I disag—"

"Yes, Jack's right. He should go, too. In case I have another attack. I don't want you alone there with an unconscious me," Cate said, patting his arm.

He pulled his chin back as he glanced at her. "I am certain I will handle it, darling."

"I'm certain you can, too, but you shouldn't have to. Let's go. Can we do the location hop thing?"

"No," Marcus said with a pucker of his lips. "I can only location hop to places I am familiar with. I have never been to this property."

Cate let her head fall back between her shoulders. "Really? So, a drive? How long?"

"Certainly not. We'll simply use a time portal."

"Oh no," Jack said with a sigh. "Not that."

"As I said, you may prefer staying with Mother."

Jack shoved his hands in his pockets and heaved a sigh. "I'll make do."

"How wonderful for us," Marcus grumbled. "Do you remember the rules?"

"Go straight through so you don't try to trap me inside," Jack answered.

"That's not exactly it, but it will do," Cate answered as Marcus narrowed his eyes. "Where should we leave?"

"Here is fine," Marcus answered, stretching his hands out.

"Marcus Benjamin Northcott," Anna exclaimed, slapping her hands against the stack of papers she perused, "how many times must I tell you not to open your time portals in the house?"

Cate's jaw dropped open, and she shot an amused glance at Jack.

“Mother—“ Marcus began.

“Outside. I do not wish to spend the rest of the day picking up papers from your whirlwind. Now, out.” Anna shooed her hands at them.

“Fine. We’ll leave from the garden,” Marcus said. Cate and Jack followed Marcus from the room and through the halls.

“So, have you opened many time portals in the house?” Cate asked, her words laced with giggles.

“I do not see the issue with it.”

Cate offered him an amused grin as they pushed into the garden. “She has a point about the wind. With all those papers, it would take us days to clean up.”

“At least we will save her that. Are we ready?”

Cate nodded as Jack answered, “Ready as I’ll ever be.”

Marcus arched an eyebrow and opened his mouth to answer.

“Just open the portal,” Cate said before he could.

Marcus clamped his mouth closed and stretched out his arms. The sparkling portal appeared in front of them. When it opened fully, Cate pushed Jack forward, then followed behind him. Within seconds, they stared up at the red bricks of the rectangular house.

Black clouds painted the sky above it, and fog shrouded it. Cate shivered as she studied the facade. She wrapped her arms around herself as Marcus arrived.

“Are you cold, dear?” he asked, removing his jacket and slipping it around her shoulders.

“Thank you,” she said, burrowing deeper into it.

“Should we go inside?” Jack asked.

“Stay here while I check it first,” Marcus said.

“Check it first? We’re not...”

Cate laid a hand on his arm. “Jack, let him check first.”

Jack stepped back next to her and wrapped an arm around her shoulders. “All right. I’ll stay with Cate.”

“Make certain she is safe,” Marcus said as he strode toward the house.

Cate pulled Marcus’s jacket tighter around her as she glanced at the trees surrounding them. The remote property was the perfect place to hide someone. Would they find Gertrude inside or was this an ambush?

CHAPTER 23



Cate's breathing turned ragged as the loneliness of the area hit her.

Jack tightened his grip on her. "Cate, are you all right? Are you seeing something?"

She shook her head and stalked forward.

"Cate?" Jack called after her.

"He shouldn't go alone."

"Are you crazy? He's invincible. Let him go."

Cate shot him a glance over her shoulder as she hurried forward. "He's not invincible."

Jack huffed before he jogged forward. "Wait up."

Cate nodded at him as he joined her, matching her quick pace to the front door. She pushed inside, joining Marcus as he surveyed the entrance.

"Catherine, is something wrong?"

"You shouldn't be alone," she answered, threading her arm through his. "This could be a trap."

"Which is why you should have stayed outside."

Cate shook her head. "No."

Marcus smiled at her, tipping her chin up. "You are too stubborn for your own good."

"I don't want to have to save you again," she said with a coy grin.

"Let's hope it doesn't come to that." He scanned the space. "It appears abandoned. But we should still be on our guard. Catherine, let us know if you see the room from your visions."

She nodded. "I'm hoping we find Gertrude."

Marcus offered her a tight-lipped smile as he laced his fingers through hers and led her into the next room.

They explored the downstairs rooms, not finding Gertrude or the room from Cate's vision.

"Does anything look familiar?" Jack asked as they climbed the stairs to the second floor.

"The architecture looks similar to my vision, but I'm sure that's true for a lot of houses. I'm starting to worry this was a mistake."

"Well at least we can rule one of the million places to check off the list," Jack joked.

Cate offered him a half-hearted smile.

Marcus squeezed her hand. "There is no reason to worry, Catherine. There is a reason you were drawn here. You must learn to trust your gut."

Her half smile broadened to a full one. They searched a few of the rooms overlooking the front lawn, finding nothing. Cate chewed her lower lip as they stepped across the hall and into another room.

She scanned the room and shook her head as Marcus glanced at her. He wrapped an arm around her shoulders and guided her into the hall. She moved toward the next door, letting her fingers glide along the wall as she walked.

Her heart skipped a beat as it triggered a memory. While hypnotized, she'd experienced something similar to this.

"Catherine, are you all right?"

She nodded to him in silent response as she continued down the hall. They pushed into the next room, and Cate's pulse quickened.

Images raced across her mind, and she grabbed Marcus's arm. "This is it. This is the room I saw."

"Are you certain?"

"Yes," Cate said, taking a few more steps into the space. She spun, searching it. "She's not here. She was here in my vision. She's not here."

Marcus studied the room, shuffling further into it and tracing a hole in the wall.

Cate pursed her lips, her brow furrowing. "She's not here. My visions were useless. She's not here."

Marcus retreated to her, bracing her shoulders with his hands. "Your visions were not useless. They led us here. This is a clue. We must

determine what it means.”

“How?” Jack asked.

Cate’s features pinched at his words.

Marcus glared at him. “There is a reason we were brought here by her visions. Trust me. I am far more experienced in these matters than you.”

Cate pressed her lips together as she traced a finger along the picture frame molding. “There has to be a reason I saw this. You’re right.”

“Of course, I am.” He offered her an amused smile, and she returned his expression.

“I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but I don’t see any clues here. It doesn’t even look like anyone’s been here recently.”

“Perhaps you should keep your opinions to yourself, Reid.”

Cate glanced out the window, her finger tracing the dirty and peeling sill. “He’s right. There’s nothing here. Maybe my visions aren’t right. Maybe they’re false.”

Her forehead creased as she recalled the future memory she’d seen when touching the rose.

“They are not false, Catherine. There is a reason you saw this room. There is a reason you saw Gertrude in it. We are missing something.”

“Yeah, Gertrude,” Jack answered. “Maybe there’s something in another room. There are two more up here that we haven’t checked.”

Marcus arched an eyebrow at him. “Perhaps you can check those instead of standing here making useless comments.”

“We should all go together,” Jack said.

“He’s right. No one should go anywhere on Agency property alone,” Cate said, wrapping her arms around herself again.

“Whenever you are ready, Catherine,” Marcus said, sliding an arm around her shoulders.

“I’m ready.”

Marcus nodded as he guided her to the door. She shuffled toward it, her mind aching from the disappointment. Her foot kicked something. The round object rattled across the floor, landing a few inches from her.

Her lips parted as she stared down at it. She leaned forward toward it. “What is this?”

Her fingers brushed it, and a plethora of images raced across her mind. She gasped in a breath as she snapped her hand back. “This was Gertrude’s.”

“Did you get a vision?” Marcus asked as she straightened.

She nodded. “I need to try again.”

“No,” he said, scooping it off the floor. “Just a moment. We should do this in a controlled way. We do not want you to pass out or suffer any ill effects.”

“Maybe we should go back to the palace?” Jack suggested.

“That is the first excellent suggestion I’ve heard from you, Reid. Yes.”

“No,” Cate said with a shake of her head. “No, I want to try here. What if this leads us to another clue?”

“There is nothing wrong with getting that information at Rosenberg.”

“Let me try again here,” she said. “Maybe it’ll tell us something about where else we can look.”

Marcus heaved a sigh and opened his hand. Cate stared down at the green button. She reached out for it, but he closed his fingers around it. “Do not push things too far.”

She nodded. “Okay.”

With a shaky breath, she reached her trembling fingers toward the fabric-wrapped fastener as he held it out to her. She let her fingers graze it, and visions began almost immediately. Instinctively, she pulled her hand back.

“Catherine?” Marcus asked.

“I’m okay. It’s okay.” She blew out another breath as he wrapped his arm around her shoulders. She pressed her fingertips against the button again. Memories flooded across her mind, most of them faster than she could process.

Gertrude sat in a chair in the center of the room with her hands and feet bound. Her head hung down to her chest. The image changed before Cate could make out anything else. People entered the room, rushing around faster than she could make out clearly.

She tried to focus on details, to slow the images, but she struggled as pain grew across her forehead. She kept her fingers planted on the button as her knees grew weak. Hands grabbed her shoulders and pulled her back. Weakness coursed through her. Someone lowered her to the floor.

“Catherine,” Marcus’s voice said, floating in the air while her vision blurred. She reached for him, and he wrapped his hand around hers.

She blinked rapidly, clearing her eyes until she could see her surroundings again. Marcus and Jack hovered over her.

"I'm okay. Just a little weak."

"You held on too long," Marcus said.

"I saw things. Some things, not many. Gertrude was here. Definitely."

"But she's not here now, so they're one step ahead of us again," Jack said.

"No," Cate said with a shake of her head. "No, I don't think so. I think she's here."

Cate shook her head and pressed a hand against her forehead.

"Easy, dear, we can discuss it further at Rosenberg."

"No, what I mean is I think Gertrude *is* here. Just not in this time. I think it was another time. The glimpses of clothing I saw in the visions looked older. Turn of the century maybe? I'm not certain. They went by too quickly."

"It's all right, Catherine," Marcus said. "We can work on it at home. That's excellent so far."

Cate nodded as she pushed up to her elbows. "If I can get one clear image, I may be able to pinpoint at least the decade."

Marcus rubbed her back as she sat up. "How do you feel?"

"Fine. I can stand."

Jack and Marcus helped her to her feet. She wobbled for a moment, grabbing Marcus to steady herself.

He clutched her hand, wrapping an arm around her. "Do you need to rest more?"

She squeezed her eyes closed for a second and shook her head. "No. I'm okay."

"Are you certain you can walk?" Jack questioned.

"Yes, I can. Let's finish searching the house." She took a step forward, struggling to stay upright.

"You need to rest for a bit more, then we can proceed." Marcus and Jack eased her back to the floor. Jack settled next to her while Marcus squatted on the other side. "Easy, Catherine, there's no rush."

She sucked in a deep breath and nodded. "Just a few minutes. I really want to make progress though. Even if it's just to finish the search here."

Marcus slid a lock of hair behind her ear. "And there will be no stopping you as soon as you've recovered your strength."

"You know it," she said with a wink and a smile. As she waited for her body to stop trembling inside, she attempted to recall any details from the

visions driven by the button. They had already begun to fade from her mind.

She reached for details that she could not pinpoint. With a sigh, she let her head rest against her knees.

“Maybe I should try—“

A loud bang resounded, cutting off her statement. She startled, grasping hold of both men and snapping her gaze to Marcus. “What was that?”

“Stay here. I’ll find out.”

Cate grabbed his arm. “Wait, you shouldn’t go alone.”

“You are in no shape to go.” He glanced at Jack. “Take care of her. Make certain she rests.”

Jack nodded, sliding a hand around Cate’s shoulders. “I will.”

Marcus rose to stand and stalked from the room, pulling the door slightly closed behind him.

Cate heaved a sigh, her forehead pinching. “Go after him.”

“Cate, no way, I’m not leaving you.”

“He shouldn’t be alone.”

“Neither should you,” Jack argued.

“Fine, help me up and we’ll both go.” Cate struggled to push herself up to stand.

“No,” Jack said with a shake of his head. He pressed her shoulder down, planting her on the floor again.

“Jack, I’m fine. I feel better. I’ll just sit here and fret.”

“Then I’ll distract you.”

“How?” Cate asked flinging her hands out to her sides.

“We can talk.”

“About?”

“Can we talk about how odd it is that you’re fretting over him?”

Cate set her chin on her knees and wrapped her arms around her legs. “The Agency is not an enemy anyone should face alone.” She picked her head up, shaking it. “No, I can’t stay here.”

“All right, easy, Cate, let me help you. If you insist on wandering around for Marcus Northcott, at least let me help you.”

Cate allowed him to help her to her feet.

“You okay?” he asked as she stood for a moment.

“Yeah, I’m okay. I’m going to take it slow.”

“Cate Kensie taking it slow? That’s a first.”

She chuckled at him before blowing out a sharp breath. "Okay, let's—"

The door creaked open on its hinges. Cate expected to see Marcus returning, but instead, another figure stood in the doorway.

She placed a hand against the jamb, cocking a hip and sticking her hand on it. "Hello, little mouse," Gianna said with a derisive grin.

"What are you doing here?"

"That's what I should be asking you," she said as she sauntered into the room and swung the door closed. "You found this place far faster than I expected. I'm starting to think I underestimated you."

"I know you did," Jack said with a glare at her.

"Well, I certainly did not expect you to get Marcus Northcott to marry you. And now this. How interesting." She spun on a high heel and raised her chin. "You are proving a worthy enemy, but I'm up to the task."

"Where is Gertrude?" Cate demanded.

Gianna puckered her lips, pulling them up into a satisfied smile. "I suppose I should tell you. Because it won't matter."

Cate's heart skipped a beat. "What's that supposed to mean? What have you done to her?"

"Oh, nothing, darling. Don't trouble your semi-pretty little head over it. It won't matter if I tell you she's in 1911 because you'll never make it there."

"Don't count on that."

"Oh, but I do. And that's because I have another present for you." She waved a ring in the air before she slipped it onto her finger. She lunged forward and grabbed hold of both of their arms.

Cate tugged at her arm but found herself unable to pull away. The room melted around them, disappearing from her sight for a moment. She tightened her grip on Jack's arm.

Bright light shone around them in the next instant. Cate squinted against it as the world filled in around her. She shivered, pulling Marcus's jacket tighter.

Gianna smirked at them as she let go of their arms and stepped back. "Have fun, Cate. I don't think you'll be alive much longer. Have fun with the three emperors."

With a chuckle, she disappeared from their sight, leaving them standing in a field.

"What just happened?" Jack asked.

Cate sucked in ragged breaths as she spun, searching the surroundings with wide eyes. "I don't know but...I don't think we're in 1956 anymore."

"What?" Jack exclaimed, his voice shrill. "Where the hell are we? When the hell are we?"

"I don't know. But it doesn't look good." Cate stared at the thousands of tents set up on either side of them, shrouded in fog.

"Are we at some sort of campsite?"

The sun sat low on the horizon, still rising. "Okay, it's morning. There's the rising sun," Cate said, pointing at it. "So, that's east."

"East of what, we don't know," Jack said. "Is it a tourist site?"

Drums resounded, stopping Cate's heart. "Oh no."

"What is it?"

She pointed a finger toward a line of men marching from within one of the camps.

"What the hell?" Jack asked, screwing up his face.

"We're in the middle of a battle. She dropped us in the middle of a war."

Jack glanced back and forth between the two camps as soldiers lined up on either side. "Which side do we go to? Which side is ours?"

Cate glanced to her left, studying the flags whipping in the wind as the soldier rode in front of the troops. She glanced in the opposite direction, studying the flags and the uniforms.

"Cate? Do you have any idea? Because I think we should get out of the line of fire and fast."

She furrowed her brow, flicking her gaze between the two parties. On her left, a man rode up, yelling at his troops.

"Oh no," Cate said, covering her gaping mouth with a hand.

"What is it?" He followed the line of her gaze, studying the man who rode back and forth, shouting in another language.

Cate licked her lips and pressed a hand against her stomach. "That..." She slid her eyes closed for a moment, swallowing hard. "That is Napoleon Bonaparte. She dropped us in the middle of the Napoleonic War."

CHAPTER 24



The color drained from Jack's face as he stared at the man racing up and down on a white horse regaled in battle colors. "I-I-I..." He scrubbed his face and tried again. "I've got nothing here. Nothing."

"We need to get out of here. The battle is going to start any minute now. He's whipping his troops into a frenzy."

"Do you know what battle this is? Which side should we go to?"

Cate spun in search of landmarks and the other generals. She snapped her fingers. "Wait. Gianna said to have fun with the three emperors. Three emperors. This is the Battle of Austerlitz."

"Who wins?"

Cate fluttered her eyelashes. "Napoleon. Definitely."

"I hate to sound like a fair-weather fan, but perhaps we should go to the French side then."

"Do you speak French?"

Cate shook her head. "Not a word. And he speaks Corsican. His troops are a mix, but I don't speak any of their languages. You?"

"No."

Cate flung her arms out. "Where's Celine when you need her?"

Jack's eyes went wide. "Do you think she's close?"

Cate shook her head. "No, she lives in Maine. Well, Massachusetts right now. And even if she was traveling, I doubt she's in Austria."

"Damn," Jack cursed under his breath. A shot rang out from the Allied side, announcing the first wave of battle. "French-speaking or not, I think

we'd better go."

"You're right," Cate said. They joined hands and raced away from the center of the battle. "We need a place to think."

"In this battle? Are you joking?" Jack asked as he tugged her along next to him.

Cate's mind raced as fast as her feet as she tried to problem-solve her way out of the situation. She stumbled, falling forward onto her knees as more gunfire erupted. A sob escaped her.

"Cate, we can't stop."

"Where are we running to?"

Jack gestured toward the battle. "Not to. From. We're running from that."

"But to where? Jack, we're stuck here." She dug the timepiece from under her dress. "This won't work. We're in 1805. With no way back. Nowhere to go. We're nowhere near Dunhaven Castle to even try the watch, and I doubt it'll work anyway."

"Okay, you're right. We need to think. Somewhere without cannons and stuff."

Cate glanced at the encampment behind the French lines. "There. We'll sneak into one of the tents."

"Is that wise?"

Cate climbed to her feet. "There's nowhere else. We're in clothes that don't fit the era. We can't possibly wander into town, a town that is under siege by the way, and ask if anyone minds giving us a place to think."

"Good point." A bullet whizzed by too close for comfort. "Tents. Yes. At least it's close."

They hurried further from the battle and ducked into the camp. A few men still milled around or hurried to join their units. Another outfit formed up, ready to head off into battle under their leader's orders.

Cate and Jack snaked through the haphazard placement of tents, using them for cover. They squeezed through a narrow passage between two tents. Jack inched to the corner and peered around them. Two men rushed past, carrying their weapons.

Jack ducked back, pushing Cate behind him. He peeked out again before he grabbed her hand and nodded. "Come on."

They hurried around the corner, past several other tents. "We need to find a place with few people. This is still too crowded," Jack said.

They turned another corner, coming face to face with a French soldier. Jack pulled Cate closer to him. The man pulled his chin back to his chest.

“Ahhh,” Jack began.

The man babbled something in French that sounded like a question.

“Ummm,” Jack stammered again.

The man stamped a foot on the ground and pointed to Cate, rambling more in French.

Jack wrapped his arm around her waist and tugged her closer to him.

The man spoke again, shaking his head and waving a hand toward a large tent. Jack glanced toward it, his forehead wrinkling. The man repeated his request, waving emphatically toward the tent again before he hurried away.

“Nice fellow. I think he was telling us to go to that tent. Maybe he wanted us to hide there.”

“I’m not certain about that,” Cate said. “But there aren’t many people around here. Maybe it’s not a tent housing soldiers.”

“You mean like a place for eating or meeting or something.”

“Right,” Cate said with a nod as she yanked Jack forward. “Although, we probably should find some clothes and change if we can.”

Jack nodded, pulling a tent flap open and staring inside. “Nothing obvious in there.”

“Here!” Cate shouted, tugging pants, shirts, and jackets from a drying line.

“Stealing laundry during a war. What is happening?” Jack asked, grabbing the garments from her and leading her toward the large tent. He flung the flap back and scanned the inside. “It’s clear.”

They slipped in, closing the flaps behind them and securing them. Cate wandered to the cot and collapsed onto it. “This isn’t a meeting tent,” she said, patting the bedding, “but hopefully this is an officer’s tent, and we’ll be safe while they plan the battle and lead the charge.”

Jack tossed the clothes on a nearby table and leaned against it, blowing out a long breath. “I can’t believe this.”

“Neither can I,” Cate said, staring at the ground in front of her.

“She dumped us in the middle of a war.”

“In another time period.”

“To die,” Jack said.

“To die,” Cate repeated. She sank her head into her hands.

Jack shuffled to her and plopped on the thin mattress. He rubbed her back for a moment until she pulled her hands away from her tear-stained face. She threaded her fingers through his and they sat in silence.

“We’re stuck, right?” Jack asked.

“Yep,” Cate answered. She opened the face on the timepiece and showed it to him.

“It’s not slow,” Jack noted.

Cate shook her head. “Because we didn’t use it to go through a time portal. Which begs the question of what would happen even if we could make it to Dunhaven Castle. Could we find a time portal leading to our time and would this open it?”

Jack hung his head, shaking it. “I don’t know. And how would we get to Dunhaven? We’re in...Austria, you said?”

“Austria in this time. Even if this would work and could get us home. Or close. It would take months to get there. We can’t live here for months.”

Jack leapt from his seat and paced around the tent. “I don’t even know what to say. I don’t know what to do. I don’t know...”

“Okay, calm down. We need a plan. We need to think. Vet options.”

“What options?” Jack shouted, spinning to face her. His features pinched, and he slid his eyes closed. “I’m sorry.”

“You don’t have to apologize. I understand. This is a nightmare. And she knew it.” Cate balled her hands into fists and pounded them against the cot.

“Do you think Marcus might...”

“How could he find us?”

“Maybe she’ll tell him?”

Cate tilted her head. “Why would she do that? She wants me dead.”

“I can’t believe for the first time in my life I’m hoping to see the face of Marcus Northcott. And I’m sad that we won’t.”

“I doubt she’s even spoken to him,” Cate answered. “We’re on our own, Jack.”

“We don’t know—“

Cate shot him a glance that stopped his words. She pressed a hand to her chest. “He’s not upset. Not disturbed.”

“You can still feel his heart?”

Cate nodded. “It’s normal, steady, strong. He doesn’t know yet. Or at least, if he does, he’s not concerned.”

Jack paced back and forth again, flinging his hands in the air. “This is unbelievable. I mean, what the hell are we supposed to do now? There has to be something. We can...Maybe...”

“I feel the same way. I don’t know what to do. Going back and forth between one time period and another at Dunhaven Castle is one thing, but...we can’t survive in 1805 for an extended period. We have no clothes, no money, nothing.”

“Okay, we’ll have to get money. And clothes. And try to find our way to Dunhaven Castle. At least there we’ll know the family. They can help us search for a solution.”

Cate let her gaze fall to her lap, tapping her toes on the floor.

“If it takes months, it takes months. We’re not giving up.”

“No, we can’t. But—” Cate stopped mid-sentence, crinkling her brow.

“What is it?”

She pressed her hand to her chest.

“Cate? What is it? Are you sick?”

She shook her head, flicking her gaze up to Jack’s face. “I think Marcus knows we’re gone. His heart is pounding.”

“Do you think they have him? The Agency?”

Cate slid her eyes closed, feeling the rhythm of his heart thudding against her ribs. She snapped them open and shook her head. “No. This is different from when they had him. This feels...agitated but not in pain.”

“Do you think she’ll tell him where she took us?”

“I wouldn’t count on it. Not without some sacrifice on his part.”

“Maybe he’ll...”

Cate shook her head, clutching the edge of the bed as she fought the tears forming in her eyes.

“Damn it,” Jack said, kicking the leg of the table near him.

Cate pressed her hand against her chest again, pinching her eyebrows. “Wait.”

Jack spun to face her. “What is it? Did something change? Is he in pain or captured or back to normal?”

“No, none of those. His heart is still racing, but...it’s 1805.”

“Yeah?”

“I met Anna in 1810 at Rosenberg. So she’s at Rosenberg. Maybe even Marcus.” She flicked her gaze to Jack, the corners of her lips turning up

ever-so-slightly. “We don’t need to get to Dunhaven, Jack. We just need to get to Rosenberg Palace.”

Jack stared at her, rubbing his chin. “Okay, so that’s a far sight closer than Dunhaven, but...”

“But?” Cate prompted when he didn’t speak.

He shook his head. “Cate, you’re not married to him yet.”

“I know. Anna doesn’t think we were married until 1810, but maybe she’ll listen. We can tell her I’m married to him in the future. She should understand. She’s very much aware of time travel.”

Jack blew out a long breath, setting his hands on his hips. “That’s not a great plan, but at least it’s a plan. And it won’t take months. How far are we from Rosenberg?”

Cate shrugged and shook her head. “I’m not certain. In our time, a drive from what is now the Czech Republic to Germany would probably be eight hours, but we don’t have a car.”

“So, this is roughly six hundred miles.”

“The average human walks maybe three miles per hour.”

Jack narrowed his eyes, flicking his gaze up. “Which is two hundred hours.”

“Eight days. Eight days of walking nonstop for twenty-four hours.”

“So, in other words, weeks of walking if we’re planning on sleeping at all.”

Cate covered her hands with her face.

“This is a nightmare,” Jack said, resuming his pacing.

Cate pulled her hands away. “Wait, horses. Horses can run pretty quickly. Maybe thirty miles an hour running, less trotting, but still quite a bit faster than walking. If we rode horses, we could cut this in half.”

“Okay. There are horses here. We’ll grab a few.”

Cate pursed her lips, patting her hands against the cot’s edge. “Great. So not only does this plan depend on finding our way to Rosenberg Palace, randomly showing up there, and convincing Anna that her very rich, very distinguished, very titled son married a common American in the future, but we also need to steal horses from the French army.”

“I know it doesn’t sound good, but it’s the best we can do. We’ll have to hope for the best.”

“And steal food along the way.” Cate doubled over with a groan. “Oh my gosh, our future depends on how good we are at being criminals.”

“Thank Gianna. She’s turned us into thieves.”

Cate shook her head and held up the jacket she’d already grabbed. “I hate her so much.”

“I’m not fond of her either. Even more so now. Every time I think that woman can’t get any worse, she surprises me. First, she kidnapped me and held me in a dungeon. Then, she tried to make me repay my salary after she ripped away my job and your estate. And now she’s stuck us in the middle of a war.”

“I’m sorry, Jack.”

“It’s not your fault,” he answered.

She stood and approached him. “It is. She’s after Dunhaven. She’s after me.”

“She comes after a Mackenzie, she comes after a Reid. That’s the way it is. We stick together.”

Cate nodded at him as he pulled her into an embrace.

“We’re in this together, Cate.”

She pulled away and smiled up at him. Her grin faded, and she cocked her head. “Wait a minute. Technically, I’m a Northcott now. Do you think we can use that loophole to get out of this?”

Jack shook his head but chuckled in spite of himself. “I doubt it. Somehow that’s made it worse.”

“Infinitely. And you thought the time I got shoved into the loch was bad.”

“Child’s play compared to this,” Jack said with a chuckle. “I’d give anything to fish you out of the loch again.”

They laughed together for a moment before Jack offered a groan. “Oh, I guess we’d better change. Hey, how’s his heart?”

“Not beating as hard as before, but it’s not steady and strong like normal.”

“But not captured or tortured or anything?”

“No, nothing like that. But normally his heart just beats in perfect rhythm. He is almost completely unflappable. But this is...different.”

“I wonder if he senses yours is different.”

“I don’t know,” Cate said, staring into space. “I hope we’ll be able to ask him.”

“We will. Think positive. All right, let’s change and begin our Bonnie and Clyde lifestyle.”

Cate shuddered and shook her head. "Right. I'll step out and keep watch while you change."

"Don't go racing off without me."

"I wouldn't dream of it," Cate said as she walked to the opening. "I'm counting on you to steal the horses."

"I suppose you'll expect me to saddle them, too."

"I can help. I helped the stablehand in 1810."

"Look at you, Cate," Jack said with a wink, "you're all ready for a life of crime."

She chuckled before stepping out of the tent. The sounds of the battle raged across the field. Cate wrapped her arms around her midriff and shifted her weight from foot to foot. Questions raced across her mind faster than she could process.

How would they navigate? How would they eat? What would they say when they got to Rosenberg? *If* they got to Rosenberg, her mind added.

She pressed her palms against her forehead as she paced in a small circle. Maybe they could steal a map before they left the camp.

Cate pressed a hand against her chest, focusing on Marcus's heartbeat. Slower than before, but different from the norm.

Something flashed across her mind, and her temples tightened. The tent flap fluttered open, and Jack stepped out in his French military uniform.

"It's a bit snug but it'll work," Jack said, tugging at the uniform. "Your turn."

"I think there are a few horses that way," Cate said, pointing them out.

"Okay, I'll think of a way to snag them while you change clothes."

Cate nodded and ducked into the tent. She hurried across to the cot where she left the clothes she's stolen. She unfastened her dress and shimmied out of it, tossing it aside. She glanced down at the slip, running a hand over the silky material.

She shook her head, deciding to keep it, and picked up the shirt. Voices sounded outside the tent. Her heart skipped a beat as she spun to face the opening. Had someone caught Jack?

The voice shouted again. What was happening?

She fiddled with the shirt, trying to find the opening with her shaky hands. The tent flap flew open and a man strode inside.

Cate held the shirt up in front of her as her jaw dropped open. She swallowed hard, staring into the eyes of Napoleon Bonaparte.

CHAPTER 25



The French military commander drew his chin back to his chest as he studied Cate. He raised his lower lip as he turned the corners of his mouth down and nodded his head. He waved a hand at her before he stalked to a container and pulled a bottle of wine from it.

“Ahhh,” Cate murmured as she tried to cover herself with the shirt. Her heart pounded and her throat went dry. Could she make it outside without him catching her?

Probably not given that she’d need to cross the entire tent, and he stood halfway across it. Even if she could, she’d have no clothes.

He murmured something to her in another language again, but she had no idea what he said. His Corsican accent made it impossible to make out. He poured a glass of wine, sniffed it, and took a sip as he studied her again.

He waved a finger at her, trying to tell her to do something but she had no idea what. After another sip of wine, he spoke again, seeming to become agitated.

Cate swallowed hard again. She had to do something. “Uh, hi, I’m Cate.”

“Américaine,” he said, arching an eyebrow.

“Yes, I’m American. And I’m lost. And I’m very sorry to have wandered into your tent.” It didn’t matter what she said, he wouldn’t learn any English until he was exiled ten years from now, Cate thought.

He grinned at her and spoke again. He twirled his finger in the air, signaling for her to turn around.

Heat rose in Cate's cheeks as the situation became obvious. "Oh, no, this is a mistake."

Napoleon took another sip of wine before he slammed the glass onto the table and stormed to her. Cate's eyes went wide as he grabbed hold of her cheeks and pressed his lips onto hers.

"Stop," she cried. "I'm not a prostitute." She pushed him back, showing him the ring on her finger. "Married, see?"

He furrowed his brow, reaching for her slip and tugging at it. "Prostitute."

"No," she said with a dramatic shake of her head. "Married." She pointed at the ring again. "Duchess." She pointed back at herself.

Napoleon drew his chin back before his face broke into a smile. He chuckled, doubling over. He grabbed her hand and rubbed a finger along the ring before he kissed it. He yanked her closer and kissed her cheek, tracing a line up to her ear where he whispered something she couldn't understand.

"You've got to be kidding me," Cate whispered.

His hands wandered down her back. She shoved him away before they cupped her somewhere she didn't want him touching. "Listen, Napoleon, I'm not here for this. I'm lost. My husband," she said, pointing to her ring, "is Marcus Northcott. Do you know him?"

"Marcus Northcott?" Napoleon repeated.

Cate nodded emphatically. "Yes. Oui. Si."

Napoleon slid his eyes sideways and shook his head. "Inno. Tu si mio."

He reached for her again, but she backed away, smacking into the cot and collapsing on it. With an arched eyebrow, he offered her a salacious laugh as he approached.

Cate gathered up the clothes she'd stolen and climbed to her feet. He reached for her as she tried to sidestep him, pulling her back against him and whispering something she couldn't understand in her ear.

He rubbed a hand along her belly, kissing her neck. She balled the clothes in her hand and spun to face him. "That's enough. I'm not here to be your prostitute!"

He stepped toward her, and she backed away from him. "No! I've had just about enough. First, the visions, then the hypnosis, then Gianna sends me here with no warning. I'm tired, I'm half-dressed, I'm a thief!" She waved the clothes in the air before she flicked a lock of hair away from her face. "And now Napoleon is trying to make me his latest conquest. No!"

She backed a few steps away. He called after her, but she ignored him. She spun away and lifted the tent's flap. Napoleon shouted behind her again, but she continued. She took one step outside of the tent when a harsh grip grasped her arm and yanked her back.

Napoleon tossed her down, shouting at her with a red face. She landed hard on her rear and the clothes she'd stolen spilled across the floor. He flailed his arms and wagged a finger at her.

She kicked her feet to propel herself backward as he chased after her. She smacked into a rifle, knocking it onto the floor. Napoleon grabbed her ankle and pulled her toward him. As she slid across the ground, she twisted to reach for the gun. Her fingers wrapped around the barrel, and she swung it behind her. The butt of the gun cracked him in the skull.

Blood bloomed from his temple, and his eyes rolled up in his head. He slumped forward, collapsing on her.

Cate sat stunned for a moment before she shoved his dead weight off of her and scrambled to her feet. She stared down at his limp form. Her eyes went wide, and her voice turned breathy. "Oh, no. I killed Napoleon. I can't believe this."

She dropped to her knees and pressed two fingers to his neck. She blew out a sigh of relief as his pulse thrummed against her fingertips. "He's alive."

Cate sucked in panicked breaths as her mind tried to recall all of the details of the battle. "Do they still need him?" she asked herself. "Uhhh, the battle started at eight. Forty-five minutes later, he orders a strike on the center. Then, later he moves the troops south. Did he do that already? Ohhh, if he doesn't wake up this could change the battle entirely."

Cate stood and paced for a few minutes, pressing her fingers to her forehead. She stared at the clothes strewn across the floor. With her eyes on the downed commander, she tugged on the pants and slid back into her shoes. She pulled the shirt over her head and stuffed both it and her slip into the pants before tugging the jacket over top. With a few twists of her wrist, she tamed her hair back and shoved it into her jacket. She snatched the gun from the floor before she grabbed the bottle of wine Napoleon had opened earlier.

She stepped to him and poured the liquid onto his face. He startled awake with a shout, wiping at his face.

Cate tossed the bottle down. “Wake up, Mr. Bonaparte. You need to win this battle.”

She spun on her heel and stalked from the tent. She pushed into the cold December air, shivering after the heated exchange in the tent.

The sounds of the battle raged behind her. She spun in search of Jack. “Jack?” she called, stalking a few steps forward.

Her breathing turned ragged as she spotted no sight of him. “Jack!” she called again. She tried to keep the panic at bay as the realization set in that he was gone. She was alone in a French military encampment in 1805.

“Jack!” she shouted again, her gaze shooting wildly around. A sob escaped her. She bit her lower lip and shook her head. “No. You can’t panic. Find him.”

She forced her breathing slower and searched in every direction. She peered around the corner of the tent. Two men walked with another man in front of them, nearing the line of soldiers preparing to advance. They shouted something at him as they shoved him forward.

“Jack,” she breathed. They must have pressed him into service for the battle, likely assuming he was a deserter. She shook her head and hurried toward them.

Before she reached them the unit marched out. “Oh no,” she breathed, trying to hurry forward to join them. The men marched out with Jack in their midst before she could. She cursed under her breath, following their direction as they advanced. There was no way she’d reach him before they entered the battlefield.

Cate’s forehead crinkled as another regiment crossed in front of her, slowing her progress even further. An officer raced past her, shouting and waving at her. She stumbled away, but he grabbed her and shoved her into the lineup. She mixed in with the others, in the middle of the group as soldiers rushed to join them.

She tried to keep an eye on Jack’s unit, but they were headed in the opposite direction. With a wince, she tried to fight through the soldiers and break free from them, but someone shoved her back into the line.

She marched forward toward the battle. The gunfire grew louder with every step. The regiment stopped marching. Cate stood in their midst, breathing hard from the walk and her nerves.

Orders were shouted. Mounted soldiers rode up and down. Banners flew, trumpets sounded, and drums beat. The unit lurched forward again,

dragging Cate with them.

They swung to the left. Across the field, another unit lined up. Cate swallowed hard as the two sides came face to face.

One man across the battlefield raised a weapon and fired. The bullet struck one of the officers, knocking him from his horse. Fighting broke out around her. Gunfire exploded, deafening her. Men rushed forward with screams.

Cate stood still as the chaos erupted around her. The soldier-less horse reared up before racing wildly. Cate narrowed her eyes at it. She tightened her grasp on her rifle as she hurried toward the frightened horse.

With bulging eyes, the horse snorted and squealed. Cate raced to get in front of it. He barreled toward her, and she held her hand out to steady it. “Easy, easy, boy.”

The horse skidded to a halt. The dead officer remained attached to him, his ankle twisted in the stirrup.

Cate reached out and rubbed the frightened horse’s nose. “Easy, it’s okay.”

She wrinkled her nose as she freed the dead man’s leg from the tangled stirrup. His open eyes stared widely at the sky. Cate closed them before she stowed the rifle in the saddle and stuck her foot in the stirrup. She swung her other leg over and mounted the horse, grabbing the reins.

“Okay, buddy, I’m scared, too, and I don’t ride very well. So please don’t kill me.”

She tugged at the reins to turn the horse toward where she’d seen Jack marching. “Come on, buddy. Let’s go get Jack.”

The horse cantered across the field. She squeezed her knees against the animal to hang on. The ground in front of her exploded in a wide spray of dirt. It rained down around her as she tugged the horse to a stop.

A man rushed toward her with his weapon aimed. Cate smacked the horse’s ribs with her heels, setting it into a gallop. The gun in the attacking soldier’s hands fired, missing her widely. He tossed down the weapon and drew his sword.

Another cannon blast stopped her again. The man closed the distance between her. She spun the horse in a circle, seeking a way out. Her heart pounded as she reached for the sword stowed in the saddle. She withdrew it and slashed at the man, slicing his arm. He stumbled back a step, and she used the small window to set the horse to gallop toward Jack’s unit.

She approached the group as they attacked the Allied units in the South. She scanned the chaos, searching for Jack. She slowed the horse and stood in her stirrups. "Where are you?"

She spotted him across the field. "Jack!"

She plopped into the saddle and signaled the horse to run. It charged into the fray, skillfully skirting fighting soldiers as he raced toward his destination. She ducked low behind his flying mane, clutching tightly to the reins and hugging the saddle with her thighs.

"Come on, boy," Cate whispered.

The man next to Jack took a bullet to the shoulder, falling backward with a bloodcurdling scream. The man on his right fell forward with a bullet to the skull.

Jack stood alone as one of the enemy soldiers rushed toward him. He struggled with his weapon, unable to fire it.

"Jack!" Cate screamed, freeing the sword again as she galloped toward him.

He snapped his gaze toward her, removing his eyes from the man who charged toward him. The soldier lifted his sword, ready to swing.

Cate urged more speed from the horse. If she didn't close the gap soon, the man would plunge his blade into Jack's chest. Jack wouldn't survive this battle. He'd die on the battlefield.

CHAPTER 26



“*J*ack!” Cate shouted again as she thundered toward him on the horse.

He stumbled to the side, and the man charging him thrust the knife into the air instead of Jack’s chest. He whipped around to try for another attack.

The horse blocked him, racing between Jack and the foreign soldier. Cate slashed at him but missed.

She tugged the horse to a stop and swung him around. The man spiraled back as Jack wrangled a gun from one of the fallen soldiers near him. He aimed it at the man and pulled the trigger, but the weapon held no bullets.

Jack tossed it down and tried for another gun from the other soldier. His attacker slashed at him again. The blade sliced Jack’s shirt sleeve but drew no blood.

Cate urged the horse forward, lining up her sword again. The man stumbled a few steps away as she swiped at him, avoiding her again.

Cate tugged the horse back again, spinning it around for another pass. The man spiraled and charged toward Jack who tried to pull another gun from a dead soldier.

“Jack!” she screamed again. She’d never get to them in time even on horseback. The man lifted his blade, prepared to strike when a gun cracked. Jack ducked instinctively. The man fell backward onto his back, an expression of shock on his features as a wound smoked between his eyes.

Cate set the horse in motion again, cantering up to Jack and easing to a stop. It trotted around him in a circle. "Need a ride?"

"Yes, please," Jack answered.

Cate grabbed his hand and helped him mount the horse behind her. She set the horse galloping across the field, heading toward the French encampment.

"We need another horse," Jack shouted in her ear as the battle raged behind them.

"I know," Cate called over her shoulder. "We should try to find some food, too."

She guided the horse through the camp as soldiers dragged hurt men for assistance. Blood oozed from a variety of wounds. Soldiers screamed in pain as their compatriots carried or dragged them for medical attention.

"Thank God I'm not one of them," Jack said as Cate slowed the horse to a trot and approached a hitching post with several horses. Jack dismounted, then Cate hopped to the ground.

"Listen, Cate," Jack said as he heaved a saddle onto one of the horses, "those guys grabbed me and—"

"I know. They probably figured you were deserting," Cate said as she helped fasten the saddle.

"I tried to get away, but...well, anyway, thanks for finding me."

"Of course," Cate said, catching his eye across the horse's broad back.

"I can't believe you charged into the battle like that."

"I was already part of it," Cate answered. "I got shoved into another regiment before I could catch up to you."

"Ugh, Cate, I'm sorry," Jack moaned, untying his horse. "That must have been frightening to walk out and find yourself alone."

"It was almost as frightening as what happened before," she answered as they pulled the horses along. She ducked into a few tents in search of food, stuffing the meager rations she found into the pouch dangling on the horse.

"What happened before?" Jack asked, adding food to their supply.

"Napoleon Bonaparte thought I was his call girl."

Jack stopped walking and shot a glance toward her. "Like *the* Napoleon Bonaparte? The one we saw earlier?"

Cate twisted to answer him as she continued with her horse. "Yep."

Jack led the horse faster as he jogged to catch up with Cate. “Are you okay? What happened? He didn’t—“

“No,” Cate interrupted. “I...hit him with the butt of a rifle and knocked him out.”

Jack’s eyes went wide.

“I thought I killed him. But I only knocked him out. Don’t worry, I woke him up, so hopefully, I didn’t change history.”

Jack blew out a long breath as they threaded through the camp toward the edge furthest away from the fighting. “This is getting insane.”

“Tell me about it. And now we’re about to ride horses in a general, vague direction in the hopes of finding Rosenberg Palace.” Cate stopped her horse as they reached the final tent and stuck her foot in the stirrup, grabbing the pommel.

“At least we know which way is west,” Jack said as he mounted his horse.

Cate balanced herself on top of the animal, grabbing the reins. “We need to go southwest, technically, but let’s just worry about getting away from this battle for now. I’d like to make progress before we have to search for shelter.”

“Aye, I think we’ll need it. It’s a bit cold.”

“It’s December. I’m not surprised. The adrenaline helped before, but that’ll wane now that we’re not actively being shot at.”

Jack twisted and stared out over the battlefield. “Yeah, I’m pretty glad about that, cold or not. Let’s get out of here.”

They set the horses to a quick trot and left the camp behind. They rode until the sounds of the battle died off before they slowed the horses to a walk.

“I can’t believe Napoleon came on to you.”

“In his defense, I was wearing only a slip. I think he took that as a sign. I tried to explain, I even brought Marcus’s name into it, thinking he may know him, but he just wouldn’t take no for an answer.”

“Good for you clocking him like that.”

“Let’s just hope he’s okay enough to win that battle before we accidentally change history.”

Jack bobbed around as the horse meandered along. “Does it matter? Gianna doesn’t care. They change history all the time.”

“They are irresponsible.” The corners of Cate’s mouth turned up, and she started to chuckle. The giggle turned into a full belly laugh, and she slapped her thigh.

“What’s so funny?”

Cate continued to laugh. “I remember you lecturing me about changing history, even subtly. And now we’re faced with a situation where history is continuously changing.” Another sharp laugh escaped her and tears fell from her eyes. “And I almost killed Napoleon.”

Jack joined in, chuckling with her. “I never thought in a million years this would be happening. Napoleon hit on you.”

Cate doubled over, tears still streaming from her eyes. “He did.”

“We fought in the Napoleonic war. I nearly killed someone. Or he nearly killed me. And we stole two horses from the French army.”

“Along with clothes and food.”

“We’re thieves,” Jack said with a belly laugh.

“I’m a clairvoyant.”

Jack pointed at her with a hoot. “Married to a warlock.”

Cate chuckled a few more times before she sobered. “Yet we’re still stuck in 1805. Too bad my clairvoyance didn’t see this coming.”

Jack blew out a long breath as his laughing tapered off. “That’s still... odd to me, too.”

“It’s not any odder than it is to me. I can’t believe it. But it’s true. I can’t deny that these images keep running through my mind.”

“And you never had it before?”

“Well, I guess I did with the dream about my parents, but not to this extent.”

Jack cocked his head, rubbing his chin. “I wonder why. What prompted it? The temporalysis?”

Cate rubbed at her palm. “Maybe the joined blood.”

Jack crinkled his brow and shot her a glance as they continued along. “Explain this to me again.”

“He sliced my hand and his and then did some sort of magic. After our blood mixed, he said he’d be able to feel my heart in his chest. And I could feel his in mine.”

“That’s so bizarre. But then, what about this situation isn’t bizarre?”

Cate stared into the distance ahead of them. “Nothing. There is nothing normal about any of this.”

"I honestly miss the days when the under-butler stole some jewelry and our biggest problem was pinning the crime on him."

"Don't forget your genius legal maneuvering," Cate said, pointing a finger at him.

"Right. Back in the day, I sweated bullets over pretending to be a lawyer. Now, I'm hopping around in time with a warlock and a clairvoyant, and pretending to be a French soldier."

"Things certainly have changed and if Marcus is correct, they won't settle for quite some time."

"Let's hope he's wrong."

Cate shot him a sideways glance. "Sadly, he's not wrong often."

Jack pulled his lips back into a grimace as they meandered along. "That's scary."

"On all fronts." Cate glanced behind her then returned her gaze forward. "Maybe we should take a break and let the horses rest before we continue on the afternoon leg."

"You're right."

"I wonder if there's a barn or something around."

"Right," Jack said, rubbing his hands together. "I'm getting cold."

"Yes. I think we could use a break."

They found a shelter and spent a few hours allowing the horses to rest while they decompressed and warmed up. They avoided eating any of the food they'd grabbed, opting to ration it for when they felt hungry.

"Well, I guess we head west for a bit more before we try to get our bearings," Jack said.

Cate nodded as she mounted her horse and led it from the warmth of the barn they'd found. The cold air smacked them in the face as they headed into the gray day.

They set the horses to canter and made more progress toward Rosenberg Palace. After a time, they slowed the horses to a trot, continuing toward the now-setting sun. As they rode along the dirt road, a carriage approached behind them.

Cate and Jack pulled their horses to the side as the carriage whisked past them.

Jack waved a hand at it. "Aww, what I wouldn't give to be in a carriage. I can't believe how much I want to be in a carriage. My standards have really sunk."

“You and me both. No wind gusts chilling you to the bone. When Marcus and I came to 1810 for you, we took a carriage from Zurich. It wasn’t a comfortable ride by modern standards, but it sure beats this.”

“No kidding. I’m not sure how much more my rump can take.”

“And we only have days more of this to look forward to.”

“Fantastic,” Jack groaned. “When we get to Rosenberg, I’m going to ask if they can magically fix my behind.”

Cate chuckled as they continued, approaching the carriage that had passed them earlier. It sat in the middle of the road, unmoving.

Cate furrowed her brow, staring at the black carriage as she slowed her horse. “Umm, something feels off here.”

“Maybe they’re letting the horses rest.”

“In the middle of the road?” Cate asked. She shook her head. “Something’s wrong.”

Jack pulled his horse to a stop as Cate did the same. “What do you want to do?”

Cate considered it, gnawing on her lower lip. “I hate to turn back. We have limited food and days to go before we even get close to Rosenberg.”

“Keep going?” Jack asked.

Cate sucked in a breath and shrugged. “Let’s pick up the pace and give them a wide berth. They should think we’re French soldiers. Hopefully, they’re not from the other side and looking to snatch a few prisoners.”

“Right.” Jack gave his horse a nudge with his heels. Cate did the same, setting a quick pace as they moved forward.

They trotted toward the carriage, leaving the road to canter through the field next to it. The carriage shifted as they edged off the road.

Several people climbed from it. Two raised weapons, aiming them at Cate and Jack. “Stop!” one yelled.

“What should we do?” Jack asked.

“They’re at pretty close range,” Cate said, tugging on her reins. “I’m not sure we can get away without risking serious harm to us or the horses.”

“Right,” Jack answered. “I guess we’ll hope for the best.”

“If they plan to rob us, they will be sorely disappointed,” Cate answered.

“Dismount,” the man yelled.

Jack swung his leg over and climbed down from his horse. “We don’t have anything of value. We’re just soldiers.”

“Step away from the horse and keep your hands up. Both of you.”

Cate slid off her horse and held her hands in the air, stalking forward a few steps. The carriage shimmied again. The door opened and another man disembarked from the conveyance.

Cate’s heart skipped a beat as she recognized Elliott Stevens dressed in 1805 finery.

He grinned at her. “Well, well, well, how interesting to meet you here, Duchess.”

CHAPTER 27



Cate raised her chin as she struggled to stop her knees from wobbling.

Elliott Stevens smirked at her as he stalked a few steps forward.

“That is quite an interesting look for you, my dear Duchess.”

Cate licked her lips as she considered her response. “We had to get creative after Gianna dumped us here in the middle of the Battle of Austerlitz.”

“Creativity is something you seem to have in spades. You constantly slip through our fingers.”

Cate flexed her jaw as her nostrils flared, and she crossed her arms. “I’m not going to apologize for making it too difficult for you to kill me or steal from me.”

“I assume you have some sort of plan to get yourself out of this little pickle, Duchess?”

“It’s none of your concern.”

Elliott raised his finger in the air as he paced behind the carriage. “Actually, it is very much my concern. You see, I’m growing weary of this game.”

“Then stop playing,” Cate said, throwing her hands out to her sides.

Elliott chuckled at her. “It is almost a shame you won’t join us. You are feisty, I’ll give you that.”

“I would never join your side,” Cate spat at him.

Elliott squashed his lips together. “I figured as much. Unfortunately, you won’t have many choices soon.”

“Are we finished here?”

“Not in the slightest,” Elliott said. He narrowed his eyes at her as he squared his shoulders, clasping his hands behind him. “Get in the carriage, Duchess.”

“I don’t think so,” Cate said with a shake of her head.

His gun-toting goons shifted their weapons to Jack.

“I’m not asking,” Elliott answered.

Cate swallowed hard, shifting her gaze to Jack. “Let’s not do anything hasty.”

“Oh, this is hardly hasty. You have been a thorn in my side for far too long. I’m ready for the endgame. Now get in the carriage.”

Cate’s knees wobbled as she took a step forward. Her heart hammered in her chest. Jack stuck close to her side, walking forward with her.

“No, no, no,” Elliott said, waving his hand in the air. “Not him. Just you. We no longer need Mr. Reid.”

Heat washed over her as she glanced at Jack. Her skin prickled, and the hairs on her neck stood up. She couldn’t leave him here.

“Come along, Duchess, only you are invited.”

“No!” Cate shouted, stamping a foot on the ground. “Both of us or neither of us.”

Elliott barked out a laugh. “Oh, you are amusing. I can almost see the appeal. Though it’s the fact that you have no ability to follow through that makes it rather ridiculous. Now, come along, or we’ll shoot Mr. Reid.”

Cate stepped in front of him, blocking him with her body. “Then you’ll shoot me, too.”

Elliott sneered at her. “Don’t tempt me.”

“You’ll lose whatever leverage you think you have by kidnapping me.”

“Oh, I don’t think it. I know it. You, my darling Duchess, are going to bring us everything. Now, get in the carriage, or we will have to get physical, and I don’t think you want that.”

“I’m not going anywhere without Jack,” Cate said through clenched teeth.

Elliott scoffed and shook his head. He waved a hand at the men. “Grab her.”

“No!” Cate shouted as the men shouldered their weapons and stormed toward her. She backed away before she spun and ran toward her horse.

One of them grabbed her roughly, tugging her backward before she made it to the animal.

“No!” she cried, trying to wiggle free.

“Cate!” Jack shouted next to her as the other man held him back. He fought against the larger man, trying to wrench his arms from the man’s firm grasp.

“Jack!” Cate screamed, reaching for him. He tried to stretch his arms toward her, but the man held him back. Tears streamed down her cheeks as her attacker dragged her backward.

“Cate, no!”

“Jack,” she sobbed as the man spun her toward the carriage. She dug her feet into the dirt, twisting to gaze at him as she struggled to break free.

Jack ripped his arms away from the man and raced toward her. “Cate!”

He dove for her as the man behind him caught up. He whipped Jack back, tossing him several steps away before he swung at him. He caught Jack in the jaw, knocking him to the ground.

“No!” Cate yelled. She kicked and flailed her arms as her attacker picked her up.

Jack recovered and swung a fist at the man, but Elliott’s bodyguard blocked it, landing another blow against Jack.

It knocked him to the ground. The man strode toward the carriage, leaving Jack breathing heavily on the ground as his partner shoved Cate into the carriage.

They climbed inside after her, flanking her on either side as they shoved her into the seat across from Elliott.

Cate sniffled and wiped at her tear-stained cheeks. “Take him with us. We can’t leave him here. Please.”

Elliott sipped liquor from a glass, studying the amber liquid inside. He flicked his gaze up to her face. “Give me Dunhaven Castle.”

Cate shuddered at the request.

“No? Too bad for Jack.” He reached up to knock on the window.

Cate shot a hand out. “Wait!”

Elliott raised his eyebrows. “Are you willing to sign it over to me right now?”

Cate swallowed hard, her lower lip quivering.

“As I thought.” Elliott rapped against the window, and the carriage lurched forward.

Cate spun to stare out the rear window of the carriage. Jack climbed to his feet as they rode away from him. He raced to his horse and mounted it. He grabbed the reins of her horse and set them both in motion as he followed behind them.

Cate kept her teary eyes on him as he rode behind them.

Elliott took another sip of his brandy. "Well, this is annoying." He knocked on the glass again. The carriage slowed to stop.

Cate sniffled, wiping at her tears and expecting Elliott to order the men to drag Jack into the carriage.

Elliott took another sip. "Tell him to stop following us."

"What?" Cate asked.

"Tell him to stop following us."

"No," Cate said. "You can't—"

"I can. Tell him to stop following us, or I will stop him permanently."

Cate's features pinched as she fought back another sob. The man next to her popped the door open.

"Go on," Elliott said with a wiggle of his eyebrows. "And if you try to run, I'll shoot you in the leg. In this time period, it will be extremely painful to live through."

Cate's lower lip trembled as she climbed from her seat. Her knees wobbled, and she clung to the carriage to stay upright. She spun to face Jack who slowed on his horse.

"Jack," she said with a sniffle, shaking her head, "you can't follow us."

"Like Hell, I won't. You tell him that."

The crease between her eyebrows deepened as tears spilled onto her cheeks. "You can't. He'll kill you."

"I'd like to see him try."

"Please, Jack," Cate said with a sob.

"Cate..." he said, his face scrunching.

Cate wiped at her tears. "Go to Rosenberg. Get help. Please don't take a chance. Please, Jack."

"Okay," he said, his voice cracking.

She wrapped her arms around her as her stomach turned over.

"Come along, Duchess," Elliott said.

Her lower lip trembled again as she gave him one final look before she stepped up toward the carriage.

"Cate!" Jack called.

She froze, flicking her gaze back to him.

“We’ll find each other.”

She nodded as more tears spilled down her cheeks. “Count on it.”

Elliott tugged her into the carriage. She collapsed into the seat, and he knocked on the window. The carriage rolled forward. Cate twisted in her seat to stare behind her.

Jack stared after her. His horse pawed at the ground, nickering as he awaited the signal to continue.

Tears streamed down her cheeks as the carriage trundled away. She pressed her hand against the window as a sob escaped her. She pulled it back, covering her mouth as she continued to cry.

“Come now, Duchess,” Elliott said behind her. “You cannot be *that* upset.”

Cate twisted to glare at him. “You’ve left him to die.”

Elliott narrowed his eyes at her as he poured another brandy. “You have very little faith in your friend. Oh, or is he more than a friend?”

He held the glass out to her. She settled into her seat with a grimace.

“I’m curious. My subsequent steps may need to change based on your answer.” He waved the drink at her again, wiggling his eyebrows.

She smacked it from his hand. The displeasure on his face spoke volumes as he whipped a handkerchief from his pocket and wiped at the liquid spilled on his jacket. “What an interesting reaction. Should I be concerned that His Grace will not make an attempt to retrieve you from our clutches?”

Cate glowered at him as anger burned through her. She balled her hands into fists as the image of Jack stuck in 1805 in the middle of Austria danced through her mind. “He knows better than to make any deals with you.”

Elliott cocked his head, arching an eyebrow. “Really? You don’t believe he will come for you?”

“He’d be smart not to. You can’t be trusted.”

A slow smile spread across his features. “Do you realize what we can offer you?”

“Nothing,” Cate spat.

Elliott leaned forward toward her, his grin broadening. “That’s just not true. Join us. Convince your husband to join us. You would be surprised at the perks.”

“I don’t think so.”

“I understand he is a very wealthy man. I’m certain you want for nothing. But I assure you the rewards will be vast.”

Cate cocked her head, flexing her jaw. “Go back for Jack, and I’ll consider it.”

Elliott snorted a laugh. “You have no bargaining power here, Duchess.”

“Then why ask me for help with my husband?”

He shrugged, refreshing his own brandy and taking a sip. “I’m offering you an opportunity. A chance to do things the easy way. Do not misunderstand, we do not *need* you to bring him to our side.”

“Then let me go,” Cate answered.

Elliott laughed again, raising his glass in a silent toast to her. “Again, you misunderstand. We do not need you to convince him. We can do that ourselves. Though it will be far more painful for you and him than if you were to volunteer.”

“I will never give in to you.”

Elliott fluttered his eyelashes, flicking his gaze out the window. “More’s the pity. I fear you will regret that decision, but it will be far too late then. Now, I am tiring of this conversation. Fletcher, if you would be so kind?”

He waved a hand at Cate. She furrowed her brow a second before his meaning became clear. A sharp, shooting pain slammed through her head. Her eyes rolled back into her head and her world went black.

* * *

Cate’s eyes fluttered open. A dark room surrounded her as she lay on her back on a soft mattress. She gasped for breath before she pressed a palm against her aching head, squeezing her eyes closed. The memory of being knocked unconscious flooded back to her.

She forced her eyes open and allowed them to adjust to the darkness. “Where am I?” she whispered.

She slid her hands along the silky material enveloping her. With a furrowed brow, she reached for the curtain hanging from the tunnel and eased it open a smidge. She peered through the slit, searching the large room beyond.

With a shaky breath, she tried the other side, finding a window. She scrambled from under the covers and hurried to it, staring out into the late

evening sky. Purple streaked it as the sun set behind her.

She searched the landscape for anything she recognized, but she found nothing. "It doesn't matter. I need to get out of here."

She spun to face the room in search of her shoes. After finding them near the bed, she tugged them on.

How far was she from Jack? Could she find him again? Her heart broke as she recalled leaving him on the road.

"I'm coming, Jack." She glanced around for anything useful but found nothing.

With a deep swallow, she wiped her sweaty palms against her pants and hurried toward the door.

She cracked it open and peered into the hall. Candelabras flickered up and down its length, revealing nothing. Her heart pounded as she swung it open. A shadow passed in front of her, and a figure blocked her way forward.

Cate stumbled back a step, her eyes wide. Her throat went dry, and her heart stopped.

Gianna sashayed into the bedroom with a cat-who-caught-the-canary grin on her features. She lifted the candelabra in her hand. The flickering candlelight twisted her smile into an evil mask. "Hello, mouse."

CHAPTER 28



Cate balled her hands into fists, ready to fight the woman to free herself.

“Don’t bother to make a fuss, Cate. You won’t get very far.” She waved toward the hall. Two bulky bodyguards entered, closing the door behind them and blocking it.

Cate’s stomach turned as she realized she was trapped.

Gianna set the candelabra on a dresser before leaning against it and setting a hand on her cocked hip. She stared at Cate with a smirk. “If it was up to me, I would have left you in 1805 on your own.”

“I wish you would have,” Cate answered.

Gianna’s grin broadened. “But this will be so much more fun.”

Cate struggled to stop her knees from wobbling as her body threatened to tremble all over. “I don’t agree.”

“Oh, I do. We have big plans for you, Cate.”

“I’m not joining you,” Cate said with a shake of her head.

“Good!” Gianna said, her eyes going wide. She pulled herself off the dresser and sauntered forward. “I hope you don’t. In fact, you agreeing now is my worst nightmare.”

Cate pulled her chin back as the woman closed the gap between them. She narrowed her eyes, staring at the dark marks rimming her neck.

“Admiring my necklace?” Gianna inquired.

“What happened?” Cate asked, flicking her gaze from the black marks to Gianna’s face.

“Your husband happened.”

Cate swallowed hard, narrowing her eyes.

“He nearly killed me when I told him what I’d done to you. Lucky for me, I escaped with my special trinket. Just a flick with a time period in mind and poof!”

Cate furrowed her brow. The pounding heartbeat she’d detected earlier must have been caused by his anger.

Gianna reached out to trace a finger down Cate’s cheek. “And I am so looking forward to doing even worse to you.”

Cate snapped her head away from Gianna’s touch. “You’ll never get the chance.”

“Oh, don’t tell me you’re going to give in and join us now,” Gianna said with a pout.

“Marcus won’t give in to you.”

Gianna’s eyes went wide, and she leaned closer, inches from Cate. “Oh, but he will. He won’t have any other choice.”

Cate shook her head. “No.”

“Oh, yes, dear Cate. He won’t be able to stand watching us torture you.” She leaned forward and whispered in her ear. “He will break. And then we will own him.”

Cate shoved Gianna away from her. The men across the room rushed forward. Gianna tossed a lock of hair back. “It’s fine. I’m fine.”

She raised her chin, the sneer returning to her features. “Oh, I am going to enjoy breaking you.”

She stalked to the door, yanked it open, and waved her slender fingers at an unseen person. A box appeared, and she grabbed it, spinning and tossing it across the floor. “Get dressed. Elliott wants to dine with you in thirty minutes.”

The men stalked from the room. The door slammed behind them, startling Cate as she stood in the center of the massive, dark space. Only the candelabra kept the blackness at bay.

Cate wrapped her arms around her midriff as she wandered to the bed and eased onto it. She needed a way out. And she needed it fast. She couldn’t risk staying here.

At worst, no one would come for her, and she’d die a slow, painful death at the hands of Gianna. At best, Marcus came for her and she’d die a

slow, painful death at the hands of Gianna. Cate wrinkled her nose at her prospects or lack thereof.

She forced herself off the bed and hurried to the window again. The cold glass sent a chill through her body as she pressed her hand against it. Darkness grew with each passing moment. She glanced down at the ground below her. She needed to get to the first floor. Unless...

Cate grabbed hold of the handle and flung the window open. She leaned out as the icy wind chilled her further. The ground swayed below her while she pondered leaping. Could she make it?

She straightened, gasping for breath. She'd try another way. This would be a last resort.

She swung the window closed and hastened across the room, bypassing the crushed white box on the floor. She eased the door open a crack and peered in the hall. Nothing. She waited for several breaths before she let go of the ornate knob.

The candelabra glowed on the nearby dresser. She grabbed it and returned to the door, pulling it open further before she leaned into the hall and glanced up and down.

"Which way?" she questioned as she eased her door closed behind her and flicked her gaze back and forth.

On her left, the hall disappeared around a corner. On her right, it continued straight before branching.

Cate chewed her lower lip before she darted to the left and hurried to the corner. Holding her breath, she peered around it. Empty.

She let out a breath and scurried down the hall, holding the candelabra high overhead. Her heart pounded so hard, she worried someone would hear her coming. She rounded another corner, spilling into a wide hall that led to a grand set of stairs.

Her heart skipped a beat, and she raced forward, grasped the thick, wooden banister, and rushed down to the marble floor below. She flung the wide wooden door open.

A dark figure filled the opening as she attempted to take a step into the night. Cate stumbled back a step, her jaw falling open. Slow and steady footsteps approached from her side.

"You are meant to be dressing for our dinner," Elliott said as he strode from one of the rooms tucked to the side of the foyer. "Not racing into the night."

“I told you she couldn’t be trusted,” Gianna added, joining him and swirling her sherry in her glass.

Cate raised her chin. “Let me go. I can’t do anything to help you.”

Elliott let out a loud, belly laugh. “I disagree. But we should discuss that over dinner. Now, please, go change.”

“No,” Cate answered.

Gianna clicked her tongue against the roof of her mouth. “There is no point in refusing.”

“I won’t help you. I can’t help you. There is nothing I can do for you.”

“You can’t or you won’t?” Elliott questioned, signaling for her to follow him into the sitting room.

“Both,” Cate said as she stalked in behind him with Gianna following her.

“I very much disagree,” he answered, pouring a brandy and offering it to Cate.

She shook her head, refusing the beverage.

Elliott’s shoulders slumped, and he heaved a sigh. “Are we going to go through this again? Just take the drink. Duchess. It seems like you could use it.”

Cate grabbed the glass from his hand as Gianna circled around her and draped an arm over Elliott’s shoulder. “Oh, please let me kill her, Elliott. She’s useless.”

“That’s enough, Gianna. Our dear Duchess is quite useful in one capacity or another. But that we shall discuss over our meal. Now, run along and dress. I do not want you at my table in that uniform.”

Cate slammed the brandy glass on the nearby table, rattling the empty vase on it. “I’m not certain I care what you want.”

Elliott sipped his drink as he leaned against the mantel and stared at the roaring fire under it. “I admire your tenacity, but I grow weary of your refusals.”

“This is why I wish you would let me finish her. She is useless to us. A thorn in our side.”

“I thought you wished to break her?” Elliott questioned.

“I vacillate between the two desires. At the moment, I prefer a swift death at my hands.”

Elliott waved his hand at her, dismissing the conversation. “Not now.” He spun to face Cate. “I will not ask again.”

“Bring Jack here, and I will.”

Elliott narrowed his eyes at the statement. “There is so much I cannot wait to dig into at our dinner. I so hope I will not need to put a gun to your head.”

“Ohh, let me do it!” Gianna said, clasping her hands together.

Cate firmed her jaw but spun on her heel, grabbed the candelabra, and stormed from the room.

“I expect you to be prompt. Do not dally!” Elliott shouted as she mounted the stairs.

Her blood boiled and heat washed over her as she made her way back to the room she’d left behind. She curled and uncurled her fists with each step. She held back the tears filling her eyes, refusing to cry over The Agency no matter how grim things appeared.

She reached the room she’d awoken in and pushed through the door. Her breathing turned ragged as she collapsed back against it. She was stuck. She couldn’t get away.

Her mind stretched as she vetted through options. Her choices were few. She couldn’t run. She couldn’t hide.

She had to stay alive long enough to find her way out of the situation. Perhaps she could sneak away in the dead of the night. She would have to endure the dinner first.

With a tensed jaw, she stalked across the room and collected the box. She picked at the collapsed corner, trying to peel the lid off.

She found a lilac evening dress inside in the typical style for the era. A grimace formed on her lips as she tugged her jacket off and stared down at the dress.

A knock sounded at the door. “I’m not ready yet!”

A woman pushed inside with a nod. “I will assist you, Your Grace.”

Cate bit her lower lip as she nodded, acutely aware of how much she missed Andrea. She peeled off the stolen clothes and slipped into the dress, allowing the maid to fasten it.

“Your hair, Your Grace?” the girl asked.

“Leave it.”

She shook her head and pulled a long plume from within the box. “Mr. Stevens insisted.”

Cate sighed as she shuffled to the dressing table and collapsed on the chair. She stared at the wooden top without seeing it as the woman pulled

her hair into an upswept style, affixing the feather to it. The fluffy plume cascaded onto her shoulder as the girl finished the style.

She hurried across the room and retrieved gloves from the box. “Your gloves.”

Cate pulled herself from her rambling thoughts, flicking her gaze up to her through the mirror. She sucked in a deep breath, rising to stand. The woman approached her, holding out the first glove. Cate slipped her hand inside as the woman shimmied the garment to her elbow. She slid the other on.

“Anything else, Your Grace?”

Cate shook her head.

“Mr. Stevens asked that you present yourself in the sitting room downstairs when ready.”

Cate licked her lips and nodded. The maid scurried from the room, leaving Cate standing in the center. Her head pounded, her muscles ached, and her stomach rolled.

She slow-blinked as she forced one foot in front of the other. Her train dragged across the floor behind her as she stalked from the room and down the hall. She followed the route she had taken when trying to escape, plodding down the stairs and into the sitting room.

Elliott sipped at his brandy from the wing-backed chair near the fireplace, his gaze shifting to her as she entered. The corner of his lips turned up at the edges, and his eyes sparkled as he studied her up and down, rising from the chair. “Well, I am beginning to understand exactly what it is our intrepid Duke finds so alluring.”

Gianna glanced at Cate, rolling her eyes. “I still don’t see the appeal.”

“That’s your jealousy speaking, Gianna, dear.” He approached her, his eyes never leaving hers. “Would you like a cocktail or would you prefer to go straight to dinner?”

“Dinner. I prefer to get this over with.”

Elliott offered his arm to her. Cate stared down at it with a frown before she flicked her gaze to his and slid her hand through the crook of his elbow.

He patted her hand. “I admire your spirit. I will so enjoy having you on our side.”

“I will never be on your side,” she said as he led her down the hall toward the dining room.

Gianna trailed behind them, her hips slowly rolling side to side as she down the rest of her sherry. “Don’t be so sure, princess.”

“Ignore her,” Elliott said as he led Cate to a high-backed chair and tugged it away from the table. Cate sank on it as he pushed it under her. She startled, her shoulders rising to her ears when he cupped her arms in his hands. “She’s jealous.”

Gianna sauntered around the table and plopped into a chair, whipping a napkin onto her lap. “I’m not. I’m frustrated.”

“Behave, Gianna,” Elliott said as he sat at the head of the long table. Servants descended on them and poured their wine.

Elliott swirled it in the glass before sniffing it and taking a sip. “Now, tell me, Duchess, what is your relationship with Mr. Reid? It seems rather... complex.”

“That’s none of your business,” Cate answered.

“Oh, come now. You are his employer, but what else are you? A friend? A lover? How does your husband feel about that?”

Cate flicked her gaze to him, her jaw flexing as her hand slid onto the table. Her fingers wrapped around her knife as she answered him. “It’s none of—

“My business,” he finished, waving a hand in the air. “Of course. You’ve said. Though I really need to know. You see, I need to understand how valuable you are.”

Cate slid the knife under the overlay fabric of her dress and into her pocket. “I don’t understand.”

“Don’t you?” Elliott questioned. “You continue to tell me you are not valuable, but I don’t believe that.”

“I’m not,” Cate said with a shrug as servants delivered their first course. She stared down at the liquid in her wide bowl.

Elliott stirred his soup before lifting his spoon to his mouth. He settled it back in his bowl and eyed Cate again. “I disagree. Please, eat, Duchess.”

“I’m not hungry.”

“You are really trying,” Gianna said. “The food is not poisoned.”

Cate flicked her gaze over the floral arrangement separating them and narrowed her eyes at the woman. “I wouldn’t trust anything you said.”

“She is quite right. At this moment, you are much more valuable to us alive. I am not certain what game you think you are playing, but I’m fairly

certain if we apply the appropriate amount of pressure to you, your husband will give us what we want.”

“I doubt it,” Cate said. She sipped at the soup, sickened by how good the food tasted after having none all day.

“I don’t. After what he did to Gianna when he found out you were in 1805, I’d wager he will move heaven and earth to ensure no harm comes to you.”

“He will never join you.”

“Respectfully, I disagree again. The question is how much will you need to survive before he does. That should be the only question burning through your mind.”

Cate slid another spoonful of soup into her mouth, letting the warm liquid roll across her tongue.

“You don’t enjoy being harmed, do you, Duchess?” Elliot asked.

“Please say yes, because I cannot wait to try a few things,” Gianna said with a smirk.

“Does it matter what I answer?”

“Yes,” Elliott said after another sip of his wine. “It very much does. You are in complete control of this situation.”

Cate’s forehead crinkled as a servant collected her bowl.

“Don’t play coy, mouse,” Gianna said with a roll of her eyes. “You cannot possibly be that stupid.”

“Gianna,” Elliott said, his voice filled with restraint, “behave.” He flicked his gaze back to Cate, his eyes gleaming in the candlelight. “Think, Duchess.”

Gianna clicked her tongue and shook her head as the servants appeared with the next course. “Really, Elliott. Do you see now? She is far too simple to be of any good to us except as a pawn.”

Elliott held up his hand to shush the woman as he kept his eyes trained on Cate. “We want your husband on our side. You can bring him around.”

“And why would I do that?” Cate asked.

“Because, dear Duchess, if you don’t, we will make your life a living Hell.”

CHAPTER 29



The words echoed in Cate's mind as she stared at the food on her plate. She swallowed hard and flicked her gaze back to Elliott.

"You don't want that, do you? You don't want us as your enemy."

"I can't help you," she answered.

Elliott cut into his beef and popped a piece in his mouth, flicking his eyebrows up. "Can't or won't?"

"Can't," Cate answered, stabbing a green bean with her fork.

"You're lying," Gianna spat.

Cate focused her gaze on the woman across from her, studying the dark bruises around her neck. "I'm not. I can't do what you're asking."

"Elaborate," Elliott said as he sawed at his meat again.

"I have no control over Marcus's decisions." She poked at a potato cube before she slid the fork into her mouth.

"Oh, come now, Duchess. You're being far too modest."

"I am not."

Gianna arched her eyebrows and fluttered her eyelashes at Cate. Elliott's utensils clattered onto his plate, and he clasped his hands together, resting his elbows on the pristine white tablecloth. "Do you mean to tell me that a man who reacts as violently as Marcus Northcott did to his wife's disappearance gives her opinion no credence?"

Cate chewed the inside of her lower lip, attempting to come up with a response.

“I don’t believe that,” Elliott said with a shake of his head. He grabbed his wine glass, taking a sip before he tipped it toward Cate. “I believe he will do anything you ask.”

Cate sighed. Marcus hated The Agency. And their less-than-real marriage wouldn’t live up to Elliott’s expectations.

A cackle erupted from across the table. Gianna bent forward over her plate as she laughed. She slapped the table before she rested her chin in her palm and eyed Cate with a few more giggles escaping her. “I think, Elliott, what has our dear little Cate all twisted in knots is that her marriage isn’t real.”

Elliott flicked his eyebrows up. “You’ve mentioned this theory before. I disagree. Care to settle a bet, Duchess?”

Cate flicked her gaze up from tracing the pattern of the lace tablecloth. She studied Gianna’s features in the flickering candlelight.

“Come on, Cate. What’s the harm in admitting the truth?”

Cate slid her trembling hand into her lap. She fought to stop her entire body from shaking, pressing her fingernails into her palms.

Gianna tugged one of the flowers from the arrangement in the center of the table and twirled the stem between her thumb and index finger. She tugged a petal from it, dropping it to the linen tablecloth. “He loves her.” She yanked another petal and let it flutter down. “He loves her not. Which is it, Cate?”

Elliott studied her from the head of the table. “I find it so interesting that you will not answer. Is there some truth to Gianna’s accusation?”

Gianna smirked at her. “Come on, Cate. Admit it. What would it hurt? You married him just to keep Dunhaven Castle safe. How you knew our play, I haven’t yet worked out. But I imagine that has something to do with your illustrious husband’s intricate network of connections.”

Cate focused on her breathing, unwilling to admit anything.

“Now, wait just a moment, Gianna,” Elliott said, wagging a finger at her. “You see, that is something quite different than what I am asking.”

Gianna tossed the flower down and snapped her gaze to Elliott. “How so? I maintain they married for legal reasons only.”

“No. You said she married him to keep Dunhaven Castle safe.”

Gianna offered him an unimpressed stare. “Same thing.”

“Oh, no,” Elliott answered, waving a finger in the air. “No, no. Not the same thing at all.” A smile spread across his face, and he studied Cate.

“Perhaps our dear Duchess married for legal reasons, but the illustrious Duke did not. Oh, how interesting. Who is in love with whom?”

“You think he loves her?” Gianna questioned. “I honestly cannot see how. She’s nothing. Certainly not his type if his previous fiancée is any measure. And he can surely attract far better.”

“The heart wants what the heart wants. And I still maintain his throttling of you speaks volumes.”

“Marcus Northcott does not like to lose,” Gianna shot back with a shrug. “It may not speak to any emotional connection.”

“We shall soon find out, I think. Much to our Duchess’s chagrin.” He flicked his gaze to Cate, his features lit by the flickering candlelight giving them a more sinister appearance. “Unless you are willing to convince him. But before that, I am very curious to know your answer, dear. We can solve that mystery here and now.”

“Admit it, Cate. Your marriage is a sham,” Gianna said. “I’d love to know I’m right. I’d love to know if my case in the future has merit.”

Cate flexed her jaw, her nostrils flaring as heat rose in her body. “Your case will be right where it deserves to be. In the trash.”

Gianna scoffed. “Perhaps Mr. Smythe’s legal maneuvering will see my complaint thrown out, but, again, that’s not what I’ve asked. I asked if the case had merit because you have perpetrated a fraud.”

Elliott leaned forward, his lips parting, as the tension between the two women hung heavy in the air.

Cate swallowed hard, narrowing her eyes at the blonde across from her. Her lips twisted as she pushed her anger down. “Your case has no merit. Our marriage is real.”

The smirk on Gianna’s face faded, replaced by a scowl. “I don’t believe you.”

“I’m not asking you to believe me.”

“Oh, goody,” Elliott said with a clap of his hands. Cate snapped her gaze to him. “I was rooting for you as a couple. It will make our job so much easier.”

Cate shook her head. “I told you already. I do not control my husband’s decisions. Real or not, I cannot force Marcus to join you.”

Elliott smiled at her. “You do not need to force him, dear. You only need to ask.”

“I’m afraid you will be sorely disappointed by my ability to change my husband’s opinion of your organization.” Cate stood and tossed her napkin onto the table. “And now, if you’ll excuse me, I am the one who has grown weary of this conversation.”

Gianna slapped a hand against the table, rattling the dishes. “You have not been dismissed from this table.”

Elliott sucked in a breath. “I had hoped to share a dessert and an after-dinner cocktail, but if you are too tired, I understand.”

Cate nodded and took a step toward the door. She restrained herself from slipping her hand into her pocket and wrapping her fingers around the knife she’d sneaked from the table.

“Just a moment,” Elliott called after her.

Cate froze, her muscles stiffening and her shoulders rising to her ears. She held her breath as she twisted to glance at him.

“You haven’t given me an answer. Can we count on your cooperation, Duchess? Will you bring us Marcus Northcott?”

She let her shoulders relax and raised her chin. “I’ll give you my answer in the morning.”

“I look forward to it.”

Cate turned away from him and strode from the room. She held her breath as she continued down the hall, rounding the banister and sliding her hand onto the smooth wood. She tugged herself up the stairs and navigated to the bedroom.

Tension grew at her temples. She pushed through the door, slammed it shut, and collapsed against it. The emotions she’d held in check until now bubbled to the surface.

A sob burst from her as tears rolled down her cheeks. She slid down with her cheek pressed against the polished wood. Her shoulders shook as she cried, releasing the tension she’d experienced through the meal.

She twisted to press her back against the door. She tried to steady her breathing, sucking in shaky breaths as she struggled to control her emotions.

A knock at the door startled her. She wiped at her cheeks and climbed to her feet. After a few more snuffles, she inched the door open.

The maid who had assisted her earlier peered in. She curtsied. “Your Grace, would you like to change now?”

“Yes,” Cate answered, opening the door further.

The girl carried in nightclothes. Cate slid the knife from her pocket as the maid laid out the nightgown and robe. She tugged open a drawer on the nearby dresser and slipped the weapon inside.

The girl spun as she slid it closed and waited for Cate to cross the room. Within twenty minutes, she had Cate readied for bed. The girl disappeared from the room after another curtsy. Cate retrieved the knife from the dresser and slid it into her dressing gown pocket.

She settled at the window, staring out at the moon overhead. Frost tinged the edges of the window. She pressed her hand against it, feeling the coldness of the night through the glass. Her mind wandered to Jack. Where was he? Would he survive the night? Would she ever see him again?

Likely not, she thought as a shiver shook her. She pulled her hand away from the pane, rubbing it against the velvety material of her robe. She stayed at the window for another hour, waiting for the house to settle.

Her best chance at making it out of this house was in the wee hours of the morning. Restlessness coursed through her as she paced the floor of the room. Her adrenaline waned, but she feared falling asleep if she sat.

She couldn't risk sleeping through the best time for her to escape. Her mind spun out of control as she planned beyond her escape. What would she do? How far was she from where they'd left Jack?

She wondered if there were stables on the property. There must be. They'd arrived by horse-drawn carriage. She should steal a horse. And she shouldn't go far in any direction because she had no idea where she was or which direction to go.

Her features pinched as the realization of how dire her situation was crashed down upon her. Where was Rosenberg from here? How far had they traveled?

She squeezed her eyes closed, settling against the window again. "Think, Cate. You couldn't have gone too far. Rosenberg is likely still to the west."

She sucked in a deep breath. She'd ride in the opposite direction of where the sun rose.

Cate licked her lips and raised her chin, happy with her plan. She could do this. She could find her way home. She had to. She'd find Rosenberg first, then search for Jack.

She blew out a long breath, resuming her pacing back and forth. A knock startled her. She wondered if the maid had returned to check on her

before retiring.

“Come in,” she called.

The door swung open, and Gianna sashayed into the room, still in her evening clothes. “Still awake?”

Cate swallowed hard, balling her hands into fists. “Like I could sleep while under the same roof as you.”

Gianna’s lips curled at the corners. She strode past Cate to the dressing table, picking up the brush and running her fingers over the soft bristles. “I feel as though our conversation at the dinner table was unfinished.”

“I don’t. I’ve said all I care to say.”

Gianna puckered her lips, letting the brush fall back onto her shoulder as she stalked closer to Cate. “What a shame. I would very much love to continue, so I think we will. You claim your marriage isn’t a fraud, but I disagree.”

Cate breathed out a sigh. “I don’t care.”

“I do. It affects all of my plans, you see. So, I would appreciate some clarification.”

“This conversation is finished,” Cate said, stepping to the side to skirt around the curvaceous blonde.

Gianna grabbed her by the wrist, yanking her back. “And I said it’s not.”

Cate tried to wrench her arm from the woman’s grasp. “Let go of me.”

“Not until we’ve got a few things straight. I have a different request than Elliott.”

Cate tugged at her arm again. “I’ve given you the only answer I can.”

“Then answer this question. What is more important to you? Dunhaven or your husband?”

Cate scrunched her eyebrows together. “What do you mean?”

“Which is more important to you? Your home and your friends or your husband?”

Cate narrowed her eyes at the woman, finally ripping her wrist free. “What kind of question is that?”

“A fair one. I have an offer for you.”

Cate stalked away from her, staring out the window. “I already know the offer. Bring Marcus to your side or face the consequences. I told you I’d let you know in the morning.”

“Oh, I have quite a different deal. One that you may find appealing.”

Cate twisted to stare at her, bringing a smile to Gianna's face. "I see you're sufficiently intrigued. Good."

Gianna rubbed the bristles of the brush against her other palm as she stalked across the room in one direction. "Elliott wants everything. I'm willing to give you something back."

Cate raised her eyebrows, prompting the woman to continue.

Gianna spun and retreated the way she'd come. "I'm willing to allow you to keep Dunhaven Castle. You keep your home. Your friends keep theirs. Everyone is happy."

"And what are you asking in return?"

"Marcus. Lure him here. Hand him over to us. Leave. Simple." She waved the brush in the air. "Oh, one more pesky detail. You will need to divorce him. We need him completely free for our purposes."

Cate stared at the woman as she cocked a hip and eyed her.

She flicked the face-framing lock of blonde hair back. "I think it solves all our problems. What do you say?"

"Get out," Cate answered.

Gianna slid her head forward, fluttering her eyelashes. "Really? You are willing to lose everything for him?"

"I'm losing nothing. You can't be trusted. I'd never make a deal with you."

Gianna sighed, flicking her gaze to the floor. "You really are stupid."

Cate raised her chin. "You'll never live up to your word."

"Neither will he. Let him go, mouse. Give him to us and save yourself."

Cate shook her head slowly.

Gianna puckered her lips, her nostrils flaring with irritation. "Well, I suppose I should thank you."

"Thank me?"

The blonde lifted her shoulder in a half-shrug. "Now I get to break you."

She stalked forward toward Cate. "And while Elliott gave you until the morning, I'd prefer to be ahead of the game."

She brandished the heavy silver brush, flicking the bristles again. "Let's start now."

CHAPTER 30



Cate's heart skipped a beat as Gianna stalked toward her, smacking the heavy silver brush against her palm.

She shook her head and pressed herself against the window sill. "I don't think Elliott will be pleased with your decision to up the timeline."

"I don't really care. I'm *sick* of the adoration of Cate Kensie. A few extra bruises won't hurt. There will still be plenty left to torture for your husband's benefit."

"No," Cate said with a shake of her head.

"Consider this payback for what your husband did to me for sending you to this time." Gianna raised the brush overhead.

Cate wrapped her fingers around the knife in her pocket and pulled it from the folds of fabric. She thrust it forward. "I don't think so."

Gianna stopped with her hand raised behind her and cocked her head. "Well, well, well, the little mouse roars."

"Leave, Gianna."

Gianna narrowed her eyes at Cate. "I don't think so. Let's have this out. At least now I have an excuse for attacking you."

Gianna widened her stance and wiggled her fingers. "Make your move, Cate."

Cate lifted her chin, fighting to steady her shaking hand. "No. Either make yours or leave. But I'm not attacking you."

"Afraid?"

“I’m not going to be goaded into a fight with you. Get out or attack me.”

“With pleasure,” Gianna growled at her. She lunged toward her, swinging the heavy brush. Cate skirted to the side, still holding the knife out.

Gianna spun to face her with her nostrils flaring. “Come on,” she said, encouraging Cate to make her move.

Cate shook her head. “No.”

“You are maddening,” Gianna answered. She sliced the hairbrush through the air. “Fight, Cate.”

“Leave, Gianna.”

“After I’ve bruised that pretty little face a few times.” She pounced forward, pummeling Cate and knocking her into the bed.

They struggled against each other as they slammed into the mattress. Cate flopped onto it, fighting to keep Gianna from cracking her with the brush. The knife slipped from her hand, thudding softly against the bedspread.

She twisted to find it. Gianna tossed the brush away and wrapped her hands around Cate’s throat. “Perhaps I’ll skip the small stuff and just go for the big finish.”

Cate gasped as the pressure increased against her windpipe. She ignored it and reached for the knife behind her. Her fingers grasped clumsily for the metal object.

“Say goodnight, Cate,” Gianna growled.

Cate winced as Gianna’s fingers tightened around her neck. Her vision blackened on the edges, and her lungs burned for air.

Her fingers finally latched onto the cold metal handle. She gripped it and swung it blindly overhead.

Gianna shrieked, releasing her grasp on Cate’s neck and stumbling backward.

Cate sucked in a breath with a groan and pushed herself up to sit. Gianna leaned against the wall, a hand pressed to her cheek. She glanced incredulously at Cate as she pulled her fingers away. Blood tinged the tips.

Cate swallowed hard as she stared at the large gash running from her lip to her ear. Blood ran from it, dripping off her jawline.

Cate’s eyes went wide, and she launched herself off the bed. She grabbed the post on the corner and flung herself around. She needed to

escape before the shock wore off Gianna.

She lifted her robe and nightgown, keeping tight hold of the knife, and started toward the door. Gianna plowed into her from the back, knocking her to the hardwood floor. Her chin smacked against it and split open. The jarring pain jounced the knife from her hand again. It skittered across the floor.

Blood pooled underneath her jaw, and tears stung her eyes. Gianna's weight pressed against her. Her head lifted as the woman grabbed a fistful of Cate's hair and yanked back.

She pushed it forward, attempting to bang her forehead off the floor. Cate flailed her arms behind her as she lifted her hips. Gianna toppled to the floor, tugging Cate back with her.

Cate kicked and thrashed her arms, striking Gianna in the face again. She yelped in pain as Cate hit the wound she'd sliced into her cheek.

Cate used the temporary pause in the fighting to scramble to her feet and race to the knife. She snapped it up and continued to the door.

She flung the door open and raced through the doorway, smashing into an individual in the hall.

She took a stunned step back, raising the knife in the air.

Elliott held two glasses and a decanter of brandy. "Well, Duchess, this is not the way I had hoped to meet."

Cate backed up a step, gasping for breath.

Gianna shouted from inside the bedroom, "Restrain her. She attacked me."

Elliott's eyebrows shot up as he studied Gianna's limping form. He flicked his gaze to Cate. "What happened?"

Cate's features pinched as she sucked in another shaky breath.

"Well? Isn't anyone going to tell me what just occurred between you two?"

"I told you. She attacked me. Lock her up until Northcott is here. She does not deserve the treatment you are offering her."

"What were you doing here, Gianna? I asked you to stay away from our dear Duchess whilst she considered my proposal."

Gianna flexed her jaw, wincing as the wound on her cheek oozed more blood.

Elliott breathed out a sigh. "You should have that tended. Go now and see to it."

“Elliott...”

“I said go,” he snapped.

Gianna offered Cate a disdainful glare while she pushed past her, knocking her back a step as she strode down the hall. Elliott waved the glasses toward Cate’s bedroom. She raised the knife at him.

“You won’t make it further than the next hall, Duchess. Do not jeopardize what little goodwill is left on my behalf.”

Cate swallowed hard as she considered her options. She let her hand fall to her side and stalked into the room.

Elliott followed her into the bedroom, swinging the door closed behind him. He set the glasses and decanter on the tall dresser near the door.

“I’ll need the knife.”

Cate slid her eyes closed as she held it out in front of her. He pulled it from her hand and set it on the dresser. He poured brandy into both glasses before he held one out to her.

She wrapped her arms around her midriff and shook her head.

“Take it, Duchess. You need it.”

Cate accepted the drink from his hand, pressing it against her arm as she tightened her fingers around the glass and stared into the amber liquid.

“Tell me what happened.”

She flicked her gaze to him, his face lit by the melting candles of the candelabra. “Does it matter?”

He sipped at the brandy. “It does to me. What brought Gianna here? And what started the scuffle?”

Cate barked out a laugh as she paced the floor. “It was a bit more than a scuffle.”

“It appears she got the worst of it. How intriguing you are to me. It seems when you are backed into a corner you become quite fierce. What prompted such a reaction from you?”

“She attacked me.”

“Unprovoked?”

Cate shot him an irked glance. “She didn’t like my answers to her questions.”

“Which were?” he asked after another sip of brandy.

“She offered me Dunhaven Castle in exchange for Marcus.”

Elliott puckered his lips, stalking closer to her. “And you refused?”

Cate nodded. “And she did not care for my response.”

Elliott sucked in a deep breath. “Well, I hope my offer is still in contention. It will make things much easier for you. I can assure you Gianna will have no mercy when it comes to using you to convince your husband to join us. Especially now. I cannot imagine this latest incident will earn you any generosity on her part.”

Cate swallowed hard, giving him no answer.

“I’ll take that as a yes.” He raised his glass. “Again, I prefer you as an ally.”

He studied her for a moment before he sucked in a breath. “Well, I shall leave you to your thoughts. I only dropped by to inform you that your husband has been sent for.”

Cate snapped her gaze to him, her eyes searching his face for more information.

“I expect him to arrive early tomorrow morning. I shall expect my answer from you over breakfast.” He offered her a tight-lipped smile, his eyes lingering on her for a moment before he spun on a heel to leave. “I’ll send someone to attend to your chin.”

“It’s not necessary,” Cate said. “I’m fine and prefer not to be disturbed.”

“As you wish.” He offered her a final nod, collecting the knife, decanter, and his brandy glass and leaving the room. The click of a lock announced the end of any escape attempts through the door.

Cate stalked to the vanity and collapsed onto the chair. She took a long sip of the liquor before she set the glass on top. She studied the cut on her chin in the mirror before she wiped the dried blood away.

She sank her chin into her palm, wincing as the touch stung the scrape. Weariness crept over her. She fought her heavy eyelids, forcing herself to her feet. She crossed the room and twisted the doorknob. It did not give way. With her hopes of the lock failing dashed, she spun and studied the room. Could there be a secret passage?

She sucked in a breath and pushed off the door. After an hour of searching, she collapsed on the bed. She buried her head in her hands. With a deep sigh, she kicked her shoes off and lay on her side. Despite her agitation, her eyes slid closed in minutes, and she drifted to sleep.

When she opened her eyes, she found herself in her room at Dunhaven Castle. She gasped, scanning the room as she tossed back her covers. How had she gotten here? Had Marcus come in the middle of the night?

She slid from her bed and crossed the room, peering into the sitting room. A scream stopped her heart. Cate swallowed hard, racing to the doors to the hall and flinging them open. Another shout echoed through the halls.

She hurried toward it, racing past Molly's room and rounding the corner. Before she took another step, the image faded around her.

Cate's eyes fluttered open. She tugged her eyebrows together as she tried to place herself. Her heart sank as she found herself in the bedroom she'd fallen asleep in. No one had rescued her. She remained with The Agency.

She turned over to stare out the window. Streaks of light brightened the early morning sky. Cate let out a long sigh as a knock sounded at her door.

She pushed up to sit, clearing her throat. "Come in."

The lock disengaged and a maid scurried in, holding a dress. "Good morning, Your Grace. Your clothes."

Cate dragged herself from the bed and slogged to the dressing table. "Thank you."

The maid styled her hair and helped her change into the blue dress she'd brought. "Mr. Stevens has asked that you join him for breakfast in the dining room."

"Thank you," Cate said, dismissing the girl.

The maid scurried from the room, pulling the door shut behind her. Cate sucked in a breath as she attempted to prepare herself for the encounter. He'd demand an answer. He would not like her response. How long could she refuse before they harmed her? How long could she refuse before they realized she held no value?

She stared at herself in the mirror for a moment before her eyes fell on the empty brandy glass on the vanity. Her fingers traced the rim before she grasped it and smashed it against the heavy wood. It shattered into pieces. She carefully picked up one large shard between her thumb and forefinger and slid it into her pocket.

With her chin raised, she sucked in a deep breath and strode from the room. She snaked her way through the halls and down the wide staircase. Her gaze lingered on the double doors leading outside.

"Duchess," Elliott said before she could consider it any further, "I hope you slept well. I was just coming to check on you."

Cate snapped her gaze to him, her heart dropping as any chance of escape diminished. He offered his arm, and she reluctantly accepted it.

“Did you sleep? You did not answer,” he asked as he led her down the hall.

“I managed a little.”

Elliott offered her a smile as they entered the large room, lit by the morning sun. A groan sounded from the table.

Gianna sat in the same seat she’d had the previous evening. She slammed her teacup into its saucer and whipped her napkin onto her lap. “Maybe now we can eat. I’m starved.”

“Good morning, Gianna, dear,” Elliott said as he seated Cate.

She flicked a less-than-impressed gaze at him, the bandage on her cheek wrinkling. Cate stared at it. “Admiring your handiwork?”

She glanced sideways at the servant who poured her tea and nodded.

“Please, Cate, have a good look.” Gianna peeled the bandage from her face, revealing the long slice. She slammed a fist on the table, rattling the dishes.

Cate startled in her seat, sliding her eyes closed before she flicked her gaze back to the angry gash.

“Gianna, please,” Elliott said after a sip of his tea. “Let’s not make a scene.”

“She has disfigured me. I—“

“Enough,” Elliott said flatly. “We have discussed this.”

Gianna’s nostrils flared as she shot a glare in Cate’s direction. “You’ll pay for this.”

Elliott’s teacup clattered back into his saucer. “That is quite enough. I hoped to enjoy a pleasant meal.”

A footman delivered a steaming bowl of oatmeal to Cate. She picked up her spoon and pushed the thick, warm paste around before she raised a spoonful to her lips.

Gianna ate some of her meal before her spoon clattered into her bowl. “I cannot do it. She should not be treated this way.”

“If you cannot manage to contain your animosity, please take your meal elsewhere.”

Cate swallowed another mouthful of oatmeal, flicking her gaze to Gianna who sneered at her.

“I will not be chased from my rightful place.”

“Your rightful place is where I say it is. Remember that,” Elliott answered.

“I have done more for you than—“

“I will not discuss this here. You have been handsomely rewarded and will continue to be so. But you do not make the final decisions here, Gianna. Accept that.”

Gianna sucked in a long breath, her nostrils flaring as she blew it out. “You’re going to regret this, Elliott. Mark my words.”

“So noted,” he said as he lifted his teacup to his lips and shifted his eyes to Cate. “And how is your breakfast, Duchess? Up to your standards.”

“Yes, thank you,” Cate answered.

Across the table, Gianna offered a frustrated sigh, flicking her gaze into space. A butler hurried into the dining room and hastened to Elliott. He bent to whisper in the man’s ear. Elliott’s eyebrows shot up, and his lips curled on the edges. “Ah, thank you, Belmont.”

Elliott dabbed at the corners of his mouth with his napkin before discarding it on the table. “Well, it seems your husband has arrived, Duchess. So, I will need an answer to my question from last night. Can I count on your support? Will you deliver us Marcus Northcott?”

CHAPTER 31



Cate chewed her lower lip as her heart thudded in her chest, and her pulse quickened. She flicked her gaze to Gianna, her eyes falling to the laceration on her cheek. She flexed her jaw, feeling her own cut stretch and pinch. Her eyes lowered to the brown liquid in her teacup. Could she continue this war?

“Duchess? I’m afraid I will need your answer immediately.”

“She’s too stubborn. Time to make her pay.”

Elliott shushed his female compatriot. “I would like to hear our dear Duchess’s answer.”

Cate sucked in a breath, pulling her gaze from the tea and twisting her head to stare at Elliott. His lips parted as he awaited her answer, one eyebrow arching in anticipation.

“I’ll see what I can do.”

A tight-lipped and triumphant smile crossed his face. Gianna let her hand slap against the table. “Oh, Elliott, please don’t tell me you believe her. She’s lying.”

“We will take the appropriate precautions. And we will know soon enough if she is. I can assure you, Duchess, if you are lying, the repercussions will be immediate and severe.”

“I can’t guarantee you anything,” Cate said.

“Because you won’t even try. You’re bluffing,” Gianna said, crossing her arm over her chest.

“Oh, don’t discount yourself, dear. I have every faith that the request of your husband will not fall on deaf ears.”

Gianna pressed her lips into a thin line as she stared at Cate. “Let’s stick with our original plan. I have more faith in that than in Cate Kensie.”

“Come now, Gianna,” Elliott said as he rose, “I think we can all agree that this course of events is preferable. Recognizing the mutual benefits we can provide each other is far better than forcing one’s hand into agreement.”

Gianna glared at Cate. Elliott fluttered his eyelashes at her. “Are you still to be counted on?”

She flicked her gaze at him through her eyelashes before she balled her napkin and tossed it onto the table. She rose from her seat with another glare at Cate before she stormed from the room.

Elliott approached Cate and offered her his arm. “Ignore her. She is jealous.”

Cate stood and slid her hand around his elbow.

“You are making the right choice,” he said, patting her hand. “The benefits of The Agency are vast, even for someone as privileged as yourself and your husband.”

“Gianna’s attitude suggests I’m not making a wise choice.”

Elliott smiled down at her as he led her down the hall. “Gianna is jealous. Between us, I believe she had her sights set on your husband.”

Cate sucked in a deep breath as he pushed open the doors to a large library. “Wait here. I shall bring your husband to you soon.”

She nodded and stepped inside. The doors thudded closed behind her. She wrung her hands in front of her as she paced the floor. What had she done?

She settled on the window seat overlooking the cold landscape. Her heart pounded against her ribs, and her stomach turned over. She licked her lips as she wiped her sweaty palms against her dress.

She couldn’t deliver what she’d promised. The only question that remained was whether she would face The Agency alone or if Marcus would help her.

Voices sounded in the hall. Cate rose from her seat, squeezing her hands into fists until her nails dug into her palms. The doorknobs twisted, and the doors pushed open.

“I think you’ll find her quite well,” Elliott’s voice said. He paraded into the room with Gianna. Marcus followed behind them.

Tears filled her eyes as she spotted him. Her gaze fell on the odd-looking shackles around his wrists. They glowed with a blue, pulsating energy.

“Catherine,” he breathed as he pushed past Gianna and hurried to Cate.

She blinked up at him before she settled her gaze on the shackles.

“Are you all right?” he asked her.

She swallowed hard and flicked her gaze up to him. “More or less.”

He narrowed his eyes at her chin, lifting his bound hands to raise her jaw. “What is this?” he demanded, twisting to glance at Elliott over his shoulder. “You assured she was unharmed. She is not.” He turned back to Cate. “What happened?”

“A small, unfortunate accident. She is quite well, I assure you. Duchess, perhaps you can attest to this.”

Cate glanced around him. “We need some time alone.”

Gianna barked out a laugh. “I think not. Come on, then, Cate, I’m dying to hear your appeal.”

Cate kept her eyes trained on Elliott. “I can’t work miracles. This is not a stage play.”

Elliott narrowed his eyes at her. “I think we can allow them a private moment. It may prove most effective.”

Gianna snapped her gaze to the man, but he held a hand up to silence her. “You have fifteen minutes, Duchess. Then I want a progress report.”

Cate sucked in a breath, drawing her chin to her chest as she waited for them to shuffle from the room. “Fifteen minutes. I expect to be impressed.”

The doors swung shut behind them with a bang, and Cate’s features pinched.

Marcus lifted his bound hands to caress her cheek. “Catherine, are you all right?”

She sucked in a shaky breath and nodded. “Yes,” she squeaked out.

“That sounds less than convincing. What happened to your chin?”

She flicked her gaze up to him. “Gianna attacked me. I fell trying to get away.”

Marcus huffed out a sigh, his irritation obvious.

“I gave as good as I got,” she assured him.

He flicked his eyebrows up and returned his gaze to her. “The wound on her cheek?”

Cate nodded.

He cocked his head and sucked in a breath. "This will end today for you. I will ensure that they return you to Rosenberg and—"

"What?" Cate asked, cutting her eyes up to his. "No."

"Catherine, I will not allow them to harm you."

"No," she repeated with a shake of her head. She wagged her finger at him. "No, you're not doing that again."

Marcus sighed, pressing his lips together. "We have few other choices."

"We have some. We'll make some options. You can't sacrifice yourself again."

"I can, and I will. I will not allow this treatment of you to continue."

"I will come back here for you."

"No, you will not."

Cate offered him a stubborn glance through her eyelashes.

"Catherine, this cannot continue. Gianna is dangerous—"

"Exactly," she interrupted. "What do you think they'll do if you are no longer in the picture?"

"I will make sure that does not happen."

Cate tilted her head and puckered her lips. "You are always saying we cannot trust them. Why would we trust them now?"

"We are wasting time. I will not allow them to do what I know they will do to you."

"Neither will I. We need a way out of this. And then we need to find Jack. We were separated again when Elliott Stevens ripped us apart." Her eyes fell on the pulsating shackles. "I assume these stop you from doing any magic."

He nodded. "Who has the keys?"

"Who do you think?"

Cate pressed her lips together. "Gianna."

"Catherine, you cannot get the key. It is impossible. We must make certain you are safe first."

Cate sliced a finger through the air, her other hand on her hip. "I am *not* telling your mother that you are property of The Agency."

"Mother will understand that I—"

"No! I refuse to do it. We are not leaving here separately."

Marcus drew in a deep breath and shook his head. "This is not a discussion, Catherine."

“No, it isn’t,” she agreed. “You are not sacrificing yourself for me. It’s nonsense.”

“I have never once made a nonsensical judgment in my life.”

“There’s a first time for everything,” Cate said with a flick of her eyebrows.

“This is not a game.”

“No, it’s not. It’s my life and your life and a lot of other people’s, too. There’s no margin for error. We have to find a way out of this, and we have to do it together.”

“You will not take no for an answer, will you?”

Cate shook her head. “And you’d better not do what you did the last time. I’ll come back for you so I can kill you myself.”

One corner of his mouth tugged up. “While I appreciate your sentiment, there is no good option here. They will not simply allow us to refuse them. Not when they have the upper hand.”

Cate rubbed her chin. “No, I’ll have to get my hands on that key.”

“Catherine!”

“I can do it,” she promised, snapping her gaze up to his face. “I just have to get close enough to Gianna to use this.” She pulled the glass shard from her pocket. She whipped the handkerchief from his pocket and wrapped the glass in it before hiding it again.

“No, we’ll find another way.”

“This is the easiest way. I’ll easily be able to get close to her, she’s been chomping at the bit to put the screws to me. All I need to do is tell them I failed.”

“Failed at what?”

Heat rose in her cheeks as she eyed him. “I may have told them I’d try to convince you to join them. Once they realize I can’t do that, Gianna will try to force you to their side. And that’s when I’ll steal the key.”

“Catherine, this is the worst plan I’ve ever heard. No.”

“There are no other plans, Marcus. This is the best we have.”

“There are other options.”

“Like what? You can’t trade yourself for me. That’s worse. That means I need to come back here for you instead of just getting the key from Gianna.”

“Or you could simply move on. Mother will help you get back to your time and to Dunhaven Castle. I’m certain she’ll also help you locate Jack.”

“No,” Cate growled between clenched teeth. “I didn’t survive the Battle of Austerlitz and nearly kill Napoleon for nothing.”

Cate took a step toward the door when Marcus grabbed her by the elbow and tugged her back. “You did what?”

“It was an accident. I didn’t have much choice. Anyway, he’s fine.”

A knock sounded at the door. Cate twisted to eye the barrier, her heart skipping a beat. She spun back to Marcus. “We can do this. Together.”

She slid her hand into his and nodded. The door creaked open behind her. His hand tightened around hers as she glanced over her shoulder. Elliott stepped inside with two bulky guards, and Gianna hovered in the doorway.

“Well, have we made any decisions?”

“Sadly—” Cate began when Marcus tugged her behind him and stepped forward.

“Yes, we have,” he answered.

Cate’s eyes went wide as she stumbled back. “Marcus, no.”

“I want Catherine returned to Rosenberg immediately. I demand a cessation of all hostility against her.”

“This is not what we discussed,” she whispered.

Elliott cocked his head, puckering his lips. “There seems to be some misunderstanding. The lovely Duchess is most welcome in our membership. If she has managed to convince you to join—”

Marcus held up his hands. “I’ll stop you there. She has not.”

“Oh?” Elliott said with a frown. “But—”

“I demand Catherine be let go immediately.”

“I don’t think so,” Gianna said, stalking into the room. “She is far too great of an asset to us. She allows us to keep you in control.”

“My apologies, Duke, but I am still quite lost in this conversation. Why not simply accept the deal on the table? We take both you and your lovely wife into our fold and—”

“No. Catherine is not to be subjected to any of what The Agency offers.”

“Marcus, this is not what we discussed,” Cate said, grabbing hold of his arm. “Don’t do this.”

“It seems your wife is not in agreement. Perhaps you would like to—”

“That won’t be necessary. We do not agree on the subject. I am currently in your custody. I am trading myself for her.”

Cate slid her eyes closed and shook her head. “Marcus, no.”

“The discussion is over, Catherine. I have made up my mind.”

Her heart thudded as her mind shot in a hundred directions. Could she get the key before they escorted her away? Would she be able to return here and rescue him?

“So have we,” Gianna said as she stalked forward. “And it appears we do not see eye to eye either.”

Elliott stared at the floor for a moment, his hands clasped behind his back as he frowned. “This is a most disappointing turn of events.”

“Speak for yourself, Elliott,” Gianna said with a smirk made even more sinister by the slice across her cheek. “I’m about to have the time of my life.”

“Elliott, I expected more from you,” Marcus said as he sidestepped to block Gianna from Cate.

Elliott shot him a confused glance. “As did I of you.”

The man spun on a heel and disappeared from the room. The guards crossed toward them.

“Elliott!” Marcus shouted after him as Gianna lunged for Cate with an evil laugh.

“You should have agreed, Marcus.”

“Take your hands off her,” he shouted as Gianna yanked her toward the door. The two men restrained him from following.

“This would have gone so much easier if you’d only agreed. But then again, I do appreciate your stubbornness. It gives me the opportunity to alleviate so much stress.” She chuckled again with a tiny squeal of excitement as she dragged Cate from the room.

“Come along, my dear little Cate. We are going to have so much fun.”

Cate sucked in a shaky breath as Gianna paraded her down the hall toward a closed door. She flung it open when they reached it and forced Cate down the wooden stairs.

Candelabras lit the space below as Gianna continued to push her forward until they reached the bottom few steps. With one rough shove, she sent Cate tumbling down to the ground. She landed on her hands and knees.

Gianna stomped down the remaining stairs and yanked Cate up by her hair. She paraded her toward a chair with leather straps next to a table of instruments. Cate eyed them, swallowing hard.

She had to escape before those wrapped around her wrists. Before she became a prisoner, or worse, a victim.

CHAPTER 32



Cate gritted her teeth as Gianna forced her across the room. She dug her feet into the floor, trying to stop her progression. Pain shot through her as the woman twisted her hair tighter.

Cate clawed at Gianna's hands, trying to break free of her. They reached the chair. Cate arched her back away from it as Gianna tried to shove her toward it. She released her grasp on Gianna's hands and reached into her pocket. She wrapped a sweaty palm around the glass shard and pulled it out. Blindly, she swiped it behind her, slicing through the fingers that held her hair.

Gianna screeched, releasing Cate's hair as she stumbled back a step. Cate fell forward, smacking into the chair. She grasped it and pushed herself up.

"You bitch!" Gianna spat at her. "You'll pay for that."

Cate twisted and sliced the shard through the air again, narrowly missing Gianna as she leaned away.

Gianna shook her bloody fingers as she winced. "Come on, then."

"Give me the key to those magic handcuffs," Cate said.

Gianna barked out a sharp laugh. "I don't think so. If you want it, come and take it."

Cate's nostrils flared as she sucked in sharp breaths. Gianna inched to the side. Cate circled away from the chair, keeping the glass shard at arm's length.

"Come on, Cate. Make your move." Gianna signaled her to come closer.

Cate's heart pounded as she tightened her fingers around the glass.

"Here, let me make it easy." Gianna pulled a glowing key from her dress pocket and dangled it in the air. She tugged her lips back into a grin as she tossed it across the room.

Cate followed the key's path until it clattered to the floor and rolled across it. Gianna lunged forward, and Cate snapped her gaze back to the women, waving the shard again.

"Give it up, Cate. You're not going to win. I'm going to take everything you have. After I ruin that pretty little face of yours."

"I told you before I wouldn't let you have anything of mine."

"You won't have a choice, sweetheart." Gianna launched herself at Cate, plowing into her and knocking her to the ground. Cate struggled to keep hold of the glass shard as her shoulder slammed into the cold, hard floor. Gianna reached for her wrist and pressed it into the ground.

Cate fought to hang on to the makeshift weapon as the woman pounded her arm against the stone floor again and again. With her free hand, Cate clawed at her face.

Gianna released the pressure on her wrist as she fended off Cate's attack. Cate used the opportunity to wiggle free and slash at her again. The rough glass caught her sleeve, tearing into it and her flesh underneath. Blood bloomed from the slice, soaking the thin material.

Gianna sucked in a gasp as she grabbed at the fresh wound. Cate slid her heels toward her rear and braced them, shoving her hip in the air to topple Gianna from straddling her.

The blonde rolled to the floor next to her. Cate scrambled to her feet, still holding the shard. It pressed against her fingers, drawing blood. She shifted her gaze toward the key glowing in a dark corner of the room.

Gianna shot her an angry glare and climbed to her feet before Cate could cross to the key. "Going somewhere?"

Cate snapped her gaze back to Gianna, trying to anticipate the woman's next move. "Go for the key, Cate," she dared her.

Cate backed away from her and the key.

"What's the matter? Chicken?"

Cate circled behind the chair, keeping the heavy wooden object between her and Gianna. She inched toward the corner opposite the key.

Gianna grabbed the tray of tools from the table and flung it toward Cate.

She held her hand up, blocking the sharp instruments from hitting her face. When she lowered her arm, she found Gianna inches from her face. The woman slammed her into the wall. The air rushed from Cate's lungs.

She struggled against the woman who pinned her. Gianna wrapped a hand around her throat and squeezed. Cate struggled to draw in a breath. She clamped a hand over the blonde's face and shoved her back, pressing the shard into her neck.

A droplet of blood dripped down her neck before Gianna backed away. Cate wrapped a leg around Gianna's, tripping her. She fell backward, smacking into the chair.

Cate raced past her and scooped the key up from the ground before hurrying toward the stairs. Gianna crashed into her as she reached them. Cate crawled up a few of the steps, their edges poking into her ribs.

"I don't think so, Cate," Gianna growled as she elbowed her in the back.

"I do," Cate grunted back. She rolled onto her side and drew her leg to her chest before she kicked it out. Gianna slid down a few stairs.

Cate clamped onto the handrail and tugged herself up, clambering up a few more steps. She reached the door, her fingertips caressing the knob when Gianna wrapped her arm around Cate's neck. Cate squeezed the shard tighter at her side before she shoved it backward. It stabbed Gianna in the gut.

The woman gasped, releasing her hold on Cate. She stared at her with wide eyes before she fell backward, tumbling down the stairs and landing in a heap at the bottom.

Cate swallowed hard, unsure if Gianna remained alive or not. She sucked in shaky breaths, unfurling her fingers and staring at the glowing key. She curled her fingers around it again before she twisted the doorknob and climbed to the hall.

She eased the door shut and hurried forward. Elliott Stevens rounded the corner. He froze as he spotted her. Cate's heart stopped, and her blood ran cold. She couldn't make it to the library first.

She swallowed hard as she hurried forward to him. "Mr. Stevens, please, I just need a few more moments with my husband to convince him."

"Where is Gianna?"

Cate ignored the statement, clamping onto his arm with a hand. "He is extremely stubborn, but I'm certain I can achieve the result I had hoped to earlier. Just five minutes."

“The time for negotiations has ended, Duchess. I—“

“This is not the way you hoped things would go. And I must admit, it’s not the way I had either. What can it hurt?”

He glanced over her shoulder at the closed door leading downstairs.

“Please,” Cate said again, tightening her grip.

“I suppose five minutes will not hurt. Though I am quite perplexed that Gianna agreed to this.”

Cate swallowed hard as she fluttered her eyelashes at him, refusing to answer the statement. He wrapped an arm around her shoulders and led her to the library doors. He pushed them open. Marcus twisted to face them, his eyes going wide. The two men still on either side of him reached to restrain him.

Cate pushed past Elliott and hurried across the room.

“Catherine, are you quite all right?”

Elliot waved the men back. “Five minutes, Duchess.”

She reached Marcus and threw her arms around his neck, tugging him closer to her.

“Catherine, what’s happened?”

She pressed her cheek against his, whispering in his ear, “I have the key.”

His muscles tensed, and he leaned into her. “Touch it to the shackles, and they will open.”

She squeezed her eyes closed and nodded. She pulled away from him, staring up into his dark eyes as she slid her closed hand down his arm.

“Elliott!” Gianna’s voice screamed.

Cate’s heart stopped, and she gasped for breath. The voice called out again, this time closer. Cate’s knees trembled as she slid the key between her thumb and forefinger.

“Gianna?” Elliot questioned as she appeared at the door. A bloodstain marred the front left side of her dress.

She pointed a blood-soaked hand at Cate. “Stop her, she has the key!”

Elliott snapped his gaze at them. Cate pressed the key against the shackles. They snapped open, falling from his wrists. The corners of his lips turned up as electricity crackled between his fingers. He leaned forward toward her and whispered, “Get down.”

Cate swallowed hard, crouching low as he swung his hands out. Two white-hot fireballs slammed into the guards on either side of him. They fell

backward, stunned and unmoving. With a stomp forward, an arc of energy buzzed over her head, shooting toward Gianna and Elliott.

A shriek split the air as firm hands grabbed hold of her and an arm wrapped around her. Her surroundings turned black.

Details filled in around her seconds later. She sucked in shaky breaths as she recognized her room at Rosenberg. She let out a sob as the pressure released around her shoulders.

"Catherine," Marcus began.

She interrupted him, spinning to face him and swallowing hard as she threw her arms around his neck.

He pulled her closer to him and stroked her hair for a moment before he pulled away. "Are you all right?"

She bit her lower lip and nodded, sniffing and wiping a tear away from her cheek. "Yeah, I'm fine."

He tipped her chin up, studying the scratch at the tip. With a swipe of his finger, he healed it. "Anything else?"

"No. I escaped pretty unscathed." She pressed a hand to her forehead as her heartbeat steadied along with her breathing. She flicked her gaze up to him and offered a weak smile. "I told you I'd get the key."

He offered her an amused smile with a shake of his head. "We really must stop finding ourselves in these situations."

"I agree."

"You must learn to defend yourself."

Cate flicked her eyebrows up. "Hey, I think I did pretty well. I drew blood three times and knocked her out again."

"That is not what I am referring to. We must stop her from doing what she's done to you this time around. I will not have you stranded in time again or worse."

Cate chewed her lower lip. "We need to find Jack. He's still stranded."

"I have search parties already looking for him."

"And we need to free Gertrude. I know where she is. Or when, rather. But I'm certain they will be moving her soon. We need to find both her and Jack as quickly as possible."

"We need to ensure your safety first."

"No!" Cate argued. "There's no time to lose. After what we just did, they will move Gertrude. And I'm sure they'll attempt to find Jack."

“Catherine, I will not go after either of them until I have given you the ability to protect yourself. Now, come along. This time there is no room for discussion.”

Cate heaved a sigh, opening her mouth to argue. He flicked his eyebrows up. “I will not take no for an answer.”

“Fine,” she said with a huff, “but I fail to see how you’re going to prevent this, short of never letting me out of your sight.”

Marcus led her from the room, sliding his gaze sideways to her as they strode down the hall. “That can be arranged.”

“That’s ridiculous. I wasn’t actually suggesting that.”

“Have you forgotten, dear, that I have a magical menagerie at my fingertips?”

Cate snapped her gaze to him as they rounded the corner, heading for the library housing the books on magic. “Do you have something to prevent unwanted time travel?”

“No. But I have something that can return you no matter where you are.”

Cate fluttered her eyelashes as he pushed the doors open to the library and waved her inside ahead of him. “That would have been more than useful yesterday morning.”

He crossed the room and opened the secret passage behind the bookcase. They descended into the darkness. Marcus lit the sconces around the massive chamber before he crossed to a shelf. He snapped open a small wooden box and retrieved the item inside. After uttering a few words Cate did not understand, he held it out to her.

“It’s a button,” she said, holding up the round brass object to the flickering firelight.

“A very powerful button.”

“It can return me to where in time?”

“Wherever I am,” Marcus said.

Cate stared down at the item laying in her palm. “Really?”

“Should you ever need me, you can return immediately to my side.”

Cate stared down at it, cocking her head. “How do I use it?”

“Just a simple rub with your thumb will return you.”

She closed her fingers around it and nodded. “Okay.”

“Shall we try it?” Marcus asked.

Cate's heart skipped a beat, and she swallowed hard, suddenly uncomfortable being sent away alone.

"We do not need to if you prefer not to."

Cate licked her lips and slid her shoulders down her back. "I'll try."

"All right. I'm opening a portal to Dunhaven Castle in April 2019. You should arrive in your bedroom. Use the button to return here."

Cate nodded, and he stretched his hands out in front of him. "Wait," she said, tugging at his elbow.

He arched an eyebrow as he twisted to face her. "Changed your mind?"

She shook her head. "No, but you're not supposed to open time portals in the castle."

Marcus tugged a corner of his lips back and thrust his hands out again. "Mother is not home."

Cate clicked her tongue as the winds began to swirl around her. The candlelight on the sconces flickered wildly as the portal sparkled in front of him. He gave her a nod. She swallowed hard and stepped through the portal. Moments later, she appeared in what was now her bedroom.

She stepped forward, glancing around the space. She hadn't arrived at Dunhaven yet. She wouldn't for almost two months. The dog beds were missing along with her personal items.

She eased onto the edge of the bed, recalling the first moments she'd seen the room. How naive she had been then. So much had changed. The sun coming through the windows glinted off her wedding ring.

She rubbed a thumb along it before she opened her hand and studied the thick, brass button. She stood and stalked forward. "Let's see if you work."

With a rub of her thumb across the round button, the room began to disappear around her. A tingly sensation shot through her body, and she experienced the sensation of falling.

A moment later, she stood in the dimly lit magical menagerie.

Marcus smiled at her. "Welcome back."

"It worked," she said, squeezing it in her hand.

"Of course, it did. I am no amateur, Catherine." He snapped the wooden box closed and slid it back on the shelf. "Now, shall we proceed with the other matters at hand?"

Cate lifted the timepiece from around her neck and unclasped it, sliding the loop of the button through the chain before she re-clasped it and hung it around her neck.

“Yes, we should search for Jack and—“

“No,” Marcus interrupted as he led her up the stairs. “We should find Gertrude first. If she is moved, we risk losing her.”

“But...” Cate said, her heart sinking as they reached the library, “Jack is out there all alone.”

“And I have people searching for him.”

“We can’t leave him here.”

Marcus pushed the bookcase closed. “I am not suggesting we do. But we have to make a choice.”

“Jack,” Cate said.

“You are sharper than this. Think, Catherine. If we lose track of Gertrude, it may be forever.”

“What about my clairvoyance? Maybe I can track her—“

“You are still learning how to use that. Let’s not pin our hopes on something that may not pan out. I prefer a sure bet. And so do you. We must leave Jack behind.”

CHAPTER 33



“No!” she shouted, her features pinching. “We can’t.”

“It’s not forever. We will bring him home, too, but we must take the opportunity for Gertrude before it’s gone.”

Cate licked her lips, pressing them together. She hated leaving Jack, but he made an excellent point. He also likely preferred to ensure the reason for their marriage ceased to exist. She only hoped he’d keep to his word to rescue Jack after they no longer needed to stay married. “You’re right. As much as I hate this, you’re right.”

Marcus squeezed her shoulder. “We will find him, Catherine, I promise. But we must save Gertrude first before we lose the chance.”

She nodded, taking solace in the words. He’d helped her find Jack once. They could do it again.

“Okay, so 1911. We need to go to the Cinderella Chateau then.”

“What date?” he asked.

Heat washed over her. “I don’t know. She didn’t tell me.”

“It’s all right—”

“No, it’s not!” Cate said, pressing a hand to her forehead. “We can’t check every day in that year.” She slid her eyes closed and stalked away, pacing the floor. “I should have known she wouldn’t have given me enough information.”

Marcus stopped her roaming. “Easy, Catherine, what do you remember from your visions?”

“Nothing. I couldn’t remember anything until your mother hypnotized me.”

“You saw the window. What was outside of it?”

Cate closed her eyes and tried to recall the vision. “I can’t. It’s all fuzzy.” She flicked her gaze up to him, tears welling in her eyes. “I’m sorry.”

“There is nothing to be sorry for, dear. We will find another way.”

“Take me back to 1956,” she said.

Marcus flicked his eyebrows up.

“I can try again. I can pinpoint something that can help us. At least narrow it down to the season.”

“You do not need to put yourself through that.”

“I want to.”

“Catherine—“

“Marcus...we don’t have time to waste. You said it yourself. Now, take me back to 1956, and let me try to find out where she is.”

Marcus heaved a sigh as he pressed a hand against her back. “Come on.”

“Where are we going?”

“I had better not open the portal in the library even if Mother isn’t home.”

Cate suppressed a giggle as they stepped into the hall and snaked their way to the garden. He stretched his hands in front of him once they were safely outside of the castle.

Cate licked her lips, hoping she’d be able to find some clue before it was too late. Marcus dropped his hands and twisted to face her. “That button does not work inside the portal. So, do not dally.”

“Right,” Cate said, pushing two pointed fingers ahead. “Straight through, no stopping.”

“Exactly.”

She smiled and nodded as he spun away and stretched out his hand again. Within moments, she stood in the same garden over a century later. Marcus arrived seconds after her, and they made their way to her bedroom suite.

Anna pursued the stack of papers they’d left her with. “Ah, there you are. Any luck?”

“Yes and no,” Cate said, wringing her hands.

Anna tugged the reading glasses from her face and set them aside. She stood, frowning at Cate before she took hold of her hands. "What's happened?"

"We need more information," Cate answered.

"No," Anna said with a shake of her head. "Something has happened. What is it?"

"Mother, we need—"

Anna waved his comment away as she kept her eyes focused on Cate. "Marcus, go fetch tea."

Cate sucked in a breath. "That's not—"

"I shall decide what is necessary and what is not. And right now, tea is necessary. Marcus will fetch it whilst you and I have a conversation."

Marcus offered Cate an apologetic glance. She smiled at him and squeezed his hand before he strode from the room, leaving them alone.

"Now, come and tell me all about what's happened," Anna said, leading Cate to the bedroom and easing her onto the bed.

"Gertrude was not at the chateau, but we found her bracelet. She's there...just in another time. We've narrowed it down to 1911, but I need to determine if I can glean any additional details about when in 1911 she is taken there before—"

Anna held up a hand, stopping her. "Just a moment. More happened."

Cate pressed her lips together. "Not much. I—"

"Catherine, dear, you are in a dress from a completely different era. And whatever happened to you during that time has frightened you terribly. Now, what happened?"

Cate squashed her features as she struggled to control her emotions. "We...Gianna found us at the chateau. Jack and I were alone, and she sent us to 1805. In the middle of the Battle of Austerlitz." Her eyebrow arched, and she fluttered her eyelashes as she remembered the surreal experience. "I almost killed Napoleon. Oh, speaking of, did he win the battle? I'm afraid I may have changed history."

"Don't worry about that now, dear. You must have been terrified. Marcus did not take the news very well either."

"I surmised as much based on the last encounter I had with Gianna."

Anna patted her hand. "He returned here after her confession. There was no consoling him."

Cate pinched her forehead. "I assume the impending confrontation with Gianna was not something he looked forward to."

"Losing you is the thing he fears the most."

Cate flicked her gaze away from the woman, certain color rose in her cheeks at the misstatement.

Anna pushed a lock of hair behind Cate's ear. "What happened next, dear?"

Cate nodded and sniffled. "After Gianna dumped us, we managed to escape. We planned to come here and hoped to get your help to return to this time, but..."

Anna rubbed her arm. "Go on."

"The Agency found us and separated us. They took me to a house. I don't know where."

"And that is where Marcus disappeared to earlier. I figured as much."

"I'm the cause of this." Cate pressed her lips together as she rubbed her forehead. "They want Dunhaven Castle. And now Gertrude has been taken, and Jack is missing again. And Marcus is—"

"Right where he wants to be." Anna squeezed her hand and grinned.

Cate forced a weak smile onto her lips.

"Oh, Catherine, I realize this is quite difficult. The Agency is not an enemy I'd wish on anyone. They are cruel and spiteful. But Marcus will do what is necessary to protect you." She flicked her eyebrows up. "And from what I've seen you make quite a formidable adversary for his enemies. It is quite refreshing how devoted to each other you are."

Cate swallowed hard at the words. She blinked a few times before he changed the subject. "We had to leave Jack somewhere in 1805. We cannot waste a minute in retrieving Gertrude before they move her again."

"I understand. How trying, though I assure you Marcus will not rest until both are found."

Cate pressed her lips together as she considered it. She could understand his reasoning to find Gertrude. But Jack? He had no motivation to retrieve her friend.

"He would do anything for you, Catherine. Do not fret."

Cate forced another smile and nodded. He must have really laid it on thick with his mother about their marriage. The truth would crush her. But she had larger things to worry about.

"I need to try the bracelet again."

“I had an idea about that. You’re still struggling to make sense of the visions even with our strategies. But what if you touch the bracelet again, and then I hypnotize you? You were able to detect things using that strategy the last time.”

Cate sucked in a breath, her fake smile turning genuine. “Yes. Okay.”

“Excellent. Then we shall use that tactic for now.”

“For now?” Cate asked, crinkling her brow.

“Well, yes,” Anna said as she rose and retrieved Gertrude’s bracelet. “We will continue our work after you have settled this matter. It may even be easier given that your nerves should be somewhat settled. At least, I hope so. But if I know The Agency, they will not allow you much downtime.”

Marcus returned with a maid scurrying behind him carrying a tray of tea. “Ah, here is the tea. Let’s have a sip before we begin.”

“Oh,” Cate started.

Anna cupped her chin. “It will settle your nerves, dear.”

“I could use that,” she answered with a sigh as Anna passed her a steam cup. She inhaled the aroma and took a drink. She let the warm liquid wash over her tongue and tried to let her muscles relax.

Anna flicked her gaze to her son. “Marcus, may I have a word with you?”

“Now is not the best time,” he said, pouring a cup of tea and handing it to her.

Anna accepted it, her eyes unwavering. She raised her eyebrows toward her hairline.

Marcus took a sip from the cup he had poured for himself before he settled it back into its saucer. “Of course, Mother.”

“Excuse us, Catherine, we won’t be more than a moment. Enjoy your tea, dear, and try to relax.”

Cate sipped at the warm drink again as they stepped from the room. She sighed as she considered the task ahead of her. She would be better prepared for it this time. Even if she became lost during her hypnosis, she knew how to come back.

She could do this. She would do it. She had to. Her mind wandered to the conversation occurring beyond her doors. What had Anna wanted to speak to Marcus about? A cold sweat beaded on her brow. Had she realized their marriage was fake? Had Cate tipped her off somehow?

The opening door interrupted any further thoughts. Marcus and Anna strode back in.

Anna set her saucer on the tray. "Shall we begin?"

Cate passed her teacup back to Anna and nodded. She lifted the lid on her music box, flicking a glance at the purple rose in its glass case. She conjured the future memory she'd had when she touched it.

Holding it in her mind, she swung her legs onto the bed and settled into the pillows.

"Are you ready?" Anna asked.

"Yes," Cate answered with a nod.

"Not too long. You must have the energy for the hypnosis after."

"I understand," she said, holding her palm out for the bracelet.

Anna dangled it from her fingers. "Good luck." She dropped it into Cate's palm. The cold metal smacked onto her skin and images began to form.

They fluttered through her mind faster than she could process. Her breathing turned labored, and tension formed at her temples. She tried to focus on the images as they rushed past.

The memories slowed, and she focused on one vision. Gertrude sat in the yellow room. Her head hung down to her chest. Voices rambled in another language. A piano played a song. She tried to focus on it when voices shouted over it.

The pain in her temples became blinding. If only she could spot one more detail. She flicked her increasingly blurry gaze to the window. With a flutter of her eyelashes, she tried to clear her vision, but the task proved impossible. Blackness crept from the edges of the room until it consumed her.

She snapped her eyes open with a gasp.

"You did quite well that time," Anna said as she hovered over her.

"I don't feel like I did well. I didn't get any additional details that can help us."

"But did you get any additional details overall?"

Cate squashed her eyebrows together. "Yes, I think so. More details than the blurry images."

"Then you have improved," Anna said as she dangled a medallion in front of her. "Now, let's try the hypnosis to clarify some of those details further."

Cate nodded and settled into the pillows, focusing on the sparkling gold pendant as Anna swung it back and forth.

After a few seconds, her eyelids grew heavy and her muscles relaxed. When Anna finished her countdown, her eyes drifted closed.

When she opened them again, she found herself in her sitting room. She smiled as she recognized the warm future memory the rose had shown her.

A moan emanated from behind her. She snapped her gaze toward it before she pulled the doors open. Blackness yawned in front of her.

"Catherine," Anna's voice echoed overhead. "Can you find the vision of Gertrude?"

"I'm trying," Cate said. "I'm searching through the darkness."

"Remember when you find it to focus on some clue about the date."

Cate stepped into the black hall with a nod. "Okay."

She crept forward until the warm light from her suite disappeared. She glanced over her shoulder, resisting the urge to turn and run back to safety. She needed information. With her shoulders squared, she continued forward until she struck something. She explored it with her fingertips.

The picture frame molding ran up the plaster wall. "I'm close. I feel the molding I ran into the last time."

"Good, Catherine. Excellent."

Cate pressed her fingers against the wall and used it to guide her. She reached the corner. Light bloomed from an open door. "I see light."

She moved toward it and peered into the room. Gertrude sat in the middle of the room, tied to a chair.

"I found her."

"What do you see, Catherine? Can you tell the season through the window?"

Cate flicked her gaze to the window. "It's snowing. It's winter."

"Good," Anna answered her. "Now, come back."

"No," Cate said, shuffling further into the room. "I can find more. There was music and a voice. I'll try for more."

"Be careful, Catherine. You do not want to become lost again. Keep in contact with me."

Cate continued around the room, approaching the limp form of Gertrude again. She knelt in front of her. "Gertrude? Can you hear me?"

She pushed the dirty blonde hair from the woman's face, cupping her chin. "Gertrude?"

The woman moaned in response, but she did not open her eyes. From the door, music floated into the room. Cate furrowed her brow as the piano music continued.

“Christmas. Someone is playing Christmas music.”

“That’s excellent, Catherine. Excellent work. Now, come back.”

“Wait, there’s something else. They’re speaking again.” Cate inched back toward the door. “They’re speaking French. I can’t understand it.”

She licked her lips, closing her eyes as she tried to pick out any words. She recognized two. It was all she needed. A smile spread across her face. “I know what date this is. I know where to go.”

“That’s excellent, Catherine,” Anna said. “Now, make your way to your safe place, and I’ll bring you back.”

Cate nodded and took a step toward the door when it slammed shut in front of her. She stumbled back a step, her lips parting as she stared at it.

“Catherine? Have you made it?”

“No,” she answered. “The door is closed.”

Cate hurried toward it and twisted the knob pulling on it. It didn’t budge. “I can’t open it. I’m trapped.”

“It’s all right. It doesn’t matter. I’ll bring you back from where you are.”

“Okay,” Cate agreed. Anna’s voice echoed overhead, informing her that when she snapped her fingers Cate would awaken.

The countdown progressed. Anna finished it. The sound of fingers snapping reverberated around the room. But Cate did not leave.

She stood in the center with an unconscious Gertrude.

“Anna? I’m stuck. That didn’t work.”

Cate dug her fingernails into her palm as she flexed her fists. “Anna?”

She received no answer. “Anna? Hello?” she called again.

No one responded. She spun in a slow circle, realizing she was trapped.

CHAPTER 34



“Hello?” Cate called again into the silence.

Anna’s voice no longer guided her. She had been cut off from all communication. She remained stuck inside her mind.

“Anna? Marcus?” she shouted.

She wrapped her fingers around the doorknob again and twisted it. It didn’t budge. She banged against it with a fist, jiggling the handle as she tried to force it open.

“I’m stuck,” she said, her voice laden with panic as she pressed her back against the door. “If you can hear me, I’m stuck. I can’t get out.”

She left the door behind and crossed to the window. She peered outside, finding nothing beyond it. “What happened to the outside?”

Blackness surrounded her. She spun to face the room again. Her heart skipped a beat as she stared at the now-empty chair in the room’s middle. “Gertrude?”

The woman no longer sat in the room. The yellow walls darkened, beginning to turn black on the top and bottom.

Cate pressed her fingertips to her temples as tightness twisted them. She squeezed her eyes closed. “Go back,” she told herself. “Leave.”

“I don’t think so,” a new voice said.

Cate snapped her eyes open. Gianna sashayed from a dark corner. In the shadows, the red gash on her face appeared even more menacing. Cate went stiff, squeezing her palms into fists again.

“You are stuck here, mouse.”

"I'm not a mouse," Cate answered through clenched teeth.

"Oh, but you are," Gianna said as she sauntered closer. "You're such a nothing. A nobody. You may as well be stuck here. You're useless."

She circled around Cate as she continued her taunting. "You got away from me, but I am working on something bigger. Something you won't get away from."

She stopped as she finished her loop, pressing closer to Cate. "Something that will destroy you and your Duke."

"I'll never let you have Dunhaven Castle."

Gianna threw her head back with a laugh. "Never say never, Cate. I have plans for you that may change your mind."

Cate scowled at her, throwing her shoulders back. "No."

"Don't be so quick to reply. You've yet to see the true power of The Agency. And you've yet to see the lengths I'll go to in order to crush you. You'll wish you had given in long ago when I'm finished."

"And you don't know how far I'll go to protect my friends."

Gianna arched an eyebrow as she circled in the opposite direction. "Oh? Does that include your husband? Because I doubt he'll go that far for you."

Cate bit her lower lip.

"No answer?" Gianna completed her arc and set her hands on her hips. "Aww, poor mouse. She's just realizing how right I am. Tell me, what are you going to do when he drops you? You can't win alone."

Heat washed over Cate as the words stung. She'd face this situation soon enough. Likely as soon as they found Gertrude. Which they couldn't do until she found a way out of her own mind.

Cate glanced around the room again in search of an exit.

"There's nowhere to go, Cate. You're here all alone with me." Gianna laughed at her again. "Maybe we'll win out sooner rather than later."

Cate hurried across the room to the door and tugged at it again. It wouldn't budge.

"There's no way out. Poor Cate. She's trapped in her own mind."

A wave of panic washed over Cate as she wrapped her arms around her midriff. Her eyes settled on the window. Blackness lay beyond it. But was there also a way out?

She crossed to it and tried the latch, finding it stuck.

"Oops, that won't work either."

Cate took a few steps back from the glass. She backed into the wooden chair Gertrude had occupied moments ago, sending it screeching across the parquet. Her eyebrows furrowed as she placed a hand against the back.

She flicked her gaze back to the window.

“Have a seat, Cate. Take a load off. You’re stuck.”

“Not if I can help it,” she answered, grabbing hold of the chair. She hurled it toward the window. It smacked into the pane, cracking it.

Gianna studied her blood-red nails as she cackled again. “Oh, the little mouse roars again. Too bad. Still not working.”

Cate retrieved the chair as it clattered back to the floor and tried again. The crack in the glass widened. She lifted the wooden object a third time and smashed it into the pane. The glass broke away, leaving sharp shards stuck.

A burst of icy air swept inside the broken window. Cate held her arms up against it as it tossed her hair wildly. Bits of glass dislodged as the gusts grew stronger. She collapsed to the floor, covering her head with her hands as the assault continued.

Gianna’s laughter stopped, replaced by a gurgle. Cate risked a glance, finding the large fragment of the razor-sharp glass poking from Gianna’s abdomen. She shot Cate a shocked glance before she slipped to the floor.

The wind continued to pound, shoving her limp form into a wall. The yellow-black barriers began to melt. Cate squeezed her eyes closed again as dust and debris floated around the room, carried by the gale-force winds.

A voice called to her, but she couldn’t hear it over the clamor. The voice called again as the wind came to a sudden stop.

Cate fluttered her eyes open.

“There you are,” Anna said with a smile as she stroked Cate’s hair.

Cate sucked in a sharp breath as she forced a nod and reached for Marcus’s hand. “I made it.” She tried to sit up, but Anna eased her back.

“No, not yet. Rest a moment.”

“I’m okay.” She flicked her gaze to Marcus. “I know the date. We should go.”

“You can rest for a moment. Then we’ll go.”

“How do you feel?” Anna asked as she poured Cate another cup of tea.

“Okay, I’m just...confused,” she answered as she accepted the saucer and sipped from the cup.

“About the visions?”

Cate shook her head. "Why do I get stuck? In both instances, I've gotten stuck."

"As I said, we've never used hypnosis to clarify clairvoyant visions. I'd wager it's one of two things. Either your mind is trying to show you something else, something it considers more vital than what you are seeking."

"Or?" Cate asked.

"Or there is some sticking point that blocks you from returning. A fear reaction, for example."

Cate pinched her eyebrows together.

"It may help to know what happens when you are stuck."

Cate shimmied up higher on the bed. "The door closed, and I got stuck. Gertrude disappeared. The walls started to turn black." She shifted her gaze to Marcus before sliding her eyes back to Anna. "Gianna came."

Anna drummed her fingers against her teacup. "Heavens, it could be either. Given your tumultuous relationship with that woman, you may have some fear of encountering her."

"Or your mind may be trying to show you a future threat," Marcus said.

Cate set her teacup on the saucer and slid it onto the night table. "We should go. I know what date. December 20, 1911."

Marcus stood and stalked to the end of the bed. "All right. I will retrieve her."

"What? No!" Cate shot up to sit and swung her legs over the bed. "I'm going, too."

"That is not necessary. You should rest. I will handle this."

"Definitely not. You are not going alone. No way."

Marcus heaved a sigh. "Catherine, I will be fine. I think Mother will agree you should rest."

Anna rose from her seat and waved her hands in the air. "Don't use me as your excuse, darling. This is between you and Catherine." Anna approached and pinched his chin. "And if it's all the same to you, I'd prefer her to go. I don't like the idea of you heading to an Agency stronghold alone."

Cate raised her eyebrows at him and offered a triumphant smile. "Let's go, dear."

Marcus huffed and took her hand. "I cannot believe you two continue to band together to defeat me."

They wound through the castle toward the garden. "You shouldn't go alone. She knows that. And I know that."

"I am perfectly capable of retrieving a woman from captivity."

Cate stepped into the bright sunshine. "I'm certain you are. But you shouldn't do it alone. And you don't have to." She offered him a smile.

The corners of his lips turned up before he let go of her hand and stretched his out. "Ready?"

She nodded. He opened the portal, and they traveled to the French Chateau in 1911.

Cate shivered as she arrived in the cold. Snow fell around her, and she wrapped her arms around her midriff. Marcus arrived a moment later. He removed his jacket and draped it around her arms.

"Thanks," she said, thrusting her arms through the sleeves and wrapping tighter in the folds of fabric as they stalked to the front door.

"Stay behind me."

"With your track record with The Agency maybe you should stay behind me."

Marcus shot her a glance, and she grinned at him. "I will never live down these instances, will I?"

"No. I feel pretty good about rescuing you twice," she said as they stepped into the empty house.

"Do you think anyone is here? In my visions, I heard things."

"It appears not," Marcus said as he scanned the rooms.

"Can you see through walls?"

He shot her a confused glance. "No."

"Oh, it would have been convenient."

"Sorry to disappoint," he said, leading her past a doorway as he peered inside.

"It's okay. I'll forgive you."

"The house seems empty," Marcus said after a glance into another room.

"Should we head up to the room?"

"I don't like this."

"You think it's a trap?" Cate inquired as they stared up the stairs leading to the second story.

Marcus narrowed his eyes. "I don't know, but I want you to stay close to me."

Cate looped her arm through his and nodded. Together, they climbed the stairs. Marcus glanced down both sides of the hall before he inched toward the room where they'd found Gertrude's bracelet in 1956.

Cate swallowed hard, tightening her grip on his arm as she glanced up at him.

He stopped. "Do you sense something?"

She shook her head. "No."

He tugged his arm from her grip and slid it around her shoulders, pulling her closer to him. She leaned into his chest as they approached the yellow room. They crept toward the partially open door. Cate peered in through the crack. A woman sat slumped in a chair in the room's center.

"There she is."

Marcus held her back. "Wait."

Cate's heart thudded as she stared at the woman. So close, yet still so far. She pressed her lips together as Marcus reached for the door. It creaked on its hinges as he pushed it open. Cate held her breath as she scanned the room, then flicked her gaze to him.

He nodded, and they proceeded inside. Cate hurried toward Gertrude and knelt in front of her. "Gertrude?"

She pressed two fingers to the woman's neck. "She has a pulse."

She glanced down at the ties around her wrist before she tugged at them. "We need to get her out of here."

Marcus crossed to the window and peered out before he approached Cate. With a touch, he burned away the rope holding Gertrude. She flopped forward, nearly toppling out of the chair before Cate righted her.

"Do you think she'll be okay?"

"She is likely drugged. We can take her to Rosenberg to assess her before returning her to Dunhaven."

Cate nodded as she stood. Footsteps sounded in the hall. Cate snapped her head toward them as Marcus tugged her back and shoved her behind him.

"Well, well, well," Gianna said as she strode stiffly into the room, "if it isn't our little mouse who could roar."

CHAPTER 35



Marcus wrapped an arm around Cate and reached for Gertrude. “I wouldn’t do that if I were you,” Elliott said before he could touch her.

Marcus flicked his eyebrows up in question. “I don’t see why not. We’ve won.”

He pressed a hand against the woman as he held Cate tightly. She expected to disappear from the room and reappear in Rosenberg, but they remained at Cinderella Chateau. Marcus’s brow furrowed slightly.

“She’s laced with anti-magic powder,” Gianna said. “If you touch her, you’re rendered powerless for a few moments.”

“I tried to warn you,” Elliott said. “But you did not listen. As you did not earlier, Duchess.”

Cate glared at him as he stepped toward the window and stared outside. “Though despite all that, I am quite glad to have this opportunity to speak again.”

Gianna offered a less-than-impressed glance at him as she settled her arms over her chest. “I’d rather just kill you and be done with it.”

Elliott twisted and wagged a finger at her. “Gianna.”

“Is that not your plan?” Cate questioned.

“It is not. Your earlier escape coupled with the coup you pulled at Eldinbury Castle only makes me want you in our fold more. Between your husband’s power and your resourcefulness, you’d make quite a strong addition to the team.”

“I think not,” Marcus answered.

“Let’s let the past be the past, shall we? Surely, we can find a way to work together toward a common goal.”

“There are no goals The Agency has that Catherine and I wish to be a part of.”

“Are you going to let him speak for you?” Gianna asked Cate.

“I agree completely with his statement.”

“Do you?” she asked as she sauntered around the room. “Are you certain? Perhaps you’d like to reconsider. It is likely you who will suffer the most in this war.”

Cate lifted her chin and sucked in a breath. “I am certain.”

“I guess stranding you in 1805 wasn’t severe enough. Don’t worry, I’ll find something that is.”

“Is there really no way to convince you?” Elliott asked.

“None,” Marcus assured him.

“I wouldn’t be so sure. People can do all sorts of things when they are pushed to their limits,” Gianna taunted.

Elliott spun to face them, his hands clasped behind his back. He sighed and shook his head. “I suppose then, there is nothing left to do here. Go ahead, Gianna, finish her.”

Gianna lifted her skirt and withdrew a knife from her boot.

“No!” Cate shouted, tearing herself away from Marcus and standing between Gianna and Gertrude.

Gianna’s lips curled into a smile. “Oh, you’ve made this easy.” She reached out and grabbed hold of Cate’s wrist, flicking a finger across the ring she wore on her right hand.

The room disappeared from sight, replaced by a barren landscape lit only by a cold winter sun.

“Welcome to the 1600s, Cate. Have fun. Ta!” Gianna backed a step away, waving a hand at her as she giggled and disappeared.

Cate scrunched her nose as she fished the timepiece from under her dress. The button dangled on the chain next to it. With an annoyed sigh, she grabbed it and rubbed a finger across it. She reappeared in the room next to Marcus as he launched a fireball at Elliott.

“Ah, there you are, dear. Just in time.”

“What?” Gianna questioned as Marcus tossed a fireball at her, knocking the knife from her hand. It skittered across the floor, landing in a dark

corner as she cried out from the sting.

She wrinkled her nose and set her jaw, diving at Cate again. They disappeared from the room and reappeared in a new location.

“Let’s try the 1500s and see if that sticks.” Gianna shoved her back a few steps before she disappeared.

Cate shook her head, scrunching her features as she used the button to return to Marcus. “That’s becoming tedious.”

“Why are you back?” Gianna growled through clenched teeth as she dove toward Cate again.

They disappeared for a third time. When they reappeared in their new location, Gianna shoved Cate backward. She stumbled a few steps before plopping on the ground. “Perhaps 1743 will suit you better.”

She disappeared again, leaving Cate in the middle of another time period. With a grumble, she climbed to her feet and returned to 1911.

“Really, you should stop this, Gianna,” Marcus said as he pinned Elliott against the wall with a beam of light. “You can’t win.”

“I’m not a quitter,” she said, reaching for Cate again. Marcus shot a fireball her way, and she danced backward away from it.

Cate narrowed her eyes at the woman before she reached for her. “My turn.” She slid the ring from a still-stunned Gianna’s finger and flicked a finger across it. The room faded, replaced by a field overlooking a small town. Cate stepped away from her. “Welcome to Spain circa 1492.”

She rubbed her hand across the button and snapped back to the room with Marcus. Elliott gasped out a breath as Marcus let up on his assault.

“Catherine? Are you all right?”

“Yes,” she said, tugging the ring from her finger and placing it in his palm. “You can add this to your collection. Now you have two time-travel devices.”

“Where is Gianna?” Elliott gasped.

Cate flicked her gaze to Marcus. “Did she tell you where I was?”

The corners of Marcus’s lips curled up. “No.”

“Then I won’t tell you,” she said to Elliott. “Open the time portal. Let’s go home.”

“You can’t,” Elliott said with a groan as he tried to climb to his feet. Marcus dropped him back to his knees with a small fireball. “You can’t touch her and open it. You’re stuck. Stranded here with only conventional means to travel.”

“Open the portal,” Cate said as she tugged Gertrude up to stand. “I’ll take her through myself.”

“There’s too much danger of you becoming stuck inside.”

“Then location hop to Rosenberg, and I’ll follow with this,” she said, dangling the button on the chain.

“I will not leave you alone with him.”

Cate sucked in a breath and stared at him. “We have to do something. Can I get rid of the anti-magic stuff?”

“I am beginning to understand why you married her,” Elliott said as he used the windowsill to climb to his feet.

Cate shook her head at the man.

“I would suggest you take your leave, Elliott. We are finished here.” Marcus lifted the man from his feet and tossed him out the door before slamming it shut.

Cate followed the man as he flew by before she flicked her gaze back to Marcus. “Now what? We have to do something.”

“There is no good option,” Marcus answered.

“Well, we have to pick the best option,” Cate answered, tapping her foot on the floor. “We can’t leave her here.”

“Yes, I know, but I am not willing to risk your safety to take her. You cannot carry her through the entire portal, and I will not leave you here alone.”

“I can do it. Just give me a little extra time before you come through.”

”Catherine—“

“Marcus, there is no other choice. We have to—” Cate dropped Gertrude into the chair and grabbed her forehead.

“Catherine? Are you all right?”

Images flashed in front of her again as she groaned and sucked in a sharp breath. “Yes. I’m fine, but I’m having another vision.”

Marcus pressed his lips into a thin line. “We cannot stay here much longer.”

Cate squeezed her eyes closed for a moment before she righted herself. “The time portal is the best option. Just hold it open long enough for me to get through with her.”

Marcus shook his head. “I don’t like this, Catherine.”

“Neither do I. In fact, I’m a little worried, but there isn’t another option. And I trust you.”

He narrowed his eyes at her as he outstretched his arms. "Flattery will get you nowhere."

"Seems like it got me a portal back to Rosenberg Palace," she said with a cheeky grin.

He clicked his tongue at her. "Be careful, Catherine. One slip—"

"I know," she said as she tugged Gertrude up and slipped her arms around her chest.

The winds began to whip in the room as the portal opened. Cate glanced over her shoulder at the black opening. She dragged Gertrude backward into the darkness.

The absence of light surrounded her for far longer than she was used to. She bit into her lower lip as she hauled the limp woman through the portal. She continued backward, worrying that she might be stuck when warmth finally heated her back.

She twisted, squinting at the bright sunshine overhead when she stepped into the garden. She dragged Gertrude back a few more steps away from the portal and laid her on the lawn.

With a press of her two fingers to the woman's throat, she detected a pulse. Cate blew out a sigh of relief and turned to eye the portal. Where was Marcus? Another moment passed, and she rose to her feet. Still nothing.

Her heart pounded harder as the portal continued to swirl. She clasped her hands, wringing them. A moment later, he stepped through and the portal snapped shut behind him.

She heaved another sigh. "There you are."

"I wanted to leave you plenty of time."

"I had more than enough time. Then I started to worry you weren't coming."

"How is she?" Marcus asked as he dropped to a knee next to Gertrude.

"Her pulse is still weak, but she seems okay."

"We'll have Mother look at her," Marcus said as he scooped Gertrude into his arms.

Cate followed him inside. "I'll find your mother."

"Tell her we are in the crystal room."

Cate nodded as they parted ways. She hurried through the halls and down the main stairs, pushing into the sitting room. Anna sipped tea as she continued to peruse The Agency's properties.

“Catherine,” she said with a flick of her eyebrows toward her hairline. “Is everything all right? Did you find Gertrude?”

“Yes. She’s been drugged. Could you have a look?”

“Of course,” Anna said as she slid the saucer onto the coffee table. “Did you run into any trouble?”

Cate swallowed hard and fluttered her eyelashes as they strode into the foyer. “A little. You can always count on Gianna to make trouble.”

Anna stopped on the first step and grabbed Cate’s hand. “Are you all right?”

“Yes,” Cate said with a nod, “we are both fine. I...”

“Yes? What happened? Did she harm you?”

“I stranded her in 1492.”

Anna slid her head forward as her jaw fell open. “You did what?”

“I know I shouldn’t have, but—”

“But nothing. Bravo, Catherine. You really are quite clever. I am so pleased with Marcus’s choice in you.”

Heat rose in Cate’s cheeks as Anna tugged her up the stairs. She changed the course of the conversation. “They’re in the crystal room.”

Anna pulled her along through the halls before she pushed into a bedroom. Gertrude lay on the bed as Marcus stared out the window.

“Careful,” he said as they entered, “she is covered in anti-magic powder.”

Anna’s eyebrows shot up. “I suppose that explains some of what I’ve heard about your trip to rescue her.”

Cate crossed to him, slipping her hand in his as Anna assessed Gertrude.

“Mother, perhaps gloves would be appropriate.”

She fluttered her hand at him. “I am not planning on doing magic in the next quarter of an hour.”

Anna peeled up an eyelid and studied the pupil. “Would you care to share how you stranded Gianna in the 1400s, Catherine?”

Marcus arched an eyebrow. “Is that where you put her?”

“Yes. She kept using that ring to dump me in various times and locations. I finally got it off her hand and stuck her in the 1400s.”

“Excellent work. She is undoubtedly resourceful enough that she will find her way back. She is like a cat,” Marcus answered.

Anna straightened and faced them. “Gertrude is merely asleep. I’ll remove the anti-magic and monitor her. You two should go back for Mr.

Reid.”

Cate crinkled her forehead.

“She will be fine here. Go find your friend, dear.”

Cate grabbed her mother-in-law’s hand and squeezed. “Thank you.”

Anna kissed her cheek and pulled her into an embrace. “Be careful, dear.” She flicked her gaze to Marcus. “Take care of her.”

“Always,” Marcus answered as he took Cate’s hand in his and led her from the room.

Cate blew out a breath as they snaked through the halls for yet another trip to the past. “I hope we find him quickly. Then this whole mess can be over.”

Marcus offered no comment until they stepped into the garden. “Ready?”

She nodded, and he opened the portal. They arrived in the same garden over a century earlier and entered the castle. “Why don’t you wait—”

“No,” Cate said with a shake of her head.

Marcus drew in a breath as he considered his response.

“I’m not going to wait in my bedroom. You said you had people looking for him. When can we expect to hear from them?”

“I returned us to a few moments before Stefano is due back. He should meet us in the sitting room.”

“Okay, let’s go.” Cate led the way down the hall as Marcus hesitated. She spun to face him. “You coming?”

“Catherine, I think you should wait for me to discuss this with Stefano and then we’ll—”

“No. You can’t cut me out of the information. We’ve discussed this.”

He closed the gap between them and slid a lock of hair behind her ear. “I don’t wish you to be upset.”

She furrowed her brow. “Upset?” Her eyes grew wide, and tears stung them. “You think...”

“With any luck, he has been found. If not, we will find him. But there is no need for you to know the details of it if you find it worrisome.”

She set her jaw and blinked her tears away. “I’ll be fine.”

She took a step away from him before she twisted to face him again. “We’ll find him, right? You promised.”

He offered her a half-smile. “I did. And I always keep my promises.”

She returned his expression and slid her hand into his. They made their way downstairs to the sitting room. Stefano paced the space, already

awaiting them.

“News?” Marcus asked as he strode inside.

Stefano clutched at his hat. “There’s a problem.”

Cate’s heart sank, and her stomach turned.

“I do not like to hear those words,” Marcus answered as he stalked to the drink cart and poured two brandies. He handed one to Cate before he took a sip of his own. “What is it?”

“He’s gone.”

Cate stiffened at the words.

Marcus slipped an arm around her and rubbed her shoulder. “Explain.”

“We searched near where you told us. We found the horses. But no Reid. He’s gone.” The man winced as he raised his eyes to Marcus. “He’s gone.”

CHAPTER 36



“What?” Cate questioned, her eyes wide. “What do you mean he’s gone? He can’t be gone.”

She snapped her gaze to Marcus, her features pinching as she stared at him.

“We’ll find him,” Marcus said, rubbing her shoulder.

“How? I’d like to believe that, but...” She pressed a hand to her forehead as her features pinched. “How?”

Marcus tugged her brandy glass from her hand and set it on a side table before guiding her to the sofa. “Sit down, dear.” He offered her the glass again. “We will find him.”

Cate popped up a moment later, the liquid in the glass sloshing wildly enough to nearly spill over the top. “Again, I ask how? What if he’s gone? What if The Agency took him again? What if they moved him to another time period?”

“Catherine, you are panicking over what may be nothing. The Agency seemed fully interested in you alone. I doubt they bothered with Mr. Reid after they abandoned him.”

“Then where is he, Marcus?”

“Wandering. Perhaps the horses got away from him whilst he slept.”

Cate’s shoulders slumped, and she collapsed onto the sofa. “Oh, Jack.”

Marcus rubbed a hand across her back. “We will find him, Catherine.” He cut his gaze to Stefano. “You checked the area near the horses?”

“In a fairly wide radius. Nothing.”

Cate groaned, letting her head fall into her hand.

“Do you have the horses?”

Stefano nodded. “We brought them back with us. Why?”

“They may offer us some clue. Take me to them.”

Cate rose to her feet.

“You wait here,” Marcus said.

“No, I want to go.”

“Catherine, there is no need. You are upset. I can look over the horses myself.”

Cate slammed the brandy glass onto the side table. “I’m going, too.”

Marcus fluttered his eyelashes. “All right. Come along.”

Stefano led the group from the room to the stables, speaking to one of the stablehands who showed them to two stalls with the horses.

Cate stared at the steed that had carried her through the battle before she moved on to the next one. “This was Jack’s.”

“Where are the saddles?” Marcus asked the stablehand.

He pointed to them, and Marcus squatted to study them. Cate looked them over from above while petting the horse’s nose. “Nothing is missing. None of the weapons. Nothing.”

She pressed a hand against her head again. “He’s out there with nothing.”

Marcus heaved a sigh as he rose to stand. Cate reached for the saddle to double-check the weapons. Her hand swept across the fastener, and a rushed image formed in her mind. She snapped her hand back.

“Catherine? What is it?”

“There’s something on the saddle that’s giving me a vision.” She dropped to her knees and reached for it again.

“Careful, Catherine. We do not want you to overdo it.”

“This could be Jack’s life.”

He squatted down, knocking her hand away. “I understand, but it does us no good if you are unconscious and cannot communicate anything about his location.”

Cate sat back on her heels as he searched the saddle. He tugged a scrap of fabric from the clasp and held it up.

“It must be a piece of his uniform. Well, his stolen uniform. I hope that doesn’t matter.”

“It seems your visions are tied to people you care for, so I would highly doubt it’s about a random French soldier. It must relate to Mr. Reid.”

Cate reached for it, and he tugged it away. “Do not overdo it.”

She nodded. “I won’t. But we need a clue.”

Marcus set the shred of fabric in her palm. Images began to form in her mind, racing past as she tried to focus on any details. They rushed past too quickly for her to make sense of. The tension built at her temples. She dropped the fabric before she passed out, gasping for breath.

“Anything?”

She shook her head as a lump formed in her throat. “It was too fast. I’ll try again.”

“No,” Marcus said, grabbing the fabric piece before she could. “You cannot try again yet. You’ll exhaust yourself and find nothing.”

“We don’t have time for this,” she said, clenching her fists.

“What we do not have time for is you to pass out trying to find him. The search will stall, and we will waste precious time.”

Cate’s face fell as she realized he was correct. “Maybe your mother can hypnotize me.”

“That would be an option if I knew where exactly my mother was at the moment.”

“You don’t know?”

Marcus rose to stand. “She is traveling. She could be anywhere.”

Cate pounded a fist against the ground. “You hypnotize me.”

“Hypnosis is not one of my many skills.”

Cate buried her face in her hands. “We have to do something.”

“Let’s return to the palace and discuss our options.” He offered her his hand. She heaved a sigh before she accepted it and climbed to her feet. Tears stung her eyes as they returned to the castle and pushed inside.

“You should—”

“Don’t even say rest. I can’t rest. I have to keep trying.”

“Catherine,” Marcus began with a sigh, “you cannot continue this until you pass out or worse.”

She pressed a hand against his lapel. “Trying in the stables was probably a terrible idea. I can do better. I just need to relax and remember my happy memory. And my music box would be nice.”

“I will retrieve it for you.”

Cate nodded as he stepped away. She grabbed his elbow before he took another step and winced. "And my rose."

He smiled at her. "Of course, dear. I won't be but a moment."

Cate offered a fleeting smile before he strode away before she wrung her hands as she paced the floor. She made two passes before her nervous energy drove her to the upstairs library. She pushed into the room and crossed to the book with information on her condition.

She pulled it open as she wandered to the desk, skimming the information in search of best practices or tips she could use to make the process easier.

Her finger traced the words as she whispered them aloud. "Remaining calm and relaxed when the visions press in is vital to information processing. Yeah, right. Easier said than done."

She continued to scan down the page. "Beginner clairvoyants often find visions painful as their mind attempts to block them. Even happy memories can be taxing on them. With practice, visions can become less frenzied."

She let her hand thud against the desk. "Yes, but how much practice? And how can I make it less painful?"

She flipped the page in search of more information. "Reminding oneself of happy memories, in particular, happy future memories can ease the pain of visions. When the visions push in, forcing your mind to turn to a happy vision can slow them and make processing easier."

Cate raised her eyes from the book and stared into space. She had one happy vision she could use. In her hypnosis, it was her safe place. Would it matter if the event would never occur?

The doors creaked open and Marcus strode inside. "I thought I may find you here."

"I was looking for more information to help with my visions."

"I expected nothing less," he said with a smile as he crossed to her. "Are you ready to try again?"

"Yes," she said as she slammed the book shut. "Did you get both the music box and the rose?"

"I did, yes. I put them in your room."

"Okay. Let's see if I can make sense of any of these visions."

They traversed the halls to the sapphire room. Cate pushed inside, finding her music box and her rose on the nightstand. She studied them as she eased onto the bed and opened the lid of the piano. Tinkling music

filled the room. She lifted the glass off the top of the display case and grabbed the rose.

Her fingers caressed the petals, and she slid her eyes closed. Memories floated by as tension built at her temples. She sought the one clear memory she'd conjured previously. It floated by and her mind slowed. The tension released in her temples.

She opened her eyes as the vision continued. She'd managed to control this one. Could she do it again with the fabric scrap?

With a reluctant sigh, she returned the rose to its case and slid the glass over it. She settled back into the pillows and held out her hand. "Okay, I'm ready."

"Do not push too far. You can try again later if you must." He dangled the fabric over her upturned palm before he dropped it into her hand.

Memories rushed past and tension built in her as she struggled to make sense of them. Images stormed through her mind. She tried to find the happy memory. She forced her mind to search for it. Pain built across her forehead. She fought to ignore it, searching for one detail that could lead them to Jack.

Loud noise deafened her as she sought information. She gritted her teeth as the pain ramped up. The visions stopped suddenly, and everything went black.

She snapped her eyes open and shifted her gaze to Marcus. "You're pushing too far," he said as he slid the fabric into his pocket. "Did you see anything we can work from?"

She shook her head. "It went too fast. I heard something like thunder, but I couldn't make out what it was."

She slammed her fists against the bed. "Okay, let me try again."

"Absolutely not," he answered. "You must wait longer."

"We don't have time to wait," Cate insisted. "I can try again."

"Catherine, this is not a discussion. You will wait." He settled into the chair next to her bed.

She collapsed back into the pillows with a sigh, drumming her fingers against the bed. She banged her head into the soft pillow. "Just let me try again."

"No. You will not convince me. Why don't we have tea?"

Cate huffed as he pulled the cord on the wall to summon the servants. "Tea is not going to help."

“Tea always helps. Ask Mother.”

“Millions of Americans would disagree.”

“Too bad you married a Brit,” he said with a cheeky grin. The maid hurried inside and Marcus requested tea. She curtsied before she scurried from the room, returning shortly after with a tray.

Cate sipped the warm liquid as anxiety built in her. She polished off the drink in a few sips and slid the saucer onto her nightstand. “Okay, I’m done. Let me try again.”

“I have barely taken one sip, Catherine.”

“I can’t help that you’re a slow tea drinker.”

“Tea is meant to be enjoyed not inhaled.” He poured her another cup and handed the saucer to her.

She snatched it from him and sipped it. “Happy?”

“Infinitely,” he answered.

She sucked in a breath, taking another sip and forcing the warm liquid down as she waited to try again. Her muscles relaxed, and her apprehension eased. Perhaps Marcus was right about the tea.

He finished his cup, and she took the last sips of hers.

“How are you feeling, dear?” he asked as he set their saucers on the tray.

She fluttered her eyelashes and yawned. “Tired.”

“Perhaps you should sleep before we try again.”

“No, I—” she said as she struggled to keep her eyes open. The music box played as she let her head fall back into the pillows. “Maybe just a few minutes.”

Her eyes slid shut and blackness replaced her view of the room. Music droned on, sounding further and further away until she slipped to sleep.

* * *

Images floated past her as she stood in a dark space. “Hello?” she called out, her voice echoing off the emptiness.

Loud noises whisked by along with more blurry visions. “Where am I?”

She tried to make sense of the things that scurried along but she failed.

“These are visions,” she said to herself. “I need to see them.”

She chewed her lower lip, attempting to make the pictures move slower. She couldn't. Her breathing turned ragged and her heart pounded. She recalled the passage in the book. She closed her eyes and forced her mind to recall the happy visions. Her breathing slowed, and her pulse returned to normal.

The image of her suite at an unidentified moment in the future appeared. She smiled as the memory filled her with warmth. Her eyes slid open, and she stared at the image stuck in front of her.

"Jack," she breathed. Her heart skipped a beat, and the image skittered. "No!"

Her hands shook as the image flickered again. She pressed her lips together, forcing her mind to the happy vision.

The picture of Jack glowed to life again. She blew out a slow breath as she stepped toward it. "Where are you?"

She studied the details. He wore the French uniform. He stood inside a tent. His hands were bound. She reached a finger toward him. The image rippled as she touched it before it sprang to life. She stumbled back a step as it played like a movie.

"No, I don't understand. I can't understand you. I'm not French," Jack shouted.

Someone spoke in another language.

Jack shook his head. "I can't understand. I'm not French. I stole these clothes. I'm sorry, but I'm not French."

A new voice entered the conversation, unseen to Cate. Someone spoke French again, and the new voice replied in English. "You have been found guilty of deserting the army with stolen arms. The crime is punishable by death. You will be hanged at sunrise."

"What? No!" Jack began when the memory began to fade.

Cate's eyes went wide as she stared at the paling vision. "No! No!"

It disappeared as her body shook. She tried to search for the future memory again but it was gone. Her body shook again, and the blackness around her faded.

"Catherine, wake up," a voice called.

She snapped open her eyes, finding the sapphire room around her, and Marcus hovering over her, his hands wrapped firmly around her shoulders. "Catherine? Are you all right?"

She grasped his lapel, balling it in her fist. “I know where Jack is and if we don’t hurry, he’s going to be killed.”

CHAPTER 37



“Slow down, Catherine,” Marcus said. “What did you see?”

“Jack. I saw him. I saw a vision. It worked.” She sat up, her heart racing from the experience.

“Easy, dear. Take a deep breath, then tell me what you saw.”

Cate swallowed hard, grabbing his arm. “The visions came when I fell asleep. They were racing, but I slowed them. I saw him. I saw Jack.”

“Where?”

“He’s with the French army again. They must have found him. They accused him of deserting.” She gripped his arm tighter. “Marcus, they’re going to hang him at daybreak.”

She flicked her gaze outside to the setting sun. Her stomach turned over.

“All right. I will find him.”

“I’m coming, too.”

“I would argue, but I doubt I’ll win.”

“You won’t,” she said as she swung her legs over the edge of the bed. “And I’ll be fine. I’ll be with you, right?”

“Is that trust I detect in your voice?”

She offered him an amused smile as she rose. “It just might be. Come on, let’s go.”

“We’ll use a portal to go to Austerlitz after dark.”

“After dark?” she asked as she hurried along with him to the garden. “Why not now?”

"I would prefer not to appear on the fringes of the French army in nearly broad daylight."

Cate arched an eyebrow at him. "Good point. Okay, night it is."

They strode into the garden. Instead of opening the portal, Marcus spun to face her. "Before we go, there are some rules."

"Rules?" Cate asked, furrowing her brow.

"Stay with me at all times. Do not go off on your own. Do not disappear anywhere out of my sight. I don't care how strong of an urge you have to find Mr. Reid, we do not separate."

"Okay," she said with a nod.

He arched an eyebrow.

She lifted her shoulders in a partial shrug. "I said *okay*."

"I want to be sure it sinks in."

Cate tugged her lips back in a grimace. "The last time I was in that camp, Napoleon thought I was his prostitute, and then I got shoved into a regiment to fight. I have no desire to go anywhere alone while there."

"Good." Marcus stretched out his arms and opened the portal. Cate stepped inside once it opened, walking through the blackness into a dark night. She wrung her hands as she waited for Marcus.

He appeared moments later, and she breathed a sigh of relief as he wrapped his arm around her. "How will we find him?"

An owl hooted in the distance. Marcus pulled Cate closer to him before he stalked toward the noise, calling back to it. Cate squashed her eyebrows together as the bird landed on his outstretched arm.

"Why?" she managed.

He tugged a feather from the bird before he whispered a few words in its ear. When he lifted his arm, the owl fluttered off and sailed into the camp.

Marcus waved the feather in the air. An image formed in the air. Cate's eyes went wide as she stared at the bird's eye view of the camp.

"Is that..."

"Yes," Marcus answered. "Our feathered friend can spy for us."

A smile crossed her lips as she glanced up at him before refocusing her attention on the aerial image. "Too bad he can't see in the tents."

"Jack is a criminal. He will be guarded. We look for the tent with soldiers stationed in front."

"Right," Cate said as she leaned closer to him.

“Are you cold, dear?” He removed his jacket and wrapped her in it before he pulled her closer to him.

“There,” she said after tugging her arms into his jacket. “A tent with guards.”

“So it is. Come along.” He wrapped her hand in his and tugged her toward the camp. They snaked through the tents, careful to remain unseen.

“What’s the plan when we reach the prisoner tent? Are you going to blast them or what?”

“Blast them?”

Cate flicked her gaze to him, mimicking his summoning of a fireball with her hand. “You know, with the fireball thing.”

“That would draw far too much attention. I shall need to be more subtle.”

She nodded as they approached the tent. “Oh, the magic sleep thing.”

“Go into the tent as soon as I disable the first guard and find him. I will join you as soon as I’ve disposed of the second.”

“Okay.” She followed Marcus as he darted around the side of the tent and knocked one guard out with a touch. Cate slipped into the tent as the other guard shouted. His voice cut off as she scanned the dark space. “Jack? Jack, are you here?”

“Cate?”

“Jack!” she exclaimed, following the sound of his voice.

“Cate! How did you get here?” he questioned in the dark.

Bright light bloomed a moment later as Marcus stepped into the tent and lit it with a fireball that hovered above his hand.

“Oh, good, you found him.”

Cate hurried to Jack’s side as he rose to sit on his cot. She stared at the shackles around his hands and feet before she flicked a glance at Marcus. “Can you get rid of these?”

“Of course.”

With one quick blast, both sets fell away, freeing Jack. Cate threw her arms around him. “I was so worried when they found the horses without you.”

“How did you get away?”

Cate pulled away from him. “Carefully.”

“We should go,” Marcus said.

Cate nodded and stood, tugging Jack up with her.

“I assume you took care of the guard outside, though I’m not certain what will happen if I wander through the camp like this again. Maybe no one will recognize me, but—”

“I think we’ll take the shortcut.” Marcus extinguished the fireball before he wrapped an arm around Cate and clamped a hand onto Jack’s wrist. The confines of the tent faded away, replaced by momentary blackness before Cate’s room at Rosenberg replaced it.

Cate breathed a sigh of relief, letting her head rest against Marcus’s shoulder for a moment as she stared at Jack. “Thank goodness that’s over and you’re safe.”

“You, too. Cate, when they took you, I—”

“I know. I felt the same way. But it’s over now.”

“Thank heavens. We can’t waste any more time. We need to find Gertrude.”

“We did,” Cate said as she righted herself. “She’s safe. She is with Anna in 1956.”

“You found her? How?”

“Her bracelet,” Cate explained. “I figured out the date, and we managed to rescue her from The Agency.”

Marcus’s lips curled at the corners as he stroked a lock of her hair. “After Catherine stranded Gianna in the 1400s.”

Jack’s eyes went wide. “You did what? How?”

“I took her little time travel ring that she used to maroon us here off of her finger and left.”

“Good going, Cate,” Jack said with an amused grin. “Let’s hope that’s the end of her.”

“I would highly doubt that. As such, we should return to 1956, return Gertrude to Dunhaven, speak with her about the importance of not changing her will, and then go home. Undoubtedly, The Agency will already be concocting the next plan.”

“These people are like cats. They never stop.”

“And I doubt they will for quite some time,” Marcus said. “They did not grow into the organization that they are by giving up.”

Jack blew out a long breath and frowned. “Right. I guess we’d better get at it then.”

“Are you sure you can manage it?” Cate questioned. “This must have worn you out. You’re still recovering from the temporalysis.”

“I’m okay,” Jack said with a nod. “It’s fine. I can make it.”

“Are you sure? Jack, I don’t want to risk your health.”

“I’m sure. I’m strong as an ox, I promise. I’ve been milking it at Dunhaven so I don’t hear it from Molly and Mrs. Fraser.”

Cate chuckled.

“Then we should go,” Marcus answered. He stretched his arms when Cate batted them down.

“Stop opening time portals inside.”

Marcus heaved a sigh and shot her a sideways glance. “You are as bad as Mother.”

“I don’t want the room wrecked. Oh, wait, my rose and music box. I should take them back.” She crossed to the nightstand to retrieve both before they made their way to the garden. Marcus opened the portal, and they returned to 1956.

After snaking through the castle halls, they arrived in the crystal bedroom. Cate set her keepsakes on the dresser as she walked in. Anna still tended to Gertrude who remained asleep.

“Ah, Marcus, Catherine, you have returned triumphant.”

“Yes,” Cate said as she approached the sleeping woman. “We found him. I managed to work through a vision while asleep that led us to his location.”

A smile spread across Anna’s face. “Progress. Excellent. You are a fast learner.”

Cate returned her expression before she sank onto the edge of the bed and pulled Gertrude’s hand into hers. “How is she?”

“Perfectly fine. I have kept her asleep until you returned, however, I can wake her if you’d like to speak with her.”

“Yes, I would like that very much,” Cate answered.

Marcus kissed the top of her head. “I will leave you to discuss the matter with her alone, dear.”

“Ah, I’d like to stay,” Jack said, stepping forward. He glanced down at his clothes. “Oh, I hope I don’t frighten her.”

“She’s a time traveler, I think she’ll be okay,” Cate said with a chuckle. “And I think you should stay. She should know both of us still protect the secret.”

Jack nodded as he hovered behind Cate.

“Come along, Marcus. There are a few things I would like to discuss with you.”

Marcus gave his mother the slightest of flinches before he grabbed Cate’s hand and squeezed. “Good luck.”

Anna slid her arm around Marcus’s and tugged him away. “She will awaken in a few moments.”

“Thank you,” Cate said before the door clicked closed. She turned her attention to her ancestor. Jack slid his hand onto her shoulder and squeezed.

She reached back to grab it, threading her fingers through his as Gertrude’s eyes fluttered open. She sucked in a gasp, a fearful expression twisting her features.

“It’s okay, Gertrude,” Cate said, squeezing her hand. “You’re safe now.”

“Who are you?” the woman demanded. She flicked her gaze to Jack, her brow furrowing. “Is that...is that Jackie Reid?”

“Aye,” he said, circling the bed and plopping onto the side across from Cate. “It’s me, Lady MacKenzie.”

“But you—”

“Left, I know. My father died, and I came back. I worked for you for the last six months of your life.” He flicked his gaze to Cate. “Cate’s the owner of Dunhaven now.”

Gertrude studied her. “And you know the secret.”

“I figured it out pretty quickly, actually,” she said with a slight chuckle.

“So did those people,” Gertrude said, her face pinching again.

“The Agency. I know. They were at Dunhaven in 1942 during the war. They have been trying to get control of the castle ever since.”

Gertrude licked her lips, her brows pinching.

“Which is why we need you to change your will again. There’s a clause that requires me to be married—”

“I know. I didn’t want to put it in, but they forced me. It was all I could do to resist giving in to that wretched woman’s so-called agency.”

“I understand. But when we return you to Dunhaven, you must call Mr. Smythe and change the will. Please.”

She snapped a panicked glance at Cate. “Has Dunhaven been lost?”

“No,” Cate said with a shake of her head. She lifted her left hand. “I’m married. But I wasn’t. We nearly didn’t catch it in time to correct things.”

“I’m sorry, dear. I tried my hardest—”

“It’s not your fault,” Cate said, patting her hand.

Gertrude shifted her gaze to Jack. "Are you..."

"No," Jack said, understanding the question without her needing to finish. "She's married to someone who can help us win against these horrible people."

"I see. Dunhaven must never be lost to them."

"We're working on that," Cate said with a smile.

Gertrude tugged one corner of her lips back as she cupped Cate's face in her hands. "You look so much like a MacKenzie. I am sorry we never met. Your father thought keeping you away would protect you."

Cate grabbed her hand and squeezed. "We're meeting now. And I'm glad for it. I just wish it had been under better circumstances."

Gertrude smiled and pushed herself higher on the bed as she glanced around the room. "Where are we?"

"Rosenberg Palace in Germany," Cate answered.

"Germany?" she questioned. "However did we get here? I believe they held me in France."

"They did. This is my husband's home. One of them," Cate answered.

Gertrude arched an eyebrow at her. "I see. Well, it seems you have the matter well in hand. I suppose we should return to Dunhaven, and I should get on with my end."

"There's no need to rush. If you feel tired..."

"I'm not ancient. I'm still in good shape. I do not need to rest like a child," Gertrude said.

Cate suppressed a chuckle at the woman's words, so very like her own protestations at times. "All right. I'll find Marcus. He can return us to Dunhaven."

Gertrude offered her a sharp nod of approval as Cate and Jack rose to stand.

"She reminds me of someone," Jack whispered as they made their way across the room to the door. "Where do you think your loving husband is?"

"Sitting room, maybe?"

"Wonder what mummy dearest wanted to talk to him about?" Jack asked as they snaked through the halls toward the foyer.

"Maybe about not opening time portals in the house."

Jack arched an eyebrow. "Wonder how Gertrude will take the time portal trip."

“She doesn’t seem afraid of much, so likely better than you,” Cate said, shooting him an amused grin.

“Very funny. Maybe if it wasn’t *him* opening them, I’d feel better.”

“Doubt it,” they said at the same time as they reached the foyer floor.

Cate crossed to the closed doors and knocked before they pushed inside. “She’s ready.”

“Excellent,” Marcus said. “We will return her to Dunhaven at once.”

Anna rose and crossed to Cate, pulling her into an embrace and kissing her cheek. “Be safe, dear.” She turned to Marcus as he strode across the room. “Take care of her. And think about what I said.”

“Of course, Mother,” he said, kissing her cheek before they left the room.

They collected Gertrude from the crystal bedroom and took her to the garden. After she confirmed the date of her disappearance, Cate explained the new time travel portals to her.

“The portal we use to access other locations is a bit different from the ones you are used to. They are quite chaotic,” Cate explained. “But once you enter, do not stop walking until you see Dunhaven Castle. Otherwise, you may become trapped.”

“I understand, though I do not see the appeal in time travel whatsoever, particularly in this form.”

Cate suppressed a giggle at the statement, shooting a glance at Jack as Marcus opened the portal. When the gale-force winds swirled around them, Cate signaled for Gertrude to enter. Jack followed behind her, then Cate.

Within seconds, bright sunshine surrounded her. She stepped forward to join Jack and Gertrude in the back garden at Dunhaven Castle.

“I never thought I’d see it again.”

Marcus joined them seconds later. “I will wait for you here.”

Cate nodded, and they set off toward the castle. They pushed in through the front door and escorted Gertrude to her bedroom.

“I will call Mr. Smythe today. I hope when you return, everything is corrected.” Gertrude pulled Cate into an embrace.

After a few more words, they parted ways. Cate and Jack hurried from the castle and returned to the garden.

“Finished?” Marcus asked as they rejoined him.

Cate nodded and sucked in a deep breath. “Time to find out if this worked.”

CHAPTER 38



“I hope so. I am afraid to go back and find out. I’m afraid something else will be haywire,” Jack said with a shake of his head.

“I guess it’s better to know as soon as possible,” Cate said with a squeeze of his hand as Marcus opened another portal to their time.

“See you at home, Cate,” Jack said with a nod before he stepped inside.

Cate followed behind him, arriving at Dunhaven Castle nearly fifty years later. She stared up at the relatively unchanged castle with a tentative gaze.

“Time to face the music,” Jack said.

“After we change, of course.

“Of course,” he said with a laugh. “I can’t very well talk to anyone like this.”

“Everyone should still be downstairs. We should have a clear path upstairs,” Cate answered as Marcus joined them.

They closed the distance to the castle, entering through the front door and hurrying up the steps and to their bedrooms to change. Cate eyed the music box on her nightstand as she tugged a cardigan over her tunic. Would she have any more visions, she wondered.

She slid her fingers across the piano’s tiny lid. “I sure hope not. They are not pleasant.”

With a smile at the small box, she spun on a heel and crossed to the sitting room. As she reached the door, she doubled over.

Pain shot across her forehead as images flooded through her mind. She fought to steady them and herself but lost the battle. She collapsed to her knees, clutching her head. Tears formed in her eyes, and her hands trembled as the visions continued. Voices murmured, but she couldn't make sense of them. Blurry figures moved around, but she couldn't make them clear.

As quickly as the sensation hit her, it passed. She sucked in a shaky breath and opened her eyes. She pressed her lips together, struggling to calm her nerves and slow her pounding heart.

A knock sounded at the door, startling her. "Coming," she called, forcing herself to her feet.

The door inched open. "Catherine? Are you all right?"

Cate took a steadying breath as she pulled the door open. He must have detected her pounding heart. "Yes, I'm okay."

"Really?" he asked.

"I had another vision. It took me by surprise. I wasn't prepared for it."

"Did you manage to make sense of any details?"

She shook her head. "No. It was all a blur. I guess I haven't quite caught on to this whole thing yet despite the strides I've made."

He offered her a tight-lipped smile. "I'm certain you will."

"Have you spoken with Mr. Smythe?" she asked as she joined him in the hall.

"Not yet."

"We should find him. With any luck, this whole mess is over."

He offered her another fleeting smile as they strode through the halls and down to the foyer.

Gayle hurried toward them from the library. "Oh, there you are. I'm so glad I found you. Mr. Smythe has requested to speak with you immediately. If you don't mind, I'll fetch the staff as well."

"Thanks, Gayle. Are we meeting in the library?"

"Yes, Jack's already there. I just need the Frasers and Molly." She squeezed Cate's arm before flitting past her to find the other staff members.

"Moment of truth," Cate said with a weak smile as they walked toward the library. She pushed inside, finding Jack in his usual armchair. Mr. Smythe sat opposite him, shuffling papers.

"Oh, good, Gayle found you. Excellent," he said as Cate and Marcus entered.

She shot Jack a hopeful glance, flashing her crossed fingers as she patted his shoulder before making her way to the sofa and perching on it.

The others joined them a few moments later.

“What is it now?” Molly asked as she took a seat next to Cate. “She wants me to also pay for the time I stayed here on vacation?”

“No, thank you all for coming,” Mr. Smythe said. “When I first announced the change in the will, I must admit to having been puzzled to have missed it. After a thorough investigation, we have found that this was *not*, in fact, Gertrude MacKenzie’s final will and testament. She updated it several years later and removed the marriage clause. The will is identical to the one I presented to you when we met in the States. You are, indeed, the rightful heir to Dunhaven Castle, married or not.”

A collective sigh of relief went up through the room, and Molly rubbed Cate’s shoulders. Cate pressed her lips together as she sucked in a breath and nodded. “Thank you, Mr. Smythe.”

“What about the lawsuit?” Mrs. Fraser asked.

“I am certain that will be dismissed given the new evidence that has come to light. It has no merit whatsoever now as the challenge is meaningless.”

“Oh, thank heavens. So, we are all safe.”

“Indeed, you are. And once again, I must apologize for the situation. I do not know how this could have happened, but I am pleased that we were able to rectify it quickly and as easily as possible despite some trepidation on your part for which I profusely apologize.”

“There’s no need to apologize, Mr. Smythe,” Cate answered. “I’m glad the matter is cleared up. Thank you for your diligence.”

“Well, I suppose this calls for a celebratory dessert tonight,” Mrs. Fraser said as she rose. “You and I had better get baking, Miss Molly.”

Molly sprang to her feet with a grin. “Definitely.” She turned to face Cate. “Congratulations. I’m so glad we don’t have to move.”

“Thank you,” Cate said with a smile.

Mr. Smythe stuffed papers into a folder and rose as Mr. and Mrs. Fraser and Molly left the room. “If you don’t mind, Gayle and I will stay on one more night and head back tomorrow morning.”

“Of course,” Cate answered, “stay as long as you’d like.”

He offered her a slight smile and a nod before he collected his briefcase, and he and Gayle departed.

“Well, I guess it did work,” Jack said as he climbed to his feet. “I can’t believe it, but it did.”

“Thank goodness. One bullet dodged.”

“I don’t want to know what they’ll throw at us next.”

A shiver ran down Cate’s spine as the memory of her vision crept back into her mind. She suppressed a shudder, wrapping her arms around herself as she forced a smile onto her face. “Whatever it is, we’ll face it together.”

“Sounds like a plan.” He shot Marcus a glance before he sucked in a breath. “I think I’ll go snag some biscuits from Mrs. Fraser while I still am considered ill enough to get away with it.”

Cate offered him a genuine smile and a nod. “Okay. Enjoy.”

He shot another glance at Marcus before he strode from the room, pulling the doors shut behind him. Cate blew out a long sigh as she collapsed onto the sofa.

A brandy glass waved in front of her. She accepted it and smiled up at Marcus. “Thanks.” After a sip, she sucked in another breath. “Well, I guess you’re off the hook.”

“Off the hook?” he asked.

“Yeah. I mean, we don’t need to be married anymore. And I’m sure you’d very much like to carry on with your life uninterrupted by the wife you never planned to have.” She forced a smile onto her face and flicked her gaze to him.

He narrowed his eyes at her as he studied her over the rim of his glass.

“Thank you. You didn’t have to do this, but I’m glad you did.”

“You are welcome, Catherine.”

She licked her lips, drumming her fingers against her thigh. “Anyway, I will speak to Mr. Smythe in the morning. He can draw up whatever paperwork is needed, and we can part ways.” She chewed her lower lip as the last words left her lips.

“Catherine—” Marcus began when a knock sounded at the door.

“I should get that,” she said, leaping to stand and setting the brandy glass on the table. She scurried across the room and flung the doors open, racing into the hall as she tried to steady her nerves.

Another knock sounded at the front door. “Coming!” she shouted down the hall.

She rounded the corner and opened one of the doors. Her heart skipped a beat, and she slow-blinked at her visitor who grinned at her.

“Hello, dear,” Anna said as she rolled her bag across the threshold and pressed into the house. “Oh, what a lovely little castle. It’s very cozy.”

Cate stared at the woman, finding no words as she eased the door shut.

Anna studied her expectantly. “Oh, no, I’ve interrupted something.”

Cate recovered her senses, shaking her head and swallowing hard. “No, not at all. I just...”

“Just what, dear?”

“Was in the library, and it took me a minute to get here, is all,” she fibbed before offering a nervous chuckle. “Let me get someone to take your things up to your suite.”

“Oh, lovely, yes, I would like to lie down after that long trip.”

“Right, of course.”

Marcus strode from the hall before she could leave, his brow furrowing. “Mother?”

“Yes, dear. I’ve made it.”

“I see. For what?”

“Catherine’s training, of course. You didn’t think I would abandon her, did you? She is far from mastering these visions. She needs help. And I am here to provide. I’ll stay as long as it takes.” She grinned at them both before she lifted her bag. “Oh, Catherine, never mind the help. I can carry it. If you’ll just show me the way. I hate to be a bother.”

“No bother,” she answered with another nervous giggle. She slicked a lock of hair behind her ear and motioned for Anna to follow her.

“I will take your bag, Mother,” Marcus said, pulling it from her hands and following them.

Cate wound through the halls, leading her to a large suite two halls away from hers. “I hope you’ll find it comfortable.”

“Oh, how lovely. Violet is my favorite color. Thank you, dear. Now, I’d like to rest. If I could just have a tray for dinner, that would be appreciated. I do not wish to cause a ruckus.”

“I will let Mrs. Fraser know. And it’s no bother at all. You’re welcome to join us for dinner.”

“Oh, no, dear, but maybe tomorrow. I’m quite tired.”

Cate smiled and nodded at her before Anna pulled her into another embrace. “Oh, it’s so good to be here, Catherine.”

“It’s good to have you.” She smiled at her and squeezed her arm before she and Marcus left the room.

Cate sucked in a shaky breath as she pulled the doors shut to Anna's room and took a few steps down the hall. She planted a palm against her forehead. "I can't believe this. Did you know she was coming?"

"No, I did not," Marcus said.

Cate let her shoulders slump and squeezed her eyes closed as she shook her head. "What are we going to do?"

"About?"

"Our divorce," Cate said. "We can't get divorced with your mother here."

"I would prefer we did not."

Cate huffed. "She will be devastated. She thinks we're really a couple."

"Technically, we are."

"That's not helpful." She breathed out another sigh as they reached the top of the stairs. "I'm sorry."

"Whatever for?"

She plodded down the stairs next to him. "You're stuck with me for who knows how long now."

"Catherine," he began as they reached the foyer floor, "we should discuss—"

Another knock interrupted his statement. Cate let her head fall back between her shoulder blades as she flung her hands out. "What now?"

She stomped to the door and flung it open, staring at the next visitor on her doorstep. Her brow crinkled as the blonde flipped a lock of hair over her shoulder and slid her sunglasses down. She looked familiar, but Cate couldn't place her.

"Hi," she said in a British accent with a grin as she chomped on her gum.

"Hello, can I help you?"

"I'm here to see Jack Reid."

"Oh," Cate said, the crease between her eyebrows deepening as she stepped back from the door and motioned for the woman to come in. It hit her why the woman appeared familiar. The pictures in Gianna's flat. This was the woman from the pictures. "Come in. May I ask your name?"

"Of course," she said with another grin as her heels clicked across the marble floor. "Amanda Reid. Jack's wife."

Cate stared at the woman as her stomach turned over. What had The Agency done this time?

* * *

THE END

TROUBLE AT DUNHAVEN CASTLE



CHAPTER 1



Cate stood in stunned silence, staring at the blonde woman in the foyer of Dunhaven Castle. *Jack's wife?* Her mind wouldn't allow her to fully accept what the woman had just told her. Was this some sort of trick by the Agency? Had they done this when they'd held Jack captive?

Her lower lip bobbed up and down as her eyebrows pinched together. She tried to form words, but she couldn't.

Next to her, Marcus recovered more quickly than she could. "Mrs. Reid, how lovely to make your acquaintance. Perhaps you would be more comfortable waiting in the sitting room whilst we fetch your husband."

"That'd be great," she said with a click of her tongue before continuing to chomp on her gum.

Marcus motioned toward the double doors as Cate swallowed hard. She stumbled toward the doors and pushed one open. The woman slid past her, gaping around the room as she entered.

Cate's hand lingered on the doorknob as she stared at the blonde, her eyes still wide. A warm hand wrapped around hers, and the door came closer to her before it slammed in her face.

Fingers touched her chin, twisting her neck sideways. "Catherine, come to your senses. You must find Jack."

"Jack," Cate repeated. "Right." Her gaze fell to the floor as she tried to force her feet to move her forward.

Marcus grabbed her elbow before she made it two steps. "Catherine..."

She flicked her gaze up to him. He shook his head before he slid his arm around her shoulders and led her down the hall to the library.

"I need to find Jack," she said as he shut the doors behind them.

"Mrs. Reid seems to be in no hurry," he answered as he crossed the room and poured a brandy. "Though I would check the room for valuables afterwards."

He held it out to her as she stared at the pattern on the area rug under the leather armchairs.

"Take it, Catherine. You need it."

She gingerly lifted the glass from his hand and took a sip. "How did this happen? This is The Agency. They've done it again. I just don't know how I'm going to break this to Jack."

"Presumably, the man will recall his wedding."

"I doubt it," she said with a shake of his head. "This has to be some trick. The Agency probably planted her."

"Really? Do you believe so?"

She stared at him, an incredulous expression on her features. "Yes. Jack's never said anything about a wife. This is going to come as a shock."

"Never mentioning her does not mean she did not exist."

Cate cocked her head, an unimpressed frown forming on her delicate features. "Marcus—"

"Never mind our opinions. Perhaps you would prefer if I fetched him?"

"No, no, that would be a disaster. You two aren't exactly each other's biggest fans."

"I would have no problem telling the man his...wife is here."

Cate took another sip of the brandy before she handed the glass back to her husband. "I'll bet. I can handle it. I was just surprised, that's all."

She shook her head as she bit her lower lip. "Things just keep going from bad to worse."

"We will fix everything, Catherine," Marcus promised.

She stared into his dark eyes, her heart tumbling at the words. "I'm sorry, but maybe it's best that your—"

Her words cut off as pain shot from temple to temple. She clutched her head, running her fingers into her hair as her features twisted. Her knees wobbled before they gave way, and she collapsed.

"Catherine!" Marcus called, though she barely heard him as blood rushed into her ears.

Images shot across her brain faster than she could process. An arm wrapped around her shoulders, and another slid behind her thighs before he scooped her into his arms.

The sensation began to wane as the doors magically blew open in front of them.

“I am taking you to rest.”

“No, wait, I’m fine. I just had another one of those visions.”

“And now you must rest. I will also inform Mother.”

“I’m fine, put me down.”

“You are *not* fine, Catherine,” Marcus insisted as he strode down the hall.

She heaved a sigh as she shook her head. “Marcus, please stop carrying me around. I need to find Jack.”

“You also need to rest.”

“I will rest later. After we’ve sorted out this mess with Jack’s wife.”

Marcus came to a stop, his lips puckering as he sighed. “Fine. But I will go with you.”

“Fine,” she answered with a nod. “Let’s try the kitchen.”

Cate grabbed his hand and pulled him toward the back stairs. “Were you able to make any sense of the images you saw in your vision?”

“No,” Cate said as frustration coursed through her and tears threatened to sting her eyes.

Marcus squeezed her hand. “Mother will be able to help.”

Cate stopped walking and faced him as she shook her head. “Marcus, she can’t stay here until I figure this out.”

“Why not?” he asked, his forehead creasing.

“This could take a while. I could never master this.”

“You will, Catherine.”

Her shoulders slumped as she stared down at their intertwined hands. “But she won’t understand...she thinks our marriage is real. You won’t be free as long as she is here.”

“Neither will you.”

She shook her head as she flicked her gaze to the floor. “But you have—”

“Catherine, there is nothing to worry about. Besides, I have a feeling The Agency is nowhere near finished with you, so it would be prudent for me to stay.”

“But you don’t have to be stuck married to me.”

“That doesn’t bother me, Catherine, unless you have a burning desire to be free. In which case, I shall tell Mother—”

“No,” Cate said, squeezing his arm as her eyes went wide. “No, don’t tell your mother anything. I don’t want her to hate me...or you. She’s too nice. She doesn’t deserve this.”

“Wonderful, then we shall remain husband and wife. I am certain Mother will be very pleased.”

Cate sighed as she rubbed her forehead. “Okay. I’m sorry, but okay.”

“There is nothing to apologize for, Catherine. Now, let us deal with the other spouse causing a ruckus.”

She smiled up at him, surprised he took the development in stride. She remained certain he would prefer to resume his crusade for Celine’s hand. However, his mother’s opinion on the woman hadn’t changed in centuries, so perhaps he wasn’t in a hurry to displease her.

She continued down the hall toward the kitchen. “I don’t even want to tell him. After everything that’s happened, this is just another blow. It’s not enough that they kidnapped him and he nearly died of temporalysis, but now they’re going to toss in this...woman as his wife. Like anyone would believe he married her.”

Marcus arched an eyebrow at her. “Really? I could believe it.”

Cate offered him an unimpressed sideways glance. “Of course, you could. You don’t like him. But...”

“But what? What about Mrs. Reid makes you think he wouldn’t have picked her?”

Cate paused for a moment before she answered. “Everything. She’s... uncouth and crass and...”

“Your gardener is hardly the epitome of grace, dear.”

“He is not my—”

“Gardener, I know. Yet he is. And for some men, those sorts can be very appealing.”

“Not you, huh?”

“Certainly not,” Marcus answered as they reached the kitchen.

Voices floated from within as Molly and Mrs. Fraser flitted around the room, readying the dinner for the day.

“Stop eating those biscuits, young Jack,” Mrs. Fraser warned. “You’ll spoil your supper.”

He chuckled as he bit into another cookie. “No, I won’t. I promise. I can still eat that roast you’re making with ease.”

Mrs. Fraser shook her head at him before her gaze landed on Cate and Marcus in the doorway. “Oh, excuse me, I didn’t see you there. You’re always sneaking up on me.”

“Hi, Mrs. Fraser. Sorry, I just needed to speak with Jack for a few minutes.”

Jack froze mid-chew, his forehead creasing as he stared at Cate. “Sure. What’s up?”

“Uh, it’s another problem with the west wing. It may be better if you took a look at it rather than me try to explain.”

“Right,” Jack said as he rose. “Let’s head up now.”

Cate shuffled down the hall, chewing her lower lip as Jack followed her. When they reached the stairs, he shot her a sideways glance. “Can you tell me now what this is really about? Is it The Agency again?”

Cate sighed, her voice quivering as she spoke. “I think so. We...have a visitor.”

“Oh, no. It’s not Gianna again, is it? I can’t deal with that woman right now.”

“No, it’s not Gianna.” Cate wrung her hands until they turned red. “It’s...”

“Cate, what is it?” Jack’s features twisted with concern.

“Jack, I don’t know how to say this, but...”

“Your wife is here,” Marcus blurted before Cate could find the words.

Her shoulders slumped, and she shook her head, disappointed in his bluntness.

Jack stood in stunned silence, shock etched into his features. “What?”

She pressed her lips together, her face melting with concern. “I know. This must be a shock...”

“Amanda’s here?”

Heat washed through Cate as she snapped her gaze up to Jack’s face. How did he know her name? “You know her?”

He bobbed his head up and down. “Yes. I never imagined she’d show up here. We’ve been divorced for years.”

Cate’s eyes widened. This wasn’t a trick of The Agency. Jack had *actually* married this woman. “She’s really your wife?”

Jack heaved a sigh as he nodded. “Yes, well, no.”

“What does that mean?” Marcus said, his tone slow and deliberate, betraying his annoyance.

“It means...I thought we were divorced years ago. I never expected her to turn up here. What does she want? Did she say?”

“She said she wanted to speak with you. And according to her, she is still your wife,” Marcus answered.

“That’s impossible. I...we...” Jack heaved a sigh as he shook his head. “I’d better speak to her.”

“Do you want someone to go with you?” Cate asked.

“Ahhh...” Jack set his hands on his hips and shook his head. “I don’t know. I don’t know what she wants. Or...why she’s here.”

“Why don’t I walk you to the room?” Cate suggested. “And we’ll go from there.”

“Thanks.” Jack nodded before he motioned for her to precede him.

With her heart pounding and her mind swirling with confusion, she led the way to the sitting room, swinging the doors open to find Amanda, her hands shoved into her pocket and a bubble of gum poking from her lips, staring at a painting.

“Amanda,” Jack said as he stepped inside, obviously recognizing her.

She sucked the gum back into her mouth and grinned at him. “Hey, Jackie.”

“Wh-What are you doing here?”

The blonde flicked her gaze to Cate who still hovered in the door before she snapped it back to Jack. “It might be best if we talked privately.”

“Sorry, I’ll leave you to speak alone,” Cate said as she searched Jack’s features for some signal as to what he preferred her to do.

“Thanks, Cate. I’ll meet you in the library when we’re finished to discuss that problem with the west wing.”

She forced a smile onto her face and nodded. He preferred to be left alone. What had happened between the two of them?

After a breath, she shuffled backward and pulled the doors closed behind her. Her hands lingered on the knobs as she stared at the wooden barrier.

“He preferred to handle her alone?” Marcus asked.

“Yes,” she said, her voice barely above a whisper. She leaned closer and pressed her ear against the wood.

“What are you doing?”

“Shh, I can’t hear anything with you talking.”

Marcus wrapped his fingers around her arm and tugged her away from the door.

“Hey!” she hissed, pulling back against him.

“Come along, Catherine, you shouldn’t eavesdrop.”

“But—“

“He will tell you what he wants you to know when he is finished.”

“Marcus...I can’t shake the feeling that...”

“That what?” he asked, releasing his grip on her. “That this is some devious plan by The Agency? Yet Mr. Reid knows her and admits to marrying the woman.”

Cate let her gaze fall to the floor. “Yes, you’re right. Why did he marry her?”

“I’m certain he had his reasons,” Marcus said as they entered the library. He poured her another brandy and offered it to her before he poured one for himself.

“But what were they? I just...can’t see Jack with her.” Cate shook her head before she sipped the amber liquid.

“Why? I think they are quite a good fit.”

Cate glared at him over the rim of her glass. “Really? I can’t see him with her at all.”

Marcus fluttered his eyelashes. “I cannot understand why.”

Cate heaved a sigh, unwilling to explain it to him as she sank into one of the leather armchairs, allowing the soft cushion to envelop her. “Never mind.”

“The fact is, Catherine, they are married. Or were. Though she still seems to think they are. Perhaps you do not know Mr. Reid as well as you think.”

Cate flicked her gaze to him, her features pinching at the suggestion. Was Jack more of an enigma than she thought?

She cradled her drink against her chest as she chewed her lower lip.

“Do not pout, Catherine.”

“I’m not pouting. I’m thinking.”

He arched an eyebrow at her, but before he could answer, the doors burst open and Jack strode inside, a loud sigh escaping him. He crossed to the drink cart without a word and poured himself a double scotch.

Cate studied him as he downed a long sip before wiping his lips with the back of his hand and settling his gaze on her. “Everything okay?” she asked.

“No,” he answered. “We’ve got a big problem.”

CHAPTER 2



Cate's stomach clenched at the words as she rose to her feet. With wide eyes, she prompted him for more information, but instead, he downed the rest of his drink before pouring himself another.

"What? With Amanda?"

"Yeah, with Amanda," Jack answered before another sip.

"Perhaps you can control your more base urges to drink away your problems and inform us of what you are yammering about," Marcus answered.

"Oh, I'm sorry, Your Grace. I just needed something to steady my nerves."

"We understand," Cate said with a bob of her head before she switched to a shake. "Except we don't. Jack, what's going on? You're really married to her?"

"Yes. Apparently."

"Apparently? Did you not know? Is this...a change in the timeline again?"

"No," Jack answered with a sigh as he set his glass down. He stalked across the room and collapsed into his usual chair before he buried his face in his hands. "I married Amanda in the original timeline. But I divorced her, too. Or so I thought."

"So you thought? So, The Agency changed things?" Cate eased into the chair next to him, her features still pinched with confusion.

“I don’t know. Amanda says she never filed the paperwork.” Jack rubbed his temples. “Which puts me in a fine mess.

“Okay, well, why doesn’t she do it now?” Cate asked. “Or is that why she’s here?”

“No, that’s not the reason she came. It’s much worse than that.”

Cate reached for his hand, giving it a squeeze. “Whatever it is, we’re here for you.”

“We?” Marcus asked.

Cate scowled at him with a shake of her head.

“He’s right. You shouldn’t offer until you know the trouble I’ve just brought to this doorstep.”

“Are you kidding? You were almost killed because of the trouble I’ve brought to Dunhaven.”

“Hardly, Cate. You couldn’t have known The Agency would come gunning for you. You’re doing your best to protect this secret and all the people in this castle. But this...this is my own stupid fault.”

“That’s sounds about right. Well, we’ll leave you to it then. Come along, Catherine, we should discuss your latest vision with Mother.”

“Marcus!” Cate shouted as he set his glass down and crossed to the door. “No. We can’t leave Jack to fight this on his own, no matter what it is.”

“He has asked us to do just that.”

“And we aren’t going to do it.” Cate gave him a stern look, speaking through clenched teeth.

“Really, Cate, I’m not certain you want to be involved in this mess.”

“We do. We’re here for you. Just tell us what’s going on.”

Jack sucked in a breath, sliding his eyes closed. Before he could speak a knock sounded at the door. Marcus swung it open to find Amanda on the other side. She eyed him with a half-smirk before she winked. “Hi there, handsome.”

He offered her an unimpressed stare and a sneer. “Is there something you needed, Mrs. Reid?”

“Amanda, I thought you were waiting in the sitting room for me?”

“I got bored. Look, Jackie, am I staying here or not?”

“I already told you I don’t live here. I have my own place, and you can stay there, all right? I just need to speak with Her Grace before I head off for the night.”

“Her Grace, my aren’t we impressive?” Amanda said to Cate.

“She is quite impressive, though it is no concern of yours,” Marcus said, stepping between them.

“Amanda, please,” Jack said with a shake of his head.

“But I’m tired. I’ve traveled a long way and want to rest. Either I’ll take a bedroom here, or I’ll be heading home.”

“Perhaps, Mr. Reid, whatever you have to say can wait until tomorrow,” Marcus suggested.

“I’d really rather here it now. Mrs. Reid, I’d be happy to have you stay with us. Let me have a bedroom readied—“

“No,” Jack interrupted. “That would be...too much to ask.”

“You’re not asking, I’m offering,” Cate said with a smile. She eyed Jack’s supposed wife, not liking the woman one bit. She preferred to keep a close eye on her.

Jack offered her a wide-eyed stare and a petrified smile. “Really, Your Grace...”

“Nonsense,” Cate said.

“Perhaps, dear, they ought to go home where they can be alone to talk freely,” Marcus replied.

“What kind of hosts would we be to make her wait when she’s tired? I’ll have Molly get something ready.”

“No!” Jack shouted, following the harsh statement with a nervous laugh. “No, no. Don’t do that. I’ll take Amanda home now.”

“Jack...” Cate cocked her head, studying him as she tried to get a read on why he insisted on removing her from the castle. Surely if they stayed, they could tackle this together. What was the issue here?

A shadow moved behind Amanda, and Molly appeared at the door. She skirted around the woman and crossed to retrieve the used tumblers. “Mrs. Fraser wanted me to check on you both since dinner is nearly ready. I didn’t realize you had a guest. Sorry.”

“That’s fine, Molly. We’re just—“

“I’m not staying for dinner,” Jack said, his voice hurried and shaky. “So, proceed without me.”

Molly furrowed her brow, the glasses clinking in her hand as she studied him. “Are you sick?”

“No, just...busy. I—“

“He can and should stay. We were just discussing that. Amanda, though, is very tired. I think she would prefer a warm bed and a tray of dinner.”

“That sounds lovely, Duchess,” the woman spat out with her usual smirk on her face.

“Yet Mr. Reid prefers to take his lovely wife home,” Marcus answered. “So—“

His statement was interrupted by the smashing of a glass on the hardwood floor.

Cate snapped her gaze to her housekeeper-in-training. The woman’s eyes were wide and her jaw agape. She looked completely stunned. “Molly? Are you okay?”

“Oh,” she said as her eyes turned glassy. “Sorry, Your Grace. I’m so... sorry. I—“

She clapped a hand over her lips before she raced from the room.

Cate stared after her, stunned into silence. “I should go check on her.”

“I’ll—“ Jack began before he shook his head. “Yes, you should go. And so should we.”

Cate crinkled her brow as she shot a pleading glance at Marcus. She couldn’t track down Molly and deal with keeping Jack here, too.

With a heavy sigh, Marcus flicked his gaze to Jack. “Perhaps it would be best if you and Mrs. Reid stayed. What with the problem in the west wing.”

“I really think that’ll keep—“

Marcus’s glare made him stop. With the situation in hand, she left them behind to deal with sorting the bedrooms and hurried after Molly. She paused in the foyer, wondering if she’d gone up to her room or back down to the kitchen.

She chose to start with the kitchen, assuming she wouldn’t have left Mrs. Fraser alone awaiting an answer on dinner. Cate hurried down the stairs, her heart in her throat, wondering what had upset Molly.

As she reached the lower level, the sound of sobbing reached her ears. It quickened her footsteps toward the kitchen. She found Molly leaning against the table, her face covered with her hands as her shoulders shook.

“There, there, Miss Molly.” Mrs. Fraser, a dishtowel slung over her shoulder, patted Molly’s back.

“Molly?”

Molly snapped her tear-streaked face up to eye Cate. “Oh, Cate,” she said, her features melting into tears again.

Cate crossed to her and laid a hand on her shoulder. “Molly, what is it? What happened?”

“I was so stupid.”

“About what?”

“Is that really Jack’s wife upstairs?”

Heat washed over Cate as she realized the reason for Molly’s upset. Had she been seeing Jack? “Oh, ummm...”

“He didn’t tell me had a wife. I feel like a home wrecker.”

“Now, now, Miss Molly,” Mrs. Fraser said, “you cannae be a home wrecker when you dinnae know there was a home to wreck. None of us did.”

“No, I didn’t know either. It was a shock.”

“I never expected him to be a liar.”

“I think that’s being unfair. From what I’ve gathered, which isn’t much yet, Jack thought he was divorced. So you didn’t wreck any homes. And he didn’t lie either.”

Molly sniffled. “Really?”

Cate nodded. “Yes. But I haven’t gotten much more information from him other than that. I’ve been trying to figure it out, but...it was a shock to everyone, including Jack.”

Molly fished a tissue from her apron pocket and blew her nose. “I guess I should give him the benefit of the doubt but...when you’ve been through a divorce once, you just...trust less.”

Cate rubbed her shoulder. “I understand. But I do think he deserves the chance to explain.”

Mrs. Fraser offered her a nod and a tight-lipped smile, indicating her agreement.

“I hadn’t realized you’d been seeing each other,” Cate said.

Molly centered her red-eyed gaze on Cate as she nodded. “Yeah, for a little while now. And I thought we were getting serious. Then this.”

“Well, again, I think this may be something unexpected, so let’s just take it one step at a time, okay?”

“Yeah,” Molly said with a nod, though Cate could tell she was still upset.

“It’ll be okay, Molly,” she said as she slid her arm around her friend. “Why don’t you head up for the night and take a tray in your room.”

“No, your dinner—“

“I can handle my dinner,” Cate assured her.

“But His Grace—“

“Will be perfectly fine if I bring him his meal instead of you.”

“I wouldn’t hear of it,” Mrs. Fraser scolded. “I will bring your meals to the dining room like a proper housekeeper. But I do agree you ought not appear in the dining room with those tear-stained cheeks, Miss Molly. Besides, Miss Andrea can help.”

“I’ll splash some cold water on my face,” she promised.

“No, you won’t. You’re going to bed, and that’s an order.”

Cate wrapped her arm tighter around Molly’s shoulders and guided her toward the door. “I’ll walk you up.”

“Thanks,” Molly squeaked out as they crossed to the door. “I’m sorry for the broken glass, too. I’ll pay—“

“For nothing. It’s fine.”

“Thanks, Cate. I’m sorry for being such a baby. I just...I guess I’m still raw from the divorce. It’s probably way too soon for me to have jumped into a relationship, but Jack seemed like such a nice guy.”

“He is a nice guy. And I’m sure there is an explanation for what’s going on right now. I think we need to give him some time.”

Molly bobbed her head up and down as she blew out a shaky sigh. “You’re right. I’m jumping to conclusions.”

“It’s no wonder. Your ex-husband was not a very nice man. You’re just a little gun-shy.”

“Yeah, he’s nothing like yours. I can’t imagine him ever cheating on you. He worships the ground you walk on.”

Cate offered her a weak smile, wondering how everyone would take it when they finally divorced so he could chase after Celine.

They reached Molly’s room, and she twisted to pull Cate into a hug. “Thanks, honey. I feel a little better.”

Cate rubbed her shoulder as she offered her a broader smile. “You’ll feel a lot better after some rest.”

“And some answers. Jack’s not quite off the hook just yet. He’s getting the benefit of the doubt, but that doesn’t mean he’s getting a free pass.”

“I wouldn’t dream of telling you to do that. I want answers, too. I was stunned when she showed up.”

Molly turned glum again, her lower lip jutting out in a pout. “Do you think he loves her?”

Cate shook her head. “I can’t see how. She’s not...” She raised her eyes to Molly. “He’d be trading up with you.”

Molly offered a tear-filled chuckle. “Aw, thanks. You don’t have to say that just because we’re friends though.”

“I’m not. I get a bad vibe from her. I just don’t like her.”

“Well, I appreciate the support. And I hope to get those answers soon. But for now, I’m going to turn in.”

“I’ll have Andrea run your tray up. Curl up in front of the fire and try to forget about all of it.”

Molly hugged her again before she disappeared into her room.

Cate hovered outside her door for a moment, her smile fading quickly. She needed answers, too. Her heart ached for her friend. She had suspected Molly and Jack were becoming close, but she hadn’t known how close.

Finding out he had a wife that he’d kept secret must be devastating, especially after a nasty divorce. Cate wandered down the hall, lost in thought. Why hadn’t Jack said anything to anyone? Had it been because he assumed he was divorced, and it was a matter best left in the past?

She heaved a sigh as she eyed a painting of a former Dunhaven Castle resident. At Dunhaven, the past never stayed buried.

As she rounded the corner, she found Marcus striding toward her.

“Is she settled?”

“Yes. In the burgundy room,” he answered. “And your secretive gardener is waiting in the library after seeing her off.”

Cate stifled a sigh. “He’s not secretive or—“

“The gardener, yes, I know. Old habits.”

Cate sidestepped around him. “Time to get some answers.”

“Perhaps after our meal.”

“Are you kidding? I can’t eat with this hanging over my head. I’m not even hungry.”

Marcus arched an eyebrow. “I was hungry.”

“Go eat,” she said as they reached the stairs.

“I would prefer to eat together.”

“Fine, we’ll invite Jack to dine with us and grill him over the roast.”

Marcus grumbled out a sigh. "Oh, joy. Just how I hoped to spend my meal."

"You'll live. This is why we should have gotten divorced faster. Then you could have enjoyed your roast however you liked."

"Listening to an earful from Mother."

Cate's shoulders slumped as her feet hit the marble floor. "She really will be disappointed, won't she?"

"She likes you very much, Catherine."

Cate pushed into the library, and Jack rose from his armchair. "Cate..."

"You're coming to dinner with us. You can explain there."

He blew out a long breath and shook his head. "I hope you can stomach it. It's not very good dinner conversation."

"I said the same, but was overruled," Marcus answered.

Cate gave him a narrow-eyed glance before she stepped toward the door. "Come on."

They made their way to the dining room where Mrs. Fraser already set out items. "I'll be right up with your dinners."

"I'll fetch my own, Mrs. Fraser," Jack assured her.

"Wow," Cate said as Marcus slid her chair in under her. "He's really avoiding this."

"I am not surprised."

After their meals had been delivered, and they were left alone, Cate dove into her questioning. "Are you really married to her?"

"Yes. I thought I was divorced, but she never filed. I'm still married."

Cate fluttered her eyelashes as she pushed a piece of meat around her plate. "I'm sorry, but I have to ask why you married her. She just doesn't seem at all your type."

"I didn't know I had a type," Jack said with a grin that faded quickly.

Marcus arched an eyebrow at him, a frown making it clear how he felt about the statement.

Jack winced and cleared his throat. "Sorry."

Cate let her fork clatter to her plate as she clasped her hands, leaning her forehead against them. "No, I'm sorry. This is personal, I know, but I can't help but get the feeling she's here to cause trouble."

"She is," Jack answered. "You're right."

"Why?" Cate asked with a shrug. "Is The Agency somehow involved in this?"

“I would not be surprised,” Marcus answered.

“I don’t know, Cate,” Jack answered, “but for your reason about why I married her...yes, you’re right. There is a reason, she’s not my type.”

Cate heaved a sigh of relief. “Thank heavens. I thought I was going crazy.”

Jack shook his head as he fidgeted in his seat. “No. I married her to protect her. From a crime.”

“What crime?” Cate asked.

Jack set his fork down, his features twisting with displeasure as he set his gaze on Cate. “Murder.”

CHAPTER 3



Cate's jaw dropped open as she stared at Jack. "What? You married her to protect her from murder? Are you serious?"

"Explain your vague statement," Marcus said. "Was she about to be murdered?"

Jack shook his head. "No. She...had a boyfriend who wasn't very nice. They got into an argument and..."

"She killed him," Cate finished, her expression grim.

Jack bobbed his head up and down. "And I gave her an alibi and married her. Stupid, but she promised it would only be temporary. Just until things settled down and the heat wasn't on her anymore."

"I guess that didn't pan out."

"No," he answered. "I thought she had filed for the divorce. We had the paperwork done before I left. I never thought about it afterward."

"Did she say why she didn't file them?"

Jack shook his head as he stared down at his half-eaten meal. "I don't even know how to explain the next bit."

"Simple. Tell us what happened," Marcus said with a sigh.

"But that's just it. I don't know. She came here claiming something completely different than what happened all those years ago."

Cate's eyebrows shot up. "Could history be changed?"

"Maybe," Jack said.

"What does she claim?" Marcus asked.

Jack pressed his lips together, his features pinching. "She says..."

His words trailed off as he opened and closed his hand into a fist. “She says she didn’t kill him.”

“Maybe she didn’t,” Cate said. “Maybe she lied all those years ago.”

Jack shook his head. “No, I witnessed it. That’s why I married her. So, I didn’t have to testify.”

“And now she’s saying she didn’t do it. Is he still alive?”

Jack shook his head, his features twisting further with upset.

“Well, then what does she claim happened?”

Jack set his eyes on her, his jaw flexing as he stared at her. “She says I killed him.”

Cate’s jaw dropped open again. “No, are you joking?”

“I wish I was. But she says she witnessed me kill him. She never filed the papers, and now she wants a married life with me or she goes to the police.”

Cate shifted her gaze to her plate. “Well, then we need to solve this.”

“If we can. I have no idea why she’s doing this.”

“I can guess,” Cate said with a wrinkle of her nose. “And her name is Gianna.”

“So, you think this is The Agency’s latest attempt to get at us.”

“Or distract Catherine from what is really important,” Marcus said.

Cate snapped her gaze to him. “Jack is important.”

“I am not saying he is not. But your visions are pointing to something large, and we have no idea what.”

“He’s right, Cate,” Jack said with a sigh as he let his gaze sink to his lap. “I can solve this on my own.”

“How?” Cate asked.

“At the very least, I can stay married to her. She says she’ll stay quiet as long as I provide her a nice life.”

Cate cocked her head, her lips tugging into a grimace. “And how long until she demands more?”

“I don’t know. But for now, while you work on those visions, I can deal with this on my own.”

“No,” Cate said with a shake of her head. “Marcus, we’re just going to have to find a way to do both. I’ll start looking into this tomorrow, then we’ll make a plan, though I suspect we’ll at least need to travel back to the night of the murder and see what’s happening now in the timeline.”

“Probably,” Jack said with a nod. “I appreciate that Cate. But, please, these visions are still difficult for you. Do what you need to do to take care of yourself.”

“I will. I promise. Anna is here to help. I hope to make some progress with them soon. But this situation is going to become untenable quickly. Not to mention the affect it’s having on Molly.”

Jack let his head fall back between his shoulder blades. “I know. When she ran out of the room...”

“She’ll be okay, she was just shocked. We all were.”

“I never told anyone. I thought it was over.”

“With The Agency, nothing is ever over,” Cate said.

Marcus sipped his wine. “And you can be certain it will get worse before it gets better.”

“I know,” Jack said.

Cate shifted in her seat as she pushed the peas around on her plate. “I hate to ask this, but...can you tell us what happened as you recall it on the night of the murder?”

Jack nodded before he swallowed hard. “I was at Oxford at the time. We had gone out for a drink. That’s when I met Amanda. She was a bartender. We often went to the bar she worked at. Occasionally, her boyfriend would come by. He was always rough with her. A few times I stopped him before things got out of control.

“I kept asking her why she stayed with him, but she never really answered. Anyway, one night I heard them arguing in the alley in the back. He was getting pretty rough with her, but before I could put a stop to it, he shoved her into a car.

“I followed the car to a posh hotel. He practically dragged her from it and into the hotel. I followed them. They went to a ballroom. There was some kind of party there. It was filled. I lost sight of them for a while, but when I finally found them, he was dead and she was holding a gun.”

Cate chewed her lower lip as she tried to piece together the relevant details. It seemed Amanda was the most likely culprit. She wondered if anyone else could have witnessed the crime. She’d look for more information tomorrow, but for now, she had only one suspect in mind. The question was, how did she prove it?

“Okay,” she said with a nod. “I’ll see what I can find out tomorrow. For now, we’ll have to play her game.”

“Thanks, Cate,” Jack said with a nod. “I appreciate your help on this. And I’m sorry for the trouble.”

After a sip, Cate set down her wine glass, waving the comment away. “Please. How much trouble have I dragged you into over the years?”

Jack flicked his gaze to Marcus, arching an eyebrow. “I suppose you have a point.”

Marcus offered him an unimpressed stare and a low grumble.

“Don’t worry, we’ll solve this. We always do.”

Jack offered her a weak smile as he collected his utensils and plate. “Well, I suppose I’ll turn in for the night. I really have no desire to stay awake and think about this anymore tonight.”

He rose, hovering at the table for a second before he spoke again. “Oh, Cate, thanks for going after Molly. I...we...”

“She told me,” Cate said with a nod. “I’m so happy for you both.”

A nervous chuckle escaped Jack’s lips. “That may be premature considering.”

“I think a conversation between you two would go a long way,” Cate said. “Though maybe tomorrow morning when you’ve both had some rest and some time.”

Jack nodded again as he collected his glass. “Good night.”

Marcus shifted his gaze to Cate as Jack shuffled from the room. “Mr. Reid and Ms. Williams?”

Cate flicked her eyebrows up. “Apparently so.”

“That is quite an upgrade from his current spouse.”

Cate’s features twisted into an amused smile. “Wow.”

“What?” he asked as he rose from his seat and offered her his hand.

“You like Molly.”

“Like is a stronger word than I would use. I find her...adequate as a housekeeper though a tad vocal. Servants should be seen and not heard.”

The statement did not diminish the grin on Cate’s features as she slid her hand around his elbow and walked from the dining room with him. “Uh-huh. You like her. And here I didn’t think you liked anyone.”

He clicked his tongue at her. “I like you.”

“Well, that’s obvious. With all my Agency problems and the general chaos that surrounds me, it’s hard *not* to like me.”

“Nightcap, dear?” he asked as they strode into the library.

“Yes. After this day, definitely.” She sank into the armchair with a sigh. “This is going to be a lot to manage between my visions and Amanda.”

Marcus offered her a glass of brandy. She accepted it, pressing it against her chest as her brows furrowed. “Do you think my visions have anything to do with the murder?”

“I doubt it,” Marcus answered as he slid into the chair next to her.

She pulled her gaze from the air and studied her husband. “Why?”

“Because of the way you are reacting to them. They are deeply personal. Otherwise, they wouldn’t cause nearly as much pain.”

“Really?”

“Yes. Recall when you had a vision of Mr. Reid’s predicament within Mr. Bonaparte’s camp. Painful, yes. But disabling, no.”

“I thought that was because I was learning how to handle them.”

“It was also because it was less personal to you.”

She cocked her head, her shoulders slumping. “Jack is pretty personal to me.”

“I am not being insulting. Of course, he is. Though he is less personal to you than...other things.”

“Other things? Such as?”

“Such as your own family. They are deeply personal. When Mother had visions of others, she was almost never bothered. But when her visions concerned her own family, she suffered greatly.”

Cate tried to imagine the poised woman struggling. She dealt with all facets of the supernatural with such ease, it was hard to believe she’d ever had any trouble.

“Was your mother always—“

“Yes,” Marcus said with a nod. “She came from a long line of seers dating back to the Oracle at Delphi.”

Cate slouched slightly in her seat. “Wow. I thought she was German.”

“Somewhere in her lineage, someone married a German. You are American, though your heritage is distinctly Scottish.”

“The Oracle at Delphi,” Cate repeated. She continued to be shocked by Anna’s acceptance of her, an unremarkable America with Scottish ancestry.

“She is quite a powerful clairvoyant.”

“I’ll bet,” Cate answered. “I really hope she can help me make sense of these visions I’m having.”

“I have no doubt she will. I have never known Mother to fail at anything.”

Cate polished off her brandy and set the glass on the coffee table before she rose. “I think I’ll go to bed.”

Marcus stood next to her. “Good night, Catherine.”

“Good night.” She offered him a fleeting smile before she left him behind. Her mind spun despite her desperate attempts to quiet it. The situation with Jack needed to be solved sooner rather than later. But where would they start? Would a trip to the past shed any light on the circumstances? Would a conversation with Amanda help?

She pressed her lips into a thin line as she pushed into her bedroom, finding Andrea turning back her covers.

“Good evening, Your Grace. All ready to turn in?”

“More than ready.”

“Long day?” Andrea asked as Cate sank into the chair at her vanity.

“Far too long of a day,” Cate said, letting out a deep sigh as Andrea pulled the brush through her hair. “Amanda’s arrival has really turned things upside-down.”

“That’s the woman claiming to be Mr. Reid’s wife,” Andrea asked.

“Not claiming. She is. He admitted it. He thought they were divorced, but she never filed. I really wonder if The Agency had anything to do with that.”

“It’s a good lead to follow,” Andrea said. “Did he say why he married her?”

“To protect her from a murder charge. But now, she claims he did it.”

“Do you believe there is any truth to that?”

Cate flicked her eyebrows up, glancing at her through the mirror. “That Jack is a murderer? No.”

“So, the woman is lying.”

“I think so.” Cate sank her chin into her palm. “I hope so.”

“If your gut says she is, she is, Your Grace. You are an excellent judge of character.”

Cate shifted her gaze to her own blue eyes. Was she? She didn’t feel like it lately. What if every decision she’d made up to this point had been wrong?

“All finished, Your Grace. Let’s get you into your comfy pjs.” Andrea stepped back and grinned at her.

Cate pulled herself from her pensiveness and forced herself to stand. Immediately, her knees wobbled and the room swirled around her. She took a stumbling step toward Andrea before she collapsed to the floor and her world went black.

CHAPTER 4



Cate's heart pounded as she raced through the halls of Dunhaven Castle. Fear gripped her so tightly, she had trouble breathing. She rounded the corner, staring at a set of double doors. Light gleamed from inside the room.

Her stomach clenched as she spotted them. Why was the hall so long? Time seemed to slow as she barreled toward the light. Worry tumbled through her mind, blurring her thoughts and forcing her to move faster.

Before she could reach the room, though, the image faded. She found herself falling through blackness until she finally hit bottom. The force pushed the air from her lungs.

She gasped for breath, her eyes going wide.

"It's all right, Your Grace. You're here with me, Andrea. You're safe."

Warm skin pressed against her hand as she fluttered her eyelashes, trying desperately to get her bearings.

Her breath came in ragged gasps as her eyes darted around the room. Andrea stroked her hair, still clutching her hand. "Deep breaths, Your Grace. That's it."

"Andrea?" her voice came out as a tired squeak.

"Yes, I'm right here. Conserve your strength. Would you like me to fetch His Grace?"

Cate tried to shake her head, but found herself too tired to do so. "No. I just...I can't move."

“His Grace warned me of this. Your attacks may leave you incapacitated. He says it’s nothing to worry about, though you must be cared for when it happens. I’m afraid I cannot lift you to carry you to the bed, but I know he can.”

“Please don’t leave,” Cate said. The fear she’d felt in her vision still twisted her stomach into a tight knot. She had no desire to be alone.

“All right, Your Grace. I will stay with you. Though, I shall still call for help.” Andrea wrangled her phone from her pocket and tapped the screen a few times before she smiled warmly at Cate.

“There, now His Grace will know.”

“It’s scary how fast you’ve become accustomed to technology.”

“I find it most convenient,” she said with a grin. “How are you feeling now?”

“Confused and exhausted.”

“Were you able to glean any additional details from the vision?”

Cate tried to pinch her eyebrows together, but even that effort seemed taxing. “I am here at Dunhaven. I’m running. But...”

“Yes?” Andrea asked before the doors burst open.

Marcus hurried across the room to Cate, kneeling at her side and pressing a hand against her cheek. “Well, at least your eyes are open.”

“Progress,” she said with a weak laugh.

“And she speaks,” he answered as he scooped her into his arms. “How long was she out?”

“About five minutes, Your Grace,” Andrea said as she trailed behind them, disappearing into the bathroom as Marcus laid Cate on the bed.

She returned with a wash basin and a cloth. After wringing it out, she placed the cool material onto Cate’s forehead.

“And have we made any progress with the vision itself?” Marcus asked.

Before Cate could answer, Anna, still tying her robe strings, rushed inside. “I’m here. What’s happened?”

“Catherine has had another vision, particularly taxing.”

Anna peered at her over Marcus’s shoulder. “Her eyes are open, that’s a good sign.”

“And she can speak,” Marcus said to his mother.

“Well, that’s quite a feat. Well done, Catherine.”

“Thank you,” Cate answered. “And, to answer your question, yes. I was telling Andrea that I’m here at Dunhaven and running. The first few times

I've had the vision, I assumed I was running away from something."

"But now?" Anna prodded.

"I'm running toward something, I think."

Anna eased onto the side of the bed, taking Cate's hand in hers. "Any idea what?"

"A room. It's in the next hall. I recognized the spot, but...there's nothing there. It's an empty bedroom."

"But in another time, it may not have been," Anna said. "With your time traveling, visions can come from any time."

"Right," Cate answered, defeat growing within her. She'd never be able to discern what these meant before the moment was upon her.

"Do not be distressed, Catherine," Anna said with a pat of her hand, "we will conquer this, too."

Cate tried to heave a sigh, finding the raising of her chest nearly impossible. "I just wish I could make more progress. Perhaps a visit to that room."

"We shall try it tomorrow," Anna said. "We should also practice more with your vision retrieval skills. Though we may wish to wait a day after this episode."

"I hate waiting."

Anna offered her an amused smile. "Are you always impatient?"

"Yes," Cate answered.

"No, she is not. Otherwise, she would not have married me," Marcus answered with a grin.

"Very true. One would need the patience of a saint to be married to Marcus," Anna said with a chuckle.

The small laugh she managed made her weary again. She struggled to keep her eyes open. "Was he a very trying child?"

"You have no idea," Anna said. "And quite a talented warlock almost from the start. I can remember him playing with fireballs even in his crib. He would entertain himself for hours."

Cate tried to imagine seeing a baby conjure the odd supernatural weapon, though she couldn't. And her exhaustion grew with every breath.

"But I will save those tales for another time. For now, you should rest," Anna said.

She hated to close her eyes, but she found it harder and harder to keep them open. When she opened them again, sunlight streamed through her

curtains, announcing the arrival of a new day. She yawned and stretched, working out the stiffness in her muscles. Judging by the way she'd woken up, it seemed she hadn't moved an inch all night. Probably another side effect of the attack she'd had.

Her mind turned back to the vision. What was in that bedroom in some time period that she was so intent on getting to?

She planned on visiting the room today, but she didn't hold out hope for finding any clues. But maybe her visions were pushing her to do just that. Maybe she could make some sense out of what they meant if she spent a little time there.

Andrea peeked into the room from the sitting room. "Good morning, Your Grace."

"Good morning, Andrea," Cate said with a smile.

"And how are you feeling this morning?"

"Much better, thank you. Some of those take a toll." Cate flung the covers back and swung her legs over the edge of the bed.

Andrea lifted her feet back onto the bed and covered her. "Yes, both His Grace and the dowager duchess told me you are to remain abed until one of them checks on you."

"Remain abed?" Cate repeated as Andrea fluffed the pillows behind her to sit up.

"Yes, Your Grace. And I am sorry, but I will not allow you to parade around until they've seen you."

"I'm hardly parading. Just trying to get dressed to go to breakfast."

"I have already rung for your breakfast to be brought here," Andrea answered. "And then after you've eaten and someone has assessed your condition today, you may be able to leave your bed."

Cate pressed her lips into a thin line as she arched an eyebrow. "I'm going to have to speak with Marcus about this. I'm not a child."

Andrea's lips curled at the corners. "Good luck. I have never known His Grace to back down from something like this."

Cate recalled the few times she'd tried to argue her case and come up against the brick wall that was Marcus Northcott. "You're right. It'll just earn me some sort of magical enchantment that will stop me from walking or leaving the bed."

Andrea burst into laughter. "I can imagine that, yes. And we wouldn't want that."

“No,” Cate said with a shake of her head. “So maybe I’ll let him believe he can dictate this.”

Andrea offered her a knowing glance. “Very wise, Your Grace.”

The door to her suite burst open, and Molly, looking much more rested and refreshed than she had last night, entered with a tray. “Good morning,” she said in her usual cheery tone.

“Good morning. I’m relegated to bed this morning after having been a little tired last night.”

“No problem, best to take care of your health.”

“And how are you this morning?” Cate asked her as she set the tray on the bed.

Molly offered her a warm smile. “Much better. You’re right, I was panicking. I think I need to just sit back and let things work themselves out. Jack and I had a conversation earlier and he explained some things.”

“Good,” Cate said with a bob of her head as she pushed the scrambled eggs around on her plate. “You two make a nice couple, you know?”

“Aw, I’m so glad you think so. I was a little worried about that.”

Cate screwed up her face as she sipped her orange juice. “Worried about what?”

Molly pressed her lips together as Andrea made herself scarce to allow them a private moment. She sank onto the edge of the bed, her features scrunching. “Well...I didn’t know how you’d feel about us dating. You know, two employees dating first of all—”

“Okay, first, you are *not* employees. You are friends. You’re practically family.”

“And second...I know you and Jack are good friends. I just...didn’t want you to think he was getting a bum deal.”

“Bum deal?” Cate exclaimed, letting her fork clatter onto her plate. “Molly, what are you saying?”

“Come on...I’m a down-on-my-luck divorcee whose first husband left her for another woman.”

“You live in a castle, so your luck has changed. Second, so your husband was an idiot, that’s not your fault. And now we know Jack is also a divorcee—or soon to be.”

Molly grinned at her. “We’re on equal footing now.”

Cate leaned forward to grab her hand. “Molly, in all seriousness, though, I’d never think that about you. I’m happy for you and Jack. I hope

this pesky business with Amanda is cleared up soon.”

“So do I. I...want to move on. I want to be happy again. Not that I need a man to be happy. I’ve been happy since I came here. What I mean is...I want to go back to not feeling like I’m upset over this relationship.”

“I don’t blame you. And I think you will very soon.”

Molly smiled at her as footsteps approached her bedroom. Anna entered, eyeing the situation before she set her gaze on Cate. “I see breakfast has arrived. How are you feeling?”

“Much, much better.”

“You haven’t eaten much,” Anna answered.

“Oh, I just started, and Molly and I have been talking.”

“I should get going before Mrs. Fraser sends a search party out for me. Take care, Cate. And thanks.” Molly patted her hand before she rose.

After she’d left the room, Anna eased into her place. “Ms. Williams seems a lovely woman, though a bit over-friendly.”

“Molly is very friendly. But we were friends before I came here, too.”

“Ah,” Anna answered, arching an eyebrow.

“I’m sorry, I know this must be confusing. I’m not from the 1800s,” Cate said with a wince.

“No, I gathered that, though you made a good show of it when we met. This is your time.”

Cate nodded as she sipped her juice. “Yes. And I used to be a college professor before I inherited Dunhaven Castle. Molly was the department secretary.”

“I see. One of the oddities of modern life is the unclear distinction of classes. Oh well. The important thing is you are feeling better. And you may be even stronger if you’ll just finish those eggs.”

Cate chuckled as she picked up her fork and stabbed at a few of them. “So, I was thinking I could visit the room in my visions after breakfast and—“

“Oh, that may be too early. You should rest.”

“Honestly, I feel fine.”

“But another attack could paralyze you, dear. We must tread carefully. Marcus said you have another mystery on your hands. Something to do with Mr. Reid?”

Cate slouched a little in the bed, unsure she wanted to discuss it with her mother-in-law. “Yes. He...is in a bit of trouble.”

“With murder, I understand. And a...pesky bride who won’t go away.”

“That about sums it up,” Cate answered as she piled the last of her eggs on her fork and popped them in her mouth. Sometimes Anna surprised her with how down-to-earth she was.

“Hmm, and Mr. Reid is unable to handle the woman himself?”

“I’m not sure there is any handling of Amanda. She seems...”

Anna raised her eyebrows, her lips still forming a slight frown. “Oh, one of those, is she?”

“Yes,” Cate said with a nod. “I’m afraid Jack will need some help with this.”

Before Anna could respond, the doors to Cate’s suite opened again. Marcus strode inside, sliding his phone into his pocket.

“Good morning, Catherine, Mother.”

Anna tilted her head to accept a kiss on the cheek from him. “Marcus. Finally. I was beginning to wonder if you had abandoned poor Catherine.”

“Certainly not,” he answered as he skirted the bed and eased onto the other side, reaching for Cate’s hand.

“Really, I’m fine. There’s no need for all this fuss.”

“I shall let Mother be the decider of that.”

“She is doing quite well, though concern from her husband is not unwarranted.”

Marcus slid his eyes sideways to eye the woman. “Well, I am concerned, though I shall leave her in your capable hands.”

“Leave?” This time the frown on Anna’s face was unmistakable. “What are you saying?”

“Something has come up. It must be attended to immediately. There is no way around it.”

“Something? Or Celine?” Anna’s voice sounded venomous as she spat out the woman’s name.

“Something,” Marcus insisted.

“And is this something in Maine?”

“Yes,” he answered.

Cate’s eyes darted back and forth between the two of them as the argument unfolded. She tried to think of a way to interject and stop it, but nothing came to mind.

“Something has come up in Maine and it doesn't involve Celine? Is this what you’d like me to believe?”

Marcus dropped Cate's hand and rose from his perch on the bed. "Mother, of course it involves her. But it involves me, too. There is no avoiding it."

"Isn't there?" The iciness in her voice chilled Cate to the bone.

He clasped his hands behind his back, his features twisting with annoyance. "Simply put, no. Dominique has crawled from under whatever chateau she's been carousing in and is causing an exceptional amount of trouble. Trouble that could ruin things for me, too."

"I see." Anna frowned, her eyelashes fluttering. "Why you involved yourself in the lives of these people is beyond me."

"You know very well Father's role in The Order was—"

"Not what yours is. I shall remind you of that." Anna kept her eyes trained in space, refusing to look at him.

"It makes no matter now. The cards have been dealt, and I must make the best play for myself."

"Fine. We shall be fine. Just remember your wife here, alone, ill, and investigating a murder on behalf of her estate manager."

"Catherine is very capable. And she is not alone. She has you."

"She needs her loving husband here to dote on her. Not an ocean away running about with that woman and all the trouble she brings."

"Really, it's okay," Cate said with a pat of Anna's hand. "I understand. Damien and I are good friends. And I know they're doing their best over there, but Marcus is an exceptional warlock. His help is invaluable."

Anna leaned closer to her. "Perhaps, dear, but his duty is to you. Not her."

"Yes, but...I don't want him to stay out of duty."

"Well, it appears he is staying out of nothing because he is not staying." Anna crossed her arms, her lips tugging into a deep grimace.

"That is untrue. If I had my druthers, I would stay at Catherine's side always. Yet, if I do not take care of this...problem with Dominique, I will be unable to be at Catherine's side at all."

Cate drew her chin back to her chest at the words. "Is it really that serious in Maine?"

"I'm afraid it is. Dominique is not a woman to be trifled with."

"Well, I hope you get it sorted out soon. Keep me informed and if there's anything I can do..."

“It is far too dangerous for you in Maine, Catherine. It is best that you stay here under Mother’s watchful eye.”

“Mother’s watchful eye?” Anna asked. “If you expect me to report to you on Catherine’s behavior, don’t. As far as I am concerned, Catherine can have ten suitors lined at her door the moment you leave, and I will not say a word.”

“That is not at all what I meant,” Marcus answered. “And I trust Catherine will not do that. As she may trust with great confidence that my eye is not straying to any other woman.”

“I don’t have any suitors lined up,” she said with a grin.

“No, likely not. Catherine is too busy solving crimes and piecing together her visions for that. A fact that you are counting on whilst you disappear to the wilds of America to aid Celine in her crusade against her cousin.”

Marcus heaved a sigh as the argument raged on. “Mother, I have grown weary of this. There is nothing I can do. The Order causes chaos for both of us. It is in our best interest to work together.”

“Well, since nothing I say matters, then I suppose you should be on your way. Goodbye, Marcus.”

“Mother—“

“Goodbye,” she said with a wave of her hand.

He grumbled as he shot a glance at Cate. She lifted a shoulder and offered him a demure smile.

“Might I have a private word with my wife before I leave?”

Anna’s annoyance increased, and she curled her fingers into fists. “Fine. Catherine, do not put up with anything from him. You have my permission to slap him if needed.”

“Thank you,” Cate said with a demure smile as the woman rose and strode from the room. She shot Marcus a wince. “You’re in trouble.”

“Always,” he said with a grumble to his voice.

Cate couldn’t suppress a giggle at the words. “Well, unfortunately, it sounds like there isn’t much to be done about it. Things sound...dangerous in Maine.”

“They are. Dominique is always a problem.”

“Who is Dominique?” Cate asked.

“Celine’s cousin. While you’d know it from looking at her as they are nearly identical, you’d never believe it. She was one of the most dangerous,

evil women on this planet. If she has resurfaced, it spells trouble, not only for your friends across the pond but for me, too.”

“Well, then you should go and help them and you.”

“I shall stay in contact. You should attend to your own health, though.”

“I will. Your mother and I have a plan. And I’ll be busy with Jack’s problem. But if you need anything...”

“I won’t. As I said, it is far too dangerous in Maine, Catherine. If any problems crop up with The Agency, though, let me know at once.”

“I think you have enough on your plate—“

“Let me know at once.” His dark eyes bore into her.

“Okay,” she agreed. “Good luck.”

“Thank you, dear. I shall return as soon as I am able.” He kissed her cheek before he strode from the room.

She stared after him, a growing knot forming in her stomach. Was the trouble in Maine merely a distraction? And would it cost her Marcus, the only man who seemed able to help her fight the shadowy network of villains she was up against?

CHAPTER 5



Cate threw back the covers before her mind could sink any further into worry.

“What’s this?” Anna’s voice said as she hurried toward her. “Up and about?”

“I can’t sit in bed all day.”

“You can whilst you have a cup of tea. Then we shall tackle the day.” Anna plopped on the edge of Cate’s bed and held the covers up for her to slide under again.

“You’re going to spoil me with all this lounging around,” Cate said as she complied.

“As it should be. You are a duchess, Catherine. Duchesses should be spoiled.”

Cate grinned at her as Molly arrived with the tea and took her breakfast tray. She wondered how badly Anna would take it when she and Marcus divorced.

Anna poured the tea and handed her a cup balanced on a saucer. “Duchesses also should be cared for by their husbands. Oh, I am sorry, dear. I feel I have failed as a mother.”

Cate sipped her tea, settling the cup in the saucer again as her eyebrows pinched. “Why would you say that?”

“My son has made some questionable choices in life and just when I thought he had finally made a turn for the better, I see he is pulled right back into that nonsense in Maine.”

“Sadly, I think Marcus’s fate is tied to Celine’s.”

“Is it?” Anna said after a sip of her tea. “If he hadn’t been so damned foolish in his younger years, perhaps it would not have been.”

“But then we wouldn’t have met,” Cate countered.

Anna flicked her gaze up from the liquid in her cup. “Really? Do tell. I thought you met at a dinner party?”

“Well, actually, we did. A dinner party in the seventeen hundreds right here at Dunhaven Castle. Jack and I were time-traveling to investigate a problem with the time rips. Douglas, my ancestor, was good friends with Grayson Buckley. He and Celine were visiting. And Marcus arrived, intent on staking his claim on her.”

Anna drew her lips into a thin line. “Why, I will never know.”

“Well, anyway, at that very dinner party, Marcus and I were seated together. So, if it hadn’t been for Celine, we may never have known each other.”

“It does not make up for the trouble she has caused. She always was trouble. Even as a young woman.”

“From what Damien tells me, trouble finds her.”

“Oh, rubbish. She invites it with her foolishness.”

Cate winced, slouching down in the bed. “Do you feel the same way about me? I’ve brought quite a bit of trouble upon myself.”

“Certainly not. You have merely been a victim of the circumstances surrounding you. And you also actively fight against them. You are quite interested in learning, too. *She* is content to sit back and allow others to help her.”

Cate shifted on the mattress. Celine seemed proactive to her, but she didn’t want to argue with her mother-in-law. Instead, she offered her a slight smile. “I do like to learn.”

Anna’s expression softened into a grin. “I know. I am certain it is one of the many reasons Marcus fell in love with you.”

The words brought heat to Cate’s face. She was fairly certain her husband didn’t love her.

“I’ve made you blush. Though I imagine you’ll turn redder if I admit your beauty is certainly a reason he is enamored.”

Cate huffed out a chuckle. “Yes, I’ll be red as lobster soon.”

“You already are,” Anna said with a giggle. “But that is just one of the things that makes you so sweet as a daughter-in-law.”

The knot in Cate's stomach twisted tighter. She would really miss Anna. "Well, I couldn't have gotten luckier with a mother-in-law. Marcus didn't tell me you lived at Rosenberg when we traveled there until the last minute. I was convinced you would hate me."

"But nothing could be further from the truth." She patted Cate's hand as she set her empty teacup aside. "Now, I think we should discuss your visions a bit more."

"I'd love to," Cate said as she offloaded her cup and saucer onto the tray. "I have a question, if that's okay."

Anna grinned at her. "Certainly."

"Why am I having them so suddenly? I've never suffered from anything like this before."

"You have. You admitted to dreaming about the death of your parents."

Cate flicked her gaze to her lap with a sigh. "Yes, but I wasn't having waking visions or collapsing."

"I'm afraid Marcus is to blame for that," she answered.

Cate raised her eyes to her mother-in-law, her brow furrowed.

"You have exchanged blood, haven't you?"

Cate bobbed her head. "Yes, we did."

"Marcus's blood is quite powerful. It has enhanced an ability that was once contained to your dreams."

Cate batted her eyelashes as she tried to process it. "Wow."

"Now, shall we talk more about the visions that are disturbing you?" Anna asked.

"So far, these ones are still beating me. My reactions are so extreme."

"Mmm, I suspect they are deeply personal and negative."

Cate furrowed her brow. What was deeply personal? Could it have to do with her parents?

"When I have had such extreme reactions as this, they always had to do with Marcus and something terrible."

Cate's heart thudded against her ribs as she tried to determine who the memory may pertain to. Was it Molly or Jack? Her parents? Who was causing this much consternation?

"Hmm," she murmured as she bit her lower lip. "Maybe it's something to do with my parents. I don't know who else would produce this extreme of a reaction. Jack? We're close friends."

“Mm, I doubt it,” Anna said. “While I’m certain your concern for Mr. Reid runs as deep as it does for any of your other friends, it is not the same as family.”

“So, my parents then. Which points us to the past because they have been dead for many years. Actually, this makes sense. The Agency orchestrated their car crash.”

Anna fluttered her eyelashes at the statement but offered no response.

“You don’t agree,” Cate said.

“I don’t. But I am not an authority on everything, dear, so I could be wrong.”

“Then who?” Cate said with a shrug.

“We shall take the necessary steps to find out,” Anna answered with a pat of her hand. “But only safely. I will not allow you to endanger yourself.”

“But if it helps us...or helps whoever this vision is about—”

“It does us no good if you are harmed. And believe me, I am just as worried about who this vision may concern. But endangering yourself will do us no good at all.”

Cate’s shoulders slumped. “I just feel like I’m not making any progress. I keep seeing these visions of running through the castle and what’s worse is—”

Her voice cut off as emotion choked her, leaving a lump in her throat.

“Take your time, darling,” Anna said with a rub of her hand. “Get it all out. It will help.”

Cate licked her lips as tears burned her eyes. “The feelings I have are so intense during these visions.”

“That’s what makes them exhausting,” Anna said.

“So, it’s normal?”

“The intense emotions? Yes. Think of it like a dream. Emotions are always more vivid in your dreams than you experience in real life in most cases.”

“But dreams aren’t exhausting.”

“Aren’t they? You’ve never woken up in a cold sweat with your heart pounding?”

Cate let her gaze fall to her lap. “Okay, yes. But this is...an entirely different level. I mean... the fear...the panic I feel...it’s...overwhelming.

Even now, I could just..." The tears brimmed again and a few trickled onto her cheek.

Anna wrapped Cate in her arms and stroked her hair. "There, there, Catherine. Just let it all out. This has been building in you for quite some time, and you need to release it."

"Why am I so panicked? That question haunts me every day. What is happening in my future that makes me feel this way?"

"It could be anything, darling. That's what makes this so tricky."

Cate pulled back from her, searching her mother-in-law's eyes. "You have some clue. There's something you're not saying."

"Not really. I haven't any idea what this is about. And to speculate may do more harm than good."

"What do you mean? How could it hurt if you tell me what you're thinking?"

"Simple. It could make you even more upset in the present. The last thing we need is your energy being drained by emotions spent on something I've said that is absolutely untrue."

Cate heaved a shaky sigh before she sniffled. "It's driving me crazy, though, and I'd really like to hear some ideas so my mind has something more to dwell on than the panic."

"Your mind should not be dwelling on this or on the panic," Anna answered.

"I can't stop thinking about it. I have never experienced this level of emotion before. What is happening, and who is it happening to?"

"Yes, I know how difficult this is. I can recall many an intense vision that struck fear into my heart." She adjusted the covers around Cate. "But do you know what always helps?"

"Figuring out what's going on?" Cate asked.

Anna shook her head with a smile. "No. A happy vision. It always soothes me."

Cate offered her a weak smile. "I don't think—"

"Try. You have one, remember? You found a future memory that soothes you. Use it."

Cate settled back in the pillows with a sigh before she flicked her eyes closed.

"Now," Anna said, "there is the tricky part. Before, we used the rose to induce it, but you must find a way to immerse yourself in it without a prop."

Cate's eyebrows pinched together at the words.

"If you are wondering why, it is because these situations will often crop up at the worst moments. You cannot carry the rose about wherever you go."

"That makes sense." Cate tried to clear her mind and allow the future memory she sought to fill up the empty space.

Random thoughts darted across, though. She desperately tried to remove them, wading through concerns about the murder investigation, her visions, Marcus in Maine, Molly's precarious relationship with Jack...

With a sigh, she flicked her eyes open, her fingers curling into fists. "I can't find it."

"You're not trying."

"I am trying!" Cate exclaimed. "The problem is I've got a thousand other things floating through my mind and I can't--"

"You will always have thousands of things floating through your mind. You must push past them. You must learn, Catherine. What I am asking of you is not impossible. You are not a special case who cannot achieve this."

"I sure feel like it at the moment."

"I am sorry to inform you that as special as you are to Marcus, and me, and the people in this castle, in the grand scheme of things, you are just an ordinary, run-of-the-mill clairvoyant with the same problems as all of the rest of us."

"Okay," Cate said with a sigh. "Fine. Can you at least give me some tips?"

"Hmm, well, I'll try." Anna stared into space, her eyebrows pinching. "It's been a long time, though I do recall some terrible visions of Marcus. But there was always one that calmed me. And I had quite an easy time retrieving it."

Cate settled back, letting her shoulders relax as Anna spoke about her experiences. "That must be terrible. I can't imagine having a vision of a child experiencing something awful."

Anna offered her a soft smile. "Well, there have been many with Marcus of that nature. One vision always helped me because it filled me with so much hope and reassured me that everything would be okay every time I called it up. Now...how did I do that? Well, it was quite easy as it was tied to a very special moment for me."

“What moment?” Heat rose in Cate’s cheeks as she winced. “Oh, I’m sorry. I don’t mean to pry.”

Anna slid a lock of Cate’s hair behind her ear. “You’re not, darling. The moment that brought me the lovely vision that always brings me comfort is the moment I first held Marcus as a baby. I’m certain that’s why I had such an easy time recalling it.”

Cate slouched further under the covers. “That makes sense.”

“Yes. All I need to do is recall the moment that I held Marcus, and I am able to find that vision. It brings me great comfort in all my times of sorrow.”

Cate smiled at her. “It must be a wonderful vision.”

Anna arched an eyebrow and grinned at her. “Yes, dear, it is. Do you want to know what it is?”

Cate’s features twisted as she tried to decide which answer was the best to give. She wanted to know, but she didn’t want to pry. “If you don’t mind sharing it, I’d love to hear it.”

“I do not mind at all. When I first touched Marcus’s soft skin and his tiny fingers curled around mine, I had the most glorious vision of a woman who would change his life and mine. A woman who would always make certain her family was protected and who would fight by his side.”

Cate forced a smile on her face as her mind worked overtime. If Anna had seen Celine in her vision, why did she dislike her so much?

Anna grabbed Cate’s hands and squeezed. “That woman was you, Catherine.”

Heat washed over Cate again as the smile faded from her face, replaced by confusion as she stared up at her mother-in-law.

Cate swallowed hard, still trying to acclimate to the news. “Me?”

“Yes, dear. You. I will never forget that moment. Such a lovely, comforting vision. He spent so much time on that other woman. So frustrating, but I knew you’d be along, dear. I could hardly contain my excitement when Marcus brought you to the palace.”

Cate recalled the moment. Anna had been kind and gracious. She’d been eager to spend time with Cate and had quickly dispelled the notion that she was displeased with Marcus’s choice. Had her vision been the reason?

“Oh, I could have danced with joy when you arrived.”

Cate offered her a nervous smile. Their marriage was fake. And visions were often misleading. Why had Anna associated so much peace with this one, she wondered?

“Maybe I can try your method of recalling the moment associated with the rose. Maybe that will trigger my future memory.”

“It may. Perhaps the night Marcus gave you that rose is special to you for some reason.”

Cate’s stomach tightened as she wondered about that, but she closed her eyes and tried to recall the evening in the garden at Rosenberg. The colors of the sunset had been so vibrant and so beautiful.

The breeze had been cool on her skin. She’d marveled at the unique color of the roses amidst the lovely gardens overlooking the rolling hills of the German landscape.

She’d turned to find Marcus offering her a rose. The moment tugged the corners of her lips up, and she found herself floating for a moment before she landed in her suite at Dunhaven Castle.

Her lips formed a fuller smile. She had found it. She’d navigated to her comforting vision. She allowed herself to stay there for a moment, wrapped in the warmth of the scene despite her questions about it.

She finally let it slip away as her eyes fluttered open.

“Well, it looks like you found it...or one,” Anna said.

“I did,” Cate said as she beamed. “I found it.”

“Good. Let’s try again, shall we?”

“Go to the memory again?”

Anna nodded. “Yes. It’s taking a bit of an effort to get you there. You need to be able to recall that very quickly, no matter what’s happening around you. So, we’ll keep practicing with it until it gets easier and easier for you.”

Cate bobbed her head up and down as she settled back into her pillows again. “All right. I’ll try again.”

She swallowed hard as she tried to relax. This time, questions poured into her mind over the happy future memory Anna used to comfort herself. She shoved them away, trying to recall that evening at Rosenberg Palace.

Her mind fought to bring back the vivid imagery it had just so easily captured moments ago. This time, it became fraught with questions and the lovely moment skittered, fuzzy and unclear.

Her eyebrows pinched together as she fought for control of her own mind. Before she knew it, she stood in her room at Dunhaven Castle. But this wasn't the right memory.

A shriek filled the air and sent her racing into the hall. She sprinted and skidded around the corner, the set of double doors coming into view.

This was the negative vision she'd been dreading, the one that left her frozen with fear. How had she gotten here? And would she soon find out what she was racing toward?

CHAPTER 6



Cate struggled to control her fear as she continued to race toward the double doors at the end of the hall. Her heart pounded hard against her ribs, and her knees wobbled as she pushed herself to race forward.

Her breath caught in her throat where a lump formed. Tears clouded her vision, but she pressed forward. She shouted something, but the vision began to fade before she could make out what she'd said.

Her eyes fluttered open again, and she found herself shaking uncontrollably under her covers.

"Catherine," Anna called to her, holding her hands, "Catherine, you are safe. You are in your bed."

But Cate couldn't stop shaking, despite it exhausting her. The fear still bubbled inside her, squashing out everything else.

Her features twisted as tears spilled down her cheeks.

"Your Grace, what shall I do?" Andrea asked Anna as she hurried into the room.

"Put another blanket on her and hold her tightly. She is in shock. Her vision must have gone to the negative one."

Andrea bobbed her head up and down as she hurried to fetch another blanket. She returned moments later and threw it over Cate before she climbed onto the bed next to her and pressed it around her.

"Catherine," Anna said, cupping her face as she sobbed, "you are all right. It was a vision, it is gone."

Tears continued to spill down her face, though her shaking eased. She flicked her glassy eyes up to Anna, her lower lip trembling. "Scared."

"I know. You are very frightened. Panicked, in fact. But the vision is gone now. Take a few deep breaths and calm yourself."

Cate tried to suck in breaths, but her chest felt like a vice gripped it.

"Deeper," Anna said. "Let your muscles relax."

Cate tried to follow the advice, still finding her fingers curled tightly into fists.

"Close your eyes," Anna tried.

Cate shook her head. "Afraid."

"Yes, I know you are. Afraid to slip back into that vision. But I will talk you through it. Listen to my voice, stay with my voice."

Anxiety gripped her as she considered following Anna's instructions. What if she slipped back into that awful moment? She couldn't handle it right now. She couldn't live with that fear and panic again.

But even when she was awake, the fear lingered, making it impossible for her to relax. Her muscles ached from holding them so taut.

After a few blinks, she finally let her eyes slide closed.

"Good, Catherine," Anna said. "Now, listen to my voice. Let my voice be the guide. It is calling you to a quiet place where you feel safe. You can begin to relax there. First, your toes, then your entire foot."

Cate focused her energy on relaxing her toes that had curled tightly. She found herself able to relax as Anna moved on to relaxing the lower part of her legs. She worked her way up until Cate finally found herself able to breathe easier and her hands no longer clenched in fists.

As she sucked in deep breaths, no longer trembling, she flicked her eyes open. "That was scary."

"I'm certain it was. This is quite a terrible one, isn't it?"

Cate nodded as she tried to sit up but found herself stopped by Anna. "No, dear, not yet. Let's take a few more moments, shall we?"

"It seems to be getting worse."

"I am unsurprised by this. Have you any additional information about it?"

The tears stung Cate's eyes again as she shook her head. "No. Same thing over and over. I'm running to those double doors at the end of the hall. And I'm frightened, panicked. My heart is racing, there's a lump in my throat."

Anna stroked her hair as she shot a glance at Andrea. "Something very personal, indeed."

"But what? That bedroom is empty. Could it be an ancestor?"

Anna pressed her lips together in a thin line. "Let us not worry about that, shall we?"

Cate's forehead crinkled. "But I am. My mind keeps searching for some reason this is affecting me so deeply. Maybe it would help me to know or figure something out. I wonder if I could find out who that bedroom belonged to in the past."

Anna cupped her cheeks in her hands. "I admire your spirit, but, Catherine, you must allow your mind to relax. Please do not dwell on it."

Cate stared at her, noting the emotion clouding her eyes. "There's something you aren't saying, isn't there?"

"No, dear. I know no more than you."

"But you have some guess. Whenever I mention a potential person, you don't say anything. Because you disagree."

Anna offered her a half-smile. "You are quite astute, Catherine. I have a suspicion, yes. But it is merely that. A suspicion. And I fear, again, that it may do more harm than good."

"I don't see how. This is already doing quite a bit of harm."

"You need a break from it. We shall visit the room later today, until then, I recommend you remain abed and work on something else. There is another matter that is drawing your attention, is there not?"

"Yes," Cate answered with a nod, "I do need to work on Jack's little problem."

"Then I would suggest you do that. Andrea can bring you whatever you need. I shall leave you to it and check later. Andrea, please stay with Her Grace, though, in case she should need something or suffer another spell."

"Yes, Your Grace," Andrea said with a nod as she finally left Cate's side and rose to stand. "What may I bring you?"

"My laptop for now, thanks," Cate said as she finally pushed herself up to sit.

"I will fetch it immediately," Andrea said with a bob of her head as she hurried from the room.

Cate blew out a long breath as she settled back in her pillows. "I am quite the invalid these days."

“You are not an invalid,” Anna answered, her expression reassuring. “But I will keep a watchful eye on your health whilst my son wanders the globe worrying over other things.”

Cate tilted her head, offering her mother-in-law a half-smile. “I completely understand the need for him to leave.”

“That makes one of us.”

Cate reached out to take Anna’s hand in hers, ready to provide comfort rather than receive it. “I trust him. If he thinks he needs to be in Maine, then he needs to be in Maine.”

Anna puckered her lips. “You have more patience with him than I have, Catherine.”

“I understand that you don’t like Celine—”

“That is an understatement.”

“But that doesn’t mean their goals don’t sometimes align.”

Anna sucked in a breath. “You are a saint, Catherine. And this is why you make the perfect wife for Marcus. But I swear to you if he ever hurts you, I will kill him myself.”

Cate crinkled her brow. “Can he die?”

“Oh, yes, he can,” she said with a bob of her head. “Difficult, yes. Impossible, no.”

Cate chuckled at the statement as Andrea arrived with her laptop. “On that note, I will thank you for your support and let you go enjoy your day while I do some quiet work.”

“Good luck with it. I shall check on you in a bit.” Anna wagged a finger at her as she rose. “And do *not* try to visit that room. Andrea, keep an eye on her.”

“I will not let her out of my sight, Your Grace.”

Anna kissed Cate’s cheek before she strode from the room.

Cate shifted her gaze to Andrea who stood at the edge of the bed. “You really don’t have to watch me, Andrea.”

“I do, Your Grace. You are a wily one.” Andrea offered her a wink.

“I’m not that wily. And I promise to behave.”

Andrea crossed the room and tugged an armchair closer to Cate’s bed. “And I shall be here ensuring that is true.”

Cate heaved a sigh as she dragged her laptop onto her lap. “Why don’t you go find a book or maybe your laptop to watch a movie. I feel badly that you’re just sitting there staring at me.”

“I have a book, Your Grace. As soon as I am certain you are settled, I shall fetch it.”

Cate patted the covers on either side of her. “I am settled. I’m going to research this murder. So, please feel free to get your book.”

As Andrea disappeared from the room, Cate considered shifting the laptop from her lap and making a run for it. She wanted to take a peek into the room just to settle her mind.

Before she could make a move, Andrea returned. “Everything all right, Your Grace?”

“Yes,” Cate said with a nod as she opened her laptop. “That was quick.”

“I always keep a book in your sitting room for just such an occasion.”

“Oh?”

“Yes. I was not about to go back to my room and give you the chance to escape.” Andrea plopped into the chair and offered her a grin.

“Escape?” Cate said, her voice incredulous. “Me?”

“You, Your Grace. His Grace has informed me of how strong-willed you are. He has made it quite clear as has the dowager duchess that you are to always be protected, even from yourself.”

“Even from myself, huh?” Cate shifted in the bed with a shake of her head. “You really picked the wrong family to be a ladies’ maid in.”

“On the contrary, Your Grace. I have grown very fond of you, and His Grace has been quite generous to me.”

“So, he pays you well to make sure I can’t escape, huh?”

Andrea opened her book as she grinned at her. “I have no complaints. Now, if there is anything else I can bring you, just let me know, otherwise, I shall be here reading quietly.”

“Thank you.” Cate focused on her laptop and pulled up a search page. She tapped her keys as she typed in a search related to the murder. A variety of results populated on her page.

She pursued them before she picked an article. The title blared in bold letters at the top of the page. *Tragic Night at Regency Grand: Local Man Found Dead*

Cate stared at the picture of the ritzy hotel before she dove into the article.

In a shocking turn of events, a night of luxury turned deadly at the prestigious Regency Grand Hotel. Local businessman, David Hensley, was

found dead outside of the hotels' opulent ballroom late last night. Sources say Hensley was involved in a heated argument at the bar where his girlfriend, Amanda Greene, worked earlier that evening.

Police were called to the scene after hotel guests reported a commotion. Upon their arrival, they discovered Hensley's lifeless body and a visibly distressed Greene nearby. The circumstances of Hensley's death are still under investigation, but early reports suggest foul play.

Hotel staff and guests expressed their disbelief and horror at such a tragedy occurring in what is considered one of the city's safest and most prestigious locations. The Regency Grand's management has assured their continued cooperation with authorities as they piece together the events of this tragic night.

Cate frowned at the article. It gave her no more information than she had so far, but at least it didn't mention Jack. She wondered how many witnesses were involved. Could they get their names or find any of them? Certainly, they could find them in the past.

What would they say?

She chewed her lower lip as her mind picked apart the details of the article. She drummed her fingers against her thigh, wishing she had a pen and notepad. She couldn't get up to get one, and she hated to disturb Andrea.

"Something wrong, Your Grace?"

"I'm so sorry," Cate said, raising her eyes to her ladies' maid. "I need a pen and notepad. I'd like to make some notes."

"Of course, Your Grace," Andrea said as she set her book aside and scurried from the room.

Cate re-read the article as she waited for the materials.

Andrea returned with them quickly. "Anything else?"

"No, thank you so much, and I'm sorry to disturb you."

"It's no problem at all," Andrea said as she settled into her chair and opened her book again.

Cate settled back into her pillows as she wrote the questions filling her mind. Who was David Hensley? Who were the so-called witnesses who had alerted police? And how had he died?

The article gave scant details, but it didn't mention Jack. She didn't know if that was a good thing or a bad thing.

She returned to the search results and clicked on the second article entitled *Murder at the Regency Grand*. The sub-headline indicated that a bartender had been released without any charges.

She skimmed the article and discovered that the bartender in question was Amanda. After being questioned by police, she was released and cleared of any involvement due to an undisclosed alibi.

Cate's heart skipped a beat. Was Jack her alibi?

She jotted a note about it on her notepad along with the question.

The article continued, stating the police did not comment on whether they had any other suspects in the case.

The lack of charges, according to the journalist, fueled speculation and rumor in a case that gripped the city. Police had not yet ruled out any motives, though friends described Hensley as a charismatic, well-liked individual. The suggestion that he had some tumultuous relationships and business rivalries that could have led to the crime topped the list of theories.

Cate scrawled *business rivalries* across her paper with a question mark as she puckered her lips. What sort of business was David Hensley in, she wondered.

Maybe Jack would know the answer.

She moved on to a third article. Dated a year after the murder, it detailed the still-unsolved mystery. She perused the short write-up.

A year has passed since the unsolved murder of David Hensley at the Regency Grand Hotel, and the case remains as mysterious as ever. Despite extensive investigations, police have yet to bring charges against anyone, leaving the case cold and the city's residents with more questions than answers.

Several theories have emerged over the past year. Some believe Hensley's death was connected to his business ventures, possibly a deal gone wrong, while others insisted it was a crime of passion. Amanda Greene, Hensley's girlfriend at the time and the initial person of interest, has tried to move on, but the cloud of suspicion seems inescapable.

Cate paused at the line. How had she tried to move on? Was it because of her marriage to Jack that the journalist had suggested this?

The article went on to say that the hotel had seen a downturn in business after the crime with guests stating that they were unable to shake the association with the unsolved crime. It ended with the burning question: will justice ever be served?

A shiver snaked down Cate's spine as she worried it was about to be served with Jack's head on a platter.

"Everything all right, Your Grace?" Andrea asked.

Cate pulled her eyes from space and focused them on her ladies' maid. "Yes, just...more questions than answers."

Andrea closed her book. "You're researching the murder?"

"Yes," Cate answered. "It's been unsolved for a while. It's a cold case."

"Good thing you have the ability to return to when it wasn't."

Cate smiled at her. "I like the way you think, Andrea."

Andrea offered her a coy grin. "Yes, I know. I believe this is why His Grace felt us a good match for lady and ladies' maid."

Her mind wandered back to meeting Andrea in the fifties. Marcus had then brought the woman along to several other time periods. Her attitude toward time travel rivaled Cate's. She was open to every opportunity to be of service no matter the era.

"I wonder if it's possible to just go back and witness the crime," Cate said, her eyes narrowing as she chewed her lower lip.

"Witnessing is one thing, proving is another," Andrea answered.

Cate heaved a sigh. "You're right. Although at least we'd know who we were aiming for."

"Good point. However, you may also become a target."

Cate wrinkled her nose. "You're right. We have to figure something out, though."

"I'm certain you will," Andrea answered as a knock sounded at the door.

Her ladies' maid rose and scurried to the suite's double doors. A moment later, Jack appeared in her room with Andrea trailing behind him.

"Hi, not feeling well?" His features looked ashen. She imagined he wasn't having the best day given his wife's arrival.

"I'm fine, I'm not sick."

"Oh? I beg to differ. Mrs. Fraser has a pot of her famous chicken soup on after Anna summoned the staff to inform them you are not to be disturbed as you are unwell."

Cate gave him an awkward smile. "Sorry. She means well."

"She's terrifying. I'm afraid I might get my head chopped off if she finds out I'm here."

"She said it was okay to investigate the murder. And I need your help with that, so you're not disturbing me."

Jack glanced at Andrea before he focused on Cate again. "Uh..."

"Andrea's fine. She's been helping me with both the investigation and my other problem."

"More visions?"

Cate nodded. "This is why I'm in bed. They've been paralyzing."

Her shoulders slumped as the fear she felt during them welled inside her.

Jack eased onto the edge of her bed with a shake of his head. "Oh, Cate, I'm so sorry. Maybe it's best if I—"

"Don't say if you deal with Amanda on your own, because it's not. I need a distraction from whatever is causing these visions. If I don't, I'll go crazy. Or end up locked inside my own head."

"I don't know if that's true, Cate. Maybe your visions are this bad because you're worried about this."

Cate shook her head. "No, Anna says they are this bad because it's about something personal. She suggested I focus on the murder case to keep my mind from getting stuck on the visions."

Jack grumbled as he shot a glance sideways. "A murder case to distract. What kind of lives are we leading?"

"Interesting ones. I just wish I knew what personal thing has me so upset."

"Maybe it's something to do with someone trying to hurt you. That's pretty personal."

"Maybe. But I'm not in danger in the visions. I'm...running toward something, not away from it."

Jack rubbed his chin as he considered it. "How certain are you about that?"

"Very," she answered. "I've been through it enough times to know that I'm definitely running toward something. It's a room in this castle. I don't know why, but I'm trying to get there as quickly as possible."

"How do you know this?"

“I just...do. It’s odd, this thing I have. There are just details that you know, sort of like in a dream.”

Jack remained silent for a moment before he shook his head. “What if we tried to go to that room?”

Cate let her gaze fall to her lap. “I plan on it, but not yet.”

“Not yet? Cate, why not?” Jack questioned.

She chewed her lower lip, tears forming in her eyes as she flicked them up to his. “Because I’m afraid it might kill me.”

CHAPTER 7



Silence stretched between Cate and Jack after her ominous statement. Jack's wide eyes spoke volumes as he stared at her, his features ashen. "Cate..."

"I'm not..." She shook her head. "I'm being a little theatrical."

"I don't think you are. Cate, I've never known you to overflow circumstances."

She eyed him with a shrug. "I mean...this isn't easy. But...I don't think it'll actually kill me. I just...the emotions I feel are so raw, it's hard. Last night I couldn't move much after the vision, which is why I'm in bed today."

"This is insane." Jack sprang from the bed and paced the floor. "And they don't have any suggestions on how to fix this?"

"It's an odd thing, and it's just going to take time to learn how to deal with it. I'm already learning, but this is just a tough one. Anna is going to take me to the room later, but I don't want to go now because if I have that vision again..."

"I understand. As much as you want answers, you must be dreading them."

Cate nodded in a silent response to his statement. "So, instead, let's focus on something else."

Jack rolled his eyes. "Me. And my trouble, I suppose."

"That's what I was doing, yes." Cate waved the notepad in the air. "I actually looked up a few articles and took some notes, but I may need help

making sense of them.”

Jack collapsed on the edge of the bed with a sigh. “I suppose in the interest of your health, we’ll have to talk about this.”

“I’m sorry. I know this can’t be easy, but the sooner we solve it, the sooner things will get back to normal,” Cate said.

Jack scrubbed his face with his hands before he nodded. “I suppose so.”

“Actually, we can put it off for a minute while I poke my nose into your business with Molly. Have you spoken with her?”

“This morning. I tried to make her understand. I think she does.”

“Did you tell her the entire story?”

“The whole sordid thing. She knows, at least, that there’s no romance between Amanda and me. Never was and never will be. I honestly thought we were divorced.” Jack leapt to his feet again, his fingers curled into fists. “I can’t believe she never filed.”

“It does seem opportunistic,” Cate said. “Like she was holding on to this in case she ever needed it.”

“I don’t understand it. I asked over and over. Why, Amanda?”

“What did she say?” Cate asked.

Jack shrugged and shook his head. “Nothing. She just shrugged and stood there. And then she gets that look. That damned look.”

Cate raised her eyebrows, prodding him to continue.

“The pouty look with the tears in her eyes like I’m the problem. Like I did this. She’s almost acting like I was really her husband and ran out on her.”

“I really think The Agency may be behind this. I wonder if we could get her to admit that.”

“What difference would it make if we did? Then, we’d know, but we still couldn’t do much about it.”

“We could if she’d just divorce you and leave.”

“Not when she’s trying to pin a murder charge on me,” he answered.

“I can’t believe she would say that. All these articles I read don’t even mention you—which is a good thing. Were you questioned?”

Jack bobbed his head up and down. “Aye, I was. But I was never even considered a suspect. It’s just...I was with Amanda earlier that night in the pub...and...at the hotel. And...I was her alibi.”

“But you said you lost track of them.”

“I did. But...”

Cate heaved a sigh as she shook her head. "You let her use you anyway. And I assume it came out that you two were seeing each other or something similar, and you married shortly after."

"We did, yes. A few days after the murder."

"Do you have any idea who did it? There's tons of speculation in these articles, but there were never any arrests."

Jack flicked his gaze to Cate, pressing his lips into a thin line. "Honestly, no. I...always thought...maybe Amanda did do it."

"And you married her anyway?" Cate exclaimed before she winced. "Sorry, I'm sorry, I didn't mean to sound so judgmental."

"No, it's fine. It's a valid question." Jack swallowed hard as he clasped and unclasped his hands. "I just...she...I thought if she had, it was because of how badly he treated her. Maybe it was an accident. And she just wanted to move on, so...I helped her. Stupid of me, but I never expected this."

"Of course not. You were just trying to help. Believe me, I understand."

"I'd love to believe that you do, but..."

"Jack," she said, placing a hand on his forearm as she shot him a glance, "I married a warlock to save Dunhaven Castle. Believe me, I understand."

A smile spread across his features before a laugh escaped him. "Oh, right. You probably do. We really drew the short straws on spouses, eh?"

Cate eyed him. "Sorry, I think you take the cake on this one. Mine isn't that bad. Just...strange."

"Strange isn't quite the description I would use for that man. All the...weird powers."

"But he's rather charming and very well-mannered."

"He also comes equipped with a flashlight, which is highly useful," Jack said with a laugh.

Tension eased away from Cate as she chuckled along with him. "Yes, very useful when investigating things. Oh, and the location hopping. Trapped? No problem, Marcus can just blink you to a new place."

Jack shook his head. "I can't get used to it. I don't know how you took it so in stride."

Cate shrugged. "I don't know. I guess...it all happened so fast, and I was so focused on finding you that...I didn't care what tricks he had up his sleeve."

"And I am ever so grateful you found me."

Cate reached for his hand and squeezed it with a smile before Jack glanced over his shoulder. "Where is the old ball and chain, anyway? I'm certain he'll pop in at any moment to dismiss me."

"In Maine," Cate said as she shifted her notebook. "Some pressing business with Celine's cousin."

"He left? Really? I'm shocked."

"I'm partially glad since now we can focus on this problem without him hovering. But I do hope he fixes whatever the problem is with this Dominique person."

Jack scrunched his features. "If she's Celine's cousin, why would there be a problem?"

Cate shrugged. "I assume they are on opposite sides. Anyway..."

"Yes, let's move on. Their lives are far too complicated for me."

Cate nodded as she consulted her notes again. "Okay, what can you tell me about the victim? The articles said he was a local businessman, but that's about all I found."

"He was, yeah. Quite a bit older than Amanda. Uh, he had a few local shops." Jack tugged one corner of his lips back. "Rumor was...he wasn't quite legitimate."

Cate's eyebrows shot up. "Really? What was he rumored to be involved in?"

"Money laundering," Jack answered.

"That's not true!" a new voice shouted.

Heat rose in Cate's cheeks as she flicked her gaze to the doorway to find a red-faced Amanda standing in it. "Amanda."

"It's not true. David was not a criminal. And you can't pin this on someone else by saying that."

Jack rose from his perch on the bed. "Look, Amanda—"

"Don't, Jack," she said as she poked a finger at him. "I just cannot believe you could do this, but I see why."

Her eyes landed on Cate. "You've been living comfortably here while I've been struggling just to survive."

At her words, the little dog next to Cate picked his head up and studied her.

"Oh, hardly," Jack argued.

"Come off it, Jack. Here you are, in the big castle, bowing to the lady of the house, spending the morning in her bedroom."

“Oh, now, Amanda, that’s going too far,” Jack warned. “Cate and I are friends. And she’s trying to help me out of this mess you created.”

“I created?” the woman shouted. “You did it! You killed him.”

Cate tugged her chin back to her chest as the woman issued the accusation.

“Amanda, I did not. I wasn’t even there.”

“Weren’t you? You were right there. Because you did it. I saw you do it.”

Jack shook his head. “I don’t know where this is coming from. But you need to stop.”

“I’m sorry, Jack. But I can’t protect you any longer. I won’t. I married you to help you. And to find out that all these years, you’ve been just going about your life on your merry way and leaving me to fight for everything, well, it’s too much.”

“But I—Bah, never mind. You won’t listen.”

Amanda crossed her arms and shook her head.

“All right, if Jack did it,” Cate said, “why didn’t you say anything to the police? Why did you marry him to protect him?”

“Because...I...I felt he deserved it. David was...difficult. And at the time, I felt a certain sense of freedom from him. I felt Jack had provided that. I was grateful. But now I’m starting to believe you were just jealous.”

“I was not. No offense, Amanda, but you and I weren’t exactly involved. I saw you a few times at the bar. That’s it.”

“Then why were you constantly after me?”

“I wasn’t,” Jack argued. “I’m sorry if you mistook my trying to stop Hensley from smacking you around as romantic interest, but it wasn’t.”

“Why were you in the bar so much then?”

“It was right near where we lived. That’s it,” Jack answered. “I was only trying to help. You seemed like a nice girl. I thought what he was doing to you was awful. I’d have stepped in for any woman in your position.”

Cate shifted her gaze back to Amanda, gauging her reaction. Tears shined in her eyes, but she wouldn’t back down. “I don’t care, Jack. You can’t talk your way out of this. You ripped away my life all those years ago, and you’re still trying to do that.”

Jack puckered his lips, his frustration obvious as he let his gaze fall to the floor and shook his head.

“All right, look, we’re getting nowhere here. Maybe it’s best if you go back to your room and relax, Amanda.”

“Until what? Until you throw me out?”

“No,” Cate answered with a shake of her head. “Just until everyone’s tempers cool off. We’ll figure this out.”

“There is nothing to figure out! I’ve been protecting Jack for all these years, and now, I’m finished. I’m going to the police. I’m going to recant my statement and tell the truth. I’m going to tell them you did it.”

Cate threw back the covers and scurried from the bed as Jack’s jaw clenched. “Now, wait, just a minute. There’s no reason for that.”

“Isn’t there?” Amanda shouted. “Speak for yourself, princess.”

“Easy,” Cate answered, her expression pleading, “just take it easy. There’s no need to rush to do anything. You’re welcome to stay here for as long as you’d like. No one is going to throw you out.”

“Really?” The woman crossed her arms, her features questioning.

Cate nodded. “Yes, really.”

“Why? Why would you help me? You seem awfully chummy with my husband.”

“Because I am Jack’s friend. And I want to help both of you. Now, I don’t know what happened all those years ago, but I do know that we need to sort out what’s happening right now.”

Amanda flicked her gaze to Jack before she lowered her eyes to the floor.

“Maybe we can even help figure out what happened back then,” Cate said

Amanda snapped her gaze back up to her. “I know what happened. Jack killed him.”

“I’m sorry, Amanda, but I don’t believe that.”

“So, you’re calling me a liar.”

“No, but I think you may be confused—“

“I’m not confused!” she shouted.

“Excuse me,” a new voice said. “What is going on here?”

Anna strode into the room, features pinched.

Amanda tightened her arms across her chest, his lips tugging into a frown.

“Catherine, you should not be up. And you certainly should not be engaging in an argument.”

“No, the princess shouldn’t be subjected to the likes of me, I suppose.”

“That is not what I said, but if you choose to take it that way, perhaps you have some guilt,” Anna retorted.

Amanda’s features twisted with anger. “I don’t have no guilt, lady.”

“Don’t you? Then why did you assume my statement referred to you?”

“I’m the one arguing with her.”

“Yes, and I said nothing about her being subjected to you, simply that she should not be arguing. She has suffered an episode and must rest. Now, if you can be kind, you may stay. But if you continue to pick a fight, you should go.” Anna arched an eyebrow as Amanda stared at her, a frown on her face.

Her eyebrow raised further, and she set a hand on her hip, continuing the stare down with Amanda.

“I’ll just...be in my bedroom. I could use some rest, too.”

“Yes, I think you could,” Anna answered as Amanda backed away. “I shall have tea sent up for you to help you relax.”

“Thank you,” Amanda said meekly before she offered a weak smile and spun on a heel to leave.

“Wow,” Jack said, “that was impressive.”

“Never let anyone push you around,” Anna retorted as she pushed past him to help Cate into bed. “And never flout my advice. Catherine, you should be resting, not fighting.”

“I’m sorry, but she wants to pin the crime on Jack, and I know he didn’t do it.”

“Of course, he didn’t.”

“Amanda wanted to go to the police,” Jack explained. “Cate was defending me.”

“Are you incapable of defending yourself?” Anna questioned.

“No, but—”

“Then why did you not do so?”

“Well, Amanda sees red the moment I speak.”

Anna eased onto the edge of the bed next to Cate. “And she has accused you of the crime.”

“Yes,” Cate said. “And this is a cold case. I researched it all morning, but I have more questions than answers. One of them being why Amanda seems to be convinced Jack did it. She says she saw him do it. Why would she lie?”

Anna heaved a sigh. "Perhaps she is not lying."

"I didn't do it," Jack said, heat in his voice.

"I did not say you did," Anna shot back in a measured tone.

"Well, if Amanda says I did it, and you say she isn't lying, then—"

Anna held a hand up as he spoke, shushing him. "Because Amanda's memory may have been tampered with. We do not know, but The Agency is adept at such things."

A chill shook Cate as the hairs on the back of her neck stood up. "I never thought of that. Can that happen?"

"Yes. They could implant a false memory. It is not simple, but it can be done. A woman as impressionable as Amanda is an excellent subject for just such an event."

"Do you think The Agency could have been behind the murder itself?" Cate questioned.

"I doubt it. Jack, you remember this from the original timeline, am I correct?"

"Yes," Jack said. "Yes, it happened. David was killed, I married Amanda, that all is correct."

"Then it's likely they are simply capitalizing on the event. That's typical for them. They are sowing chaos because they are working somewhere else and do not wish us to know it."

Cate's stomach turned over at the words. Would they ever be free of this? And what else was The Agency working on that they wanted Cate and Jack away from?

She sank her head into her hands as she shook it. "What else?"

"That, my dear, I believe is tied to your vision," Anna said as she rubbed Cate's shoulder.

Cate's gaze slowly rose to meet her mother-in-law's. If her assessment was correct, whatever they'd face after they'd solved this murder would be far worse than anything they'd faced before. And she wasn't certain she'd survive it.

CHAPTER 8



Anna patted Cate's shoulder. "Now, dear, let's not get ourselves all riled up. We shall face both problems together."

"Maybe you ought to work on Cate's. She's terribly upset over it. And I can handle—"

"I shall decide what is worked on, Mr. Reid. Catherine cannot constantly obsess over her visions. It is unhealthy. Your case gives her some measure of relief."

"But—"

"Have you or have you not both solved mysteries similar in nature to this in the past?"

"Yes," Jack said with a bob of his head.

"Good, then you shall do so again."

"But—"

Anna offered him a stern glance, cutting off his statement in one word.

"Right. Of course."

"And we will work on Catherine's visions in between your investigation. Catherine, this is an excellent opportunity for you to learn to balance things. You will always have visions. And you will always have many other problems."

"You're right," Cate said with a bob of her head. "I will. So, what should we tackle first?"

Anna rose to her feet and clasped her hands as she paced the floor in thought. "Well, perhaps a trip back in time is in order. After that, we shall

work on your vision. Perhaps visit the room you have been seeing.”

Cate bit her lower lip as she considered it.

“Maybe the other way around,” Jack answered.

“No. The trip to the bedroom may incapacitate her. I’d rather she tackle the time travel first.”

“Right,” Jack said with a nod. “Good point. What date shall we go to?”

“Night of the murder?” Cate asked.

“And what?” Jack questioned. “Just...wait and see what happens?”

Cate shrugged. “It’s worth a shot. When we went back earlier with Randolph’s murder case, we didn’t learn much of anything from it.”

“No, we just spent lots of time in the past, and we were just as in the dark about the murder as we were when the whole blasted thing started.”

“Well, I guess we head back to the crime and find out what’s happening. Oh,” Cate said with a wrinkled nose, “it’s all the way in Oxford.”

“We’ll have to build in time to get there.”

Cate’s shoulders slumped. “Yeah. That’s inconvenient. I really liked time travel with Marcus. He just opens the portal wherever we need to go.”

“I can open a portal for you,” Anna said.

“Yes, but we wouldn’t be able to return.”

“Haven’t you the magical button that returns you?” she asked. “I thought Marcus gave you one.”

“He did. It returns me to wherever he is. And I doubt he wants me showing up in Maine. And what about Jack?”

“Perhaps you should,” Anna said before she shook her head. “Never mind. The button will return you and whoever you touch. Give it to me, I shall modify it to return you to me.”

“That would be very good. I was not looking forward to traveling.” Cate dug her necklace, containing the timepiece and button, from under her nightgown.

“At least it’s in modern times, Cate,” Jack said. “In the past, we’d had to go by horse or buggy or...on foot after I wrecked the car.”

“Still...I’m getting kind of spoiled with Marcus making things so easy.”

“And here I thought time travel of any kind excited you. Now, we’re getting picky.”

She giggled as she slipped the necklace off and handed it to Anna. She fiddled with the button, muttering a few Latin words before she handed it back. “Here you are. Switched.”

“Shall we try it?” Cate asked.

Anna arched an eyebrow at her. “Do you think me an amateur?”

“No,” Cate said with an apologetic smile, “but...”

“Then you shall be fine. Now, you should dress, and we will meet in a discreet location outside. I will open a time portal. When you have finished assessing the killer’s identity, return here and we shall discuss next steps.”

“Right,” Cate said as she swung her legs over the side of the bed.

Andrea pulled clothes from the cabinet. “Since it wasn’t that long ago, Your Grace, these clothes should do.”

“Yes,” Cate agreed as Jack pumped a fist in the air.

“Finally, we get to time travel in regular clothes.”

Cate grabbed them and hurried to the bathroom. “I’ll just be a minute.”

As she pulled the clothes on, Cate wondered what they would find when they stepped back in time. Would the mystery be easy to solve? Perhaps there was a clue overlooked, or a suspect that hadn’t been questioned. How easy would it be to pin the murder on the guilty person?

Her heart twisted as she considered their return. She’d have to face her visions again. She wondered what would happen... Would she finally make progress, or would this be another setback?

As she zipped her boots, she shook her head. “One problem at a time,” she murmured.

With her hair tugged into a ponytail, she emerged into her bedroom. “All right, I’m ready. Let’s go solve a murder.”

Jack swallowed hard before he nodded at her. “Okay.”

“There’s a mausoleum on the property which may be a good place to leave from,” Cate said.

“Yes, I do hate to open time portals in the house.”

Cate smiled at the sentiment, recalling the turmoil they created as she led the group from her bedroom. They stepped into the warm sunshine and made their way across the property to the mausoleum.

“Good luck, Catherine. I hope you find results. I will send you back several hours before the murder so you may get into the place easily.”

Cate nodded at her before she stretched her hands in front of her to open a time portal. The winds whipped around them as they waited for the hole to grow large enough to enter.

“It’s open! Go!” Anna shouted over the din.

Cate grabbed hold of Jack's hand as they stepped toward the black hole sparkling in front of them. They walked for a few seconds in blackness before they emerged in a new location.

Jack glanced around the abandoned alley. "This is the alley behind the bar where Amanda worked."

"And it looks like a few hours before sunset. Which gives us some time to get oriented."

Jack shifted his weight from foot to foot. "Or hide."

"Hide? Jack, we're here to figure out what happened, not hide."

"I know, but..." Jack pressed his lips together into a thin line as he sighed.

"What?" Cate asked.

"I'm not entirely comfortable being back in a spot where I could run into myself."

Cate sucked in a breath. "Oh, right. Yeah, that could be tricky, but...if you see yourself coming, we'll go the other way."

"Very funny, Cate. I'm still concerned the world will collapse in on itself with two Jack Reids around."

Cate giggled as she stared at him. "I've really missed time traveling with you."

"Oh yeah? I thought you loved His Royal Highness's magical powers."

Cate offered him a coy grin. "It's His Grace, and sometimes they come in handy."

"Like when you need to disappear quickly from a tight spot?" Jack asked.

She nodded, holding in a laugh.

"I still can't get used to that. One minute we were in a closet. The next we were on the street. I don't know how you do it, Cate. You make being a warlock's wife look so easy."

"It's a gift," she said as she glanced around. "Anyway, without his location hopping skills here to help us, maybe we should get out of this alley before we get caught."

"Yeah, by me. I can't handle that."

They hurried to the end of the alley and peered around the corner of the building.

Cate furrowed her brow as she flicked her gaze to Jack. "Wait, which of you can't handle it? Present you or past you?"

Jack glanced at her, his face twisted with confusion. “Me. This me. No, wait, that me. Neither me can handle it, Cate. At that age, I won’t be able to handle knowing about time travel. And at this age, I can’t handle telling myself about time travel.”

Cate fluttered her eyelashes as she nodded. “I think I get it. And I do really miss time traveling with you. Marcus is quite used to talking to himself at any age.”

“I can’t. Please don’t. The idea of one of him is enough. But two? I couldn’t handle that either.”

“It is rather odd,” Cate said as they stepped onto the sidewalk and hurried down the street toward the hotel. “Especially because they act somewhat different.”

“I really don’t know how you took to all this so easily. It’s not normal.”

“It’s definitely not that. Damien helps.”

They pushed into the doors of the hotel. “The ballroom is that way,” Jack said with a nod of his head. Let’s check it out.”

“Okay,” Cate said.

“Damien is odd, too. I don’t care how nice he seems. He’s an odd duck.”

“So am I, I guess,” Cate said with a shrug. “Maybe that’s why I don’t mind it. It’s kind of fascinating.”

“I’ll stick to plain old murders, thanks. Well, except this one. I’d have been happy for this murder to stay buried.”

“I’ll bet.” They stepped into the ballroom that was being readied for tonight’s event with hotel staff placing linens on tables and setting up chairs.

“I’m sorry, this is off-limits,” a woman with a clipboard said.

“Oh, we’re just passing through,” Jack said as he pointed toward a door across the way.

“Sorry,” she said with a shake of her head. “The entire area’s closed.”

“Oh, but—“ Cate tried but the woman flicked her hand toward the door as she marched them to it.

“Well, that went over well,” Cate said with a sigh as they stood in the lobby again.

“Really. And now we’re stuck out of here. My former self could dart past us at any moment.”

Cate glanced around, finding a restaurant on the opposite side. "Let's get something to eat. We can watch the entrance from there."

"Eat? How can you eat at time like this?"

"I thought you always could eat," Cate said.

"Not when there are two of me running around here. How did you handle it? Have you ever spoken to yourself?"

"No. I just saw myself when you were missing. So far, I haven't had any conversations with myself." She approached the host stand and requested a table for two.

They settled in at the table and perused the menu. "Now that you mention it, I could eat. Everything looks good to me."

"I figured," Cate answered with a chuckle. "You and your stomach."

"Oh? I suppose His Grace doesn't eat."

"Oh, he does. Usually in the most extravagant places." Her mind flitted back to their meal at a prestigious club while searching for Jack. "Of course. I'd expect nothing less. Oh, and given your recent travels with him, someone here may know you as the lovely Duchess of Wherever."

"Stratfordshire," she answered as she took a final glance over the menu.

"Right." The waitress approached, and they placed their order before resuming their conversation. "So, will you be leaving Dunhaven for Stratfordshire, then?"

"I've never been, but I can tell you, I will not be leaving Dunhaven at all. Dunhaven is my home."

Jack offered her a smile. "That's good to hear, Cate. I think we'd all miss you if you decided to reign over another kingdom."

Cate chuckled at him as she took a sip of her water. "I would miss all of you, too. I'm not going anywhere. Dunhaven needs me."

"Yes, we do," Jack said as their meal arrived.

"And we need you, too," Cate answered as she dove into her pasta. "So, we have to fix this."

"I didn't do it. I still can't believe Amanda says I did."

"I wonder if we can get Anna to hypnotize her. Maybe we can sort through clues that way, too."

Jack flicked his eyebrows up. "It's worth a shot, but I don't know if we'll get her to agree."

"Sometimes, you don't need a person to agree when Anna is around."

Jack wrinkled his nose. "She's as frightening as her son."

Cate's fork clattered to her plate as she laughed. "She is. I remember when I first met her, I was terrified. Marcus didn't tell me. I barely got a word out to her."

"She likes you at least. She looks at me like I'm a slug."

"Or like she's about to turn you into one," Cate answered, still chuckling.

Jack shook his head. "It's not funny. See how nice the grounds look around Dunhaven when you've only got a slug for an estate manager."

"Let's hope that doesn't happen. I'll do everything in my power to stop Anna from turning you into an animal or bug of any kind."

"Thanks," he said with a grin, "I really appreciate that."

"Anytime," Cate answered with a smile. "Well, I think we'd wasted enough time that the ballroom is now open, so maybe we can slip back into the back hall and catch a murderer."

Jack didn't move. Instead, he sat staring at the white linen tablecloth, a frown on his face.

"What is it?" she asked.

"I just...go catch a murderer. I don't like it."

Cate rose from her seat, her smile broadening. "You never do. But it has to be done, so let's get it out of the way."

"Fine, fine," he said as he slowly climbed to his feet. "We'll go find out who murdered this man, then all we'll have to do is prove it. And this entire mess can be finished."

"That sounds like a fantastic plan."

"Yeah," he answered, "let's hope it works out that way."

"What could go wrong?" she asked.

"Don't tempt fate."

They crossed the lobby, finding the ballroom doors propped open and guests filing in and out.

"I don't see anybody suspicious," Cate said, scanning the room as they crossed it.

"No, I don't either. Though I don't know what someone suspicious would look like to be honest," Jack answered, his gaze darting around the space.

"Gun-toting maybe," Cate said before she shot him a grin.

"Oh, right. What was I thinking? He's probably wearing a giant sash that says Murderer, too," Jack answered, wiggling his eyebrows at her.

“That’s what I was hoping for, yeah.” They stepped into the hall where the murder would occur in just over an hour and searched it for a suitable hiding spot.

“I don’t see a good place to hide,” Jack noted.

“Me either. I wonder if any of the smaller ballrooms are open. We could slip into one of those.”

“Aye, that’s worth a shot, I guess.”

Cate nodded as she crossed to a set of double doors and wrapped her fingers around the brass handle. She tugged at it, finding it locked.

Jack tried another set across the way but found it locked, too. Cate tried the last set at the end of the hall. As the door swung open toward her, she shot a glance over her shoulder and grinned at Jack. “Found one.”

“Great. It should give us a good view of the hall, too. We’ll be able to see exactly what happens.”

“Good, then we can solve this and put it behind us.”

“So we can focus on your problem,” Jack said with a nod as they slipped into the darkened room.

“I’m not certain I really want to focus on it. And I’m eternally grateful that I haven’t had any visions while we’ve been here. Maybe Anna is right, and I need the distraction.”

“Or you’re just that bad of a psychic.”

The voice that answered her made Cate’s skin crawl. She spun to scan the dark space, lit only by the twilight outside the windows. Heels clicked across the wooden floor as Gianna stepped from the shadows.

Cate’s fingers curled into fists at her sides as she stared at the woman’s smirk. “Of course, you’re here.”

“Yes, I am. And I’m so pleased to find you unprotected. Where is your duke?”

Cate refused to answer.

Gianna shrugged. “It doesn’t matter. All that matters is he’s not here. What a delicious opportunity.” She drummed the tips of her fingers together. “What to do?”

“You’ve caused enough trouble,” Cate shot back. “This is your worst, though.”

Gianna threw her head back with laughter. “Oh, really? Is that what you think? Well, well, well, I can’t *wait* for you to see what I have in store for you next. Though I really can’t take credit for digging up Amanda.”

“Oh? Who did that? Your superior or one of your minions?”

Gianna crossed her arms as she continued to chuckle. “Oh, no, darling. That would have been your loving husband.”

Heat washed over Cate as the woman issued the blame. “I don’t believe that.”

“I don’t much care, but it’s the truth.”

Cate swallowed hard as she tried to think of a response when a voice cut through the air behind them. “...fairly certain I left it in the small ballroom.”

Cate’s stomach dropped as footsteps approached. She shot a terrified glance at Jack. Someone may catch them hiding in the ballroom. Would they lose their secret spot before they witnessed the murder?

Light spilled in as the door started to open.

“Time to go,” Gianna said.

Cate twisted as the woman tore a card in half and tossed it toward them. Cate’s features pinched as an electrical energy crackled between the two pieces before it shot toward them. She lifted her arms to block the attack when the bolt hit her, jolting her body before the world went black.

When her eyelids fluttered open, she found herself in an unfamiliar location, staring up at a cloudless night sky.

Next to her, Jack groaned as he rolled onto his side. “What happened?”

“I have no idea, but I don’t think we’re in Kansas anymore.” Cate pushed herself up to sit, catching sight of a woman laying nearby, her features twisted.

“No kidding, I wonder where she sent us,” Jack glanced around, trying to get his bearings.

“I’m not sure but—“

Cate’s words were cut off as the woman nearby pushed up to sit, scanning the space before she screamed. “What happened? Where am I?”

Cate’s stomach twisted. The voice had been the same one who had almost caught them in the ballroom. She shot a panicked glance at Jack. Gianna had not only sent *them* spiraling through time, but she’d accidentally sent an innocent bystander with them. How in the world would they explain this to the poor, terrified woman?

CHAPTER 9



The woman's lips formed a terrified grimace as she touched the grass below her, her features incredulous.

"Oh, no," Jack said with a wide-eyed stare.

"Yeah, this isn't good," Cate answered as she scrambled to her feet. "Excuse me, excuse me."

The woman shot her a panicked glance.

"Hi, I'm Cate. What's your name?"

"A—Amy Grace," she answered.

"Well, Amy Grace," Cate said, trying to keep her voice tempered and even, "this may take a lot to explain, but you're perfectly safe. Just...in a new place...and time."

The woman nodded, her head bobbing slowly up and down before she snapped her gaze to Cate, her eyes uncertain. "What?"

Cate winced as she tried to think of the best way to explain what had just happened to the woman. "Well..."

"I think we're in London," Jack answered.

"But when?" Cate murmured.

"How did I get to London?" Amy Grace's features contorted as she shot a fearful glance at Cate and Jack. "What did you do to me?"

"Nothing," Cate said. "We are victims, here, too."

"Victims of what?" she asked.

Cate sighed as she scanned the area. "Of a group of people who are determined to make our lives horrible."

“Why did they pick me?” Amy Grace asked.

“You were caught in the crossfire. But it’s okay. We’re going to help you.” Cate reached a hand toward the woman to help her up.

Amy Grace stared up at her, the fear still lingering in her eyes.

“I promise we’ll get you home. I know it’s not a lot to go on, but you’ll need to trust us.”

“What if I don’t want to?” she asked.

Cate exchanged a glance with Jack, who shrugged.

“You’d be far better off if you did,” he answered. “You’ve just been sent to—”

“Well, just a second, Jack. If she’s uncomfortable, there’s no reason to force her. I feel responsible for what happened to you, and I’d like to help, but if you don’t want to come with us, that’s okay. I can leave my information with you, and you can find us when you’re ready.”

“Cate...” Jack began. “We can’t leave her here.”

“And I’d prefer we didn’t, but I’m not going to force her to come with us. I don’t want her any more traumatized than she is already.”

Amy Grace’s eyes darted back and forth between them as they spoke. “Okay, okay, you two seem normal enough. I’ll go with you. I still don’t understand how we got to London, though.”

Jack glanced around again. “The better question isn’t how we got here, but when are we?”

“What?” Amy Grace asked. “Why do you keep saying when? It can’t be too far from whenever they grabbed us, right?”

“Uhhh,” Cate said, shifting her gaze to Jack again with a wince.

“Well...” Jack rubbed the back of his neck, his nose wrinkled.

A car rolled past on the nearly empty street.

Amy Grace furrowed her brow. “Ha, look at the old car.”

“I’m afraid it’s not as old as you think,” Jack answered. “Wait here, I’m going to try to find a newspaper.”

“What did he mean by that?” Amy Grace asked.

“I’ll explain later,” Cate said as she wrapped her hand around Amy Grace’s. “Come on. Jack, wait up. We’re coming, too.”

Jack hurried ahead of them to the street corner and leaned closer to the newspaper box. He squinted at the date before he stood, running his hand through his hair as he rose.

“Well?” Cate asked.

“Nineteen fifty-five,” he answered. “Well, that’s not terrible, but not great.”

Cate pressed her lips together as Amy Grace shifted her gaze between the two of them. “Are you two playing a prank?”

“No,” Jack said with a shake of his head.

“Amy Grace,” Cate answered, keeping her voice calm and measured, “I have some more bad news. Well, it’s not bad so much as it is...strange. And it’s going to be difficult for you to understand.”

“Difficult to understand? That you’re fooling with me? What is the date, really? Have we been missing for over a day?”

Cate shook her head.

“More?”

Cate shook her head again. “No, it’s complicated. The people who did this...they can control not only location but...time.”

“They can control time,” Amy Grace repeated, her features unimpressed with the statement.

“Yes,” Jack answered. “Which is how we ended up not only moving from Oxford to London, but to nineteen fifty-five.”

“Nineteen fifty-five,” she said. “We are in nineteen fifty-five.”

“Right,” Cate answered. “Which is a stroke of luck, actually.”

“Well, I agree. As I said, this is not the worst time to be in. We’re not in a war, there are phones, cars. We can get to Dunhaven—“

“Wait, I’ve got the button for that. We can just use this. Although, that doesn’t help Amy Grace.”

“No, but it does let us return home where we are better equipped to deal with this.”

“Button?” Amy Grace asked.

Cate nodded. “I’ll explain later. Uh, Anna said it returns me and whoever I’m touching, so I guess I should touch both of you and rub it.”

Jack nodded as Cate dug the necklace from under her tunic and grabbed the button. She laced two fingers through Amy Grace’s and two through Jack’s before she flicked her thumb across the button. “Oh no.”

“Should it have worked by now or is there a delay?”

“There’s no delay. It should have worked by now. But it’s not working.”

“Do you think Anna disenchanting it when she changed it?” Jack asked.

Cate shook her head. “No. I’m guessing the electrical charge did something to it. Maybe that card was laced with anti-magic.”

“Anti-magic? What are you saying?” Amy Grace shouted.

“Shh, don’t say that so loud. Most people don’t know about magic,” Cate warned. “But I know someone who does. And like I said, it’s a lucky stroke we landed in London in this era. I know exactly where to go.”

“You do?” Jack asked.

Cate grabbed Amy Grace’s hand as she nodded. “Yes. If we can find a cab, I can get us there.”

“How will we pay for it?”

“Oh, right,” Cate said with a wince. “Okay, we’ll walk. I just...need to find Ellerby Crescent.”

“Ellerby Crescent?” Jack screwed up his face. “What’s there?”

Cate tugged Amy along with her as she sought to find her bearings in the massive city. “Marcus’s townhouse. And by extension, mine.”

Amy’s brow furrowed further. Cate offered her a smile. “My husband lives in this time...sometimes.”

“Your husband lives in nineteen fifty-five, but you’re from—“

“No, actually, we’re not from that time. We’re from the future,” Jack answered. “Never mind. Try not to think about it. Cate, will he know you?”

“Probably. We were married in the eighteen hundreds. And that version of Marcus knows me.”

“You married your husband who lives in the nineteen fifties during the eighteen hundreds...” Amy’s voice trailed off as she stared into space.

“It’s complicated,” Cate answered.

“And then some. Okay, I have no idea where Ellerby Crescent is from here, but I’ll ask at that pub up ahead.”

Cate nodded as he trotted into the bar, and she turned her attention to Amy Grace. “How are you holding up?”

“Just peachy,” she said with a frown. “I have managed to travel through time with two strange people who seem perfectly comfortable with this.”

“Jack and I have a lot of experience time traveling.”

The woman eyed her again, her forehead crinkling. “Oh, well, of course, you do. Apparently, you have traveled quite a bit. And been married in another century.”

“Actually, I was fake married in another century. I really got married in 2014. Although, to be honest, we time-traveled to do that, too. It’s all very confusing.”

“Sounds like it,” Amy Grace answered as Jack rejoined them.

“Okay, I’ve got the directions. Let’s head over to his...your...Ellerby Crescent.” Jack led them further down the sidewalk.

“Is it far?”

“No, not very, thankfully,” he answered before he leaned closer to Cate. “How’s she holding up?”

“I can hear you,” Amy Grace said. “And I’m...actively trying not to think about it. It’s disturbing to think I’d end up in the nineteen fifties. How will we get back?”

“Well, that’s what we’re trying to figure out. You see,” Cate said, “we usually have a way to return, but it seems the magical item they used to send us here fried my magic button. I’m hoping my husband can help.”

“Right, of course. The magic button,” Amy Grace said with a nod.

“I know it sounds strange,” Cate began.

“It sounds crazy, actually.”

They rounded a corner, and Jack led them up the block, across the street, and turned again onto Ellerby Crescent.

“Which one is it?” Jack asked.

“Fifty-five,” she answered. “Oh, it’s dark. Darn it.”

“You don’t have a key?” Jack asked.

“Not on me. I wasn’t planning on being in London today.”

Jack stared up at the dark house as Cate climbed the steps and rang the bell. “Maybe he’s asleep.”

No one answered, and she tried knocking, though the sinking feeling that no one was home grew in her. She heaved a sigh as she shook her head. “Sorry, looks like no one is home.”

“Maybe he leaves a key under the mat,” Jack suggested.

“I doubt it. He can unlock doors with magic. He doesn’t need a key.”

“So, what?” Amy Grace asked, her voice turning shrill. “What does this mean? We’re stuck?”

“No, of course not,” Cate said. “Do you know where Mr. Smythe’s office is?”

“Yes,” Jack answered with a bob of his head, “but Cate, William Smythe isn’t even alive yet.”

“No, but his father, Charles is. He can call Marcus.”

“Oh, right. You know his father. What was I thinking?” Jack squeezed his eyes closed as he shook his head. “Okay, well, I suppose if we leave now, we can make it to his office before it opens and wait for him there.”

Cate nodded as she glanced at the hints of light streaking the eastern sky. "Right. Okay. Hopefully, we'll have some help soon."

Cate shot a glance at Amy Grace, offering her an apologetic smile. "Sorry," she said. "Do you need to rest before we go?"

"No," she answered with a shake of her head. "I'd rather keep moving. When we stop, I can't stop thinking about how strange this is. Hopefully, I'll wake up and find out it was all just a really bad dream."

Cate smiled at her again as Jack led them on another trek through the city toward the law offices of Smythe, Smith and Smithton. They arrived as the city began to come to life with the birth of the new day.

Cate slicked a lock of hair behind her ear as they waited outside the offices. "I hope he remembers me."

"Me too," Jack answered.

A few people filtered into the office, offering them a strange glance as they passed by, before Charles Smythe appeared.

He stopped as he spotted Cate, his eyebrows furrowing. "Your Grace? I didn't realize you were on my appointment book today."

"I'm not," Cate said as she wrung her hands. "I've run into a bit of trouble. My plans fell through, and I had to stop in London. But I don't have my key for the London house."

"Oh, dear, well I certainly can help you with that. We keep a spare key here for emergencies."

"Oh, good. And can you also contact Marcus?"

"Of course. He should be in Germany. I'll call at once. May I offer you tea?"

"Yes," Cate said with a sigh of relief. "We'd love some. And thank you so much, Charles."

The man held the door open for them to enter the office, leading them to a richly decorated conference room. Cate eased into the chair with a sigh as the secretary scurried in with a tray of tea.

Amy Grace sipped hers as she leaned back in the chair. "I hope someone takes care of my poodles."

"Don't worry," Jack said, "with any luck, we'll return to the moment we left or shortly after. No one will miss you."

Amy stared down into her tea, her forehead creasing.

Any further conversation was stopped by the arrival of Charles Smythe. "I have your husband on the line."

He pulled a massive phone from the middle of the table closer to Cate. After he pressed a few buttons, he spoke into the receiver. "Your Grace? Yes, I have Her Grace right here. Just a moment."

Charles offered the phone to her. Cate settled her teacup onto the saucer and took the receiver. "Marcus?"

"Catherine. What are you doing alone in this time period?"

"That's a good question, and I can explain it later, but I need your help with a few things. Is there any way you could come to London?"

"Yes, I can. I will be there by mid-morning. Charles will send you to the house in a car."

"Thanks," she said before she replaced the receiver on the base and smiled at Charles. "Thank you, Mr. Smythe. Marcus is coming to London."

"Yes, and I have the car arranged to take you to the townhouse."

"Thank you," Cate said as she rose from her seat.

Charles handed her the key. "I will send a messenger to pick up the key whenever you'd like."

Cate nodded as he motioned for them to follow him from the room. After tucking them in the back of the chauffeured car, he waved them off.

Cate blew out a sigh as the car threaded through the streets toward the London townhouse she'd stayed at before.

"Your Grace?" Amy Grace asked as the buildings blurred by their window.

"Yes, Cate is a duchess."

"A time-traveling duchess?" she said. "Really?"

"I used to be a time-traveling countess, but I upgraded."

"Or downgraded. I'm still not certain," Jack said with a wiggle of his eyebrows.

Cate offered him an amused grin as the car slowed to a stop outside of the townhouse. "Very funny, Jack."

They climbed from the car and approached the house again. Cate slid the key in the lock and pushed inside the quiet space. "Home, sweet home. Make yourself comfortable."

She motioned toward the living room as she shuffled inside and plopped on the couch. "With any luck, Marcus can send us right back to where we came from."

"Let's hope," Jack said as he slid into an armchair.

Amy Grace hovered in the doorway, shifting her weight from side to side.

“Amy Grace,” Cate said as she sat straighter, “why don’t you sit down and try to relax? Hopefully, we’ll be home soon.”

The woman chewed her lower lip. “I’m worried about my dogs.”

“What kind of dogs do you have?” Cate asked. “I have teddy bears.”

“Poodles,” Amy Grace answered as she finally settled into an armchair. “Three. Blazer, Heidi, and Archie.”

“I bet they’re really cute,” Cate said with a smile. “Oh, can I offer—“

Her words cut off as Dembe appeared in the doorway with a bow. “Duchess, may I bring tea?”

“Oh, Dembe. I didn’t realize you were here.”

“I have just arrived. His Grace will arrive within the hour.”

“Oh, good. And yes, tea would be lovely. Would anyone like anything else?”

“I’ll be okay with the tea,” Amy Grace said.

Jack winced as he stared at the man. “Do you have any biscuits?”

“Of course, sir,” Dembe said with another bow before he left the room.

Cate flicked her gaze to him.

“What?”

She shrugged. “I’m surprised you didn’t ask for a Full English.”

“I could have, but I was trying to be polite,” Jack answered.

“I’m still confused as to how you two can sit there so calmly in the face of being transported through some magical mechanism back to another time period,” Amy Grace said.

“We’re rather used to it,” Jack answered. “Besides time-traveling to solve cold cases and the like, we’ve also accidentally been pulled through time by The Agency. And I’ve had the lovely experience of being imprisoned by them in another century, so this is a walk in the park.”

She stared at him as though he spoke another language.

Cate offered a nervous chuckle as she slid her eyes to Amy Grace.

“He’s joking, right?” she asked.

The laugh continued to roll from Cate. “Sadly, not.”

She bit into her lower lip as a shadow hovered in the door. Her eyes went wide, and she leapt from her seat. “Oh, good, Marcus is here.”

“Catherine,” he said as he strode into the room, his eyes scanning it. “And others.”

“Hi,” she said. “Sorry to pop in unannounced, but we’re having some... trouble.”

“With The Agency, I assume.”

She nodded as his eyes went to Amy Grace.

“And our friend?”

“Along for the ride,” Cate answered. “She accidentally got caught up in the crossfire.”

“I see,” Marcus said. “Perhaps a private word is in order, dear.”

“Right,” Cate said with a nod. “Jack, can you stay here with Amy Grace?”

“Sure,” Jack said, offering her a dubious glance as she shot him a smile.

Cate snaked past them and followed Marcus into the foyer. He motioned for her to precede him upstairs. She climbed up, slipping into her bedroom.

“Sorry,” she said with a shake of her head as she spun to face him.

“Are you unharmed?” he asked.

“More or less. And very glad that we ended up in this time period in London so close to the house. I can’t imagine what would have happened if we’d ended up somewhere else. Especially with that poor woman who is stranded with us.” Cate wrung her hands as she chewed her lower lip. “I really hope she doesn’t tell anyone.”

“Not to worry, Catherine, once you return her to her time, I will ensure she has no memory of the incident.”

Cate flicked her eyebrows up. “You can do that?”

Marcus stared at her, a blank expression on his chiseled features.

“Right, of course, you can do that,” she answered with a nod. “All right, well...”

“What happened to your button?”

She dug it from under her tunic and slipped the necklace off. “It doesn’t work. Your mother re...magicked it or whatever.”

He tugged his eyebrows together. “She did what?”

“She...changed it. She made it so we go back to wherever she is, not wherever you are. Because you are in Maine doing something dangerous.”

“Am I? And I have left you unprotected. That doesn’t sound like me.”

“It was urgent. And this murder thing seemed to be an easy mystery for me to handle. Plus, your mother was there to keep an eye on me.”

She handed him the necklace.

He flicked his gaze up to her after he took it. “Highly doubtful she made an error.”

“I don’t think she did either. I think whatever Gianna used to send us here somehow shorted it out.”

“What did she use?”

Cate shrugged as she fluttered her eyelashes. “Some kind of card. She tore it in two and threw it at us. There were tiny lightning bolts that shot out of it.”

Marcus pressed his lips together as he shook his head.

“I’m sorry, I’m not explaining it very well.”

“No, I know exactly what you are talking about, Catherine. And unfortunately, I have very grim news.”

Her stomach turned over at the words as she snapped her wide eyes up to him.

“You are stuck in this time.”

CHAPTER 10



Cate's jaw dropped open as her stomach clenched. "Stuck? Like forever?"

"At least until we find a solution."

She pressed a hand over her heart as she shook her head. "Please don't scare me like that. Okay, the solution is to open a time portal for us."

"Unfortunately, that is not a solution."

Cate scrunched her features. "Why not? Oh...did someone use anti-magic powder on you?"

"No, Catherine. It has to do with the card used. The Ace of Hearts."

Cate offered him a questioning glance. "What about it?"

"It is designed to send the victim to another time...and freeze them there."

Cate's stomach clenched at the words. "Freeze them there? What?"

Marcus draped the necklace around her neck again. "No conventional means of time travel will work. We must seek a solution to this."

"You don't know the solution? Can't we...counter it with another suit or something?"

Marcus chuckled at her as he rubbed her cheek with his thumb. "Oh, I do enjoy you, Catherine."

"Thank you, but I'd rather you enjoy me in my own time period. *And* that we solve the murder Jack's being accused of, return Amy Grace to her time and erase her memory, and solve these visions that are haunting me."

“Well, Catherine, for the time being, you will have to work on some of those things whilst here.”

Cate paced the floor. “How in the world am I supposed to solve a mystery in the future?”

“You could work on the visions.”

She pressed a hand to her forehead as she spun and crossed in the opposite direction. “What about Amy Grace?”

“I could put her to sleep until the situation is solved,” Marcus answered.

Cate winced. “No. That seems...overkill. She’s been doing well so far. I don’t know how she’ll take this development though.”

“Likely better than the gardener.”

Cate let her shoulders slump. “I really wish you were the version of you that has evolved to not call him the gardener.”

“Sorry, I have not been upgraded yet, dear,” Marcus said with a grin.

She offered him an amused smile. “I suppose I’ll just have to take what I can get.”

“I will begin preliminary research on the card. I suspect the best place to begin will be the library at Rosenberg. I shall call Mother.”

“Okay. What can we do until then?”

“Nothing, dear. I will have Dembe prepare rooms for our guests. Oh, and if you wouldn’t mind, I’d prefer to dine at the club without them.”

“That’s kind of rude.”

“Fine, we will all dine out.”

Cate sucked in a breath as she nodded. “All right. If there’s any research I can do, let me know. Otherwise, I’m just going to pace the floor here until it’s time for dinner.”

“I shall send you to Rosenberg to help Mother.”

“But that leaves Jack and Amy Grace here...alone.”

“I won’t bite them,” he answered. “But fine. I shall send all of you.”

Cate nodded. “All right. Hopefully, we’ll find something that’ll be an easy fix.”

Marcus offered her a dubious smile as he reached for the door.

“It bothers me that you’re not saying anything.”

“Does it?”

“Yes,” she said with a bob of her head. “Why?”

“Because, Catherine, I do not wish to tell you that this will likely be another long haul. I know you prefer quick solutions.”

“Are you saying I’m impatient?” she asked, her nose wrinkling.

“I have not said those words, and I will not say them.”

She set her hands on her hips. “But that’s what you’re getting at. You think I’m impatient.”

He flicked his eyebrows up, clasping his hands in front of him.

“Why don’t you just say it?” she asked.

“Because I do not have the desire to die, darling.” He kissed her cheek before he stepped to the door. “Now, if you are ready…”

She heaved a sigh as she shook her head at him. “Yes, I’m ready.”

She squeezed past him into the hall and headed for the stairs. “We can use a location hop, right?”

“Of course,” Marcus said as they descended.

“No,” Jack answered. “No, I didn’t just hear what I think I heard, did I?”

Cate arrived in the foyer and winced at him as he hovered in the doorway to the living room. “Yes, you did.”

“Oh, no. No, no, no. Please. I’ve had enough already. Just send us home. Look, if we’ve got to go to Dunhaven to use the watch, we can do that. I’ll drive. I don’t mind.”

“Unfortunately, it’s not quite that simple,” Cate answered.

“Cate, I’ll even take the creepy portal through time courtesy of your husband. But, please, no location hop.”

“What’s a location hop?” Amy Grace asked.

“A horrible thing,” Jack said with a shake of his head.

“It’s not,” Cate countered. “It’s a…magical form of travel where in one second, we will be here, and in another, we’ll be at another location.”

Amy Grace stared at her for a moment before she shrugged. “Why not? We’ve already traveled through time, and you have a magic button. Why not this, too?”

“I told you she would take it better than the gardener,” Marcus said as he poured himself a cup of tea.

Cate shot him an unimpressed glance.

“That’s very funny, very funny,” Jack said as he paced the floor. “You can call me what you’d like. Call me the head weed puller for all I care. But please don’t whisk me across the world in one of those…hops.”

“Fine, we can leave you here. No problem,” Marcus answered.

Jack wrinkled his nose. “Okay, never mind. I’ll make the sacrifice.”

Marcus stared at him. “Wonderful. We shall leave after Catherine finishes her tea.”

“We could go now. I don’t need—“

His raised eyebrow silenced her.

“I’ll drink my tea.” Cate dutifully sank onto the couch and poured a cup of tea. She took a slow sip, flicking her eyebrows up at him as she settled the teacup into the saucer. “Happy?”

“Incredibly,” he answered. “You haven’t gulped it down.”

“Amy Grace, would you like more tea?” Cate asked.

“Sure,” the woman answered. “I may as well have another biscuit, too. I may need the energy for the trip to...where are we going again?”

“Germany,” Cate answered. “Marcus has a palace there with an extensive library.”

“Why do we need it?” Jack asked. “Can’t he just send us back to where we were?”

“No. Apparently, the mechanism Gianna used has stranded us here.”

“Stranded!” Jack and Amy Grace shouted at the same time.

“Temporarily, yes. No traditional means of time travel will work to return us to our time or...any other time. We’re stuck in nineteen fifty-five until we can figure out how to counteract that card she used.”

Jack slapped a palm against his forehead. “Oh, no. How could this happen? And why can’t you fix it? Aren’t you Oz, the Great and Powerful?” Jack shot a pointed glance at Marcus.

With an unimpressed stare, Marcus sighed. “This is not a fairy tale, Mr. Reid. Magic is messy. Can I fix it? Yes. Do I need more information to do so? Yes. We shall begin our search for information in Germany.”

“Why can’t the library be here?” Jack lamented as he grabbed another cookie from the plate.

“I would be most happy to leave you here, Mr. Reid,” Marcus answered.

“You’re not leaving Jack anywhere. We stick together.”

“Cate’s right. No splitting up. People get killed when they split up.”

Amy Grace raised her eyes to him, her teacup clattering into her saucer. “Have you known many people who have died?”

“No,” Jack answered, sliding his eyes to Cate. “But some of us almost have.”

“I have not.” Cate shook her head. “Don’t listen to him.”

She took the last sip of her tea and placed the saucer on the tray. "I'm finished, let's go."

"Patience, Catherine," Marcus answered as he strode from the room. "I must speak with Dembe before we leave."

Cate rose and paced the floor. "I hope we find some information in that library. It's incredibly frustrating to be stuck here."

"At least we're not stuck in a horrible time period. There are some modern conveniences here," Jack answered.

"Not enough. And we have no access to solve the murder."

"You're solving a murder, you said?" Amy Grace asked.

"Yes. One that was about to occur in the hall between the two ballrooms," Jack answered. "We were hoping to spot the culprit, until we were sent here."

"How odd. You time-traveled to witness a crime, but why not stop it?" Amy Grace asked.

"We can't," Cate said. "Well, more like we shouldn't. It could change the course of history. We try to meddle as little as possible with the timeline."

"But this crime was unsolved, so your solving it is meddling," Amy Grace pointed out.

"Yes, it is, but...there isn't much choice. Jack's been accused of it over a decade later."

"I see. And you didn't do it, I take it?" Amy Grace asked.

Jack shook his head. "Of course not. I wasn't even there at the time. But a witness says I was."

"That's awful. I can see why you'd want to change this history."

"First," Cate answered as she plopped onto the couch, "we'd like to know what happened. Maybe the case will remain unsolved, but we have to be able to clear Jack's name."

"Are there no other suspects?"

"Plenty," Cate answered, "from his girlfriend to some sketchy business associates, but no one the cops could pin it on."

Amy Grace drummed her fingers on the chair's arm. "Who didn't have an alibi?"

"That's another thing we'd need to look into if we can't identify the assailant clearly," Cate answered. "There's so much work to be done. This detour is incredibly frustrating to deal with."

Cate curled her fingers into fists before she shot an apologetic glance at Amy. "And I'm truly sorry that you got dragged into this."

"Don't fuss over me. I'm rather enjoying myself, actually. I've never time-traveled before. And I'd like to help with the investigation, both into how we'll get back and who murdered this person."

"Well, I really appreciate your offer, but..."

"But what?" Amy Grace asked. "I'm quite good at solving things. I read plenty of mystery books."

"Me too," Cate said with a smile. "And we're happy to have your help. I just don't want you to get caught in the crossfire here in either situation."

"I'm counting on you fine people to keep me safe."

Jack offered her a solemn nod. "We'll do our best. Just stick close to us."

"Well, I'm not going with him," Amy Grace said as she thumbed toward the door. "No offense, but he's kind of strange."

"It's okay. He is. So am I, to be fair," Cate answered.

"Not that strange," Jack answered. "I can remember when you were plain vanilla Cate."

"I'm still plain vanilla Cate. Now I just come with sprinkles," she said with a chuckle as Marcus strode into the room.

"Are we ready?"

Cate nodded as she rose. "Yes."

"Good. Now," Marcus said, holding out a hand, "everyone will need to touch my hand and in a moment, we will be in Germany."

They gathered around him, each of them placing their hand on his. The room faded away, replaced by the grandeur of Rosenberg Palace's sitting room.

"Wow," Amy Grace said. "This place is something else."

"There you are, Marcus," Anna said as she set down her teacup and rose. "And dear Catherine. How lovely to see you again, dear."

"Hello, Mother," Marcus answered.

She pulled Cate into a tight embrace before she stepped back and eyed the other two.

"And I see Mr. Reid is among us and along with..."

"Amy Grace...oh," Cate said, her brow furrowing. "I'm afraid I don't know your last name."

"Hoffman. Amy Grace Hoffman. I accidentally came along."

“Well, Ms. Hoffman,” Anna said with an arch of her eyebrow, “this is delicate work.”

“I’ve got the stomach for it. After all, I accidentally time-traveled today with my new friends, Cate and Jack. And now, I’ve...eh...what is it that we just did again?”

“Location hop,” Cate answered.

“Right. I’ve location hopped, so why not do a little research?”

“I see,” Anna answered. “I suppose at least you have a good attitude about it. Which is more than I can say for some of us.” She flicked a narrow-eyed glance at Jack before she plastered a smile on her face.

Before she could move them to the library, the doors burst open. A maid hurried in, carrying a black and white dog.

“Oh, Athena,” Anna said with a genuine grin that reached her eyes as she lifted the dog from the woman’s arms. “How stunning you look freshly brushed.”

“That dog reminds me of good sir Riley,” Jack said with a chuckle as Anna kissed the dog’s head.

“She should. She’s his mother.”

“What?” Jack asked. “Are you joking?”

“No,” Cate said with a shake of her head. “Riley was one of Anna’s dog’s pups. Oh, wait, that was in the eighteen hundreds. Maybe—“

“That is the same dog, dear. Mother couldn’t bear to lose her,” Marcus answered.

“Wow, I wish my poodles lived that long,” Amy Grace said.

“Oh, you have dogs. How lovely,” Anna answered. “Are they not simply wonderful?”

“I think so,” Amy Grace said with a nod.

Anna handed the dog back to the maid with a smile before she clasped her hands in front of her. “Well, I suppose we should begin. This way.”

She led them to the library on the second floor. “I have already pulled several volumes that may provide some insight. Though I fear we will not find many answers. This may take some doing, Marcus.”

“Yes, I agree. But we must start somewhere.”

“I’m happy to wade through what you’ve already identified,” Cate said. “I’m sure Amy Grace and Jack would love to help.”

Amy Grace settled into an armchair, extending her hand to Cate. “Just pass me a book, and I’ll do my best.”

Cate shifted a dusty volume from the top of the stack and passed it over to her. "Try this. The item used was the Ace of Hearts, so any references to it would be what we're looking for."

"Ace of Hearts. Got it," Amy Grace said with a nod.

Jack removed a book from the stack and eased into a chair next to the woman. "Ace of Hearts. Let's see what we can find."

Cate plopped into the desk chair, pulling another book from the stack as Anna and Marcus continued to peruse the shelves. She tugged it open, wrinkling her nose at the dust that plumed from it.

She traced a finger through the table of contents as she searched for any information on the card. While she didn't find any direct references, she did come across several chapters on time travel devices. She flipped to the first and scanned the entry.

When she'd first learned about time travel, she had been stunned. She and Jack had assumed that it only existed at Dunhaven. The addition of other forms of magic had left them speechless.

This chapter threatened to shock her again. There seemed to be no shortage of methods by which to travel through time.

She studied a few of them in depth, marveling at the differences that existed before she pushed herself to move on to seek information relevant to their predicament.

She found nothing that referred to the card used to trap them in nineteen fifty-five. With a sigh, she flicked to the next chapter, hoping to find more information there. After a cursory search, she couldn't find a shred of information that helped.

They spent the next several hours poring over the information in the library, coming to no solutions and finding limited information on the item.

With a heavy sigh, Cate slouched in the seat as her stomach grumbled.

"I told you it wouldn't be easy, Catherine," Marcus said as he returned a book to the shelf.

"I thought you were being cautious."

"Are there really vampires?" Amy Grace asked.

"No," Jack said with a shake of his head as Marcus answered, "Yes."

"There are," Marcus answered with a glare at Jack. "Of varying degrees."

"Hmm." Amy Grace crinkled her brow as she stared into space. "That explains a lot."

“Unfortunately, it does not explain how we can reverse this problem we have,” Cate said as she sank her chin into her palm.

“We shall have to pursue other avenues,” Marcus answered. “But for now, we should return to London and ready for dinner.”

“We should stay and work more on this.”

Marcus arched an eyebrow at her. “We agreed to dine at the club tonight.”

“And I really need to fix this so we can solve a murder.”

She held his gaze, her features shifting from insistent to pleading.

“Do not pout, Catherine.”

“I’m not pouting, but we need to solve this!”

“After you’ve eaten and slept. Mr. Reid is not going to be carted off for a murder yet to be committed. This is the safest place for him.”

“I can’t believe I’m about to say this,” Jack said as he rose from his chair, “but he has a point. Also, I’m starving. Those sandwiches we had for lunch weren’t nearly enough.”

“Thank you, Jack. I can always count on you.”

He grinned at her. “Well, actually, I’ve come to enjoy nineteen fifty-five. A time without a murder charge hanging over me or my wife.”

Cate’s shoulders slumped, but she rose from the chair. “All right, all right. We’ll go to dinner.”

“I have clothing arranged for everyone. Come along, we shall return to London.”

Within seconds, they hopped back to the townhouse, arriving in the sitting room.

Cate grinned as she spotted Andrea waiting for her.

“Hello, Your Grace. Shall we ready you for the evening?”

Cate nodded as she followed the others up the stairs. Dembe settled them in their new quarters. Within the hour, Cate descended the stairs, finding Jack tugging at his collar.

“I hate these things,” he answered.

“You look nice, though.”

“Why couldn’t you marry a guy who goes to a diner?”

Cate chuckled as she straightened his tie. Amy Grace joined them moments later.

“You look very nice,” Cate said with a smile.

Amy glanced down at the rose-colored cocktail dress. "Oh, thank you. It's...very fancy."

"I would expect nothing less from Marcus," Cate answered with a nod as her husband joined them.

"Are we ready?" Marcus asked as he joined them from the living room.

"Yes," Cate answered. "Though I maintain we could have had sandwiches at Rosenberg and continued our search."

"I disagree wholeheartedly," Jack answered. "I very much prefer a full meal. Though I'd rather it without this monkey suit."

"Have you no decorum whatsoever, Reid?" Marcus asked as they left the house behind and slid into the waiting car.

"Of course, I have. I used my napkin at every meal."

"How fortunate for us. Try not to embarrass us at the club."

Jack narrowed his eyes at the man before he slid them to Cate. She offered him an apologetic smile and a shrug as the car rolled to a stop.

Within minutes, they were seated at a central table in the dining room with a bottle of the finest wine on order.

Cate fidgeted in her seat, wishing they could make more progress on the problem rather than wait for an elaborate dinner, though Jack seemed pleased.

She scanned the room, wondering if anyone from The Agency was present. The last time they'd dined here, they had spotted a member, and she had met Ginger, who had been instrumental in helping them investigate.

She wondered if Ginger may be here tonight. With no sign of her, Cate excused herself to the ladies' room in search of her friend.

As she pushed through the door, another woman stepped from the ladies' room.

"Oh, excuse me," Cate said as she shuffled around her. She lifted her eyes with an apologetic smile to the woman, but the grin faded quickly as the woman pushed past her to cross to the lobby.

The hairs on the back of her neck stood up as she recognized Amanda Reid. But what was she doing in nineteen fifty-five?

CHAPTER 11



Cate stared after the woman as she crossed the space in her cocktail dress. She blinked her eyes a few times, wondering if she was seeing things.

The woman was definitely Amanda Reid.

Cate abandoned her trip to the ladies' room and hurried across the space as the woman disappeared into the hallway leading to the meeting spaces and offices.

Her heart thudded against her ribs as she tiptoed after the woman.

Amanda disappeared around the corner, and Cate hurried to it, peering around it. The hallway beyond was empty, making Cate's stomach drop. Where had Amanda gone?

She took a step into the hall when strong fingers wrapped around her arm. "Going somewhere, dear?"

She slid her wide eyes sideways to find her husband. With a sweet smile, she said, "Ladies' room."

"Which is that way. A fact of which you are quite well aware."

"Yes, but—"

"But?" He arched an eyebrow in the disapproving manner she'd come to recognize.

"I saw something. And I had to follow up."

"The last time you saw something and followed up, I had to pry someone's fingers from around your throat."

"Yes, I remember that, but—"

“Yes?” he prodded.

“I don’t think that would happen this time. What are the chances that lightning strikes twice?”

“When you are Catherine Kensie Northcott, they are quite good. What did you see?”

She smiled at his interest in her tale. “You’re not going to believe it.”

“Try me,” he answered flatly.

She lifted her chin as she grinned. “Amanda Reid. Jack’s supposed wife. I just saw her here in nineteen fifty-five. What would she be doing here?”

“An excellent question. Come along and let us ponder it at the table.”

Cate narrowed her eyes as she tugged against him. Gianna’s words floated through her mind. *I can’t take credit for digging up Amanda. That would have been your loving husband.* “Wait a minute...”

“What is it?”

“This is a good lead. Why don’t you want to follow up on it?”

“We have guests, dear.”

“Who are involved in a problem being created by Amanda who I have just seen roaming these very halls!”

“Yet she is not here now.”

“Marcus,” Cate said, setting her hands on her hips, “I demand to know what you know about this.”

“Nothing.”

“Really? Because Gianna says differently. Before she tossed that card at us, she said she didn’t send Amanda. You did.” Cate poked a finger at his chest.

“And you believed her?” he asked, his tone unchanged despite the accusation.

“I’m starting to. Why do you not want to follow her? Marcus, this could be a huge lead on the murder investigation that started this whole ridiculous issue.”

He heaved a sigh, pressing his lips together. “I do not wish to follow her because I know exactly where she is going. Stefano can handle the matter and report back whilst we enjoy our dinner.”

Cate’s heart skipped a beat. “You know where she’s going?”

“Yes. There is a slight truth in Gianna’s statement.”

Her jaw unhinged as she stared at her husband. “I can’t believe you. Why would you do this? Why would you drag Jack’s wife back into the

picture?”

“Because it is a matter that needed to be dealt with.”

“I can’t believe this.” Cate stalked a few steps away, crossing her arms as she frowned. “I thought I could trust you.”

“I have done nothing to lose your trust, Catherine.”

She whipped around to face him. “Except bring Jack’s wife to Dunhaven.”

“A woman he assumed he was rid of. A woman who now accuses him of murder. Would you rather that small detail have been revealed at another time? Perhaps when we are dealing with another crisis regarding your current visions? Or maybe after he and your housekeeper, Molly, have decided to wed. Would that have been an appropriate time?”

Cate glared at him, her hands on her hips. “You really need to tell me these things.”

“Would it have led to any less of an argument?”

“No,” she admitted, “but still...”

Heat washed over her, and she flicked her gaze up to her husband. “Oh...or did you tell me, and then you erased my memory?”

“I have not.”

“Ever?”

“Never,” he answered.

She arched an eyebrow. “How would I know? You could have erased my memory, and I’d have no idea.”

“I have never erased your memory, Catherine. Although, I am tempted to right now.”

She wagged a finger at him. “Don’t.”

“Fine. But can we dispatch with this argument? It is quite ridiculous. It matters not who found the current Mrs. Reid. It must be dealt with.”

“I guess you’re right,” she said with a sigh. “But we can’t do anything stuck here in nineteen fifty-five.”

“Can’t you? Did you not just stumble upon a lead?”

“A lead someone already knew about. Honestly, Marcus, will you please share information?”

“We have barely had the chance to share information. Now, you know it. I thought you preferred to focus on freeing yourself from this time, anyway.”

“I do. No, wait, I just want to solve the whole thing.”

“You always do, dear,” he said as he wrapped her arm around his and tugged her down the hall.

Cate let her shoulders slump as she meandered alongside him. “Why are things always this difficult?”

He patted her hand, offering her a consoling glance.

“Don’t give me that look.”

“What look?”

“That all-knowing, ‘poor Cate’ look.”

“I have no such look, Catherine. I’m attempting to be a doting husband.”

She shook her head at him.

“Are you not impressed?”

“I am not,” she said with a coy smile.

He puckered his lips before he frowned. “What a shame. I suppose I shall have to erase your memory and try again.”

“Don’t joke about that. It’s not funny.”

He offered her an amused glance as they reached the dining room. They crossed to the table and settled into their seats as their meal arrived.

Cate shot Jack a sideways glance, wanting to tell him about Amanda, but not in front of their dinner guest.

“So, you two got married a century ago, huh?” Amy Grace asked.

“Technically, no,” Marcus said. “While we did have a wedding ball over a century ago, we were not married until twenty-fourteen.”

Amy Grace’s forehead creased as he spoke the words. “But...you’re...so, technically, you’re not married now.”

Marcus wrapped his hand around Cate’s, displaying her wedding band and engagement ring. “We most certainly are.”

“But you’re not married yet. You don’t get married for over fifty years.”

Marcus grumbled as he glared at her. “I suppose we shall have to fix that. Perhaps a wedding in the sixteen hundreds will do the job.”

“Depends.” Amy sliced into her steak before she flicked her gaze back to him.

“On?” he questioned.

“Whether or not you plan on traveling back further in time, because then you wouldn’t be married then.”

Cate slid her eyes from the woman to Marcus as she chewed her food.

“What an interesting take. You are so...particular.”

Amy Grace shrugged. "It just seems straightforward to me."

"Really? I suppose given my life and abilities, marriage is different to me," he answered. "I've lived through many time periods. I would consider Catherine my wife in all of them."

"Wow, that's a tall order, buddy," she answered.

Cate suppressed a giggle at the statement, earning a sideways glance from Marcus. "I'm sorry."

"I'm with Amy Grace," Jack said after a sip of his wine. "It would be a tall order no matter who it was, but for you...that makes it even taller."

"And I suppose you find yourself a better candidate, Mr. Reid?" Marcus asked.

Jack shrugged. "I don't mean to brag, but I'm quite a bit funnier and some may even argue more handsome."

"Hmm, yet your wife is accusing you of murder while mine is still happily married."

"I'd question the happy part."

"All right, that's enough," Cate said before the argument turned heated. "I actually would say, I consider myself married to Marcus regardless of time period because of the strange lives we lead."

Marcus lifted his chin as he shot Jack a triumphant glance.

"Hmm, maybe because this is my first experience time traveling," Amy Grace said. "Although, if my husband appeared here, I guess I'd consider myself married too. Maybe it goes by the person, not the time period."

"Yes, that's how I see it," Cate said. "If you brought a younger version of me here, I wouldn't consider myself married, but this version of me is."

Amy Grace took a long sip of wine. "This is really making my head spin."

"The wine or the time travel?" Jack asked.

She glanced down at her glass. "Both."

"Best not to think too much about it, then," Cate said with a smile.

They finished their meal, keeping the conversation lighter. As they rose, Marcus kissed Cate's cheek. "Why don't you accompany Mr. Reid and Ms. Hoffman home, dear? I have some business to attend to."

She leaned closer, her brows furrowing. "Like business business? Or like *business*?"

"I don't know what you're saying, Catherine. It makes no sense."

"Agency stuff or just general business?"

“It has to do with The Agency.”

She nodded. “Then I’ll stay. Jack can take Amy back to the house.”

“No, you will go with them. I will report back as soon as I have finished. Never fear.”

“But...fine,” she said with a wrinkled nose. “I’ll wait up.”

“I would expect nothing less.”

“Where’s he going?” Jack asked as he strode away from them.

“Business,” Cate answered. “Let’s go home.”

They left the club behind and slid into the backseat of the waiting car to make the short trip to the townhouse.

Dembe greeted them with a bow as they entered. “I trust dinner was enjoyable?”

“Very,” Cate answered with a smile. “Amy Grace, do you think you’ll be able to sleep?”

“I hope so. I’ll let you know if I can’t.”

“Perhaps a cup of hot chocolate for your nerves, madam,” Dembe suggested.

Amy Grace tugged a corner of her lips back into a half-smile. “Oh, that actually sounds very nice. Thank you.”

“Of course,” Dembe said with a bow.

“Jack, can I talk to you for a second?” Cate asked as Amy climbed the stairs.

“Sure. I think. I’m a bit nervous about what you may tell me.”

“Sit down,” she said as she motioned to the armchair.

Jack eyed it before he flicked his gaze back to Cate. “Oh, no. It’s worse than I thought. Let me guess. Northcott wants to trap me in the thirteen hundreds.”

“No,” she said as she eased onto the couch. “But it is surprising.”

“Northcott wants to turn me into a toad.”

“Marcus isn’t going to do anything to you, Jack,” she said with shake of her head. “I promise.”

“That’s what you say. His glares at me say something entirely different.” Jack shivered.

Cate puckered her lips as she considered it. “Marcus glares at everyone that way.”

“Not you,” Jack noted. “He never glares at you.”

“He does. All the time. In fact, he just glared at me earlier this evening.”

“When? Which course?”

Cate lifted a shoulder. “When I tried to sneak off to follow a lead. He caught me and glared at me.”

Jack stiffened in his seat, leaning toward her with his eyes wide. “What lead?”

“That’s what I wanted to talk to you about,” she said, clasp and unclasp her hands. She eyed him, a pang of guilt tugging at her as she prepared to speak. “I recognized someone and started to follow them.”

“Who? Oh, wait. It’s another Northcott, isn’t it? There are two of him here.”

She shook her head. “No. It’s...Amanda.”

Jack’s jaw unhinged, and he stared at her, speechless for a moment. “What? It can’t be.”

“It was her. Definitely. No mistaking that woman. I’m sorry.”

“But...she’s...” Jack leapt from his seat and paced back and forth on the thick area rug.

“I think it’s time we realize that Amanda may not be as innocent as you once assumed she was. If she’s here in nineteen fifty-five, she has the ability to time travel. Which means she’s either Agency or...magic...or something.”

Jack shook his head, his jaw tight as he spun on his heel and crossed the room in the opposite direction. “I can’t believe this. I cannot believe this. Are these people everywhere?”

“We don’t know if she is part of the Agency.”

“What else could she be?” Jack snapped before scrubbing his face.

Cate sucked in a breath. “It seems likely that she is, yes.”

“Which means they did this on purpose. They deliberately put her in my path. And I stupidly fell for it.”

“Don’t beat yourself up for being a kind person.”

“Kind? A kind person would have just let her cry on their shoulder and offered her support. An eejit like me would marry her.”

Cate winced as she rose. “It may not have been your smartest decision, but we’ll fix it. Though this twist does make it more likely that you’re being set up by The Agency, and she is in on it.”

“She has to be. To say she saw me do it...twenty years later...”

Cate laid a hand on his arm. “I know this is hard. I’m sorry. But we’ll figure it out.”

Jack sucked in a breath, wrapping a hand around hers. "We always do."

She offered him a reassuring smile as the front door opened and Marcus strode inside. He eyed the scene before crossing to the drink cart. "Should I be jealous, dear?"

"Infinitely," Jack said. "I'm stealing your wife."

Marcus twisted to eye him over his shoulder before he returned his gaze to his brandy. "I do not find your version of humor appealing, Mr. Reid."

"That's a shame, but I understand. I'm afraid if I saw you laugh, I may not recover from it." He returned his focus to Cate. "I'm heading up. See you in the morning."

"Good night, Jack," she answered.

"That man is trying," Marcus said, staring out the window as he nursed his brandy.

Cate joined him, looking out over the street. "He's not."

Marcus heaved a sigh. "I am pleased that he prefers to deal with you."

"Give him a break. A woman he assumed he was divorced from has returned, told him they are still married, and accused him of murder. And now, she's shown up in this time. Does she work for The Agency?"

"No," Marcus answered. "A pawn for The Agency, probably. A member? Definitely not."

"How do you know?" she asked.

"You've met the woman, dear, she is hardly Agency material."

Cate wrinkled her nose. "I didn't realize they were picky."

"Exceptionally. Though not as particular as some other organizations."

Cate stared out at the streetlights lighting the trees. "They don't seem that choosy. They asked me to join."

He twisted to study her. "You are of great value to them, Catherine."

"Oh, right. Because of you."

"No, dear," he answered as he slid a lock of hair behind her ear. "Because of you."

"I don't think so. I'm hardly a catch for people like them."

"I fail to understand how you underestimate your worth, Catherine."

Cate twisted to stare out the window as she contemplated the statement. In the streetlight, a shadow shifted, sending her heart racing. She leaned closer to the window, her jaw unhinging. "Someone's out there!"

CHAPTER 12



Cate's heart hammered hard in her chest as she stared at the shadowy figure that moved through the night, carefully avoiding the glare of the streetlights. "Someone is there."

"Yes, I know. This pertains to the business I had at the club earlier. And it may be a lead to solve your problem."

Cate offered him a wide-eyed glance. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"Tell you what? That I was chasing a resource that may not pan out?"

"Well, something," Cate said with a shrug.

"Catherine..."

"Yes?" she asked.

"I may have a lead on your problem. With any luck, this shady individual making his way toward our home will be able to give us more information."

She offered him an unimpressed stare. "Very funny, Marcus. But I guess that's a start."

He grinned at her before he set his glass down and strode toward the door, opening it before the figure could knock. "Quickly, inside."

He glanced out the door, shifting his gaze up and down the street before he closed it.

The hooded man hurried into the foyer, his face obscured from view. Cate swallowed hard, her heart still pounding as she studied him. Once again, she found herself grateful for marrying Marcus—a man with the

connections to quickly find solutions and the courage to deal with dubious characters.

“This way,” Marcus said as he showed the man deeper into the house. He opened a secret panel and they stepped into the windowless room Cate recognized as the one they used when they time traveled.

As they entered, the man pulled his hood back, revealing a long scar stretching from his right eye to his chin.

Marcus pushed the panel closed, then slid his arm around Cate. “Catherine, this is Ronault Dellacourt. Mr. Dellacourt, my wife, Catherine.”

He offered her a smile that bordered on a sneer, though she couldn’t tell if that was because of his scar or his attitude.

“Mr. Dellacourt, I trust you have some information for me?” Marcus continued.

“I do,” he answered, his deep voice gruff.

Cate’s heart skipped a beat as she hoped it would be something useful.

“General consensus is an Ace of Hearts is a show-stopper. Irreversible,” he answered, sinking her hopes into the depths of despair. “But lucky for you, I don’t take no for an answer.”

“Then, you found something?” Marcus asked.

“I did.”

He flicked his eyebrows up. “I’d say lucky for you, too, since I don’t tolerate failure. What have you found?”

“A vague bit of information that suggests there may be a way to reverse the effects. It’s tricky both to gather materials for and to pull off—“

“Do not worry about that. I am well-versed in difficult procedures. What do we need?”

“A quantum compass,” Ronault answered.

Cate pinched her eyebrows together. She hadn’t stumbled upon that in her research at all.

“Oh, is that all?” Marcus answered.

Cate snapped her gaze to him. “You know it?”

“I’ve heard of them,” he answered. “Tell me you’ve found one.”

“I may have,” Ronault said with a shrug. “I’m waiting to see if it pans out.”

Marcus narrowed his eyes at the man. “You may have, or you did?”

The man’s lips pinched before he raised his eyes to Marcus. “I did. If this lead doesn’t do it, I will dig more. I’ll find your compass.”

“You’d better. My wife is most anxious to return to her time.”

The man shifted his dark eyes to her. She resisted the urge to wince as they bore into her. “We’ll get you home, Your Grace.”

“Thank you, Ronault,” Marcus said. “I expect to be informed as the situation progresses.”

He offered Marcus a nod before Marcus opened the secret panel. They said their goodbyes and the man disappeared into the shadows of the night.

“Wow, he’s really good at hiding,” Cate said as she watched him practically disappear into the shadows.

“Mm, yes, he is. Which is why I hired him. He will not make too many waves and lead trouble to our door.”

“So, how does this compass thing work?” Cate asked.

“That I cannot answer. I must research it. I’ve heard of it, but I’ve never encountered or used one.”

Cate’s stomach twisted into a knot at the words. She wondered how difficult it would be to escape from their predicament.

“Do not fret, Catherine. I am quite good at these things.”

She smiled up at him. “I know. I’m not fretting. Just wondering.”

“Your clever mind is quite attractive, dear.”

Her smile morphed into a coy expression. “So, you’re attracted to me for my brains, are you?”

“It is one of your finest features, yes. Although there are many,” he said with a tender smile as his thumb rubbed her cheek.

“Oh, yes. I’m filled with fine features,” she said with a laugh. “Well, I suppose we should get some sleep.

“I will see you in the morning, Catherine. Rest well.”

“Thank you,” she answered before she left the living room behind and headed to her room.

Within thirty minutes, Andrea had her readied for bed, and she slipped between the sheets, hoping to drift off quickly. Questions filled her mind as she tried to relax, though, and she found herself wandering through the maze of her current predicament, the murder charge Jack faced, and her daunting visions.

She wondered if she’d ever find answers to any of them. She twisted to find her music box on the nightstand. It brought a smile to her face, and she reached for it, spinning the dial to bring it to life. The soothing notes helped lull her to sleep.

When her eyes fluttered open again, the morning's light already filtered through her curtains. She yawned and stretched as she appreciated the tinkling music from her music box.

She rose, pulling her robe around her before she called for Andrea. After dressing for the day, she made her way downstairs, finding herself alone with Marcus.

"It seems everyone has managed to sleep," he said as she sank into the seat next to him. Dembe delivered her breakfast and poured her a cup of tea. "Did you sleep well, dear?"

"I did," she answered with a smile before biting into her toast. "I am ready to do research on this compass."

"Already done," Marcus answered. "I went to Rosenberg last night and retrieved several resources."

Cate raised her eyebrows as she sipped her tea. "I take it you did not sleep well, then."

"Sleep is not something I require."

Cate pondered the statement. "That's a very useful trick."

"What is?" Jack asked as he strode into the dining room and plopped in a sit across from her.

"Not sleeping."

"I disagree. I quite like sleeping. Almost as much as I enjoy eating." He grinned as Dembe delivered a plate full of eggs, sausage, toast, and bacon. "This is the only thing I like about you, Northcott."

Marcus offered Jack a questioning glance.

Jack readied his fork to dive into his breakfast. "Your food."

"I suppose I should be pleased."

"Marcus found something that may help us escape our little problem of being stuck here," Cate said, changing the subject before the two men argued.

"Oh? What is it? Some sort of magical device?" Jack sipped his orange juice as he waited for the answer.

"Yes, a compass."

Jack furrowed his brow. "Seriously? And this will uncure us?"

"It's not as crude as that," Marcus said with a frown. "But that is the long and short of it."

Jack sipped his tea before he settled the cup in the saucer. "Good. Well...I guess give us the compass, and we'll be out of your hair."

“Quantum compasses are not easy to locate, Reid. Once we have one, and have refined exactly how to use it for this purpose, only then shall you be...out of my hair, as you put it.”

Jack gave him a sideways glance as he retrieved his fork. “Well, I just figured you’d like to be rid of us so you can carry on with your...business. I thought you may have...nefarious deeds that need attending to.”

Cate shook her head at Jack, offering him an amused warning glance.

“There is never a time when my so-called nefarious deeds outweigh my commitment to Catherine.”

Jack narrowed his eyes at the man as Amy Grace wandered into the room, offering a good morning to everyone. “Well, what’s on the agenda today?” she asked as Dembe poured her a cup of tea after delivering her breakfast. “Magic pill boxes? Maybe a magic carpet ride? Oh, I know...I read a book once with a tiny teal dragon. Could we see one of those?”

“Sorry,” Cate said with a shake of her head, “there are no such things as dragons.”

Amy Grace stared at her for a moment, her forehead creased before she returned to her breakfast. “Of course, there aren’t. Magic buttons, time travel, location hopping, but dragons are ridiculous.”

“Obviously,” Cate said with a chuckle. “But we have some good news. We may have found a way to get back to our own time.”

“I suppose it doesn’t involve dragons.”

“No, it doesn’t,” Cate answered.

“Magic compass,” Jack said as he polished off his breakfast and rubbed his belly.

Amy Grace poked at a piece of egg white with her fork. “Oh right, that makes sense. Why didn’t I think of that? I suppose we just...point it in the direction we’d like to go and follow it.”

Marcus fluttered his eyelashes at her. “Even the newbie has more sense than you, Reid.”

Jack frowned at him. “Well, once Amy Grace finishes breakfast, shall we do the necessary research on this compass?”

“Yes,” Cate answered with a nod.

Marcus shook his head. “No. We must split our efforts. Someone must fetch the compass whilst others do the research.”

“I’m happy to do either,” Cate said with a smile as she dabbed the corners of her lips with her napkin.

“Unfortunately, the research requires my full attention,” Marcus answered, “so I must remain here.”

“No problem, Cate and I can fetch the compass,” Jack answered.

“Yes,” Marcus said, “I trust Catherine can fetch it and you can...go along with her.”

Jack narrowed his eyes at the man’s statement.

“Well, sounds like we have a plan, then,” Cate interjected before the conversation could turn into an argument.

“Guess that leaves me with you,” Amy Grace said as she stared at Marcus.

Jack rose from the table. “Aren’t you lucky?”

“Would have been luckier if he had a dragon, but here we are.” She shrugged as she tossed her napkin on the table.

Cate rose, pressing a hand against Marcus’s chest as the others shuffled from the room. “Be nice.”

“I am never anything but, dear.”

“You can be a little...overbearing,” she answered.

“Me? Overbearing? Never. I’m as cuddly as a kitten.”

“Uh-huh,” Cate said with a chuckle as she stepped toward the foyer, “a feral kitten, maybe.”

“Really, Catherine, I’m quite tame, and I promise to mind my manners.”

“You’d better. That poor woman is traumatized enough,” she said as they stepped into the foyer. “Where are we going to pick up the compass?”

“You should meet Ronault in the park at the end of the street. He will take you to it. Come directly here afterwards. Do not dally.”

“Got it,” Cate said with a nod. “No dallying.”

“I’m not joking, Catherine. It took all in me not to fetch another one of me so I could both research *and* go with you.”

“I’ve got it, pal, don’t worry,” Jack answered.

Marcus stared at him. “Forgive me for not feeling reassured in any way.”

“We’ll be fine. Jack and I have solved many a mystery before you came along.”

“That was before you were my wife.” Marcus shifted his gaze to Jack. “Do not let anything happen to Catherine.”

“You can count on me,” Jack said with a nod.

Cate threaded her arm through Jack's and led him through the front door into the bright sunshine. "At least the weather's nice."

"That's a miracle in and of itself. Also, we are on our own without your overbearing husband breathing down our necks."

"He claims he's not overbearing."

"Right, no, of course, he isn't."

Cate grinned at him. "Wouldn't you be the same with Molly?"

Jack heaved a sigh as he shook his head. "You got me, Cate. You're right. I suppose I can forgive him that."

"Plus, he's awfully handy in a crisis."

"So he is. Though we were doing just fine solving crimes through time before."

Jack tugged the corner of his lips back. "I suppose I ought to be thankful for his help with this situation. The Agency seems hellbent on putting us through it."

"They do. And with their tactics, we need a powerful ally."

"I just wish you weren't stuck with him, Cate. I feel terrible it came to that."

Cate pressed her lips together, trying to plaster on a reassuring smile. She wasn't certain it was as terrible as Jack made it out to be, but that was a matter for another time.

"Oh, Cate, I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to rub it in."

"You didn't," she answered quickly. "I just...was thinking about this compass." She steered the conversation away from the touchy subject, unwilling to discuss her feelings on the matter.

"Oh, right. Yeah, we've stumbled into an odd world, haven't we? Magical watches, buttons, and compasses. I wonder how this thing will work."

"That's the same question I had." She allowed her mind to switch from ruminations about her marriage to the problem at hand. "I would imagine we'll have to navigate something to fix this."

"Navigate what though? That's the real question."

"I suppose we'll find out," Cate answered as they reached the park.

Jack stopped on the edge of the grass, scanning the area. "How are we supposed to find this fellow?"

"He's not easy to miss. I met him last night." Cate rose to her tiptoes and searched. "There. Behind the tree."

Jack tugged his lips back into a deep grimace. “Yikes. He looks shady.”

“He seemed okay last night. Plus, I doubt anyone will mess with Marcus. He’s not exactly forgiving.”

“I suppose that is the upside of being married to Northcott. Outside of a few people, most won’t dare lay a finger on you lest they be turned into a toad.”

Cate grinned at him as they approached the hooded man. “Mr. Dellacourt...”

“Your Grace,” he said with a nod before he shifted his gaze to Jack. “I thought His Grace would be here.”

“No, myself and my associate, Mr. Reid, will be retrieving the compass. Do you have it?”

“I do not. I need some assistance to retrieve it.”

Cate’s pulse quickened at the words. “Magical assistance?”

“I don’t need any skills from your husband, just a...distraction. With your looks, you’ll do just fine.”

“Hey, whoa,” Jack said with a shake of his head, “you’re not dangling her like bait.”

Ronault straightened as he pulled himself away from the tree. “Then we’re not getting the compass.”

“Now, wait just a minute,” Cate answered, “we need that compass, so failure is not an option. Although, Jack has a point.”

“Darn right, I do. If this puts Cate in danger—“

“No, it’s not that,” Cate said with a shake of her head, “I’m just not certain I am a compelling enough distraction for you.”

Ronault raised his eyebrows, the expression making the scar on his face even more menacing. “Have you looked in the mirror lately, sweetheart?”

Heat rose into Cate’s cheeks as Ronault eyed her like a wolf. “Yes, I have, but I’m not...never mind. What do I need to do?”

“Flutter your eyelashes and offer a few sweet smiles. That ought to do it. I just need to slip past a few folks.”

“Wait a minute, how dangerous are these folks you need to slip past?”

Ronault shrugged nonchalantly. “I wouldn’t cross them twice if you know what I mean.”

“I do. And I don’t like it. I’ll be the distraction,” Jack said, raising his chin.

Ronault screwed up his face. “I don’t think that’ll work.”

Jack heaved a sigh as he shook his head. "I'm certain I can pull something off."

"Unless you plan to morph into a beautiful woman in the next fifteen minutes, I doubt it. Now, are we doing this or not?"

"Yes," Cate said with a nod. "I'm certain that is why Marcus sent me. I'll do my best."

"What should I do?" Jack asked.

"You are going to help me escape," Ronault answered. "Come on, I'll show you the way. You'll go around back to the window while Her Grace and I enter through the front."

"Who are these people anyway?" Jack asked as Ronault led them down the sidewalk.

"Band of magical traders. Nasty folks, but dim-witted enough to be taken advantage of from time to time."

"How did they come by the compass? Aren't they very hard to get?" Cate asked.

"Hard enough, but these folks are excellent at digging in the deepest, darkest corners of the earth to find things. It's how they exist."

"Oh," Cate said with a nod. She wondered how sure of a bet this was.

"It's just ahead. The brick building. See the alley on the side?" Ronault asked.

Jack nodded.

"You'll go in there. Stand just under the window. Make sure no one approaches that alley. Your Grace, we'll head in the front door. And once you've gotten them distracted, I'll head up to the safe. Give me ten minutes, no more, no less. Once the time is up, you'll take your leave. Understand?"

Cate swallowed hard as she nodded. She wiped her sweaty palms against her dress as she tried to slow her racing heart.

"I don't like this," Jack said as he eyed the dilapidated building.

"Too bad. Let's go." Ronault offered his arm to Cate.

She tried to hide her trembling hand as she slid her arm through his.

He led her to the door. "It should be open. You go in first."

"Wait," she said, her breath catching in her throat, "what am I walking into here?"

"A brothel."

Cate's heart stopped and her jaw unhinged. "What?"

He arched an eyebrow at her. "I am sorry, Duchess, but these folks aren't quite as refined as you're used to."

"I can't go into a brothel and distract people. I..."

"You'll do just fine. None of the girls will be awake at this hour. Only the men. And they'll appreciate a woman as lovely as you. Now, off you go."

He shoved her a step closer to the door. She swallowed hard again, shooting him a pained glance before she walked up the few concrete stairs and tried the doorknob. As Ronault suggested, it turned easily.

She pushed into the dimly lit space, trying to let her eyes adjust. The scent of liquor and cheap perfume hung heavy in the air. She eyed the dilapidated furnishings, assuming they looked better in the evening's light than what little of the morning sunlight lit them through the thick curtains.

"Well, well, well, what have we here?" A rough, unshaven man emerged from the shadows, eyeing her.

Cate offered him a nervous chuckle. "Uh, I...think I'm lost and was wondering if you could help me."

"Lost, are you? What a terrible shame a beautiful lady like you would come to be lost." His eyes traveled up and down her form. "That's a lovely ring you've got there, missus. Your husband would probably be devastated to learn you're lost."

Cate swallowed hard her grin faltered. "Yes. Which is why I need to get home. If you could point me in the direction of Ellerby Crescent—"

"Ellerby Crescent?" The man chuckled. "Well, we are well-to-do, aren't we?"

Cate tugged her lips back in a wince. Should she mention Marcus's name or not? "Not really. But I could give you a small bit of money for the help—"

The man darted forward and grabbed her, yanking her away from the door and toward the stairs. "I think not, my darling. You look like you'd fetch a pretty penny if we asked the old man for some money to get you back. So, until further notice, you'll be staying here."

Cate struggled but found herself unable to escape as he yanked her up the stairs. He shoved her into a room and slammed the door behind her. The sound of a lock clicking sealed her fate.

Cate clutched at her purse as her heart hammered against her chest. She was trapped, and she had no way to escape.

CHAPTER 13



Cate stared at the closed door, blood rushing through her ears as the gravity of her situation sank in. The man planned to hold her hostage and demand a ransom for her return.

She raced to the door and banged against it. “Let me out! You can’t do this.”

No one answered her. She hammered her fist against it again. “Let me out! You’re going to regret this when you find out who my husband is!”

The door unlocked. She stumbled back a few steps as it swung toward her, and the man entered again. “And just who is your husband? I’ll need to know so I can demand your ransom.”

Cate eyed the door over his shoulder before she dashed toward it. He grabbed hold of her in a bear hug. “I don’t think so.”

“Let go of me!” She thrashed in a desperate attempt to free herself.

“I’d really like to know who your husband is the way you were bragging about it so loudly a moment ago.” He tossed her backward, and she stumbled, landing hard on her backside.

“Too bad. I’m not telling you.”

“Really? You seemed to want to bigmouth it a moment ago.”

Cate pressed her lips together as she glared at him. “No. I’m worthless to you, so you may as well let me go.”

“Oh, you’re hardly worthless, dear. You can earn your keep here or we can ask your husband to pay it. The choice is yours. With that face, you’d do quite well here.”

She scrambled to her feet, her hands clenched into tight fists. "I'm not a prostitute."

"Yet," he answered. "And you don't have to be. Just give me your husband's name...and then hope he pays the ransom."

Cate tried to stop herself from trembling as a mix of anger and fear filled her. "Marcus Northcott."

The man's eyebrows shot up, and he eyed Cate up and down. "You don't say. You are the Duchess of Stratfordshire? Married to the Duke himself?"

"I am," Cate said, lifting her chin. "And he will not be very happy with you."

"Well, I had a ransom demand in mind, but this little twist has me rethinking. Time to up the ante. Give me your ring."

"No," Cate said, shoving her hand behind her back.

"Well, now, I need some proof that you're with me, don't I?"

She shook her head. "Not the ring, no."

He slid a switchblade from his pocket, opening it. The knife gleamed in the dim light streaming through the window. "Maybe I'll have to take something else."

She backed a few steps away as her mind spun, desperately searching for some escape. "Stay away from me!"

He crept closer to her, his knife at the ready when a voice shouted in the hall. Cate's heart hammered, wondering if Ronault had been caught.

The man glanced over his shoulder. "To be continued, Duchess."

He strode from the room, slamming and locking the door behind him.

Cate blew out a sigh of relief, pressing a hand against her chest. Her gaze darted around the room in search of a way out. She raced to the door and tugged at it, but she couldn't budge it.

With her breaths coming in gasps, she scanned the space, her eyes landing on the window. She hurried toward it and tugged it open, sticking her head into the morning air.

She glanced down at the alley below. Jack waited at the bottom next to a dumpster. "Jack!" she called.

He snapped his gaze up. "Cate?"

"Jack! I'm trapped!"

"What?" His eyes went wide.

"I'm going to jump."

“No!” he shouted. “Don’t do that. I don’t want your husband to kill me after you die.”

“I’m not going to die. I mean...I am if I stay here. The man is holding me hostage.”

“Wait, wait!” Jack scanned the alley before he scrambled onto the dumpster and stood. “Okay, try to hang from the sill, and I’ll see if I can grab you.”

“Okay.” Cate ducked back inside before she stuck her foot through the opening and straddled the windowsill.

She shimmied her way outside, clinging to the sill as she swung her leg over and dangled from it.

Strong hands wrapped around her legs. “Okay, I’ve got you. Let go.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, Cate, I’m sure. Now, let go.”

Cate released one hand then the other, slipping a little until he caught her around the middle. They wobbled for a second before they landed in a heap on the dumpster top.

She sat up, breathing a sigh of relief. “Thank goodness.”

Ronault slipped around the corner of the building and eyed them. “Oh good, you’ve escaped. Come on, let’s move.”

Cate’s forehead creased as Jack hopped down from the dumpster. “Escaped?”

“Yes. He did try to hold you for ransom, didn’t he?”

Jack helped Cate to the ground as she continued to stare at Ronault, her jaw agape. “You knew he’d do that?”

“Of course. What did you think he’d do, Duchess?”

“I don’t know...flirt with me. The way you said all that stuff about a pretty face keeping him busy. I figured I’d flutter my eyelashes a bit and be on my way.”

“With this bunch? No, no, my dear duchess.” Ronault shook his head. “With your face and those clothes, he recognized right away what a prize you were. I fully expected him to do exactly what he did.”

He dug in his pocket and held up an ancient compass. “Which gave me the time to retrieve this.”

He held it out toward her.

Cate stared down at it with a wrinkled nose before she snapped her gaze up to him.

“Well, go on, take it.”

Cate slid it from his hand and put it in her purse.

“Now, let’s go before they realize you’re missing, missus.”

Ronault started toward the main road, hesitating as Cate failed to follow.

“Well, come along.”

“I can’t believe you did that,” Cate said, finally forcing her legs to move forward. “What if I couldn’t have escaped?”

“His Grace said you are very bright and resourceful. I had every faith in you.”

“What if he put me in the basement?” Cate cried, her knees still shaky from the experience.

Ronault slid his eyes sideways to her. “He’s never done that in the past. Look, Duchess, it was a calculated risk.”

Jack slid his arm around Cate’s shoulders. “But still a risk. A risk we never should have taken.”

“Did you want the compass or not?” Ronault asked.

“Yes, but we didn’t need to risk Cate’s life,” Jack argued.

“Hardly a risk. Firstly, she is here, perfectly fine. Not so much as a scratch. And second, if she hadn’t escaped—unlikely, but still—His Grace would have ripped them limb from limb. It really wasn’t a risk.”

Cate swallowed hard, pushing the frightening memory of her brief captivity away. “Whatever, it’s over now. And we have the compass. Thank you for your help.”

“Of course, Your Grace. Tell His Grace payment may be handled using the usual method.”

Cate nodded as they stopped on the street corner.

“Good luck, Duchess. I hope you get home safely.” He offered her a fleeting smile before he spun on his heel and strode away from them.

“What kind of world have we gotten into?” Jack asked as he stared after him. He shifted his gaze to Cate. “Are you okay?”

She nodded as she sucked in a deep breath. “Yes. The shock has passed. I just...was surprised Ronault would have played that loosely with me.”

“I’m not. The man looks like a thug. He probably plays fast and loose with everyone.”

“But Marcus’s wife?” Cate shook her head as she meandered down the sidewalk.

“Oh, we have an ego, do we?”

“Sort of,” Cate said with a chuckle. “I just always assume Marcus is feared enough that I’ll be safe.”

“Except from The Agency. They hate him with a passion.”

Cate’s shoulders slumped as she shook her head. “They do. But they hate us, too, so he’s in good company.”

“Or we’re in bad company. I’m still concerned that marrying him made this worse.”

The statement sliced at her heart. Marcus wasn’t to blame for this. She shook her head as she pulled her thoughts together. “No, Gianna was after you when we went to the forties. We had no ties to Marcus then. At least not this one.”

She raised her ring finger in the air.

“True. And I nearly fell for her shenanigans then. She just seemed to be a flirt.”

“You men and your inability to resist a pretty face who fawns all over you.”

“Oh, come on, now. Who came home from the seventeen hundreds spouting about how Northcott had an old-world charm?”

Cate offered him a coy sideways glance. “He does. At least he doesn’t fall for Gianna’s advances.”

“Ohhh, I see. He has resisted the women who throw themselves at him which makes him a saint.”

She grinned at him. “That’s it. He is the perfect man.”

“Oh, Cate,” Jack answered with a laugh and a shake of his head. He heaved a sigh. “Seriously, though, I’m concerned about you.”

“There is no need, Jack. Marcus and I...are fine.”

Jack shuddered as the park came into sight. “Ugh, I hate it when you refer to yourselves as a couple. We’re not talking about your marriage and needing counseling or something.”

Cate stopped as they reached the corner of Ellerby Crescent. “I know. And I know you’re worried about me. But I’m fine. Really, I am.”

“I know you’re fine. You’ll always be fine. You’re Cate Kensie. You can make it through damn near anything. But I don’t want you to be fine. I want you to be great. Happy. Wonderful.”

She sucked in a breath and smiled at him. “I am. And actually, I’m Cate Kensie Northcott.”

Jack rolled his eyes as he offered her an amused glance. "Oh, right. Yes. How could I have forgotten."

"Yes, how could you? My ring is big enough to remind you."

"Yes, it is. I suppose what he lacks he makes up for in expensive baubles and houses. You have more houses than seasons, dear Duchess."

Cate looped her arm through his as they made their way toward the townhouse. "Yes, I do. And good thing for us one of them was within walking distance of where we were sent by Gianna this time."

Jack furrowed his brow. "Yeah, about that, what are the chances we came here and to a time where you saw Amanda?"

"I don't know. But that could be the clue we need to track down what's going on," she said as they reached the door.

"What do you think it means?" Jack asked. "Is she part of The Agency?"

"Marcus says no. He says not everyone associated with The Agency is a member of it. She may be working for them. Recruited for this specific purpose," Cate answered as she pushed into the foyer.

"So, they picked her. Why? Because they knew I'd fall for her act?"

"Try not to be too hard on yourself. These people are master manipulators."

Jack blew out a sigh as he shook his head. "I am hard on myself. I fell for their manipulations twice. Maybe you have a point about Northcott. At least he doesn't fall for them."

"His father was killed by them. He has a good reason," she answered as Marcus strode toward them.

"Catherine, I am pleased to see you back safely. Did you retrieve it?" he asked.

Cate pulled the item out of her purse and held it toward him. "We did."

"And we had some trouble, too, in case you're wondering. Your friend was very cavalier with Cate's life."

Marcus arched an eyebrow as he focused on Cate. "Is this true?"

"Yes and no. Ronault's plan...left a little to be desired, but we're here and we are safe."

"Barely," Jack answered.

"What happened?" Marcus asked.

"Your mate, Ronault—"

"He is not my mate," Marcus countered.

Jack heaved a sigh. "Do you want to hear it or not?"

Marcus motioned for him to proceed. "Ronault sent Cate inside where she was kidnapped to be held for ransom. She climbed out a window to escape."

"All part of his plan, he said." Cate shrugged.

"Remind me to discuss his plans with him. He is...a wildcard. At any rate, I am pleased you are safe." Marcus squeezed her arm.

"Have you made any progress on how to use it?"

"Yes, I have. I should understand how to use the compass by this afternoon."

Cate grinned at him. "Then we'll be able to return home this evening, right?"

"With any luck, yes."

"Okay, how does it work?" Jack asked.

Marcus motioned toward the living room. Cate shuffled inside, her eyebrows pinching. "Where is Amy Grace?"

"Upstairs resting," Marcus said as he poured a brandy and offered it to Cate.

She accepted it, her concern not dissipating. "Resting forcibly or..."

"No, dear. Simply resting of her own choice."

"Oh, good, okay," she said before she sipped her brandy. "Now, how can we learn about this compass? Is there something I could read or..."

"I thought it best for you to confer with an expert on the subject."

"That'll work. Do we go to him, or does he come here?"

"She, dear," Marcus corrected. "And I have brought her to you. Just a moment."

Cate bobbed her head after taking another sip of her brandy while Jack poured one for himself.

"So, who do you think this is?" Jack asked. "His mother?"

"No, she would have said yesterday," Cate answered with a furrowed brow. "But Marcus always has a person who knows something about something."

Jack nodded as he took a sip of his drink before he flicked his gaze to the entrance. His eyes went wide, and his jaw dropped open. He dropped his glass, causing it to smash into pieces on the hardwood under his feet. "You can't be serious."

Cate's stomach twisted into a knot as she eyed his reaction. Who had just stepped into the room that caused that much shock?

CHAPTER 14



Cate's heart thudded against her chest as she lowered her glass and twisted to eye the newcomer.

"Your expert, dear," Marcus announced as he stepped into the room next to her.

Cate's eyes widened, and she sat there in stunned silence, unable to tear her gaze away from the woman.

"Hello, Cate," the woman said with a soft grin.

Cate slow-blinked as she rose on wobbly knees. She pressed her lips together, desperately trying to make sense of what she was seeing.

"Cate?" Jack questioned.

She twisted to face him, her features pinching with confusion before she slid them back to her teacher. She hadn't expected it to be herself, but there she stood across the room. A carbon copy of her own form.

"I'm the expert?" she asked.

"Yes," Marcus answered. "You have successfully navigated through time twice using the compass. Who better than yourself to explain the ins and outs of it."

"I can't even..." Jack murmured. "There are two of you. Two Cates. Where is that Cate from?"

"The future," Cate said with a nod. "Many years from when you've come from."

Jack stepped closer, squinting his eyes. "Really? How many years?"

"Jack!" Cate answered.

“What? You don’t look very different. I don’t see any new wrinkles.”

“Hey,” Cate exclaimed. “I don’t have many wrinkles to start with.”

“But if you’re from years in the future you should have some.”

“We can debate that another time,” the future Cate said. “It’s important that you get home. And equally important that you solve this problem with Jack.”

“How do we solve it? Give us the answers.”

Future Cate sucked in a deep breath. “Unfortunately, I can’t. I need you to solve it. And I need you...or me, rather, to go through all of the things you’re about to go through.” Future Cate’s features pinched as she glanced at Cate. “I’m so sorry. But you will get through it.”

Cate swallowed hard as she studied herself, a near mirror image outside of a few minor differences. Her future self seemed...calmer, more at ease with things. “I don’t like that.”

“I know,” Cate said with a smile. “I’m you, remember? I didn’t like it either. But it’s a part of our lives. And you’ll have to live it. I could prepare, but...it would overwhelm you. You need to experience it yourself.”

“Oh, good, Cate has turned cryptic in the future. What does that mean? And are you going to tell us that we just need to wade through using the compass on our own, too?”

“Easy, Reid, do not attack Catherine because you are in shock over there being two of her.”

“I’m sorry,” he said with a wave of his hand, “but I’m starting to wonder if that’s really Cate.”

Future Cate offered him a soft smile. “It’s really, me, Jack.”

“Yeah? Prove it.”

“When we were in 1925, you helped me with my fiddly shoe clasp so we wouldn’t be late for dinner.”

Jack frowned at her.

“When we were trapped in Douglas’s lab, you told me I should have brought a Cate Kensie cardigan. And when I didn’t want to get rid of the sapphire necklace, you threw it in the loch.”

“He did what?” Marcus asked her.

“Sorry,” she said with a shrug. “And you sent it right back to me.”

“Okay, okay, so maybe you are Cate. Or you’re some kind of evil clone of Cate who knows all her memories.”

Future Cate wrinkled her nose as Cate did. Jack shifted his gaze between the two of them. "It's just not right."

Future Cate cocked her head. "Maybe you ought to rest while I talk to Cate."

"Rest? How can I rest when you're down here...being you."

Future Cate arched her eyebrow at him. "I'm sorry, but it's rather distracting, and I need Cate to focus."

His eyebrows pinched together as he grimaced at her.

"Catherine is correct, Reid. If you cannot do anything constructive here, you should leave."

Future Cate shot him a sideways glance. "Give him a chance to acclimate. You know he doesn't like magic."

Cate knitted her brows at the scene. "How far into the future are you?"

"Let's not focus on that," Future Cate answered.

"It's the fact that you won't say that makes me nervous," Jack noted with a wag of his finger. "Why can't you be honest?"

"Because it would..." Future Cate pressed her lips together. "You of all people should be arguing against me to answer that question."

"Well, I changed my mind," Jack answered. "Rules be damned."

"Cate needs to live through her life without a laundry list of information from me. It's too dangerous. There are too many things at stake."

"But yet you *can* tell us how to get home using the compass."

"That is necessary, yes. And it reveals nothing about future events," she answered.

Jack shot Cate a glance. She shrugged, offering him a fragile smile. "I think we need to listen to her."

"It disturbs me, Catherine, that you presume that I would bring someone here to mislead you."

Heat rose in her cheeks as she flicked her gaze to him, her features apologetic. "Sorry."

"You ought to be. I would never harm you."

"Ha!" Jack barked out.

He lowered his gaze to the floor as Marcus glared at him.

"You're right," Cate said with a sigh. "This Cate didn't just show up out of nowhere. Marcus brought her. So...she has to be the right Cate. A real Cate. Whatever."

"I don't like it."

“Hey,” Future Cate said, sticking a hand on her hip, “I’m the same person I was before. I’m just smarter now.”

“Smarter?” Cate answered.

“Of course, Cate,” Future Cate said with a laugh. “I’ve spent years researching. I’ve learned a lot.”

“Oh, right. That sounds like me. Well, I suppose we should stop debating this and sit down to discuss how to use this compass. I’d like to get back home. Although...”

Future Cate cocked her head. “If you’re tired after what happened this morning, we could talk later.”

Cate shook her head. “No, it’s just that...for twenty-four hours, I haven’t had one of those awful visions. I wonder if you could—“

Future Cate shook her head, offering Cate an apologetic, tight-lipped smile. “I’m sorry, Cate, but...you need to live through this.”

Cate’s features pinched as she sank onto the chair.

Future Cate rubbed her shoulder. A tingly sensation shot through her, but she wasn’t certain if it came directly from the contact or merely the idea that a future version of her was comforting her.

Future Cate knelt in front of her. “I know this is hard, but you’ll make it through. See?”

Cate’s lower lip trembled. “They’re so frightening, though.”

“I know. I remember. But you will make it through. Keep working with Anna. Don’t give up.”

“Can you at least give me a hint?” Cate asked. “No one will tell me anything, and I feel like everyone knows what’s happening but me.”

Future Cate pulled her into a hug. “It won’t be much longer before you understand, Cate. And then it will all make sense. Just a little longer.”

Cate sucked in a shaky breath as she pulled away and nodded. “Right. Okay. Well, I guess then we need to know how this compass works so we can move forward with Jack’s investigation and mine.”

Future Cate smiled at her as she squeezed her hands. “Do you have the compass?”

Marcus produced the object, and Future Cate took it from his palm with a smile. “Thanks.”

“Tea, Catherine?” he asked.

“Yes,” they both said at the same time.

“Oh,” Cate answered with a furrowed brow, “which one were you asking?”

“Both,” he answered as Future Cate grinned at him. “I shall inform Dembe.”

He strode from the room, and Future Cate shot Cate a smile. “He wasn’t willing to anger either of us.”

Cate glanced down at her future counterpart’s hands, clutching hers, her brow furrowing as she stared at the rings on her finger. Future Cate patted her hand as she rose and tugged Cate with her to settle on the couch.

Cate covered her face with her hands as she tried to steady her nerves. The reality of speaking with a future version of herself settled in, making her legs wobbly and her chest tighten.

“It’s okay, Cate,” Future Cate told her. “I know this is very overwhelming.”

“I guess you do,” she said with a sigh. “I just...tell me things get better.”

“They do,” Future Cate answered. “You are very happy. Things get easier.”

Jack shuffled to her and rubbed her shoulder. “Cate, if you don’t want to—“

“I do. I want to keep going. I just...needed some reassurance.”

Future Cate grabbed her arm and squeezed. “I know. I remember how difficult it was, especially at the beginning. But you should understand soon. It will all make so much more sense.”

“I wish it did now.” Cate sucked in a deep breath. “But that’s enough whining from me. Let’s talk about this compass. How can we use it to navigate back to...wait...I guess we need to go to the murder and drop off Amy Grace before we go back to our own time.”

“Can we go back to our own time?” Jack asked. “All of our time travel tools aren’t working.”

Future Cate glanced at him. “That’s from the effects of the Ace of Hearts. Once you counteract that, you’ll be able to use them freely.”

“Oh, right. Sorry, I’m not as learned as you. Either of you,” he said, shifting his gaze between them.

“It’s okay. But you’ll soon get used to this, too,” Future Cate said with a smile.

“No, that’s where you’re wrong. And if I do, it’s because that’s not the Jack in your time. It’s some imposter Jack who is pretending to be okay with all these odd things.”

Future Cate giggled at him. “No, it’s really you, Jack.”

“Are you certain? I don’t believe it.”

She continued to chuckle at him. “I’m one hundred percent certain we don’t have a fake Jack in the future. Trust me, I’d know.”

He arched an eyebrow, crossing his arms as he stalked across the room. “Whatever you say. I still don’t believe it. But please proceed with the lesson. I would very much like to get home and solve this little mystery with my soon-to-be ex-wife.”

“All right,” Future Cate said as she produced the compass. “Now, you may have noticed that this isn’t an ordinary compass.”

Cate swallowed hard as she studied it. The needle pointed toward the southeast. “I see. It doesn’t point north.”

“It’s a bit more complicated than that. Here, let me show you.” Future Cate dumped the compass in Cate’s hands.

The needle wobbled around wildly as though it was being pulled in every direction. Cate’s eyes went wide. “It’s...haywire.”

“Because your thoughts aren’t focused,” Future Cate said with a nod.

Cate glanced up at her future self. “Well, there goes our chances of using this. My thoughts are never focused. Maybe Jack—”

“No,” Future Cate said with a shake of her head. “You, Cate. You must do this. You must focus your thoughts.”

“But—”

“Cate,” her future self said, “focus. Let’s try to get you focused on the time you need to return to. I want you to close your eyes and focus on the last details you remember of being there.”

Cate crinkled her brow as she stared down at the compass as its needle wobbled in her hand.

Future Cate patted Cate’s knee. “Close your eyes.”

Cate fluttered her eyelashes before she nodded. She slid her eyes closed, inhaling a deep breath.

“Good, now, focus. Every detail you can recall.”

Cate allowed her mind to fill-in some of the imagery of the darkened ballroom they’d stepped into. It was hazy, but she attempted to piece them together her memory.

“Good, Cate, good.”

The sound of her own voice interrupted her thoughts. The fragile image she’d been building cracked to pieces.

She opened her eyes with a wince. “Sorry, I lost it.”

“I saw that. The needle was steadying before I spoke.”

“Maybe don’t speak this time,” Jack suggested.

“Unfortunately, navigating the time portal isn’t going to be done in a vacuum of silence. She will need to learn to cope with ambient noise, and other sensory distractions.”

“This is hopeless,” Cate said with a shake of her head.

Future Cate offered her a matter-of-fact look. “Obviously, it is not.”

Cate heaved a sigh. “Right. You’re right. I’ve clearly done this once before.”

“You’ve done it twice before,” Future Cate answered.

“Twice?!” Cate exclaimed. “Are you joking?”

“Oh, heavens. Are you saying that woman uses this card on us twice?” Jack asked.

“No, only that Cate will find herself in a circumstance where navigating a time portal will be necessary to survive. I can’t say more than that, but you can do this, Cate.”

“Okay, so, before she tried again, let me get this straight. Once she has the place she needs to go in her mind, the needle will...stabilize?”

“Yes, and point in the direction you should travel,” Future Cate answered.

Cate sucked in a deep breath as she stared down at the needle bouncing around in the compass. “All right. I’ll try again.”

She blew out a quiet breath and closed her eyes. She allowed the details to fill in again around her. This time, she focused on Gianna’s face moments before she’d thrown the card. Her heart rate increased as she recalled the moment.

“Good, Cate. That’s good.”

She fought to stop the memory from leaving her.

“Excellent, Cate,” Future Cate said. “You didn’t completely lose focus that time. Keep filling details until it feels like you’re there.”

Cate struggled to shut off all of the things from her present location. Sounds, scents, the way Jack’s pacing echoed in her ears, the soft air blowing past her skin. She filled in details of the ballroom, recalling the

scent of the wood polish, the sound of Gianna's voice, the coolness of the air.

"Very good, Cate. You've almost got it completely steady."

She eked out the details from the farthest reaches of her mind until she heard the magic words.

"You did it!" Future Cate exclaimed.

She huffed out a breath as she opened her eyes, a smile crossing her features. She frowned as she spotted the needle, wildly bouncing around. "But..."

"You did it while your eyes were closed. Now you need to learn to do it with your eyes open, so you can watch the needle."

Cate's shoulders slumped as Marcus strode into the room, followed by Dembe. "How are we coming along, Catherine?"

"She's doing well," Future Cate answered as Cate said, "Okay."

"Oh," Cate said, "sorry. I never know which of us you're talking to."

"Yes, we need some way to distinguish the Cates," Jack said with a bob of his head.

"Actually," Future Cate said as she rose, "there's no need for that. Cate, you understand what you must do. You can continue to practice with it until you feel ready to head into the time portal."

Cate's stomach clenched as she stared up at her future self. "You're leaving?"

Future Cate nodded. "You'll be okay. You know what to do. Just... believe in yourself. You can do this."

Cate's features pinched as she glanced down at the compass, its needle wildly hopping around. She thought she'd had much more time with her future counterpart. It seemed far too rushed.

"I know you feel that I'm abandoning you," Future Cate said. "But I'm not. There's just nothing more that I can tell you and far too much danger that something could be revealed that shouldn't be."

Cate rose on wobbly legs, forcing a smile onto her features. "I...don't know what to say. Thank you."

Future Cate offered her a warm smile before she wrapped her in an embrace. "You'll do great, Cate. Just remember to focus. Even if you lose your place, focus."

Cate bobbed her head up and down, her stomach twisting into a knot as her future self stepped away from her.

Future Cate slid her fingers around Marcus's forearm. "Can I talk to you for a minute?"

"Of course," he answered. "I trust you will be fine with your practicing?"

Cate nodded, a fleeting smile crossing her features before he strode from the room with Future Cate.

"What the hell was that?" Jack asked.

"I don't know," Cate answered, still staring toward the foyer where they'd disappeared. "I wonder what she's saying to him."

Jack sidled up to her, his features pinched. "No, I meant the entire thing. A future you? Standing right in front of me, talking to me, talking to you... she hugged you. Was it weird?"

"A little," Cate said with a slow nod. "It was...bizarre. Marcus made it look so much easier when he talks to himself."

"Oh, at least I haven't witnessed that. That's worse. Way worse," Jack answered.

"Not for me. I..." Cate's shoulders slumped. "I could have used a few more hours with her. Maybe she would have said something to help me with these visions."

Jack heaved a sigh. "I can't imagine you're happy to return to our time and go through that again. It must be nice not to have them now."

"It has been. Although, I'm not certain if it's a product of being here or just a..." Cate crinkled her brow as pain shot across her temples.

"Coincidence?" Jack finished for her. "I'm starting to think there are no such things as coincidences."

Cate squeezed her eyes closed as she struggled to focus on the images crowding into her mind.

"Cate?" Jack asked, his voice sounding miles away.

She pinched her features together, gritting her teeth. She tried to focus on the images, but it made the pain worse. What had Anna said? Use the good memory to help with the bad?

She struggled to breathe, her chest tightening as she grabbed hold of the wing of the armchair to steady herself.

Warm arms wrapped around her. "Cate, I've got you. It's okay."

Her knees gave way, and she collapsed into his arms as she struggled to make sense of the visions.

Her lower lip trembled as she struggled to stay conscious, but the edges of her vision blackened. She fought to stay present, searching for that soothing future memory as she dug her fingers into Jack's arm in a desperate attempt to stay grounded.

The pain spread throughout her body, tightening her muscles and twisting her stomach into knots.

Tears streamed down her cheeks as Jack laid her on the sofa. He gripped her hand, worry etched into his features. "What can I do?"

She tried to shake her head, but she couldn't. Instead, she squeezed his hand as she rode out the rest of the attack.

The images in her head slowed, centering on the double doors at the end of the hall that she'd seen so many times before. The fear that accompanied the vision filled her, closing her throat and making her shake all over.

In her vision, she closed the distance to the door, a shout emerging from her lips as she laid her fingers on the doorknob. She gasped as the vision ended, leaving her almost paralyzed with exhaustion.

But her mind kept working, fixating on the new detail she had uncovered in its latest iteration. She'd shouted a name as she approached the door. *Laura*.

Her mother's name. Were these visions about her mom?

CHAPTER 15



The pain began to subside, leaving behind a numbness as she lay against the soft cushions of the couch.

“What’s happened?” Marcus asked as he entered.

“I—I—I don’t know...she...collapsed. She was talking, and stopped, then she seemed to have trouble breathing.”

Marcus pushed past Jack to take Cate’s hand and assess her pulse. “Catherine? Have you had a vision?”

“Yes,” she squeaked out.

“All right. Just relax. How are you feeling?”

“Tired,” she answered. “But I didn’t pass out this time.”

He smiled at her as he tucked a lock of hair behind her ear. “Good. You’re getting better. Mother will be pleased.”

“I used her advice,” Cate answered as she tried to sit up.

“Not yet, dear. You’re still too tired. Would you prefer to rest in your bed?”

“No, I’m not sick,” she answered.

He stroked her hair. “But you must rest. The more you rest, the sooner you will recover your strength to use the compass to return home.”

With a sigh, she forced her head into a tiny nod. “Okay, fine. Just help me—”

Before she could finish her statement, he scooped her into his arms.

“I can walk,” she answered. “I’m moving a little.”

“What you can do and what you will do are separate things, Catherine.”

She tugged her lips into a slight smile. "Well, I know how you love to carry me around."

"Yes, I do," he said with raised eyebrows as he laid her on her bed. "I shall fetch Andrea to tend to you."

"Thank you."

Jack hovered at the foot of her bed. "I'll wait with her."

Marcus nodded at him before he left the room behind.

"Well, I'm making progress," she said with a sigh. "Look, I'm moving and talking after one of my visions. After the worst one of those."

"Want to talk about it or would you rather I prattle on about something else to take your mind off it?"

She focused her gaze on him. "I'd like to talk about it. Especially since I got a new detail this time."

Jack's eyebrows raised as he pulled an armchair closer to her bedside. "What was it? Maybe it'll help us figure this out."

Before Cate could explain, Andrea pushed into the room. "Your Grace, His Grace said you had a vision. How are you feeling?"

"Tired, but hopeful," Cate answered.

Andrea smiled at her as she skirted the bed and eased onto the edge to take Cate's hand. "That sounds wonderful."

Cate bobbed her head. "Yes, as you can see, I'm making more progress on them not being so crippling."

"And she has a new bit of information," Jack added. "I'm waiting to hear it."

"Oh, good, perhaps that will help us."

"Tremendously, I think," Cate said with a grin. "It's a detail that has clarified everything, though it has also made some things less clear."

"As always with these visions, Your Grace," Andrea said.

Cate knitted her brows. "Yes. As always."

"What was the detail?" Jack asked.

"Well, I had the usual vision. Terror striking at my heart as I run through the halls of Dunhaven. I rounded the corner and ran toward the double doors. This time I reached them. I had my hand on the handle when I called out a name."

"What name?" Jack asked.

"Laura," Cate answered.

"Laura," Jack repeated. "Do we know a Laura?"

His eyes went wide, and he snapped his fingers. "Oh, I wonder if that's Amanda's real name. Though she's not in the bedroom you indicated."

Cate shook her head. "I know a Laura."

"You do?" Jack asked. "Well, who is she?"

A smile spread across Cate's features. "My mother."

"Oh," Jack said, his eyelashes fluttering. "Right. Your mother. So, the visions are about your mother, you think?"

Cate nodded. "It fits with what Anna said—that these are so crippling because they're personal."

"Right, your mother would make sense then."

Cate let her gaze fall, her lips curling. "But what doesn't make sense is what is she doing at Dunhaven? She'd never been to Dunhaven. My grandparents left the country when my father was only five. I know because I convinced them to do it. Well, Marcus did, but still..."

"Perhaps they came back before you were born or when you were a baby," Jack suggested.

"And they never mentioned it to me? Maybe," Cate said with a shrug. "But why?"

"For your safety, Your Grace? Do you think?"

"No wait, that can't be right. Gertrude met them in the United States, but she never mentioned them being at Dunhaven." Cate let her head fall back to the headboard behind her. "None of this makes any sense."

"It must, somehow. Your mother must have been at Dunhaven at some point in the past. Perhaps history is different now. Or The Agency lured her there," Jack suggested.

Cate pressed her lips together, her features pinching. "That would make sense. That's why I'm afraid and running to her. I wish I had some other clues about when this may have occurred."

"Maybe next time you will get the door open, Your Grace, and you will be able to glean a clue from the clothing."

Cate offered her ladies' maid a smile as she squeezed her hand. "That would be great. I'd really love to solve this mystery." She snapped her gaze to Jack. "But not before we solve yours."

"Bah, what's a murder charge when The Agency is after your mother?"

"I wonder if that's what this is all about. Did they distract us with the murder charge while they somehow meddle with the past. Meddle with my

parents again?" Her jaw dropped open as the blood drained from her face. "Are they trying to kill me as a baby?"

"I suppose we could time travel back to when you were born and see if you were at Dunhaven," Jack suggested. "Well, once we can time travel again."

"I promise to keep working with the compass, just as soon as I've gathered a little more strength."

"Take your time, Cate. We're not stuck anywhere horrible. We'll go when you're recovered and ready," Jack said.

She offered him a warm smile. "Thank you. Well, I suppose I should get a little rest now, then so I can practice later."

"I'll leave you to rest as long as Andrea is staying with you."

"I am, sir," Andrea answered with a smile. "I will take good care of her."

"Good. If you need anything, Cate—"

"I'll ask," she said as she reached for his hand and squeezed it.

After a last smile, he left the room behind. Cate slouched down in the bed.

"You should try to close your eyes, Your Grace. Perhaps a nap will help fortify you." Andrea retrieved an extra blanket and draped it over Cate.

Cate tugged it higher around her, tracing the edge with her thumbnail. "While I would love to nod off and hope I wake up feeling better, my mind just keeps whirling. Every clue I get makes less and less sense. Each time I think I'm on the cusp of a breakthrough, it makes me even more confused."

"The Dowager Duchess did say these things can get very confusing, and are often not what they seem."

"Yes, she did." Cate flicked her gaze to her ladies' maid. "Did she say anything to you? About these visions?"

Andrea eased onto the mattress next to Cate, taking her hand. "Nothing specific."

"But something," Cate said, searching the woman's face for answers.

Andrea lifted a shoulder. "It's nothing, Your Grace. She is only conjecturing."

"Conjecturing what, though? I do wish you or she would say. It would be so helpful."

"But it's nothing more than conjecture about the subject. Which cannot help you at all."

Cate heaved a sigh, letting her gaze fall to her lap.

“Your Grace, I am so sorry. I do wish I could say more to help you...”

Cate patted Andrea’s hand. “It’s okay. I understand. You don’t want to confuse me more.”

Andrea offering her a consoling grin as she nodded. “Yes. And I’m so afraid to do that. I don’t want to make things worse. And that is the same reason the Dowager has given for now saying what she suspects.”

“You’re probably correct. Every time I think I can’t get more confused, I get more information and things get worse. It’s probably best to just let events unfold. Even I told myself that.”

Andrea chuckled at the words. “I did speak with your future self earlier. It was so lovely to see you.”

Cate winced. “It was odd for me.”

“Oh, yes, it was the first time you’ve spoken with yourself, wasn’t it?”

“Yes, it was,” Cate answered with a chuckle. “And very odd. And even I wouldn’t tell myself what was happening or give myself a clue. If you can’t count on yourself, who can you count on?”

Andrea laughed as she nodded. “Correct. How are you feeling?”

“Much better. I’m improving at a faster rate, so that’s also progress.”

Andrea grinned at her. “You are making excellent progress, Your Grace. The Dowager will be so pleased when you return.”

“I will be pleased when we return, too. I just want to try to make some progress on any front, including the murder that we started investigating when Gianna struck again.”

“I’m certain you will be there very soon. You do not stay down for long.”

“Thank goodness. And on that note,” Cate said as she pulled the compass from her pocket. “I think I will practice—“

“Is that wise, Your Grace? Perhaps I should consult with His Grace first.”

Cate shot her pleading glance. “Or you could just let me try it and if I get too tired, I’ll stop.”

Andrea tugged the corner of her lips back. “All right. As long as you promise to stop if you become overexerted.”

“I promise. Believe me, I do not want to be worse off than I already am. Marcus will have me sedated if I am.”

Andrea giggled at the statement as she nodded. “Yes, he will. What must you do with the compass?”

“Concentrate on the details from the moment I want to return to and the needle will steady. Can you let me know when it’s steadying? I haven’t been able to master this with my eyes closed yet, and I’d like to do that before I try with my eyes open.”

“Of course, Your Grace. I will watch the needle while you do your work.”

“Thanks.” Cate sucked in a deep breath and let her eyes slide closed. She conjured the image of the last few seconds before Gianna had cursed them with the card. The scent of wood polish rushed back to her along with the dust motes floating in the sun streaking into the dimly lit room.

The snarky bite to Gianna’s voice tumbled through her mind along with the delicate warmth she felt from Jack next to her.

“It’s steady, Your Grace,” Andrea whispered.

A smile spread across her lips, but she fought to maintain her concentration rather than celebrate.

“Still steady for the most part.”

She held the image for a few more moments before she snapped her eyes open. The needled wobbled wildly in front of her, but it didn’t matter. “I think I’ve got it. Now, I just need to try with my eyes open.”

“You’re doing so well, Your Grace.”

Cate chewed her lower lip as she continued to grin. She let her head fall back against the pillows. “I’m going to try as soon as I take a little rest. I don’t want to overdo it and end up sedated.”

For a few minutes, she basked in her newfound skill, trying to keep the questions haunting her from clouding her mind.

With a deep breath, she pulled her head up and adjusted the covers. “All right, I’m going to try again.

“Good luck,” Andrea said with a nod.

Cate fixed her gaze on the needle that bobbed around wildly, struggling to visualize the room’s details in her mind. Concentrating on them became increasingly difficult as she watched the constantly moving object. After a few minutes, she flicked her gaze elsewhere with a sigh.

“It’s all right, Your Grace. Just take a rest, then try again.”

Cate nodded, closing her eyes for a second before she sucked in a breath and eyed the compass.

She allowed her vision to blur slightly as the memory came into view. She forced herself to recall all of these sensory details, pulling back the scents, sounds, feelings, and sights.

The needle's wild motions slowed, still flopping around, but in a smaller arc.

"It's working," Andrea whispered.

Cate continued with her memory, filling in the finer details such as how the light caught Gianna's hair and the slight smudge of her eyeliner.

The needle trembled slightly but pointed in one direction. "I've done it," she said, the sound of her own voice not disturbing the steady point.

"You have. You should be able to return soon, Your Grace."

"Yes. I'll rest a bit more, but with this progress, I think we'll be ready to leave this evening."

"What's this?" Marcus asked as he hovered in the door. "Ready to leave already?"

Cate grinned at him as she nodded. "I think I have this compass thing working."

He offered her an impressed grin. "Do you? I am not surprised, Catherine. You are a quick learner."

"I think I'll be ready to leave by tonight. Then we can finally get a start on solving this mystery. After we make sure Amy Grace is okay."

"Ah, yes, your friend. We will need to ensure she does not remember this."

Cate crinkled her forehead. "How are we going to pull that off? We'll return to the past just before the murder, and then we'll need to see who the murderer is and get Amy Grace to you."

Overwhelm coursed through her as she tried to decide on an order of events that made sense.

Marcus crossed to her and eased onto the edge of the bed. "Do not worry, Catherine. Solve your mystery, then bring the woman to me. I will handle it."

"Right. Okay. She seems like a good enough sport. Maybe she'll even enjoy helping us."

He rolled his eyes. "When she isn't pestering you about that teal dragon that she insists must exist somewhere. She continues to ask about a woman named Paige Turner. I have never heard of a more ridiculous name in my life."

Cate scrunched her features. "I wonder where she got that name from?"

"I have no idea, and truthfully, I do not wish to know. The idea of dragons, specifically, a tiny dragon is preposterous."

"Right. Only Dracopires."

"Those are obviously real," Marcus said with a matter-of-fact glance.

"Obviously," Cate said with a giggle. "Well, anyway, at least soon we will be out of your hair."

She paused her features pinching again as she flicked her gaze to her lap. "And in need of your help somewhere else. I'm sorry."

He smiled at her as he caressed her cheek. "Do not be. I will always be here for you."

"Sometimes two of you are here for me," she said with a chuckle.

He winked at her as he rose. "I shall have Dembe bring your lunch here. You can continue to practice with the compass. We shall make plans for you to leave this evening."

She nodded at him as she grabbed the compass again, prepared to practice. After a fortifying cup of tea, she spent the next several hours perfecting her ability to focus on the memory.

By the time their departure arrived, she felt confident to navigate through the time portal. They gathered in the windowless hidden room. Cate wiped her sweaty palms against her leggings as she waited for Marcus to open the portal.

Her heart thudded against her chest as she began to second guess her own abilities at navigating through the time-space continuum successfully.

Marcus offered her a consoling smile as his thumb rubbed her cheek. "You will be fine, Catherine."

Her smile faltered but did not fail completely as she nodded. "Okay, well, let's head back."

"Are you sure you're ready, Cate? There's no rush," Jack said.

She pressed her lips together as she sucked in a steadying breath. "I'm ready. It's time to solve a murder."

"I shall open the portal then. Make certain you stay together. And use the lantern I gave you to see the compass. I will see you in thirty years or so." He wiggled his eyebrows at her before stretching his hands in front of him.

The small sparkling appeared in front of them, and the winds picked up. Amy Grace pressed closer to Cate as the hole grew larger.

“This is normal, right?” she shouted over the din.

“Perfectly,” Cate assured her with a nod.

The portal opened fully.

“Good luck, Catherine,” Marcus called over the noise.

Jack held the lantern higher to cast the warm glow over the compass’s bouncing needle as they stepped inside.

The portal snapped closed behind them, startling Cate as the blackness enveloped them. A shiver snaked down her spine as an icy chill wrapped around her. She hadn’t realized how cold the time passage was since they only spent a few seconds in it, usually.

She glanced down at the needled wildly swinging around. With a deep breath, she started to focus her energy on where they needed to go.

“The needle is steadying,” Jack whispered. “Good job, Cate.”

Her eyebrows pinched together as she pulled more details of the memory into focus before taking a step forward. The needle pointed straight ahead as she pivoted and continued forward.

“It’s working. Cate, it’s working,” Jack said, his voice breathy with excitement.

She dared not answer him and lose her focus, so she only responded with a smile. They continue another two steps forward when a pain shot across her forehead.

Her stomach clenched, and she sucked in a shaky breath. “Not now.”

“What is it, Cate?” he asked.

The pain grew more intense, and the corners of her vision faded to black. “Oh, no.”

“Cate?”

Her hands trembled. A tear rolled down her cheek, and she dumped the compass in Amy’s hands. “Hold this. I’m going to—“

The world turned black, and her knees buckled as she slipped away from consciousness.

CHAPTER 16



Her heart raced as her feet pounded along the thick runner in the hall. *I'm coming.*

Her mind informed the unknown person at the end of the hall that she was coming for them, that she wouldn't leave them.

She barreled toward the double doors, her hands outstretched and reaching for the handle.

The cold brass sent a shiver down her spine as she reached for it, wrapping her fingers around its slim form.

"Laura!" she called before her eyes shot open. She gasped, trembling as she found herself in a black space.

"It's okay, Cate. You're okay."

Amy Grace held the light over her. "Cate?"

"She can't talk. After those visions, she often can't talk."

Cate trembled all over, clutching Jack's arm as she tried to force her lips to move. "I'm okay."

"Oh, good. She can talk. That's good. Cate? Another vision?"

"Yes," she answered. "I'm afraid it was fairly taxing."

"It's okay," he said as he cradled her in his arms. "Just take all the time you need to recover."

Another chill shook her, and she waged her head. "No, I think I'd better try to gather my strength and get us back."

"Cate, I don't know if you can or if that's a good idea," Jack answered as she struggled to stand.

“I don’t think staying here is a good idea, either.” Her knees barely held her as she rose.

Jack steadied her, concern etched into every line of his face. “Cate? I think you should rest.”

“It’s cold here. I’m afraid we may freeze. And we have no idea what may be lurking in this portal.”

“Lurking?” Amy Grace questioned. “Maybe a teal drag—“

“No,” Cate said with a shake of her head. “I’m afraid that may not be what’s lurking. I don’t want to take any chances. But I’m a little unsteady.”

“Just lean on me, Cate,” Jack answered as he wrapped an arm around her. “You focus on the compass, and I’ll drag you along with me.”

She nodded as Amy Grace slipped the compass back into her hand and slid an arm around her waist. “I’ll help you, too.”

“Thank you,” Cate said with a gracious smile at the woman.

Jack held the lantern high over their heads as Cate worked to steady the needle again. Exhaustion made the task difficult. She wanted to close her eyes and curl into a ball. Her limbs tingled, and she struggled to lift her feet as Jack finally moved in the direction of the needle.

Her head lolled back, and they slowed to a stop. “Sorry,” she answered, tugging it back up.

“This isn’t working,” Jack answered, handing the lantern to Amy Grace.

“I’m just...really tired. I can keep going.”

Jack shook his head as he scooped her up. “I’ll carry you. Focus on that compass.”

She let her head fall against his shoulder, and her eyes slid closed. “Let me know if the needle falters.”

“I will.”

With her eyes closed, she found it easier to focus on the location despite her exhaustion.

“It’s steady, Cate,” Jack’s voice said as they moved forward through the chilly realm.

She held the image in her mind, hoping they’d soon reach the end of the time portal and exit into the real world.

Finally, warmth surrounded her instead of icy coldness. She struggled to force her eyes open.

“We need to take her somewhere,” Jack said.

“My place,” Amy Grace answered. “She can rest there.”

Cate pried her eyes open. "The murder," she answered.

"You're too tired, Cate."

"I can do it," she insisted. "Then we can decide how to proceed."

"How to proceed? You need rest," Amy Grace answered. "You stay here. Jack and I will go watch for the crime to be committed."

Cate heaved a sigh as she collapsed to the floor in the dark, empty ballroom. "Okay."

"Don't go away," Jack said with a grin.

"Very funny," she answered. "See if you can work on his comedy routine while you're sleuthing, will you?"

"I'll do my best," Amy Grace answered with a nod. "Come on, before we miss it."

"Wait, wait," Jack said. "Are you certain you want to see this? It may be...upsetting."

"Upsetting? You're going to watch, aren't you?"

"Yes, but—"

"Don't say you're a man. I can stomach it. And it has to be done. So, let's go." Amy Grace waved for him to follow her to the door.

Cate sat quietly against the wall as she eyed them peering from a small slit in the doors into the hallway.

After a few moments, their muscles went stiff, and they shared a glance before they hurried back to her.

"Well? Did you see it?"

"Yes, and no," Jack said with a shake of his head.

"What happened?" Cate asked.

He shifted his weight from foot to foot. "I'd rather explain it when we're somewhere safe. This place gives me the creeps after we got stuck in another time."

"We can go to—" Amy Grace began.

"I think that's a bad idea," Jack said. "We don't want anyone following you to your home."

Cate nodded as Jack pulled her to stand. "He's right. We'll have to take her with us. The button should work now."

"Oh, right, we're back to the magic button," Amy Grace said with a nod.

Cate held out a trembling hand, still shaky from her exhaustion. "Hang on to me. We'll be back at Dunhaven Castle in no time."

“Okay,” Amy Grace said with a shrug as she clamped her fingers around Cate’s wrist. Jack held on to her hand, and Cate flicked her thumb over the button.

The world blurred around them before coming back into focus. Moments later, they found themselves in the familiar library once again. Anna set her teacup in its saucer and slid it onto the table. “Ah, there you are.”

Cate collapsed into her chair with a heavy sigh.

“She had another vision during the time portal journey.”

“Oh, dear,” Anna said as she hurried to Cate’s side. “You’re doing quite well, though.”

“Yes,” Cate answered. “Just tired. I’m fine, though.”

“Let’s settle her in bed,” Anna said to Jack, “and then we can discuss what happened. I trust you did see something from the night of the murder?”

“Jack and Amy Grace did. And I’m dying to hear it. So, please, someone either tell me or carry me upstairs.”

“Jack, if you wouldn’t mind,” Anna said. “Though *this* is why Marcus should not have left.”

“I know he loves to carry me. He’ll be sad he missed the chance,” Cate said with a weak smile as Jack lifted her to carry her upstairs.

They traversed down the hall to the main staircase.

A wide-eyed Molly appeared from the back hallway. “Is she sick?”

“Yes,” Cate said with a nod. “I overdid it. I’m going to rest.”

“Good.” Molly shifted her gaze to Amy Grace. “Are you a nurse?”

“Uhhh,” Amy Grace began.

“Yes,” Jack said with a nod. “Amy Grace. Cate’s nurse. Come along, Nurse. Let’s get Lady Cate settled.”

“Right away, sir,” Amy Grace said as she followed him up the stairs.

They navigated through the halls to Cate’s bedroom suite. Jack laid her on the bed, and Andrea fussed over her, making her comfortable.

“How did I do with the nurse bit?” Amy Grace asked. “It felt convincing on my part.”

“Great job,” Jack answered, clapping her on the shoulder. “No one will suspect a thing.”

“Your castle is beautiful,” Amy Grace said.

“Thank you,” Cate answered with a smile. “I’m sorry to drag you here. And don’t worry about your dogs. We’ll get you back home before they even know you’re gone.”

She patted the two furry pups pressed on either side of her. “These are mine. Riley and Bailey.”

Amy Grace eased onto the side of the mattress to pet Bailey’s head. “They are very cute. I miss mine.”

“We’ll make sure you get home to them,” Cate said, patting her hand. “I promise.”

“In the meantime, we have a murder to solve,” Jack answered. “Sort of.”

“Sort of?” Cate asked. “What happened in that hallway? Did you witness a murder or not?”

Jack and Amy Grace exchanged a glance.

“Well, yes and no,” Jack answered.

“What does that mean?”

“It means...one minute, people were standing in the hall, in the next they were gone, and then in the next, there was David...dead.”

Cate heaved a sigh, her eyebrows pinching. “What? People were there, then they disappeared?”

“Right in front of our eyes,” Amy Grace said with a nod. “If I hadn’t seen it with my own eyes, I wouldn’t have believed it.”

“Who were the people?” Cate pressed.

Jack paced back and forth at the foot of Cate’s bed. “David, Amanda, and another man. I’ve never seen him before.”

Cate shifted on the mattress as she tried to parse through the details. “So...okay, give me every detail you can.”

Jack continued his trek back and forth across the area rug. “David and Amanda were fighting. They came barreling into the hall, shouting at each other. But then the other man appeared. I thought surely, he was going to kill him, but instead, Amanda just stopped speaking mid-sentence.”

“When the man arrived, did he come from the ballroom, or did he just appear?”

“He slipped in front the ballroom. And Amanda went nearly comatose.”

Cate chewed her lower lip. “I wonder what he did to her. This must be related to The Agency. What did he look like? How was he dressed?”

“He was dressed like a waiter,” Amy Grace said. “Cocoa brown hair with a wave to it. Chocolate brown eyes. Pointed features.”

“Okay,” Cate said with a nod. “Do you think you could identify him if you saw him again?”

Amy Grace nodded. “Definitely. I memorized his features so we could identify him later.”

“Okay, then what happened?” Cate asked, cutting her gaze to Jack.

“The second he walked in, Amanda stopped talking and went mute. She was almost like a frozen doll. He said a few words to David. David shook his head. It looked like he didn’t agree based on that and his posture and gestures. The man didn’t really react other than a smirk, and then they just disappeared.”

Cate twisted the blanket over her legs between her fingers. “This doesn’t sound right.”

“No kidding. And then after a second, David’s body appeared there, dead, and Amanda was back, too.”

“This is The Agency. They are interfering in this. Or they set this up to begin with. This explains why Amanda thinks you did it.”

“It does?” Jack questioned.

“Yes. She’s been brainwashed. Anna was right.”

Amy Grace’s features pinched. “Who is this woman?”

“Jack’s wife. Sort of. She’s here, accusing him of the murder.”

“Well, he obviously didn’t do it,” Amy Grace said as she lifted her chin. “And I can clear him. He was with me.”

Cate winced. “Technically, you can’t do that. That’s not the right Jack you were with.”

She screwed up her face. “Huh?”

“I’m the Jack from this year,” Jack said as he poked a finger toward the floor. “The Jack from that year was following Amanda. So, you couldn’t have been with him.”

Amy Grace’s eyes went wide, and her forehead creased. “Oh...wow, this time travel stuff is...confusing. Okay, so, I can’t give him an alibi because I was with Future Jack and not Present Jack.”

“No, you were with Present Jack and not Past Jack,” Jack corrected.

“No, Present Jack,” Amy Grace answered with a shake of her head.

“What? I’m Present Jack.”

“You’re Future Jack.”

“Actually, you’re Future Jack to her, but normal Jack to you. And she’s Past Amy Grace to us but normal Amy Grace to her,” Cate explained.

“What?” Jack asked as he scratched his head.

“Time is relative at this point. So, her current time is in the past, and our current time is now. But this is the future to her, but the present to us. And her time is the past to us, but the present to her.”

Jack collapsed on the edge of the bed and shook his head. “Okay, we have to stop. My head is going to explode. Let’s just go with you can’t give me the alibi because I’m not the right me.”

“Right,” Amy Grace said with a nod. “You are the wrong you. There is another you there who is the right you, but since I was with the wrong you, I can’t help the right you at all.”

“Right,” Jack said. “I think.”

He leapt to his feet and resumed his pacing. “So, what do we do now so all versions of me don’t go to jail for murder?”

“I think we’re going to have to confront Amanda.”

Jack rubbed his chin. “Do you think she has any information about the man?”

“She must. She has to know something.”

“But will she tell us.” Jack ground to a stop, setting his hands on his hips.

“Maybe,” Cate said, “with a little persuasion?”

Jack tugged his lips into a frown. “Persuasion? Do I want to know what you mean by that?”

Cate’s shoulders slumped. “I don’t mean anything...weird. I’m not going to waterboard her. But maybe Anna can hypnotize her.”

“Do you think she’ll agree to that?” Jack asked.

Cate pushed the covers back as she swung her legs over the edge of the bed. “There’s one way to find out.”

Jack shook his head as he hurried around the side of the bed and lifted her legs back onto the mattress. “No, no, no, you can’t get out of bed. You need to rest.”

“And we need to gather more information, Jack. We have to go.”

“I’ll go,” he insisted.

Cate heaved a sigh. “You just set her off. It’s better if I go. I’ll take Anna.”

“Wait just a moment,” Jack said. “Your nurse here may have something to say about this.”

Amy glanced at him, her features scrunching before he poked her shoulder. “Oh, right. Yeah, uh, maybe you shouldn’t do this.”

“That’s it? That was weak,” Jack complained.

“Sorry. It’s her house. And we do need to solve a murder.”

“Wait,” Cate said with a snap of her fingers, “I have a better idea.”

She pressed her lips together as a small smile formed on her lips. “Amy Grace, how do you feel about acting?”

CHAPTER 17



“This isn’t going to work,” Amy Grace said with a shake of her head.

“I think it will,” Jack answered as he studied her up and down.

She offered him an unimpressed stare as she flicked open the leather wallet. “This badge doesn’t even look real. And it says I’m Officer Playwell Kidd.”

“No one’s going to look at that. Just...flip it real quick.” Jack made a flicking motion with his wrist.

Amy Grace sucked in a breath as she practiced her credentials display. “Fine. But if I get caught...”

“Don’t worry, you’ll be okay.”

Cate hurried into the room. “Is she ready?”

“Yep,” Jack said as Amy Grace said, “No.”

Cate shot her a wide-eyed glance and an apologetic grin. “I really think this is the best possible way to do things. I’m sure you’ll be great.”

“Good thing I’ve read a lot of mysteries.”

“You’ll be perfectly fine. Jack managed to use the legal skills he learned from Law & Order to get two people out of jail,” Cate said as she wrapped her arm around Amy Grace and led her into the hall.

“Now, remember what we went over. You’re here to take her statement, but due to the inconsistencies in what she said then and what she’s saying now, you want to hypnotize her to ensure the details.”

“Right.” Amy Grace nodded as she fluttered her eyelashes. “Whew, my heart is beating fast.”

Cate patted her arm. “You’ll be okay. You’ll do great. I know you can do it.”

Amy Grace blew out a shaky breath as they arrived at a set of double doors.

“Ready?” Cate raised her eyebrows, her features expectant.

Amy Grace firmed her lips and nodded. “Yes.”

Cate twisted to face the doors, raising her fist to knock. Cate’s heart thudded against her ribs as she flicked her partner in crime a tentative smile.

The door whipped open in front of her.

Amanda eyed them both, her lips tugging into a frown. “What do you want, princess?”

Cate heaved a sigh at the words but forced a smile onto her lips. “I have a visitor for you.”

Amanda glanced around her, eyeing Amy Grace. “Who is she? Some friend who is going to plead your case or worse?”

Cate opened her mouth to answer when Amy Grace stepped around her. “Amy Grace Hoffman, Scotland Yard.”

She flashed the badge quickly before she shoved it back into her pocket. “I’m here to take your statement about what happened on that fateful night when David Hensley met his end.”

Cate flicked her eyebrows up as she watched the woman play her role.

“You’re from the police?” Amanda asked, crossing her arms.

“Yes,” Amy Grace barked at her. “May I come in and take your statement?”

Amanda shot a surprised glance Cate’s way. “And you let her in?”

“You have a story to tell, and it’s important that you tell it. Whether I believe it’s true or your memory is incorrect isn’t the point.”

“Wow, you surprise me, princess. I thought for sure you’d be keeping me under lock and key.”

Cate’s jaw flexed as she forced a smile onto her features. “Like I said, we need to get to the bottom of this, and your story is part of that.”

Amanda stepped back, allowing Amy Grace to enter the room. Cate stepped toward the door when Amanda stopped her. “I don’t think so, princess. I need to be able to speak freely.”

“Actually, I would prefer another witness while I question you if you wouldn’t mind,” Amy Grace answered.

Amanda heaved a sigh and shook her head as she waved for Cate to enter. “Fine.”

Cate slid past her into the bedroom, tightening her arms across her chest as she prepared for Amanda’s accusations against Jack.

Amy Grace pulled a notebook from her pocket along with a pen and flipped it open. “Let’s start from the beginning. What was your relationship to David Hensley?”

“We were dating,” Amanda said with a shrug.

“How long?”

“Little over a year.”

Amy Grace nodded as she scribbled in her notepad. “And what was the nature of your relationship? Were you cordial? Was the relationship difficult?”

“We had our problems like any couple. We argued sometimes. Other times, we were great. Normal relationship.”

“Normal? I have witnesses saying he was often loud and borderline violent with you. Did it ever go further than just loud? Did he ever hit you?”

Cate slid her eyes sideways to study Amanda’s reaction to that question, impressed with Amy Grace’s questioning.

Amanda huffed out a breath. “I see what you’re trying to do here. You’re trying to pin this on me. But you’re not going to do that. I didn’t do this.”

Cate winced at the words, shooting a panicked glance at Amy Grace, who didn’t seem bothered at all.

The woman shrugged, a nonchalant expression on her features. “You can think what you want. I’m just trying to get to the bottom of this. Now, did you or did you not have a tumultuous relationship with the deceased?”

“Yes, okay, yes, I did. We argued publicly several times, but I didn’t kill him.”

Amy Grace jotted a few notes down as she nodded. “No one’s saying you did, Mrs. Reid. But we need to get to the bottom of this and your statement switcheroo isn’t helping matters.”

“I can’t help it. I can’t keep lying.”

“So your original statement was a lie.” Amy Grace eyed her sternly.

“Yes,” Amanda said, “and I am very sorry about that but—“

“Why did you lie?”

Amanda licked her lips, shifting her weight. “I, uh...I thought I was doing the right thing. Jack was a nice guy. I didn’t want him to pay for something that...”

“That what? You didn’t want him to pay for something that he did? You didn’t want him to pay for something that he didn’t do? What?”

Amanda shook her head, letting her gaze fall to the floor. “I don’t know why I did it, okay? I just did.”

“And then you went on to marry the man. This man who killed your boyfriend, according to you. You married him. Again, why?”

“I...he...I’m sorry, this interview is too much for me. I can’t do this.”

“Unfortunately, Mrs. Reid, you insisted we do it,” Amy Grace pressed. “And now I have to follow through.”

“Well, now I’m not so keen on it, okay?”

“Aw,” Amy Grace said, narrowing her eyes at the woman. “Well, that’s just too bad. I need answers. And I’m going to get them from you. This isn’t a game. The law isn’t here to play with at your whim because you’re mad at your husband.”

“That’s not it at all!” Amanda shouted back.

“Then, what is it, Mrs. Reid? Tell me. What made you show up on his doorstep over a decade later and claim he’s the guilty party?”

Amy Grace raised her eyebrows toward her hairline. “No answer? Well, I have a way to get answers.”

“What are you going to do to me?” Amanda asked, wrapping her arms around her midriff.

“I want you to be hypnotized. We’ll get to the bottom of what happened that way. You may want to play games, but your subconscious will give us all the answers that we need.”

“No,” she refused with a shake of her head. “No, I won’t do it. I’m not going to allow you to manipulate me. Jack killed him. I witnessed it. I don’t know what else to tell you.”

Amy Grace wrote another note on her notepad before she flicked it shut. “Fine. If that’s all you have to say, I think we’re finished here.”

“Are you going to arrest him?”

Amy Grace shrugged. “I’ll take this back to my office and see what my superiors think. But I can tell you the word of what may be a disgruntled

wife over a decade later may not do the trick. I'm sorry, Mrs. Reid, but without any way to corroborate this, your statement may be absolutely useless."

Cate pressed her lips together as Amy Grace strode toward the door. Amanda stared at a spot on the floor, her features pinched. "Wait..."

Cate spotted the fleeting smile on Amy Grace's face before she spun to face the woman.

"Is there something else?"

"I'll do it," Amanda answered, sinking onto the edge of her mattress. "I'll do the hypnosis thing."

"Good," Amy Grace answered as she raised her chin. "That's very good. That will help the investigation quite a bit."

"When and where?"

Amy Grace raised her hands to the sides with a shrug. "How's right now?"

Amanda glanced at her. "Are you a hypnotist?"

"No, but I believe Her Grace's mother-in-law is a very practiced one. She can do it."

Amanda leapt to her feet, her fingers curled into fists. "No! No, I won't have her mother do it. She'll plant information. She will distort the facts."

"I'm not going to allow that to happen." Amy Grace shook her head. "I'm well-versed in how this works. I just want her to put you under, then I will ask the questions, and you will tell us what you remember."

Amanda swallowed hard. "I want it recorded. I want to hear what I say."

"I think that would be an excellent idea," Amy Grace answered.

"Fine." Amanda tightened her arms around her midriff again. "I guess bring her in."

Amy Grace shot Cate a glance. "I'll come with you, Your Grace."

Cate opened the door, and they slipped into the hall. "Wow," Cate whispered as they hurried to find Anna, "that was excellent. Even I believed you were from Scotland Yard."

"Thanks. I really enjoyed it. And at least she agreed."

"Let's hope Anna can do the trick." They hurried down the stairs and to the library.

Anna sat near the fireplace drinking a cup of tea as she perused a book.

"We have good news," Cate said with a grin. "Amanda has agreed to be hypnotized. Do you think you can use that to clear up whether or not her

recollection of that night is a false memory?”

Anna snapped the book shut, setting her tea aside and rising. “It may take some work, but yes. We should be able to sort fact from fiction. Where is she?”

“In her room,” Cate answered.

Her mother-in-law bobbed her head. “Let’s see what information we can find.”

Cate led the two women back to Amanda’s room. Anna flitted closer to the bed, offering the woman a polite smile. “Hello, Amanda.”

“Hi,” she answered with a frown. “I’m not happy about this, but...I’m willing to give it a go.”

“Don’t worry,” Amy Grace said, “I’ll be here the entire time. And I will make certain they record the entire thing.”

Amanda nodded as she shot a frown at Cate, her eyes narrowed. Cate shrank back, trying not to roll her eyes at the woman’s suspicion. She was lying, yet she was going to play the victim.

Anna settled into an armchair she’d dragged closer to the bed and pulled a gold medallion from her pocket. “Now, Amanda, I want you to lie back and try to relax. I know it may seem difficult, but listen to the sound of my voice and keep your eyes on this locket.”

Amanda swallowed hard and sank into the pillows. She glanced at the gold jewelry swinging on the chain. It swayed back and forth lazily as her eyes slid side to side to follow it.

“Good, now I’d like you to just concentrate on the sound of my voice. And as you listen to me talk, you will begin to feel more and more relaxed. First, your feet and the bottoms of your legs, then your thighs. They feel like they are sinking into the bed.”

Anna continued to swing the medallion back and forth. “And then your torso, your arms, and your head. And now you’re feeling so relaxed that you can let your eyes slide closed. Just focus on the sound of my voice.”

Amanda’s eyelids grew heavy before they finally closed.

Anna pocketed the medallion. “Very good, Amanda. You’re still feeling relaxed. I’m going to count backward from ten and when I reach one, you will be completely relaxed. Ready?”

“Yes,” she murmured in response.

“All right.” Anna began a slow count backward, landing on the number one.

“Are you relaxed, Amanda?” Anna asked.

“Yes,” she answered, her voice a whisper.

“Good. I’m going to ask you some questions, Amanda, and I’d like you to answer truthfully. Do you understand?”

“Yes,” the woman said.

“If you don’t answer truthfully, there will be a consequence, and you won’t like it very much.”

Cate wrinkled her nose at the statement. What did Anna plan to do if she suspected a lie?

“What is your full name?” Anna asked.

“Amanda Leigh Reid.”

Anna lifted her chin and frowned. “Mmm, yes, that is the name you are using right now, but what is your real name?”

Cate’s breath hitched as she waited for the answer. She’d seen Amanda in the 1950s. Was that her real time period?

“Lucy,” she answered without hesitation. “Lucy Thorne.”

“Lucy Thorne,” Anna answered. “And where is Lucy Thorne from?”

“Rye,” she answered.

Cate’s eyebrows furrowed as she quickly found the location and scanned a brief paragraph about the small town near the coast.

“And when is Lucy Thorne from? What era is yours, Lucy?”

Amanda didn’t answer, her eyebrows pinching.

“Lucy,” Anna prodded. “When were you born?”

“2024,” she answered.

Cate couldn’t stop the gasp that escaped her. The woman wasn’t even born yet. She was from some era in the future.

“Do you know what year you are in?” Anna questioned.

“Yes,” she answered.

“So, you have been sent back in time. For what purpose?”

Her features remained blank as she answered, “I do not know the purpose I serve, only that I serve them.”

Anna sucked in a breath, her eyes narrowing as though she assessed the truthfulness of the answer. “Who do you serve?”

“The Agency,” Amanda answered.

“And The Agency has not shared with you the purpose you serve?”

“No,” Amanda said. “It is not mine to know. Only to do as I am told.”

Anna shot Cate a glance before she returned her gaze to Amanda. "All right, Lucy, let's continue in a different direction for now, shall we?"

"All right," Amanda answered.

"I want you to think back to a very particular evening. The evening David Hensley was killed. Do you remember this evening?"

"Yes," Amanda answered.

Cate's heart thudded against her chest. She licked her lips as she waited to hear the truth about what happened that night. While likely none of this would be admissible, at least they could start to track down the guilty party and spare Jack a murder charge.

"You say you witnessed David's murder. Is this true?"

"Yes. I was there when he was murdered," she answered.

"Who did it?" Anna asked.

Amanda hesitated for a moment, her eyebrows pinching together before she spoke again. "Jack Reid."

CHAPTER 18



Cate's heart plummeted at the words she'd spoken. Jack couldn't have done it. She knew he didn't do it, but even under hypnosis, Amanda claimed he did.

"Jack Reid?" Anna repeated. "Are you certain?"

"Yes," Amanda answered. "I saw him do it. I watched David die."

Anna puckered her lips as she studied the woman. "Describe the sound he made as he died."

Cate's stomach twisted into a knot. Why would Anna ask such a question? Did the gruesome detail matter?

"I don't recall," Amanda answered.

Amanda's eyebrow arched. "What did you smell when he died?"

Amanda hesitated again before she answered, "I don't recall."

"Describe what you witnessed when David died," Anna pressed.

"Jack...killed him," Amanda answered.

"How? Describe the events. You two were arguing, correct?"

"Yes," she answered. "He had a temper, and we often argued."

"And then what?"

"Jack burst through the doors. He crossed to us and strangled David."

"Strangled. And yet you do not recall the noise either of them made?"

"No, maybe I blocked it out," Amanda offered. "It is a terrible memory."

"Your subconscious has access to it. You may prefer not to speak of it, but your subconscious has all the details. Describe them to me now."

Amanda's forehead creased again. "Jack crossed to us and strangled David."

"More details," Anna pushed.

"Jack crossed to us. He put his hands around his neck and strangled him."

"Is that all you can tell me?"

"Yes," Amanda answered.

"All right, Amanda, I'm going to bring you out of this now. When you awaken, you will not want to speak about this at all. You will ask to be left alone to rest. Do you understand?"

"Yes," Amanda answered.

"Good. I will count backward from ten. When I reach one, you will awaken and ask to be left alone to rest." Anna started her countdown, and when she reached one, Amanda's eyes fluttered open.

She pushed up to her elbows, eyeing them.

"How do you feel, Amanda?" Anna asked.

"Okay. But I would like to rest."

"I understand." Anna smiled at her as she rose. "We will leave you to rest."

"Thank you," Amanda said, her forehead creasing as she settled back in the pillows. "Yes, I would very much like to rest undisturbed."

Anna flicked the light off near the bed, and they shuffled from the room into the hall. Cate's fingers curled into fists as she fought the upset welling inside her. "We've learned nothing. She just keeps insisting Jack did it. If Amy Grace had really been from Scotland Yard, they'd have him in handcuffs already."

Anna slid her arm through Cate's and led her down the hall along with Amy Grace. "She is lying."

Cate's forehead pinched. "I think so, too, but that hypnosis trick didn't work to get the truth out of her."

"We will need to try several more times," Anna explained. "But I am certain she is lying."

Cate's lips parted as she tried to make sense of the statement. "How do you know?"

They pushed into the library and found seats around the fireplace.

"She cannot describe a single sensory detail from the murder she supposedly witnessed. If you had witnessed a murder, you would recall

things. You may block them out, but in a hypnotic state, you would recall them. A gurgling noise from the victim, the smell of sweat from the attacker, the redness of their faces, the bulging of eyes. Something would have stuck with her if she'd truly witnessed that crime.

"Instead," Anna continued with a shrug, "she simply repeats the narrative she has already been given. Jack killed him. That has been ingrained in her with a false memory."

Cate settled deeper into the cushion, her eyebrows knitting. "What if she suppressed it?"

"No. Her subconscious would recall the details. We may even witness her becoming upset as she relives them during the hypnosis, but she would recall them."

Cate drummed her fingers against the chair's supple leather. "So, how did this happen? Was she lying when she said she saw Jack kill David even under hypnosis? You said she had to tell the truth or else something would happen to her, but how could you tell?"

"No, she wasn't lying per se. She was repeating what had been drilled into her, likely through some form of mind control."

"Mind control." Cate's thoughts whirled at the nugget. Had they somehow brainwashed Jack's wife? And could it be undone?

"I'm still wrapping my mind around the fact that the girl lying in bed upstairs hasn't been born yet," Amy said.

Cate shot her another stunned glance. "Right. You're right. I wondered about that because I have seen her in the 1950s, then in your time, and now here. This is so...confusing, which doesn't make things any easier."

"No. So, this Agency...they recruited her in the future, and what? Brainwashed her and sent her back to the past?" Amy Grace asked.

"She was likely sent back to the past for the express purposes of marrying Mr. Reid. Once the murder occurred, The Agency capitalized on it."

Amy Grace shook her head as she massaged her temples. "I hope I can stand this stuff without my brain exploding. My mind is ready to burst."

"Let's take a break," Cate suggested. "I'll fill Jack in on what's happened, and we'll give our next steps some thought."

"All right," Amy Grace said. "Oh, uh, not to be a pain, but should I just stay here?"

“No, no, let me get you a bedroom. You can have a nice cup of tea and lie down for a bit.”

“I don’t want to impose,” she said as she rose with Cate.

“No imposition. I’ve got plenty of them.” Cate laughed as she led the woman from the room. “I’ll be right back.”

“I’ll be here when you’re ready, dear,” Anna answered.

Amy Grace followed behind Cate as she led her down the hall to the main staircase. The woman chewed her lower lip as they climbed.

“Everything okay?” Cate asked.

“I’m just...worried about my dogs.”

“Aw, I’ll bet. But I promise as soon as we can, we’ll get you home to them and they won’t even know you were gone. Time travel is nice like that.”

“I still can’t figure that out. Time is passing, and I’m not there.”

“No, you’re here. But you can live for days and days here and still return to the moment you left, and no time has passed there.” Cate snaked through the halls toward a rose-pink bedroom.

“I believe you but...I just can’t wrap my head around it.”

Cate patted her on the shoulder. “You get used to it after a while.”

“I’m not sure I want to.”

Swinging the door open to the bedroom, Cate chuckled. “Well, I’m certainly glad to have you along for this ride. You did very well with the Scotland Yard bit.”

“Glad to be of service,” Amy Grace said as she stepped inside, her eyes rising to take in all the details. “Wow. This is fancy.”

“I hope you like it. I’ll have Molly bring some tea up for you.”

“I appreciate that very much. Thank you.”

With a nod, Cate left her behind to explore the room and hurried down to the kitchen to pass the message along to Molly.

“Your Grace,” Mrs. Fraser said, her eyes wide. “What are you doing up? Aren’t you ill?”

“I’m feeling much better. I’d like to have tea sent up to Amy Grace.”

“The nurse?” Molly asked.

Cate bobbed her head. “Yes. She’s in the rose-pink bedroom in the west hall.”

“You shouldn’t be out of bed ordering tea for your nurse,” Mrs. Fraser said with a wag of her finger.

Cate chuckled. "I'm perfectly capable of ordering tea. And I'd like to get her settled in, too."

"That's you, Cate," Molly answered as she began to prepare a tray. "You're always trying to settle everyone else. You should be settling yourself."

"I will. I'm just trying to do a little to keep my strength up."

"Well, so long as it's very little, Your Grace," Mrs. Fraser answered with a nod and a wag of her finger, "else, I'll have to put my foot down. I don't want His Grace returning to find out we didn't care for you properly."

"You are doing just fine taking care of me. Marcus can't possibly object."

"He can, and he very well may," Mrs. Fraser warned. "He likes things just so. Typical English Duke."

Cate chewed her lower lip as she eyed the preparations for their meals and Amy Grace's tea. What would everyone think when they divorced? She wondered if he'd erase their minds so they didn't recall their marriage at all.

Her stomach clenched as she wondered if he could erase hers, too. It may be best if she didn't remember it either.

"Your Grace? Is everything all right? You look as though you've lost your best friend," Mrs. Fraser said.

Cate plastered a smile onto her features and nodded, pulling her mind away from her musing. "Yes. Just wondering how things are going in Maine."

"Is that where His Grace went?" Molly asked.

Cate bobbed her head. "Yes. Remember Celine, Damien, Michael..."

Molly smiled at her. "Who could forget the people who helped bring Jack back to us?"

"Right," Cate answered, "they are from Maine and needed a little help with a problem of their own."

"Aw, that's sweet that he'd help them. I'm surprised you didn't go, too," Molly answered, pouring steaming water into a teapot.

Cate pondered it. He hadn't asked her to go. In fact, he'd explicitly said it was far too dangerous. She wondered if that was true or if he merely didn't want to be burdened with a spouse.

She knew the score. Their marriage was fake. But still, a hovering wife may put a damper on his plans to woo back his former love interest.

"Well, with my illness..."

“I didn’t think His Grace would allow it,” Mrs. Fraser finished for her. “I’m surprised he left your side, though. It must be a large issue for him to attend to.”

“I’m sure it is. And I’m really not that sick, so I’m certain he felt more than comfortable leaving me here in your very capable hands.”

“Tea’s ready,” Molly said with a cheery smile. “I’ll run it up.”

“I’ll walk up with you. I’m going to be a good patient and rest.”

Mrs. Fraser raised her eyebrows, surprise etched into her features. “Well, progress! Our Duchess Cate taking it easy.”

Cate laughed at her comment before she ducked out of the kitchen behind Molly. She had no intention on resting. She had too much of a mystery on her hands with Jack’s trouble.

She wanted to inform him of what had happened with Amanda and hope that they could figure out a direction to move in. Their investigation was stuck in quicksand.

“So, how long will the nurse be with us?” Molly asked.

“Uh, not very long,” Cate answered. “She’s only here to make sure I don’t get any worse. As soon as I’ve proven that I’ve turned a corner, she’ll go back home.”

“Well, I hope you have turned the corner,” Molly answered.

Cate offered a polite smile, knowing she hadn’t. She’d gotten no further on the issue causing her to faint at every turn.

They reached the foyer, and Molly started up the stairs. She twisted to find Cate heading for the library. “I thought you were going to rest.”

“I just need to check in with Anna,” Cate answered. “Then I promise I will.”

Molly nodded at her before she continued up the steps with the tea tray. Cate chewed her lower lip, hurrying down the hall.

Too many loose threads were dangling. She wished she could grab hold of one and unravel the mystery before it unraveled her.

She pushed into the library, finding Anna with her book.

She glanced up from the pages with a smile. “Have you gotten your friend settled?”

“Yes,” Cate answered. “And now I think I need some help from you.”

Anna snapped the book shut and set it down on the cushion beside her. “Of course, dear. There are several ways we can continue forward in our search for information with Ms. Thorne—“

Cate plopped into the chair across from her. “Yes, I’ll need help with that, too, but that’s not what I meant.”

Anna’s eyebrows shot up. “Your visions?”

Cate sucked in a breath, suppressing a shudder at what was quickly becoming her least favorite subject. “Yes. I had two more while we were stuck in the past. I got a bit of information, but it’s not doing me any good. I’d like to practice more. Maybe in the room I’m running to in my visions.”

“Tell me about what you learned,” Anna said.

Cate sucked in a breath and nodded. “It’s still the same vision. I’m running down the hall toward those double doors. I’m afraid. But in these latest ones, I’ve reached the door.”

“Progress.”

Cate gave her a weak smile as she nodded. “Yes. And...I call out a name. This is where the real progress is, though it makes no sense to me still.”

“What is the name?”

“Laura,” Cate answered, her mind conjuring an image of her mother’s face.

“And what about that confuses you?”

Cate raised her shoulders, tension building in them. “Well, you were right. These are personal because they are about my mother. But when was my mother at the castle? No time that I know of. It must be in the past. But when? And am I changing the past by bringing her here?”

Cate’s features scrunched as she realized she was no closer to answers.

“Catherine, I know this is difficult, but you must learn that visions can be incredibly difficult to sort through.”

“It doesn’t make it any less frustrating. I get one answer solved, and it gives me ten more questions.”

Anna offered her a cryptic smile.

“What?” Cate asked.

“I didn’t say anything.”

“No, but you...have a look. A look like I haven’t solved anything.”

Anna rose from her seat on the couch and approached Cate, stroking her hair as she perched on the arm of the chair. “I have something to say, though I do not wish it to sound harsh. If you are not in a place to hear it, I’ll hold my tongue.”

“I’d rather you just say it. I don’t want people to hold back. I’m not sickly.”

“No, but you are stressed. Exceptionally over these visions. I do not wish to make things worse. But there is something you should consider.”

“What is it?” Cate asked.

“So far, your assessment of the visions has been very closed-minded.”

Cate furrowed her brow as she lifted her gaze to her mother-in-law.

“Don’t be offended. This is all new to you. But I feel it is something I must mention.”

Cate assessed the statement, trying to determine what it meant. How was she being closed-minded? She’d barely made any suppositions about the visions because, until recently, she hadn’t had anything to latch on to.

Even now, she had precious little, but from what she did know, she hadn’t jumped to any conclusions.

“All right,” she finally answered, “but I don’t see what you mean?”

Anna offered her a consoling smile. “You’ve assumed the Laura you’re running toward is your mother. But it could be another Laura.”

Cate wrung her hands in her lap. “But that’s because you said it was deeply personal. I don’t know any other Lauras who I have a deeply personal connection with.”

“Yet,” Anna answered. “You don’t know any Lauras yet.”

Cate sucked in a breath as she realized what Anna was hinting at. The Laura she raced to could be a part of her future. Which meant she was no closer to solving anything. How could she guess at her future?

She would never be able to solve her visions.

CHAPTER 19



A flurry of emotions sped through her from despair to anguish, and Cate sank her head into her hands as tears welled in her eyes.

Anna's hand rubbed her back as she chewed her lower lip, trying to hold her emotions together.

"Catherine, you shouldn't take it so hard. It's not a criticism of you, just a bit of helpful advice."

Cate shook her head as she wiped away the tears that had fallen to her cheeks. "I'm not...it's not..."

Her features pinched again.

"Tell me what's upsetting you," Anna said.

Cate's lower lip trembled as she glanced through glassy eyes at her mother-in-law. She would truly miss the woman after her divorce, and she wondered if they could remain friends. Likely not. The woman would probably be angry about what had occurred and blame Cate for roping her son into a loveless marriage.

Cate swallowed hard, facing her present instead of her future. "I don't feel it's a criticism, but I don't understand it. I don't understand anything. I keep having these visions over and over, and I'm getting nowhere nearer to the truth. I'm just frustrated."

"Perhaps, then, we shouldn't visit that room. Maybe it's best if you put it out of your mind for a bit and focus on the situation with Mr. Reid."

Cate pressed her lips together into a thin line. Was it best that she did that? Or would she be better off searching for answers in her future?

“No,” she said as she clenched her fingers into a fist around the tissue she’d fished from her pocket, “no, I have to face it. If I let this vision beat me, I’ll never learn.”

Anna’s features softened. “You are a fighter, and an excellent pupil. I am reminded every day of why Marcus chose you as a wife.”

Cate swallowed hard, forcing a smile onto her features.

Marcus hadn’t chosen her. He’d done her a favor.

“I know I usually make you blush when I tell you that, but it is the truth, Catherine. Your quiet strength, your curiosity, and your willingness to fight. It is what drew him to you. And what binds you together.”

This was going to be so difficult when they separated. Not only the fall out with the others around her, but the one that would occur privately for her. But she couldn’t face that now. She’d deal with it when it happened. She had too many other things on her mind to cry over her future.

Though, she assumed she had better start thinking about it since Anna seemed to think the Laura she’d become so close to would fill it.

“Maybe we should try visiting that room,” Cate said, deflecting from answering anything about her marriage.

“Are you certain you feel up to it? You are very upset.”

“Yes, but then I will be less upset. I’m facing it. Right now, I’m falling apart because I haven’t faced it. But at least I’m doing something.”

“All right, then. If it becomes too much for you, we’ll merely move on to Mr. Reid’s dilemma.”

“At least we made some semblance of progress on that. We know her claims are false. We just need to prove them.”

“And we will all work on that. But first, let’s satisfy your curiosity with this room.”

Anna rose and held a hand out to Cate. Cate clung to it, needing the steadiness the woman provided as she rose. She wasn’t certain what would happen when she stepped into the room that had been haunting her visions, but she hoped it would lead to some clarity.

With a deep breath, she skirted the chair and headed for the doors.

Her heart hammered against her ribs as she climbed the stairs. In a moment of weakness, she nearly stopped herself from threading through the halls toward the room in her visions. Her fingers curled into fists as she willed herself along toward it. She had to find answers.

As she rounded the corner, the double doors at the end of the hall coming into sight, her breath hitched. Her fingernails dug into her palms as the sense of déjà vu swirled within her.

A warm hand slid around her shoulders. "Take your time, Catherine."

Cate offered her a nervous smile, the expression faltering within seconds.

"It's all right, dear. In fact, let's pause here. Is this the direction you were coming from?"

Cate shook her head. "No, I..."

Her shoulders slumped as her eyebrows pinched.

"What is it, dear?"

"I don't know why I think this, but I feel like I was coming from my bedroom. But I don't think I started out in my bedroom in any of the visions. I'm just running from that way to this hall."

"Good, that's fine. Your gut reaction is likely correct. Let's shift there and retrace your steps from the bedroom, approaching the door in the same direction as you do in your vision."

Cate bobbed her head, though she wasn't certain she agreed. Her muscles tensed as Anna led her to the next hallway.

"You may experience some of the emotions you experience in your vision this way. But you are perfectly safe."

"Right." Cate pressed her lips together into a thin line as she repeated Anna's words over and over in a mantra.

Her trepidation built as they spun around to approach the hall. Her heart thudded, her palms turned sweaty. The future memory of her racing down this hall toward some unknown problem that had twisted her stomach in knots manifested.

"Breathe, Catherine," Anna reminded her.

She realized she'd been holding her breath, her chest constricted as they approached the corner.

She forced out an exhale through her lips and pressed on around the corner.

"Does this feel right?" Anna asked, hesitating at the end of the hall.

Cate nodded, unable to formulate words. "Y-yes," she whispered.

"It's all right, Catherine. These visions are terrifying, but there is nothing to be afraid of now."

“To be honest,” Cate said as they took a few steps closer to the doors at the end, “I’m a little afraid of having the vision again.”

“Of course, you are. And you may. The feel of the brass knob on your fingers may trigger it. The opening of the door could bring a new rush of it. But it also may bring some clarity.”

“Okay, I’m preparing myself for it,” she responded. “And maybe this time, I’ll actually manage to get through it.”

“It’s all right if you don’t. This is not a race to mastery.”

“I feel like it is. How long did it take for you?”

“Oh, darling, I had a much different life than you, but for me even, it was hardly fast. More like a slow crawl on my knuckles over glass.”

The statement elicited a chuckle from Cate, easing some of her nerves.

“Perhaps we should have bought your rose. It’s comforting to you.”

“It’s okay. I have that memory floating in the back of my mind, though I’ll admit, I’m trying to concentrate on details from this vision.”

Anna stopped her, twisting to face her as they stood in the middle of the hall. “Here is a tip. I realize your mind is searching for answers, so it is natural to focus on the vision, but try focusing on your happy vision.”

Cate’s brows knitted as she parsed through the advice. “Really? What if I miss something?”

“It’s far likelier that you will miss something when you are hyper focused on the vision, combing through it, because your mind is overtaxed and burdened. It’s less likely you will miss something if you aren’t forcing anything. Then, things tend to flow more freely.”

“Right,” Cate said, “okay. Focus on my happy vision.”

Anna nodded.

Cate slid her eyes closed, trying to bring the full future moment into her mind, focusing on every detail she could recall. She opened her eyes, a smile playing on her lips. “I have it.”

“Good, hold on to it and let’s continue.”

Cate sucked in a steadying breath as Anna led her further down the hall. Her future memory slipped a little, replaced by details of her vision. Her forehead creased as she fought to hold on to the happy moment in her future.

“Doing all right, darling?” Anna asked.

“Yes,” she answered with a shaky voice. “Trying to hold on to my happy future memory, but it’s slipping.”

“It’s all right. This needn’t be perfect. If you slip, you slip. Just let things come naturally, dear.”

“I’m trying.” She fought the urge to shudder all over as they approached the doors.

Images of her reaching for the doorknob shattered the peace she’d found in her comforting vision. Her legs wobbled.

“Can you reach for the door?” Anna asked softly.

Cate bobbed her head, stretching a trembling hand toward the brass knob. More emotion and images flooded her mind, taking her breath away.

“Breathe, Catherine. I know this is difficult, but you must remain as calm as possible.”

She clung to her mother-in-law’s words, reminding herself that she was safe, pulling on the emotion from the happy memory.

The sound of her panicked voice calling for Laura echoed in her mind.

Before she could second-guess herself, she swung the door open, holding her breath as she peered into the room beyond.

She gnawed at her lower lip, expecting something to happen. She wasn’t certain what, but she almost anticipated a monster to leap out at her.

“Anything?”

Cate shook her head. “No, nothing. Nothing is triggering anything.”

“All right. Perhaps that is enough for the day,” Anna suggested.

“No,” Cate said with a shake of her head. “I want to go inside.”

Anna offered her a supportive smile and a nod. Cate stepped into the quiet room, scanning it in search of some clue that could help her unravel the vision.

She spotted nothing that meant anything to her. She crossed to the bed, running a hand over the dust cover spread across it. Maybe if she touched the actual bed, it would trigger a vision. Objects had a way of doing that.

She grabbed the post poking toward the ceiling before she traced her fingers down to the mattress. She slid her fingers under the dust cover and ran her hand along it.

Nothing popped into her mind. With her lips pressed together in a thin line, she shifted her gaze to other furniture items in the room. Doubtful any of them would help, she heaved a sigh.

“What is it, Catherine?” Anna asked from the doorway.

“I’m trying to trigger something. I thought maybe the bed would do it. You know? If my mom was here at some point...” Her voice trailed off as

she let her gaze slide to her mother-in-law. "I know I'm not supposed to assume that, but...I just...whoever this Laura is, she was in this room, I guess. And...I thought touching something here would trigger a vision. It's happened before."

"Yes, physical objects can do that. Perhaps not the bed, but something else," Anna suggested.

"I'll try everything here. Honestly, I'm surprised the touch of the doorknob didn't help."

"This can be unpredictable."

"Tell me about it. I guess if it was predictable, though, we could easily control the world."

Anna chuckled at the statement. "It would certainly help."

Cate crossed to a dresser, lifting the sheet that covered it and running her fingertips along the smooth surface. She slid her eyes closed, hoping to find something in her mind's eye.

Maybe she was trying too hard. She let her brain relax, pulling the happy future memory into her thoughts as a distraction. But it didn't help. Nothing crept into the fringes of her mind even remotely related to this room and what was happening in it at some undisclosed time period in her future.

She pulled her hand away as she rolled her eyes, her hopes sinking. "I know I shouldn't feel like this is a setback, but I do."

"That's natural, darling. Continue to explore until you've satisfied your curiosity."

Cate bobbed her head as she wandered around the room, trying the other pieces of furniture. Nothing brought even the whiff of a vision to her. She ended her quest in the center of the room, spinning in a slow circle as she gnawed at her lower lip. "Nothing."

"It may be for the best. These visions are becoming quite taxing on you."

"What's taxing is that I'm nowhere closer to solving them."

Anna offered her a consoling glance. "Let's work on our other problem, shall we?"

"Okay," Cate answered as she took a step toward the door.

Within seconds the room around her melted, her vision darkening on the edges. Her footsteps faltered, and she grabbed the post on the bed to steady herself. Her head snapped back as a violent vision tore through her.

Jumbled images rushed through her mind in a maddening mess. As she fought to make sense of them, her limbs turned weak and her senses began to close off.

She collapsed onto the floor in a heap.

CHAPTER 20



“Catherine?” a muted voice called to her. “I am here with you.”

Cate struggled to open her eyes, her eyelids fluttering before they fell shut again. She moaned and made a desperate attempt to move her leaden legs and arms. She must be exhausted again from the force of the vision that had torn through her moments ago.

Perhaps she could use this time to sort through the jumbled mess that had brought her to her knees.

Her brain refused to cooperate, though.

“Catherine.” She recognized Anna’s voice, though it sounded further away this time.

She wanted to answer, but she couldn’t.

“Catherine, try to focus on my voice.” The sound warbled, distorted by something.

Cate’s forehead pinched as she forced herself to focus on Anna’s voice which trickle in and out.

She had to force her eyes open so she could use her surroundings to ground her.

With a concentrated effort, Cate snapped them open. A gasp escaped her as she peered around in her surroundings. Where was she?

She shook her head. She was in her bedroom, but Anna was nowhere to be found. She had heard her voice only moments ago.

Cate flung back the covers, staring down at her pajamas for a second as she wondered how she’d gotten into them.

A bloodcurdling scream filled the air, and she snapped her head in its direction as she pulled her robe around her shoulders.

She tore from her bedroom as another scream echoed in the halls. It was coming from the bedroom she stood in...or had stood in. Her mind tried to wrap itself around what was happening.

She turned the corner, fear building in her. Was she stuck in her vision?

She ran to the end of the hall, but the world around her started to collapse, falling away piece by piece as her fingers wrapped around the handle.

Words and random images tore through her mind again. She tried to latch onto any of them, but it was impossible. As she fell through darkness, one image formed and etched itself into her brain. Her startled features.

She awoke with a sharp gasp in the bedroom she'd collapsed in.

Anna hovered over her. "There you are."

"What happened?" she questioned, her eyes wide as she took in her surroundings and her breath ragged.

"You collapsed. I assume something to do with the vision. Did you experience it again?"

"Ah, something like it. I don't know, it was different."

"How so?" Anna asked, her hands still wrapped around Cate firmly.

"Like...like I was there. Like I was inside the vision."

"Ah, yes, that can happen. Did you glean any details from the new experience?"

"Not really," Cate said with a sigh. "It was mostly the same thing. I was in my bedroom, heard a scream, and ran toward that door. When I started to open it, the world fell away. It was just a jumble of images and words. Except for one thing."

Anna slid a lock of hair behind Cate's hear. "What was it?"

"The image of me, startled, scared. I...don't know why or how. Maybe I caught myself in a mirror before the world collapsed around me."

Anna pulled her closer into a tight hug. "Try not to think about it so much, darling. It's difficult to pry apart, I know. And not know is just as difficult. I understand that. But there is nothing you can do at this moment. How are you feeling otherwise?"

"Okay. At least I don't feel as exhausted as I normally do."

"Still, you should rest. Let's get you back to your bedroom, shall we?"

“Ugh,” Cate said with a roll of her eyes, “I’m so sick of resting. That’s all I do is rest. No, I need to start solving things. And if I can’t make progress on this front, then I’ll make it on Jack’s. I should fill him in, and we should talk about next steps.”

“All of which can be done from the comfort of your bedroom,” Anna argued. “Really, Catherine, you are a duchess. You ought to act like one.”

“Duchesses do not spend their days lounging in bed,” Cate answered as Anna rose and tugged her up to stand.

“Of course, they do. I, myself, spent many a day lounging in my bed. It is our birthright.”

Cate offered her an amused smile. “I wasn’t born to this like you.”

“You were born to it, Catherine. It matters not that you were American-born and bred. You were made to be a duchess. It was your destiny. Now that you have fulfilled it, it is time to step into the role fully.”

Cate’s brow furrowed at the words, and her heart sank. This poor woman was simply trying to guide her into the life she assumed she’d lead. She had no idea Cate would return to her previous station soon enough.

“Catherine, do not be hesitant to be the Duchess of Stratfordshire. I sense a reluctance in you, as though you are waiting for the other shoe to drop. It will not. Take your rightful place.”

She offered a nervous chuckle as she avoided her mother-in-law’s gaze, certain her cheeks were bright red.

“Perhaps once you’ve dealt with a few of these situations that are burning brightly in your mind. After at least Mr. Reid’s is solved, I will take you to the Stratfordshire estate. And you will begin to flex your muscles there.”

They arrived at the bedroom, and Cate gave her a nod and an awkward laugh in agreement.

“I will find Mr. Reid. You rest. Even if you choose to do it on the chaise, you must rest.”

“I promise. I will be a lazy duchess,” Cate answered with a wink.

“Good.” Anna spun a heel and meandered down the hall

Cate disappeared into the quietness of her room, breathing a sigh of relief to be finished with the conversation about her role as Marcus’s wife. It was getting harder and harder to keep up the charade. She’d have to confess soon. She couldn’t keep lying to someone she cared for so much.

She shoved it aside, unwilling to deal with it now, and crossed to her bedroom to retrieve her phone before she curled on the chaise with her two dogs.

It had been so long since she'd had these quiet moments to herself. At every turn, they'd been plunged into a crazy circumstance by The Agency.

She let her head fall back against the soft fabric as her mind flitted from trouble to trouble. Her phone chimed, interrupting her thoughts.

Her screen glowed with a new text message. She smiled as she spotted the name attached. Damien.

She toggled into the message. *Hey Cate. Just checking in to see how you are.*

She responded to him, the smile still playing on her lips. *I'm doing fine. I heard you all are having some troubles though. You okay?*

Riley pawed her before climbing onto her lap, and she stroked his silky fur, allowing the act to ease both of their nerves until the next message arrived. *We're okay. We're dealing with it. Crazy stuff, though.*

Cate shook her head at the phone, wondering what was so crazy. On second thought, she may not want to know. Though she did worry about Marcus.

She switched over to the message thread with her husband and sent him a text, feeling somewhat stupid. To cover her feelings, she returned to the message from Damien and answered. *I wish I could help, but I'm certain you are far better at dealing with these things than I am. I'm still getting used to magic. At least you have Marcus to help. He is helping, isn't he?*

A message from her husband popped onto her screen as she sent the other. *Something has come up. I will be away longer than anticipated. I hope everything is quiet in Dunhaven.*

She answered that she was a fine and not to worry before she returned to Damien's.

It's okay, Cate. And yes, weirdly, he's helping...I think. I mean, he's helped us in the past. That's all thanks to you. So...thanks.

Cate laughed out loud at the text before she typed back a new response. *Me? I doubt that. Can't take credit, sorry.*

His response was immediate. *I'm serious. Married Marcus is so tame. Keep up the good work. I'll check in with you later.*

She let her head rest against the back of the chaise again as she shook her head at her friend's message. She enjoyed the relationship she'd found

with him. It was one of the saner things to have come out of the strange situation where she'd met them.

She stared down at the wedding ring on her finger, her thumb rubbing it as she waited for Jack to appear. Outside of the friendships she'd formed, nothing else seemed sane at all.

Finally, her doors burst open, and Anna strode in with Jack. "I found him."

"Good," Cate said with a smile. "And I have been resting as promised."

"Another vision?" Jack asked.

Cate nodded. "Yes. I went to the room I've been seeing. Nothing triggered anything, but just before I left, I had the vision. It felt...immersive this time. No new information, just an image of my terrified features staring back at me. I guess just more confirmation about how scared I am in these visions."

"Too bad we can't nail down a time period or something that could help us explore."

"I know," Cate said with a sigh as Anna settled into an armchair.

"Now, Catherine," she said, "you know how I feel about you dwelling on these visions. Especially when there is work to be done on other fronts."

Cate sucked in a breath and smiled at Jack. "Yes. We made some progress. Not much, but some."

"Her Grace said something about the result of the hypnosis you did on Amanda," Jack answered. "What happened? Did she name the killer?"

"She did," Cate said, her smile turning into a wince. "She said it was you."

Jack's eyes went wide. "That's crazy. I'm innocent."

"I know. But we were able to sort out that it is a false memory. It's been planted. She can't recall a single detail about the crime," Cate said. "So, we know she's lying."

"Now, we have to prove it."

"I may have an idea on that front," Anna said. "It's a bit of a...workaround, and it may be difficult, however, I think we can pull it off. But it'll take a bit of work on your part."

Cate's heart thudded faster at the words, a slight smile spilling across her features. "What is it? I'll do anything to help track this down."

"Well, it's an object called a time tracer. Very finicky, but it may help us."

“What does it do?” Jack asked.

Anna raised her eyebrows. “Well, it can literally determine where people have been through time. Based on what you saw and what we know about what Amanda has told us, it appears that they skipped to another time. This is where the murder likely occurred, and where Amanda received her instructions on what to say.”

“So, this object will allow us to determine where they landed in time?” Cate asked.

“Well, yes and no. It’s incredibly tricky to use and on top of that, we’ll need to place the object on Amanda or David.”

Jack chewed his lower lip as he crossed his arms. “I can do that. I can get it on her. She knows me. She trusts me.”

“All right. But here is the problem...we also need to get it off of her when she returns.”

“Okay,” Jack said with a nod. “We’ll do whatever we have to do.”

“If you pull that off, we’ll be able to parse apart where they went roughly. Though, it will be very rough.”

Cate nodded at her. “All right. Then we know what we have to do. We need to head back to the murder and slip this time tracer onto Amanda.”

“Try to put it into a pocket or on her clothing,” Anna said. “She’ll be wearing the same thing when she comes back. You’ll just need to retrieve it.”

Jack sucked in a breath. “Okay, what is this thing we’re working with? Big, small, heavy, light?”

“It’s a pin. A small brooch.” Anna pulled a tiny red jewel from her pocket and laid it in her hand.

“Oh, okay. I have an idea. I should be able to get it onto her.” Jack perched on the edge of an armchair. “That night...I told her I had a surprise for her. I’ll give her that and tell her it’s to remember my friendship.”

“That’s perfect. Hopefully, she won’t take it off,” Cate said with a nod. “Well, when shall we go? Now?”

“It’s up to the two of you. Whenever you feel prepared,” Anna answered.

Cate swallowed hard, her pulse quickening. “I’m ready whenever you are. This will be your show, Jack. I’ll just be there for moral support.”

“I’ll need it,” Jack answered. “But I’d like to get it over with.”

Cate nodded. "Then we'll go now. Same plan as before? Leave from the mausoleum and use the button to get back."

"Hopefully, we won't get sent to any random locations with a playing card," Jack said with a shake of his head.

"I've got the compass if we need it. I did tell myself I used it twice."

"Well, at least we know what we're doing with it if we need it again," Jack said. "Should we go?"

"No time like the present." Cate shed her blanket and rose. "Should we take Amy Grace back?"

"No," Anna said with a shake of her head. "You'll need to go back earlier than the last time. We'll worry about returning Ms. Hoffman to her time when you are not working with this object."

"Oh, good point, yes. I suppose we should worry about that when we can devote our full attention to it. I don't want to ruin her life by messing that up." Cate flicked her gaze to Anna. "Will you make sure she's all right?"

"I will. Don't worry about anything here." Anna stood and handed off the brooch to Jack. "Good luck. When you return with the time tracer, we'll sort through what we learn from it and discuss our next steps."

After discussing a few details, they made their way to the mausoleum for Anna to open the time portal, this time to hours before the murder.

As the dark hole yawned in front of them, Cate swallowed hard. Would they finally be able to free Jack?

CHAPTER 21



Shaking off a shiver, Cate stepped into the afternoon light of Jack's college days. He stood waiting for her in the alley they'd arrived in the last time.

"Odd to think that we'll be arriving here in a few hours," Jack said with a shake of his head. "This time travel stuff is strange."

"No stranger than the thing Damien and his crew are dealing with," she answered.

"Do I even want to know?"

"Probably not, but I'll tell you anyway if you'd like."

"I suppose it'll help us pass the time, but first we should handle our business. Amanda comes on shift in thirty minutes, if I recall. I can give her the brooch then."

Cate nodded. "Do you want to wait in the bar until then?"

"If we can. You probably ought to stay out of sight. We don't want her thinking I've got a new girl."

"Oh, right. Maybe I should wait across the street in the bookshop."

"And split up? Are you crazy? I could get stuck here while Gianna sends you...who knows where. And then there will be two of me running around. No...three of me. There will be me, other me, and past me." He rubbed his temples. "My head is starting to hurt."

"I'll hide in the ladies' room."

"No," Jack said. "You'll sit in plain sight where I can see you. We'll just...sit apart."

Cate sucked in a breath as he drew the door open, the warm air scented with hops floating past her nostrils. “Okay. I’ll take the dark shadowy booth in the back.”

She bit her lower lip as she stopped talking to him, and wandered to a wooden table tucked in the back so no one spotted them together. She slid into the booth, positioning herself so she could see Jack on his barstool.

She blew out a long breath, drumming her fingers on the table. Thirty minutes to wait seemed like an eternity. Her mind spun with questions and issues. She hoped this would be as easy to pull off as Jack expected.

She chewed her lip. Getting this item back from Amanda would be the larger issue. She’d likely accept the gift, but trying to find her to get it back may be difficult.

Her heart thumped against her ribs. She glanced at the clock, swearing it had stopped. As a distraction, she traced the wood grain on the table. When she finally flicked her gaze back to Jack’s seat, her heart stopped.

He was gone. Heat washed over her as she stiffened, her gaze darting around the bar in search of him.

She found him standing near a dartboard speaking with someone. He twisted, catching her eye and wiggling his eyebrows. What was he trying to signal to her?

He tilted his head oddly. She wrinkled her nose. *What is he doing?*

Jack sipped his ale before he grinned at the man he spoke with and answered. As the man lined up another dart to throw, Jack turned toward Cate, furrowing his brows as he gave her the strange nod again.

Cate winced and shrugged. He responded by wrapping a hand around his stein, one finger pointing.

She wrinkled her nose, trying to follow the line of it. It ended with a man in a plaid cap, the hat low on his head, hiding most of his features as he hunched over his beer.

What was the interest in him, she wondered?

Jack gave the man one final comment before he strode back to the bar and grabbed a napkin. He fished a pen from his pocket and scrawled something on it before he strode toward Cate. The napkin fell from his fingers, sliding across the floor as he pushed into the men’s room.

Cate scurried from her seat to grab it. As she regained her seat, she squinted at his scrawl. *Plaid hat is the murderer.*

Her heart thudded and her palms turned sweaty as she snapped her gaze to him. He was the one they'd seen with Amanda and David?

This could be a chance to catch him in the act. Maybe they didn't even need the time tracer.

Her mind searched ways to use this to their advantage. Could they confront him? Or prevent the murder?

"Psst," a voice whispered from behind her.

She twisted to see Jack's face in the slit of the door to the men's room. "Cate, that's him."

"I know," she hissed, trying not to turn toward him and give their conversation away. "Maybe we can follow him."

"We may need to. Amanda is late."

Cate arched an eyebrow. Had she always been late or was this a new development?

"We'll have to leave soon because I'll be coming here in about...twenty minutes."

Her stomach clenched at the words. Past Jack's arrival would ruin everything.

"We need to leave soon, then," she murmured. "We'll follow Plaid Hat. Maybe we can slip the tracer onto him."

"That's a risk, but...it's one we may have to take. I can't believe she's not here."

"Any place we can check for her?"

Jack didn't answer for a moment. "I don't know. And I'm not certain if we should try that or stick with Plaid Hat."

Cate tugged her brows together tightly. "I say we stick with Plaid Hat. If we have the opportunity to get that tracer on Amanda, we take it. They should come together at some point, right?"

"Right. Perhaps right before the murder, but still, maybe we pull it off somehow."

"Okay. I'm going to leave now. You follow me. We'll go to the bookshop and watch for him to leave."

"Cate, be careful leaving here, for heaven's sake."

"I will," she said with a nod.

She twisted the napkin in her fingers, taking the clue with her as she rose and took a step toward the door. With a shake of her head, she twisted and retreated toward the bathrooms.

“Give me the tracer. I’ll try to put it on him.”

“Cate, that’s dangerous.”

“We don’t have much choice. We can’t get it on Amanda. Now, give it to me before we lose our chance.”

“Cate...”

“Jack!” she hissed, her teeth clenched tightly. “We’re going to lose our chance and have to come back again!”

He heaved a sigh as he dug into his pocket and shoved the brooch forward through the opening in the door. She grabbed it, eyeing the small gem and its attached pin. She likely couldn’t get it pinned on him, but maybe she could drop it into his pocket.

The only problem would be getting it back from him when they arrived back with David’s body.

Her mind spun as she second guessed her plan. Maybe she ought to wait for Amanda. Past Jack wouldn’t recognize her when he came into the bar.

“Cate?” he whispered behind her.

“I’m thinking. What if we can’t get this back from the man? Maybe I should try to pin it on Amanda when she comes into the bar. Neither of you will recognize me. I can do it.”

“I’m not certain she’ll take it,” he answered. “Let’s go to the bookshop and regroup. We need another plan.”

She nodded, closing her fingers around the gem and heading for the door. She hesitated as she skirted around the man, wondering if she could somehow get it on him, but she decided against it, too afraid they’d never get it back and lose their chance to trace them through time.

Instead of placing it on him, she pushed through the door into the spring air and hurried across the street to the bookshop. A man in a cap and a lazy cat lounging on the counter greeted her as a bell rang over her head.

She breathed in the scent of old books as she wandered into the stacks to wait for Jack. Her fingers lingered on a well-worn copy of *The Time Machine*, appreciating the irony.

The bell above the door chimed again, and she peered from between the shelves to find Jack scanning the bookshop.

She waved a hand, drawing his attention, and he crossed to her, slipping between the shelves. “What should we do?”

“I don’t know. I’m worried if we put the tracer on the Plaid Hat, we won’t get it back. But I’m worried we won’t get it on Amanda. Especially

with her being late.”

“I know. And I wouldn’t have known if she was late for her shift or not back in the day. She was there when I arrived, but...we can’t chance it.”

“I can chance it, but I’m not certain I can get this pin on her.”

Jack shook his head as a curse escaped it. “Blast it. Why is everything so difficult?”

“Because we’re time travelers up against a massive evil agency?”

Jack heaved a sigh as he shook his head. “Stop making sense. Okay, we need a plan and fast.”

“Well, not fast. We have a few hours to wait...again.”

Jack rolled his eyes. “Oh, yes. We came *earlier* this time. For all the good it did.”

Cate sucked in a breath, squeezing his arm. “We could read a time travel book.”

He offered her an unimpressed stare. “That’s very funny. Maybe we can pass the time with your stand-up comedy act.”

She wrinkled her nose and shook her head. “Nah. It’s not becoming of a duchess.”

“Well, I suppose we could go to the restaurant and asked to be seated away from the other versions of ourselves.”

“What if we get the same waitress?”

“Tell them we have a set of twins and we’re playing a prank.”

Cate crossed her arms, leaning back against the shelf with a shake of her head. “This is really becoming complicated.”

“Sorry,” Jack answered with a penitent glance. “I can’t help but feel this is my fault.”

“Don’t,” Cate said. “It’s not.”

“It is. I had to go and be a hero.”

“You were set up. During our hypnosis session, she admitted her real name isn’t Amanda.”

“She was using a fake name? What is it?”

“Lucy Thorne. And it gets a little weirder.”

Jack scrubbed his face as he paced the floor. “Weirder? Oh, no. Is she a vampire?”

“No,” Cate said with a chuckle. “She’s not...but...”

His eyes went wide as he stared at her. “But?”

Cate bit her lower lip, glancing up at him through her eyelashes. "But... this isn't her time. She was recruited and planted here by The Agency. She was here to do a job. You were that job."

His features turned stony. "I can't believe this. When did she come from then?"

Cate raised her eyebrows. "Well...she was born in 2024."

"What?!" Jack exclaimed. "She hasn't even been born yet?"

"Nope. She hasn't even been born in our time."

He rubbed his temples. "It's too much. No wonder I was had. She probably..."

"Studied you. Knew how to play up to you. Yep. So, you weren't so much had as you were...manipulated by a woman who had trained to do just that."

"And now we're all paying the price."

"Jack, you can't think like that. They've come after me, too."

"Indirectly, yes. I suppose you were too smart to be conned whereas I was not."

"We have no idea if they'll manipulate me," she answered. "They very well may be."

"You're not married to...oh..." He tugged his lips back into a wince as he shot her a glance. "Actually, you are married to a rather odd person."

"Odd, yes. But I don't think he's conning me."

"Well, he hasn't accused you of murder...yet."

Cate chuckled at the statement. "No, he hasn't. But that doesn't mean they won't use some other aspect of my life. They killed my parents, Jack. And now...this vision...it seems to suggest they're doing something else to my mother."

"Nothing else on that front to help us figure out how?"

"No," she answered. "Just that stupid image of me terrified stuck in my brain after I call out to my mother. Or...Laura. Anna told me not to assume it's my mother."

"Kind of an odd coincidence if it's not, no?"

"I think so, too. I think she may know more than she's saying, but...she won't tell me."

Jack cocked his head. "Why not? Why wouldn't she help you?"

Cate shrugged. "She says she doesn't *know*, merely suspects. And if she is wrong, it could make things worse for me than to just ride out the visions."

She doesn't want to overwhelm me."

"How can answers overwhelm you?"

"Same thing I thought, but here we are. Stuck with trying to figure this out and wonder who else Laura could be."

Jack rubbed his chin. "No idea. Sorry I'm not more help."

"Well, it's my life. This is someone I'm supposedly close to, and I can't figure it out, so..." She threw her arms out to the side. "Go figure."

"I'm sorry, Cate. For what it's worth, when we finish dealing with this...saga, I'll do whatever I can to track down information."

"Thanks, Jack." She squeezed his hand. "I appreciate that. We'll figure it out. Both situations."

The bell jangled above the door and a cool breeze swept in past them. Boots clomped across the creaky hardwood, approaching their location. Cate twisted around to peruse the books while Jack stared at the opposite shelf.

Someone turned the corner, and Cate worked to stay focused on the books in front of her. Her pulse raced and sweat beaded on her brow.

The figure approached her, and she glanced sideways to offer a polite smile and step around them when her eyes went wide.

Standing in front of her was the plaid-hatted man. Standing in front of her was a murderer.

CHAPTER 22



Cate tried to hide her trembling hands and force a smile onto her face. She reached into her pocket, her fingers sliding around the time tracer. She wondered if she could somehow place it on him.

Her mind whirled as she tried to make her decision, offering him a polite, “Excuse me.”

As she tried to step around him, he reached out, grabbing her arm. “I don’t think so, duchess.”

Cate’s eyes went wide, and she twisted to eye Jack who already stepped forward, determination etched into his features.

The man latched onto his arm, too, and in an instant, the world around them crumbled.

Cate’s heart hammered out a frantic rhythm. “Jack!”

“Cate, I’m here. I don’t know what’s happening.”

“What’s happening,” the man grumbled as the world settled around them again, “is I’m stopping you two from ruining our plans.”

Cate glanced around her new surroundings as the man finally let go of her arm. She shivered as the damp air sent a chill snaking down her spine. Her stomach twisted into a knot at the sight of the bars closing them into a cell.

“Where did you take us?”

“Where you belong. Let’s see you solve this little problem from inside your cell. Guard!”

A brawny man with a weapon strode into the room outside of the cell.

“Look who I caught,” the man in the plaid hat said with a grin.

“I need to move our fair duchess to another cell.”

“I’ll grab the keys,” the other man answered. “And let the others know.”

“No, no,” Plaid Hat answered. “I want to be the one to tell them. It’s my coup, after all.”

The guard nodded before he left them behind to retrieve the keys. Before he returned, Jack slid an arm around the man’s neck, wrenching him backward.

Startled, Cate pressed herself against the wall, her jaw hanging open.

“You’re not going to tell anyone anything,” Jack growled. “You’re going to let us go.”

“Jack, stop. We’ll use the button to go now before anyone comes back.”

“I’m not letting go of him. Grab onto me, and we’ll try it.”

Cate tugged the chain from under her shirt and isolated the magic button. Clamping a hand onto Jack, she rubbed it. Nothing happened.

“Again?”

“It won’t work,” the man said with a grin. “You’re in a magic-suppressing cell.”

Cate’s heart plummeted. They’d used one of these cells with Marcus, preventing him from using any of his magical abilities. And now what little magic they had at their disposal was squashed, too.

“Oh, no,” Cate said with a shake of her head.

“Magic-suppressing cell? That can’t be real.”

“It is,” Cate answered. “They used it on Marcus.”

Jack tightened his grip on the man’s neck until his cap fell off and his features turned red. “Fine. Then we’ll have to wait until we’re out to use it.”

The guard re-entered the room, keys dangling from his fingers.

“Don’t come any closer,” Jack shouted. “Not unless you want your buddy to die.”

The man froze, his eyes going wide at the scene.

“Toss the keys to the cell and put your hands in the air.”

“Don’t do it. He’s not going to kill me. He hasn’t got it in him. Go fetch help!” Plaid Hat yelled.

The guard shifted on his feet, uncertain what to do.

Jack shook the man hard, determination etching his face. “I will kill him. Make no mistake. You leave this room, and you’ll come back to a dead man.”

“I’m only a foot soldier. My death means nothing,” Plaid Hat answered. “Go fetch someone. It’s more important that we have the duchess under our control than my life.”

Cate screwed up her face. What sort of person was willing to sacrifice their life for a cause like this?

“Go!” Plaid Hat shouted.

“It’s no use, Jack, let him go. We’ll find another way. You don’t want his blood on your hands.”

“Listen to your lady friend,” the guard answered. “Let go of him and both of you get against the back wall.”

“Okay, we’re—“

“No,” Jack said with a shake of his head. “No. Throw the keys over. Cate, you take them, and you open that cell door.”

“You’ll never get away with it,” the guard answered as he tossed them into a heap.

Cate hurried forward to the bars and stuck her hand through, barely able to reach them with her fingers. She managed to tug them closer.

“Open the door, Cate,” Jack said from behind her.

She fumbled with the keys, her hands shaking as she isolated one and worked to shove it in the lock. She finally got it in and twisted, but it wouldn’t turn.

With a curse under her breath, she yanked the key out and dropped it on the floor before moving on to the next one.

She wrinkled her nose, retrieving them and trying another. On her third attempt, she finally found the right key. The lock clanged as she twisted it and let the cell door swing open.

“Move,” Jack boomed behind her as he forced the man forward.

“Don’t let her go!” Plaid Hat shouted from behind her as she scurried into the outer chamber, keeping her distance from the guard. “You fool, grab her before she can escape!”

Cate twisted to find Jack, hoping to latch onto him and escape, but before she could the man in the plaid hat lunged toward her. Jack struggled, red-faced, to hold on to him, but the man hit him in the gut with a well-placed elbow.

A sharp breath escaped Jack’s lips as he stumbled backward. The man in the plaid hat latched on to Cate as the guard leapt forward to shove Jack into the cell and slam it closed.

Cate struggled to free herself from the man's grip, but she found it impossible. She dug her feet into the stones of the floor, hoping not to be driven backward.

"Cate, use the magic to escape. You can come back for me!" Jack shouted.

But with a firm grip holding both her arms, she couldn't reach the necklace even if she tried. Instead, with the help of the guard, they wrangled her into a separate cell and tossed her back. She stumbled and slammed to the floor, pain shooting through her hip.

The cage slammed shut in front of her as she raced toward the opening in a desperate attempt to escape it.

"I don't think so, Duchess," Plaid Hat said with a grin. "And now, I'm off to do my business. Tell Gianna I'd like to speak with her once I've finished."

The guard grunted. "You won't get an audience with her."

"I will now that I've landed the duchess." The man smirked at the guard. "See you around, duchess. Or not."

The two men strode away, chattering about his upcoming task with David.

Cate gripped the bars of the cell, leaning her head against the rough surface.

Jack's voice cut the quietness in the large room. "Oh, Cate."

"I couldn't get to the button. And I wasn't leaving you, anyway."

"Try it now."

"I don't want to leave you."

"I don't care. You can come right back with Anna's help. Just try it."

Cate fished her necklace from under her tunic and flicked her thumb across the button. "Nothing. I'm probably in one of those magic-squashing cells."

"I can't believe they have those."

"Believe it. They had Marcus in one when I had to rescue him."

"Wait, wait, wait," Jack answered, his voice echoing off the walls. "*You* had to rescue *him*?"

Cate chuckled as she recalled her frantic race to the German castle to find him. "I did. After he traded himself for you, I went back to the castle later that night."

"You never cease to amaze me, Catherine Kensie."

“Northcott,” she reminded him.

“Right. Catherine Kensie Northcott. That’ll take some getting used to.”

Cate rubbed at the diamond sparkling even in the dim light. She had already gotten used to it. With a shake of her head, she decided not to dwell on what she couldn’t control. “We have to find a way out of here.”

“I’m not certain that’s going to happen, Cate. I don’t think they built these cells for people to escape.” The bars rattled as if to punctuate the statement.

“I know, but we need to try. We’ll have to...I don’t know...maybe I can pick the lock.”

“Pick the lock? Just what has Northcott been teaching you?”

Cate reached back to find a bobby pin in her hair and pulled it free, wincing as a few hairs came with it. “Not to pick locks. He can open them with magic, remember?”

“Oh, right,” Jack answered. “What is that scraping noise? What are you doing?”

“Trying to pick the lock,” she answered as she searched for the hole blindly.

“Do you think you can?”

She shrugged even though he couldn’t see her. “I’m not sure. Marcus’s cell required a special key, but this one looked like a normal key to me. So maybe.”

“I hope so. Then we can escape from here.”

Cate froze, her mind whirling. “But should we?”

“Cate, are you kidding? Yes, we should.”

“You heard Plaid Hat. He’s going for David. And likely bringing both him and Amanda here. We could grab her and stop them from brainwashing her, and maybe even prevent the murder entirely.”

“Cate, that’s dangerous ground.”

She frowned as she fought with the lock again. “I know, but...I’d rather that than you be accused of murder.”

The loud sigh that answered her told her he didn’t agree.

“Look, Jack, we need to do something. Nothing we’re doing is working so far, and we need to wrap this up.”

Silence stretched between them for a moment before Jack finally answered. “I know. I’m sure this is wearing on you with your visions looming, too.”

“It’s not that...” Cate shook her head, dismissing the visions from her mind so she wouldn’t collapse and lose her bobby pin. “I want this to be over for you. For Molly. For all of us. We’re a family, Jack. What affects one of us affects all of us.”

Jack sighed again. “I appreciate that, Cate. I’ve been feeling awfully guilty about this.”

“Well, don’t.” Her fingers twisted the bobby pin in a desperate attempt to escape. “Should I feel guilty that I have these visions that are making me collapse?”

“Of course not.” Jack scoffed. “Don’t be ridiculous.”

“Then you can’t feel bad about this murder charge. It wasn’t your fault either.”

“If I hadn’t been such a blasted idiot falling for Amanda’s nonsense, we wouldn’t be in this situation.”

“No, we may be in a lot worse of one.” Cate groaned as she thudded her head against the bars. “I can’t get this lock.”

“Take a break. You’re probably all twisted up about getting out right away, but maybe you just need a minute to breathe.”

She slid her hands back into her cell, her fingers toying with the bobby pin. “I wonder what would happen if I stuck my hands out and used the button. Would just my hands go?”

Silence stretched again before Jack said, “I don’t think I’d try that.”

“You’re probably right. But we need to get out of here.”

“We need a plan once we do. I don’t want to escape from my magic-blocking cell only to get caught again while we argue about whether or not we’re returning home or staying here to search for the murderer and Amanda.”

Cate heaved a sigh. “I know. Though, I still think we should stay here. Although...”

“Yeah?”

Her fingers reached into her pocket to rub the bejeweled brooch. “I wonder if we could just come back here after filling in Anna. We have been carrying the time tracer. So...it should be tracing us, too, right? We should be able to find our way back here.”

“Hmm, I hadn’t thought of that, but I suppose we could.”

“Do we chance it, though? Anna said it would be tricky. I’m not sure. Plus, where are we in the world? We could be anywhere.”

“Is this the place I was being held?” Jack asked.

“No,” she answered with a shake of her head. “This isn’t the place you were held. I know that. Those cells looked different. So, we’re in another Agency stronghold. They have so many, it would take forever to track down.”

“All right, you make a good point. We’re already here. But...can we get out of these cells, and then this dungeon? There’s a guard out there.”

“I know,” Cate answered as her mind worked to find a solution. “Even if we get out of the cells, we’d need to deal with him.”

She cursed under her breath.

“What?” Jack asked.

“Sometimes I wish I had Marcus’s magic. He just blows people down with some kind of electric arc or a fireball.”

“I remember seeing that battle between him and Celine. And to be fair, I wouldn’t mind that power right now. Maybe you can throw a fireball.”

Cate threw her head back in laughter. “Thanks for that. I needed a laugh.”

“I’m serious. You’re a clairvoyant. Maybe you have magic, too.”

“I don’t think so,” she answered as she held her hand out to stare at it. She narrowed her eyes, flicking her wrist around to try to conjure some sort of magical weapon, but nothing happened.

“You’re trying it, aren’t you?” Jack asked.

She slid her hand behind her back against the cold stone. “No.”

“Yes, you were. You were trying to conjure a fireball.”

“No, I wasn’t,” she claimed.

Jack’s laughter echoed off the cold walls. “You were. Oh, Cate, that’s really amusing. Thank you for that.”

“Okay, so I was. Just in case. I mean, maybe I’m magic, too.”

They were quiet for a beat before Jack asked, “Could you?”

“No. If I could, you’d know about it by now.”

He sighed. “Ah, well. It was worth a try.”

“I’m going to ask Marcus next time I see him. It’s a handy tool to have.”

“It may be...though, I’m not certain I can manage watching you conjure one of those light orbs and toss it at someone.”

Cate returned to the lock, inserting the bobby pin into it again. “What if that someone was Gianna?”

“I’d pay to see that one. Although, it would still be odd to see you throw a light orb.”

“Well, don’t get your money ready yet. I probably can’t do it.” A clank sounded before a creak as her door fell open. “But what I can do is pick a lock.”

She grinned at him as she stepped from her cell and approached his.

His jaw fell open as he spotted her. “Cate! Good going. Now, open mine.”

“I’m trying,” she answered as she stuck the pin into the keyhole and fiddled with it.

“How’d you get yours? Just do the same thing.”

“Yeah, that was pure luck, I think.”

“Hopefully, you’re still lucky.”

She wrinkled her nose as she continued to fiddle with the pin, desperately trying to free Jack. As she worked, a voice shouted behind her.

He sucked in a breath, his eyes going wide as he glanced at Cate. She raised her gaze to his.

“Cate, someone’s coming.”

CHAPTER 23



Cate's heart thudded hard against her ribs as she frantically fiddled with the bobby pin in the lock. "Come on, come on."

"It's no use, Cate. Get back in your cell before you get caught."

"What if they check it and lock it again and we can't get out?"

"We'll cross that bridge when we come to it."

"Well, then I'm staying out here," she said, her eyebrows pinching together as she continued to work. "Either way, I'll end up locked up in that cell again, probably."

"No, Cate! You may end up far worse off if they catch you out here. And you'll likely lose your little lock pick, too."

"We have to escape, Jack!"

"Get in your cell!" he growled at her, his knuckles turned white as he gripped the cell bars between them.

With a sigh and a groan, she tugged the pin from his lock, shoved it into her pocket, and hurried into her cell, pulling the bars closed.

A second later, two figures appeared at the far end of the room. The guard led a well-dressed man in a business suit into the space. Cate tried to assess his wardrobe, guessing it came from sometime in the 1950s.

"Here they are, sir," the guard said, waving at Cate and Jack.

"Well, well, well, I must say," the man answered as he closed the distance between them, "I'm honored to be in the presence of the Duchess of Stratfordshire."

"Who are you?" Cate demanded.

“Thomas Holden,” he answered. “A full-fledged member of The Agency, though, not quite at the rank you’re used to dealing with. But with this little coup, I just may be.”

“I demand—” Cate began.

“Nothing,” Thomas answered. “You may demand nothing. I only came to see you. To try to understand why you are so...difficult.”

“Difficult? I suppose that is because The Agency continues to attack my family and try to kill me and the people I love.”

He chuckled at her, clasping his hands in front of him. “That’s not what I meant.”

“What did you mean, then?” Jack asked.

The man flicked his eyebrows up as he began to pace the floor. “The Agency has tried and failed numerous times to capture our dear duchess and either turn her to our side or...dispose of her. And each time, she has managed to slip right through our fingers.”

“Your point?” Cate asked through clenched teeth.

“My point is that this time, you will not. I will be the man who finally deals with you. I will be the hero.”

Cate sucked in a breath as she stared at the man looking to make a name for himself by ridding the world of her. “You may not want to be too hasty. My husband is a powerful man. A man The Agency would very much like on their side.”

“And a man who will never join us. No, I will not summon him, Your Grace. I will not fall prey to your trap. Somehow, you always manage to escape our clutches with his help.”

“And sometimes he escapes with mine,” she informed the man, keeping a tight hold on the bars so the door didn’t swing open.

“You are an impressive specimen. It is obvious why he married you. However, this will be the last of it.”

“If you harm me or anyone close to me, the wrath you will receive—”

“Oh, now, now,” he said, waving his hand in the air, “let’s not get too perturbed. I haven’t said I was going to kill you. But I will *not* bring your husband here. Instead, we will negotiate at another site.”

“Where is here?” Cate asked.

“Wouldn’t you like to know?”

Cate lifted her chin. “Yes, I would. And since you are so confident in being able to rein me in, there should be no harm in telling me.”

He smirked as he stepped closer to her cell. Her heart thudded hard in her chest, worried he may touch the bars and discover she'd opened the cell door.

"I am not going to fall for this," he answered, stopping short of the cell door. "I will not be manipulated by you. No, you will remain in the dark. I will, however, keep you updated as to when you can expect to join our ranks. I imagine your husband will be most anxious to have you returned. Though, I don't plan on handing you over to him until he's proven himself to The Agency."

Cate's stomach twisted into a knot at the words.

"Good day, Duchess." Thomas offered her a slight bow before he strode away with the guard in tow.

Cate slid her eyes shut, breathing out a sigh of relief and anxiety. This man could be a dangerous problem with his desperate desire to make a name for himself. But at least he hadn't caught that she'd opened her cell door.

"Cate, we need to get out of here. Or you do."

"I'm not leaving you here after that. No way. They'll kill you just to punish me or use you to force our hands."

"I don't think I'm enough leverage to force Northcott's hand."

She swallowed hard, still in her cell as they waited to be sure no one returned. "He sacrificed himself for you once before. So, it may be."

"I still find that...mind-boggling."

"I know you do, but, Jack, he literally traded his life for yours." Cate pressed a hand to her heart as she recalled feeling the effects of what The Agency did to him in the hours that they held him captive.

"Okay, so then we need to get out of here. Both of us. So, I need your lock-picking skills."

Cate finally pushed from within her cell and hurried to his. "I'm not so sure they're skills as much as random luck, but I'll try my best. I still say we need to stay here and finish this with Amanda."

"Cate! Are you crazy? This guy is out to make a name for himself. We need to get out of here as soon as we can. We can't take any chances."

"We need to wrap this up, Jack. We can't keep going back to that time period over and over, trying to make something happen. Pretty soon, Oxford will be overrun with Cate and Jacks."

“Oh my word,” Jack said as he rubbed at his chin. “There could be dozens of us running around.”

“Right. Which I would very much like to avoid.”

Jack blew out a long breath. “Wow, I really can’t even with this time travel stuff anymore.”

“Tell me about it. I’m still reeling from knowing Amanda actually hasn’t been born yet.”

“I robbed the cradle,” Jack said, his voice pensive.

Cate stopped fiddling with the lock as a laugh bubbled up from her belly. “You did. You really did. I mean...she’s what? Forty years younger than you?”

He hooted at the statement. “Forty years younger. Oh my. What have I done?”

She grinned at him, still working on the lock.

“Well, now, just a minute,” he said, wagging a finger at her. “I think Northcott has taken the cake on this. He beats me by a mile. You’re what? Two hundred years younger than him?”

“At least,” Cate said with a nod. “He was around in the seventeen hundreds. I wasn’t born until the late twentieth century.”

“There we have it. He’s the real cradle robber.”

She chuckled as she jiggled the bobby pin again, and the lock clanked. Her eyes went wide as she snapped her gaze up to Jack. “I did it.”

A grin formed on Jack’s lips as she tugged his door open. “Cate, great work. Now, let’s get out of here.”

She shook her head. “No. We need to stay here and find Amanda.”

“Cate! We need to go. You heard that man. He’s going to use you to lure Northcott into The Agency. What do you think he’s going to do once he finds out you’ve escaped?”

“Lock this place down and search for me. But Amanda should be arriving at any moment along with Plaid Hat. We need to stay here and find her.”

“And then do what with her?”

“Take her back to Dunhaven?” Cate said, her voice questioning.

“Oh, that’s lovely. Then we’ll have two Amandas running about the castle.”

“Well, obviously, we need to keep them away from each other. But we need to do something. And this way we can consult with Anna.”

Jack heaved a sigh as he shook his head. "Fine, fine. I hope this doesn't make things worse.

"Worse? I don't see how we could be any worse off than we are right now."

"Don't tempt fate. We don't need any more problems."

"Right." Cate nodded as she glanced at the door leading from the cells. "We need a plan for that guard. Should we lure him inside or just go on the offensive as we go through the door?"

Jack pressed his lips together as he followed her gaze. "Are you sure you can't conjure a fireball?"

"I'm sure." She flicked her wrist around to demonstrate. "See?"

"Are you really trying?"

She offered him an unimpressed stare.

"Okay, fair enough, that's not an option." Jack rubbed his chin. "Maybe we ought to—"

Cate's stomach clenched as voices echoed from the room outside theirs. "Shh, someone's coming!"

"What should we do? Go back inside the cells or try to spring out at them?"

"Cells?" Cate winced. "I hate to do it, but we don't know how many people are coming."

"Good thought. We'll go back in the cells and hope no one notices."

Cate nodded as she hurried toward hers. "Oh, I held my door shut so it wouldn't swing open. You may want to do the same."

"Right." Jack slipped into his cell and pulled the door closed, wincing as it creaked.

Cate did the same. Her heart hammered in her chest as shadows grew larger on the wall leading from the room. Perhaps they should have left without waiting for Amanda, though she hated to lose the opportunity. But now, stuck in her cell, waiting to see what fate brought through the doorway, she wondered if she should have escaped when she had the chance.

"Put her in the first cell. We'll be working with her later today," Thomas's voice answered.

Two men appeared, Thomas and the guard, who carried a limp Amanda in his arms. He carried her inside and laid her on a cot before he locked her in.

“No need to lock it, most likely. She’ll be out for hours. She needs her rest before we begin the process to implant the memories,” Thomas answered.

Cate’s breath hitched at the words. If they could rescue Amanda now, she’d never have those memories. They may not be able to prevent David’s murder, but they could stop Jack from being framed.

She wondered where David was. Perhaps they had taken him to a different location.

Maybe it was for the best. Preventing the murder outright could change too much of history.

Thomas flicked his gaze to Cate as she peered through the bars, careful to hold the door steady. “Well, Duchess, our plan is in motion. Soon, Amanda will recall only that Jack killed David Hensley. Mr. Reid will be a wanted man.”

“Where is David? What have you done with him?” Cate demanded.

“Why, he’s right here,” Thomas answered with a grin. “Maybe you can get to know him before your untimely demises.”

More shadows stretched on the wall before two figures appeared. David, his face pale, marched into the room with his hands raised in the air. Behind him, Plaid Hat pressed a gun into his back. “Into the cell.”

Cate’s heart skipped a beat. Could they prevent his murder, after all? And would it help or hurt?

Her jaw flexed as the door slammed shut behind David. If they hoped to escape together, she’d now have to open two cell doors. She hoped her lock-picking skills were up to snuff.

Her heart continued to hammer until the three men shuffled from the room, leaving the four prisoners behind.

“David?” Cate called as she waited to make certain no one would return.

No one answered.

“David? It’s okay. We’re friends.”

“No one is my friend right now. That little witch set me up. I thought she was going to kill me, but this is worse.”

Cate winced as she realized he would soon be killed anyway as part of The Agency’s plan.

“David? It’s Jack Reid.”

“Jack?” The man’s voice wavered as he answered, approaching the door of his cell.

“Yeah, I’m here. This is a mess. And I’m sorry to say you’re caught in the crossfire of a war that has nothing to do with you.”

“Fat lot of good it does me now. You did this to me. You and her.”

Cate wrinkled her nose at the harsh words. It was obvious the two men didn’t get along.

“I didn’t do anything to you, but it is my fault,” Jack said.

“That’s not true,” Cate interjected. “This isn’t Jack’s fault, it’s mine.”

David flicked his gaze to Cate. “And who are you?”

“Catherine Kensie Northcott,” she answered. “I’m the reason this is all happening.”

“That’s not true either,” Jack said. “She isn’t the entire reason. There are things in this world that you don’t understand. All Cate and I are trying to do is protect the world from people like this.”

“Well, you’re doing a terrible job if you’re both stuck in a cell.”

“Sorry,” Cate said. “That happens pretty frequently with us. But...we usually get out of it.”

“Bully for you.”

“If we do...would you be willing to come with us to escape these people? We’ll return you to your life as soon as it’s safe.” Cate shifted her weight as she awaited his answer.

Silence stretched between them as she waited for an answer.

“How do I know you’re providing me safety? You could be worse than those people. Reid isn’t exactly my favorite fellow, you know?”

“I’m not, but come on, I’m not a bad guy and you know it.”

“I know nothing of the sort. I know you’re constantly trying to undermine me and Amanda. Filling her head with nonsense.”

“That’s because you’re already filling her head with ideas that she’s not good enough. Putting her down and the like. Who does that to someone they supposedly love.”

“I’m not putting her down, but she’s got these crazy notions. And...ah, never mind. I’m not going to argue with you.”

“All right, so what is your decision?” Cate asked.

“I’ll tell you when you escape and can offer me something.”

Cate rolled her eyes, annoyed with the man’s answer. “Fine,” she said as she pushed open the door to her cell and hurried toward Amanda’s. “I’ll

take that answer now, though to be fair, I almost don't want to take you anymore."

Jack followed behind her as David stiffened in his cell, his forehead creasing. "How did you—"

"She has a host of skills. And she happens to be a duchess with a very powerful husband," Jack answered, "so I wouldn't cross her."

Cate shoved her bobby pin in the lock of Amanda's cell and twisted it, hoping to make short work of the lock.

"Oh? A duchess? And how did you get involved with her? Oh, let me guess, you played up to her, too?"

"No," Jack said with a shake of his head. "I'm her estate manager. Went back home after I left Oxford."

David narrowed his eyes as Cate continued to work on the lock. "After Oxford? You're still at Oxford."

"Sorry, mate, I'm not," Jack answered. "I'm not the Jack from the time you live in. I'm Jack from the future."

David threw his head back with laughter. "Jack from the future. Okay, right. Like that movie? With the crazy-haired doctor?"

"No, not like that. We don't have a car."

"Because where you're going you don't have roads?" David asked with another chuckle.

"Very funny," Jack said. "But no. Come on, you just time traveled with the plaid-hatted fellow, but you don't believe we're from the future?"

The lock clanked, and Cate swung the door open. "I got it, Jack. Grab Amanda."

She stepped closer to David's cell. "We are from the future. Now, what's it going to be? Am I opening this door or are you taking your chances with The Agency?"

David narrowed his eyes at her. "Open it."

With a deep breath in, she slid the pin into the lock. Jack emerged from Amanda's cell with her cradled in his arms.

Voices and footsteps grew closer. Cate's heart thudded against her ribs as she shot a wide-eyed glance at Jack.

"Someone's coming," he whispered as he approached her.

"I know...but...I don't have David's cell open yet."

"We have to leave," Jack argued.

"You can't leave me. Open the door."

“I can’t!” Cate exclaimed as she tried again, but failed to open the lock.
“I’m sorry.”

“No, you can’t leave me.”

She chewed her lower lip as she fished the necklace from under her tunic and eyed the button. They had to escape, but they couldn’t leave David behind. If they didn’t go now, though, they’d never get another chance.

She had to make a decision soon, or they’d be trapped. Or worse.

CHAPTER 24



Cate's breath turned ragged as she tried to think through their options. Soon, someone would walk into the room, and they'd be out of time.

Her breath caught in her throat as Jack shot her a wide-eyed glance. She clamped a hand onto Amanda's limp arm. "Quick, grab onto me."

Cate pushed her elbow out toward David.

"What?"

"Grab onto me."

He crinkled his brow as he latched onto her elbow. Jack reached his fingers toward Cate's arm as she shifted close enough for him to touch.

Figures entered the room as Cate's heart hammered hard against her ribs. Thomas's jaw fell open as he stepped inside. "Guards! Get more guards!"

Before anyone could approach them, though, she flicked her thumb across the button. The world began to fall away around her, replaced by blackness.

Seconds later, the library at Dunhaven Castle filled in around them. Her heart continued to beat hard as she glanced around, spotting Jack, an unconscious Amanda, and David.

Anna rose from a seat near the fireplace with a smile. "Hello, dear. I see you have found some friends."

Cate let her pulse return to normal before she answered. "Yes. Sorry, we had...an incident."

“Hmm, well, it seems you have handled it. I know Amanda, but who is this person?”

“David Hensley.”

Anna arched an eyebrow at him. “I see. Mr. Hensley. I hope you understand that you owe my daughter-in-law and Mr. Reid your life.”

“I do. I don’t believe it. But I do. One minute, I was in a cell, and the next...” He grabbed onto an armchair and skirted it, collapsing onto the seat. “I must be drugged.”

“Close, but not quite.” Anna reached for the man’s cheek, and he slumped off to sleep.

“That’s handy,” Jack answered.

“Indeed. And I assume this is Amanda from your Oxford days?”

“Aye,” Jack said. “We...got caught by the murderer. He took us to some castle and put us in cells.”

“And they arrived with David and Amanda shortly after. We thought it best to escape with all of us. There was no way we could have placed the time tracer. Amanda never showed up at the bar before the Jack from that time did.” Cate offered Anna an apologetic glance.

Anna patted her arm. “You did the right thing. Let’s get them settled somewhere in the castle where we can keep an eye on them while we consider our next steps forward.”

“Which I cannot even fathom,” Cate answered. “But we’ll put them in the south wing, I think. Away from the other Amanda and the rest of the bunch. How is Amy Grace?”

“Resting. We should return her soon, perhaps before we determine what to do with these two.”

Cate raised her eyes to the ceiling as she shook her head. “How can we figure this out? This is...history-changing stuff that we’ve done.”

“Yes, it is,” Anna said with a nod, “but The Agency certainly has done this multiple times. Has anything catastrophic happened?”

Cate’s brows pinched as she led Jack, Anna, and Amanda to a set of back stairs. David followed behind them like a zombie, still asleep, but following Anna’s orders.

“No,” Cate admitted. “No, nothing that catastrophic has happened. Well, outside of the havoc wreaked on our lives.”

“Yes, but the world has continued to turn, and most people are blissfully unaware any changes have been made.”

“Are you saying that there is no butterfly effect?” Jack questioned as they threaded through the halls.

“Oh, there is. It’s just far more exaggerated than it actually is in real life. Tiny changes here and there won’t amount to much of anything.”

“So...stopping the murder may not change history very much?” Cate asked, her stomach churning as she considered the alternatives.

“As long as we play things right, no,” Anna answered when Cate stopped at a door and swung it open for Jack to enter.

“But how will we know if we’re playing things right?” Cate’s features pinched as she vetted ideas.

“We will attempt to minimize the changes. Of course, much of it will depend on our subjects.” Anna waved a hand at David as he trudged behind them to the next door.

“You have a plan,” Cate said after tucking David into a room and closing the door behind him.

“I have a suggestion,” Anna answered. “Mr. Reid, how close were Amanda and David?”

“Dating,” he said with a shrug. “I’m not sure beyond that. Why?”

“Dating for a while? Dating casually? On and off?”

Jack sucked in a breath. “They had a tumultuous relationship, but...I had the impression they were together for a bit with no plans of breaking up when he was murdered.”

Anna bobbed her head.

“What are you thinking?” Cate asked.

“I’m thinking we send these two off together to live a quiet life. The downside is, they may be discovered. But the upside is, they both more or less disappear around the same time they already had. Minus the complication of the marriage to Mr. Reid.”

“And then what?” Jack asked.

“Then the problem is solved, more or less,” Anna answered. “Though, again, this all depends on whether or not they agree to this.”

Cate drummed her fingers against her forearm as she hugged herself. “Could it be that simple?”

“You may have made it that simple by rescuing them when you did. It certainly solves quite a few issues and allows us to move on with the investigation into your visions.”

Cate shot Jack a wide-eyed glance. “What do you think?”

Jack rubbed his chin as he shook his head. "I don't know. It seems far too simple. So...if we do this...if we convince them...when this is complete, we'd come back here and what?"

"No one would be any the wiser. Amanda would never show up, you'd have never been married, the problem is solved."

Jack shifted his weight from side to side. "I don't know. This is a big change. And we're not supposed to change history."

"What's the alternative?" Cate asked. "We take David back to be killed? Or worse...we have to kill him ourselves."

"I'm not doing that," Jack said with a shake of his head.

"Me either. I'll do a lot of things to protect Dunhaven Castle, but not murder someone even if they were already dead. Or...were they? I don't know." Cate shook her head. "The time travel stuff is getting to my head, too."

"If you really want to set things up the way they had been, we could fake his murder, pin it on The Agency, and let David and Amanda move on."

Cate massaged her temples as she considered it. "Wow. That's...a lot."

Anna shrugged. "Again, all of this hinges on David and Amanda's decisions. Without them, we may be stuck."

Cate pressed her lips together. Her mother-in-law was right. Without their cooperation, and their continued cooperation, they couldn't pull off this plan. "What are the chances they follow through for the duration of their lives, too?"

"That is a consideration, yes," Anna said with a nod. "Especially with The Agency in contact with Amanda."

"They could still get to her. She was born in the future," Cate said. "I saw her in the 1950s. She could have been recruited as a child."

"So, what do you want to do?" Jack asked.

Cate offered him a wide-eyed glance as her stomach churned. "I don't know."

"What you need to do is defeat The Agency," Anna answered.

Cate scoffed. "If only it were that easy."

"It may have to be. They will continue to push until they defeat you or vice versa."

Cate lifted her shoulders. "I imagine this will be a lifelong fight. Never-ending. Which really...makes me nauseous."

“Tell me about it.”

“You cannot endure this all your life. They can be driven back, but you must fight fiercely. Until we do, we must take the necessary steps to ensure these sorts of issues do not continue to crop up.”

“So, we safeguard against distractions while we use our resources to take them down?”

“Or at least dismantle the arm that is so focused on you,” Anna answered. “Gianna, specifically. She has a bit of an obsession.”

Cate shook her head as she heaved a sigh. “I don’t know why. I wish I had never gotten on her radar. I suppose it was our trip to the forties that did it.”

“No offense, but she set her sights on me on that one. This is my fault. I was so stupid to have even bothered to speak to her.” Jack wrinkled his nose as he frowned.

Anna cocked her head and raised a shoulder. “Sorry, Mr. Reid, but I believe Gianna’s problem is with Catherine. She cannot compete with you, dear. You have a quiet strength, and a sweet personality. Something she sorely lacks. You also have a powerful husband who is devoted to you. Another thing she sorely lacks.”

Cate’s stomach twisted at the words. Before they did anything else, she needed to tell Anna the truth.

“Catherine?” Anna asked as she stared at the carpet beneath her feet. “Are you all right?”

“Yes, I...”

“We’ll figure it out, dear. And don’t worry, you won’t murder anyone.” Anna offered her a cheeky grin meant to console her, but it only made her feel worse.

Her features pinched as she tried to offer a nod.

“Oh, darling, what is it?”

“Cate? Are you okay?”

“Yes, I just...I need a moment alone with Anna. Can we pick this up later?”

The worry etched in Jack’s features intensified. “Sure. Are you sure you’re okay?”

“I am. There’s just something I need to speak with her about. And we should take some time to consider our options and how we’ll approach David and Amanda.”

“Right,” Jack said with a nod. “I’ll put my thinking cap on and we’ll reconvene in a bit.”

She squeezed his arm, forcing a smile onto her face.

They parted ways at the next hall with Cate and Anna continuing to her bedroom suite.

“Have you had more on your visions?” Anna asked as Cate closed the doors behind them.

“No,” she said, tears already forming in her eyes. How would Anna take the news?

Cate’s hands trembled as she motioned for the woman to sit down in one of the armchairs while she perched on the opposite one. Her stomach twisted into a tight knot, and her throat parched.

“Oh, darling, what is it? Something has you terribly upset?”

Cate pressed her lips together to stop the lower one from trembling. Anna had turned into such a staunch supporter. She hated to lose the woman’s support, respect, and affection, but she couldn’t keep up the charade.

Perhaps she should have tried to stick it out until after Jack’s problems were solved but she couldn’t.

The pressure weighed down on her too much, threatening to crack her apart.

Before she could speak again, Anna rose. “I’m ringing for tea. You clearly need it.”

Her mother-in-law made this worse and worse with every passing moment, showing her every bit of comfort and affection owed her.

Anna returned to her seat, leaning forward to take Cate’s hands in hers. “Now, tell Mother what is bothering you.”

The words caused the tears welling in her eyes to escape to her cheeks. Her stomach clenched again as she sobbed.

“Oh, dear, this is something quite big. Tell me, darling, so I can help you with it.”

Cate wiped at her cheeks as she attempted to compose herself. “I...don’t know where to begin.”

“At the beginning, dear,” Anna said with a bright smile as Molly popped into the room.

Cate twisted away from her, holding in a snuffle as Anna requested tea.

“Right away, Your Grace,” Molly answered, then disappeared, pulling the doors closed behind her.

Cate finally sniffled and fished a tissue from her pocket. “Sorry.”

“It’s quite all right. Now, tell me what’s wrong.”

“You have been...so accepting of me. So wonderful.”

“Well, I hope that isn’t a complaint.”

Cate offered her a fleeting smile. “It’s not. But it’s the reason I can’t keep doing this. I can’t keep lying to you.”

“All right. When you are ready, tell me the truth.”

Cate swallowed hard, her last meal threatening to rise up into her throat. “You keep saying...”

She paused to blow out a shaky breath, digging deep within herself to find the strength to speak the words. “Marcus isn’t in love with me. Our marriage is fake. And I’m so very sorry that I lied to you about it. I feel awful. But each time you talk about our relationship, it just reminds me that I’ve done this terrible thing. I’m so very sorry. I know you may not be able to forgive me, but I treasure the friendship we have. Which is why I can’t keep lying.”

Anna’s eyebrows pinched together as she studied Cate.

Cate braced herself for the tongue-lashing she would inevitably receive, wondering how large the fall out would be. She hadn’t considered it before, but the woman was the mother of a powerful warlock. She surely had tricks up her sleeve that could make life very uncomfortable.

As Cate sat in the uncomfortable silence, she wondered if she’d just made a grave error in judgment. And what it would cost.

CHAPTER 25



Anna tilted her head, the confused expression still on her face. Cate shifted in her seat under the woman's intense stare, preparing herself for the onslaught that would come from the admission.

After a moment, the corners of Anna's lips tugged upward. She glanced at the carpet as a chuckle escaped her before it turned into a full-blown laugh.

When she refocused her gaze on Cate, her features held a genuine smile. She patted Cate's hands. "Oh, Catherine, you are a dear."

"What?" Cate asked, screwing up her face. "But...I...I just told you we've been lying to you."

Anna's shoulders shook with another laugh. "You think you have been lying to me. You have not been."

Anna shook her head again, the smile still playing on her lips. "Oh, Catherine, I understand your marriage was not conventional. I have no illusions that you and Marcus met at a party—that he swept you off your feet and you raced to the altar unable to bear being apart. What sort of foolish woman do you think I am?"

"I don't think you're a foolish woman at all. But..."

"But nothing, dear."

Cate tugged her eyebrows together, her lips pulling into a wince. "You don't understand. We're going to get divorced. I...almost had Mr. Smythe draw up the papers already. I can't keep him from—"

"From what? His heart's desire? A life without you?"

“Yes,” Cate said with a nod.

Anna heaved a sigh, the smile finally lessening a little, replaced by a consoling expression. “Oh, Catherine...”

“I know. And every time you say how in love he is, and how wonderful our marriage is, I just...I can’t bear it any longer. I don’t want you to be shocked when it happens.”

Anna fluttered her eyelashes. “I doubt I will be. Because I simply do not see it happening.”

Cate tugged her chin back to her chest. What was Anna thinking?

“Darling, many a marriage begins without the heat of passion. When I married Marcus’s father, I certainly hadn’t been overwhelmed with love and devotion so much so that I couldn’t bear to be apart from him. We met once before I was marched down the aisle.”

Cate swallowed hard. “I hadn’t realized you were an arranged marriage.”

“Yes, of course. That doesn’t mean our marriage was loveless. Quite the opposite, in fact. Merrick and I were very devoted to each other, and I was very much heartbroken when he was taken from us.”

Cate reached out to pat Anna’s hand. “I’m so sorry.”

“Quite all right, dear. It has been centuries... though time helps, the void in one’s heart never disappears.” She forced a smile onto her face. “Let us hope you never know that pain.”

Cate’s lips tugged into a slight smile, and she sniffled. “I’m sorry that you do, but I still don’t think you understand. We only married—“

“For your inheritance, yes, I am aware. Catherine, do you really believe me this dim that I do not know what is going on with my own son?”

Cate shook her head, her features pinching. “No, I don’t mean to imply that at all...just that...well, I thought we were doing a rather good job of fooling you.”

The comment made Anna chuckle again. “Oh, Catherine. I am not fooled easily. And I know my son. I also know a man in love. Marcus is devoted to you, darling. Do not think otherwise.”

Cate chewed her lower lip, unconvinced. Anna had to be fooling herself into believing their relationship was more than a simple arrangement.

“Did you really think that I didn’t know?” Anna asked.

“Well...yes,” Cate answered with an earnest nod.

Anna shook her head, another giggle escaping her. "It's no wonder you are so dear to me. Now, I will not pry, and I have already told you my take on it, but I believe you both are quite dedicated to one another. And it will only grow stronger with time."

Cate lowered her gaze to her lap, weary of continuing the argument. She had done what she intended: she'd informed Anna of the true nature of their relationship. That way, when they divorced, Anna wouldn't be too shocked.

"Let's stop this silly talk of divorces and move on to solving some of our other more pressing issues, shall we?"

Cate sucked in a deep breath as she nodded. A knock sounded at the door before they could move on, and Anna rose to answer it.

"Ah, tea, lovely."

Molly flitted in with a grin on her face. "And a visitor."

Cate's stomach clenched as she wondered who it was, noting the three cups on the tray rather than two.

"Who is—" she began when her husband strode into the room. "Oh."

"Marcus, what perfect timing," Anna said. "I'm glad you are here."

Cate cringed inside. Her timing couldn't have been worse at admitting the truth to Anna.

Anna thanked Molly and closed the door behind her as Marcus narrowed his eyes at Cate.

"Yes, it appears my timing is fortuitous. What have you said to make Catherine cry?"

"That is no doing of mine," Anna answered with a shake of her head as she poured the tea. "It is between you and Catherine."

Cate's eyes went wide as she accepted her teacup. "I just...it's too many things going on, that's all."

Marcus puckered his lips as he flicked his gaze between the two women before he sipped his tea. "Hmm."

"Yes, hmm," Anna answered. "Maybe instead of flitting off to Maine you should have been here helping your family."

"Mother, I told you it was unavoidable. And I am not staying. The situation grows worse in Maine. I am merely here to check in."

"Merely here to check in?" Anna slammed her cup onto the saucer and set it aside, her jaw clenched. "Here your wife sits dealing with visions that are robbing her of any peace whilst she also prevents a murder and constant taunts from The Agency, but you are merely here to check in? Marcus, I

warn you I am seconds away from striking you to knock sense into your head.”

Marcus’s posture stiffened at the lecture, though he did not lash out. “It is unavoidable, I have told you this. Now, if you wouldn’t mind, I would like a moment alone with Catherine.”

Anna heaved a sigh as she rose. “Fine. I suppose I should take solace in the fact that you have a moment to spare for your wife. And do not slink off afterward, I must speak with you.”

“Yes, Mother, of course.”

Anna offered him a fiery glance before she strode from the room. Marcus sighed, then took another sip of tea. “What happened?”

Cate winced at him, her nose wrinkling. “I may or may not have told your mother our marriage was fake.”

He slid his eyes closed as he set the teacup on the table. “Wonderful.”

“Sorry,” she answered, her lips still firmly tugged into a grimace. “I thought I was helping.”

“It’s fine. I will handle it. And Mother. What has made you cry?”

She shrugged. “I felt really bad lying to her. I thought she was going to let me have it.”

“Mother adores you. She would never quarrel with you.” Marcus sipped his tea before he settled his cup in its saucer with a frown. “She will let me have it.”

“I’m sorry,” Cate said, her nose wrinkling as she shot him an apologetic glance.

“It’s fine, Catherine. I cannot complain. I have, after all, left you here to deal with everything on your own, but I promise it is—“

“Unavoidable, I know. And it’s fine. Really. I can’t keep relying on you to solve my problems. We won’t be married forever. I have to solve them on my own.”

He didn’t answer her comment, instead moving on to another topic. “What have you found so far in Mr. Reid’s case?”

Cate tugged her lips into a wince. “I accidentally prevented the murder.”

“I see you have taken well to breaking rules. How did you manage it?”

“Your mother discovered that Amanda—whose name isn’t even Amanda—had false memories implanted about Jack being the murderer. So, Jack and I went back to try to put a time tracer on her to learn where The Agency had taken her to do this.”

“So, she is an Agency recruit. I thought as much.”

“Yes, her real name is Lucy Thorne. And she hasn’t even been born yet.” Cate shook her head as she tried to wrap her mind around the strange situation. “Anyway, we couldn’t put the tracer on her. And while we were in a bookshop trying to figure out what to do next, the man who Jack thought was the murderer found us and took us somewhere and put us in a dungeon.”

Marcus’s eyes went wide as his teacup rattled in his saucer. “He did what? What dungeon?”

Cate shrugged. “I’m not sure. I didn’t recognize it, but it had those magic-dampening cells—though they were different from the one you were in. And there was a man there named Thomas Holden.”

Marcus screwed up his face. “I don’t know the name.”

“I don’t think he was a very high-ranking member of The Agency, though he thought he would be after our capture.”

“I assume Mother found you?”

“No, I picked the locks, and we escaped. But not before they brought Amanda and David Hensley to those same cells. I used the button to bring us all back here.”

Marcus narrowed his eyes. “So, there are two Amandas here and the victim?”

“And Amy Grace. We still haven’t taken her back to her time.”

“My, you’ve had your hands quite full, Catherine. No wonder Mother is ready to strangle me. And your visions on top of it all? Have you made any progress there?”

“I think they’re about my mother. I called out the name Laura. And I’ve just had a clear image of me looking very frightened. Other than that, no, nothing to write home about.” Cate heaved a sigh as she took a long sip of warm tea.

“I see. Well, we should deal with at least some of these issues before I return to Maine.”

Cate flicked her gaze from the amber liquid in her cup to his dark eyes. “I can manage it. Don’t worry about me.”

“But I do. Also, you cannot erase that woman’s memory, so I must help you.”

“Right.” Her eyebrows flicked up as she sat straighter. “Oh, that reminds me. I can’t do any of the fireball stuff right?”

His features crinkled. "Fireball stuff?"

She flicked her wrist, mimicking the way he conjured a fireball.

Amusement crossed his features, a sight she had rarely seen before.

"Oh, Catherine, you are a dear."

"I didn't think so. It just seemed handy...especially when I got stuck in that cell."

"Since you continue to find yourself in compromising situations, I will teach you how to defend yourself the moment I return from Maine."

"With a fireball?"

"Not quite. Sorry, dear, you do not come equipped with those."

She offered him a slight smile. "That's fine. And like I said, you don't need to worry about me. I'll be fine. I've been getting myself out of trouble for a while now--"

"And you no longer need to do that. We will handle it when I return from Maine. Now, we should manage the situation with Ms. Hoffman. Would you gather her whilst I speak with Mother?"

Cate set her teacup aside and nodded. "Yes. I'll tell her we're ready to take her home. We'll meet in the library."

"Good," Marcus answered, setting his cup and saucer on the tray.

"Good luck," she said as she rose and straightened her tunic. "I'm sorry."

"Do not apologize, Catherine. I can handle Mother."

Cate offered him a dubious glance.

He heaved a sigh as they strode into the hall. "Mostly."

She chuckled as they parted ways, with him heading toward Anna's room while Cate navigated to Amy Grace's. She knocked at the door but received no response.

Her forehead crinkled as she tried again. "Amy Grace?"

Her pulse quickened, and she tried the knob. The door swung open to a darkened bedroom. "Amy Grace?"

Cate peered into the room, finding it empty. She hurried across it and glanced into the open door leading to the en-suite bathroom. "Uh-oh."

With no one in the room, she hastened into the hall in search of the woman. Her gaze flicked back and forth before she selected a direction. She'd search the castle, but first she'd find some reinforcements.

As she rounded the corner, voices floated from Anna's room.

“...haven’t told her anything,” Anna said, her voice incredulous before she heaved a sigh.

“The situation is delicate, Mother. I have attempted to explain that several times to you.”

“It has become even more delicate after the discussion I just had with Catherine.”

Cate hesitated, wondering if she should turn back or continue to Anna’s door.

“I will handle it.”

“Oh? Will you? Before or after you run off to Maine again.”

This time Marcus sighed. “That is—“

Cate twisted on her heel, ready to retreat.

“Don’t bother. I care not what is happening in Bucksville. I care what is happening here. With Catherine. Do you know she believes Laura to be her mother?”

Cate froze at Anna’s words, tilting her head as she furrowed her brow.

“And you have told her anything?”

“No,” Anna answered. “I have hinted that she should not be so shortsighted, but other than that, she has no idea who Laura is.”

“It is best kept that way,” Marcus answered. “As for the rest, I will handle it when the time is appropriate.”

Anna sucked in a breath. “Fine. I will trust you to do what is best. Though know that I disagree.”

“I already know, Mother. Now, we must handle the other situations. I am to meet Catherine in the library—“

Cate’s heart thudded hard against her ribs, and she scurried down the hall, breaking into a run to put distance between her and her spouse and mother-in-law.

She reached her room and closed herself inside of it, gasping for breath. Her mind worked overtime to process the information. Anna and Marcus knew who Laura was and were deliberately keeping it from her.

Why?

CHAPTER 26



Cate pressed her trembling hand against her forehead as she slid her eyes closed, desperately trying to compose herself.

The words she'd just overhead floated through her mind, stinging her again. *Have you told her anything?*

No, she has no idea who Laura is.

Cate swallowed hard, realizing they had every idea who Laura was and had kept it from her.

For what reason, she didn't know. But they'd been lying to her since these visions had started. Or at least since she'd identified Laura as part of them.

She twisted her fingers into fists, setting her jaw. She had to confront them. She had to know what they knew.

Her heart thudded hard against her ribs, and she spun to face the door. She imagined the conversation in her mind as her fingertips lingered on the knob.

With a huff, she shook her head. She couldn't confront them until the other situations were handled.

They needed to return Amy Grace to her own time and convince Amanda and David to disappear. Only after those two things were settled could she focus on determining why her husband and mother-in-law had lied to her about her visions.

A knock startled her, pulling her from her thoughts and sending her heart pounding against her ribs once more.

She tugged open the door, finding Jack on the other side. With a deep inhale, she settled her nerves, forcing her heart rate back to normal.

“Cate? You okay?”

She swallowed hard as she nodded, chewing her lower lip and forcing the thoughts about what she’d overheard from my mind.

“You don’t look okay. Did something happen?”

“We’re going to take Amy Grace back to her time and then deal with David and Amanda. If all goes to plan, we should have this wrapped up today, I hope.”

Jack skirted past her into the room, rubbing his chin. “So, if this works...I’ve never been married to Amanda.”

“Right,” Cate answered with a nod. “We should return to find everyone else blissfully unaware of your marriage.”

As she said the words, she wondered if that was what would happen with her own spouse. Would they quietly divorce shortly after their marriage, and she would return to a household none the wiser?

“Cate?” Jack asked. “Something’s bothering you. Have you had another vision?”

Cate shook her head. “No. I just...I couldn’t find Amy Grace and...”

“She’s in the kitchen,” Jack answered. “With Molly and Mrs. Fraser. I came from there just now after hearing your beloved spouse is back in residence.”

She sighed. “Only to wrap up the loose ends we need his assistance with. Then he’s back to Maine.”

“How lovely of him to stop by.”

Cate’s hands clenched into fists again.

Jack eyed them, flicking his eyebrows up. “I see you’re as tickled as I am about it.”

Cate licked her lips, weighing the idea of telling him her suspicions. She raised her gaze to his, her shoulders slumping. She had to tell someone. “I think Marcus and Anna are hiding something from me.”

“I’m not surprised. Those two are hiding a lot of things if you ask me. We know he comes equipped with a flashlight, but what else? She can put people to sleep with a touch—“

“I knew that about him. He used it on me when he kidnapped me in the 1700s.”

“Oh, right. I’d forgotten that we had placed our trust in a man who nabbed you from these very halls.”

“I try not to think about it because...”

“Because?”

Cate’s features crinkled as she refused to admit her feelings to herself. “Nothing, never mind. The thing is...I think they know who Laura is, and they aren’t telling me.”

“Why? Are they determined to torment you?”

Cate sucked in a breath, her happy future memory taunting at her. “I don’t know. I don’t want to believe that. Anna has been such a help to us...”

“Has she? Or has this all been set up by the Northcotts?”

Cate frowned at the words, though mostly because she couldn’t stop but wonder the same. Was that warm future memory that had gotten her through so many terrifying moments all fake? “I don’t know.”

Her features pinched as she struggled to make sense of things.

“Oh,” Marcus’s voice said from behind her, making her startle. She batted her eyelashes to make her tears recede. “I hadn’t realized you were waylaid by Mr. Reid. Have you readied Ms. Hoffman?”

“Not yet,” Cate answered, desperately trying to steady her voice.

She failed. Marcus skirted around her, an unimpressed frown settling onto his features. “I hadn’t realized Mr. Reid was upsetting you either.”

“It’s not me upsetting her,” Jack shot back.

A pang of regret raced through her as she wondered if Jack would confront Marcus before she was ready.

“Then what is?” Marcus asked, his focus never leaving her.

She pressed her lips together, swallowing hard. “We need to have a talk once we’ve gotten these other situations squared away.”

“Concerning?”

Cate let her gaze fall to the floor, her heart thudding hard again. “Laura.”

She glanced up at him, trying to read his expression, but, as usual, it was unreadable.

“Then I suppose we should locate Ms. Hoffman and return her before we work on Amanda and David.”

Cate bobbed her head. “She’s in the kitchen. I’ll get her.”

“Good. We’ll meet in the library as planned,” Marcus answered.

Cate stood for a second, eyeing both men before she spoke again. "Maybe you should come with me, Jack."

"Oh, right," Jack said with a nod. "Sure."

Cate offered her husband a weak smile before they stepped into the hall, putting distance between them.

"Are you okay?" Jack asked.

"Yes," Cate answered. "We have a job to do."

"Cate...I just don't know how you're doing this. The nerve of that guy to blame me for upsetting you."

Cate studied the red runner beneath her feet as they descended the stairs. "I don't know. I don't understand why they're doing what they're doing, but there must be a reason."

"Yes, they're lying to us because they have some other agenda," Jack answered.

Cate shook her head. "I really don't want to believe that."

"Cate, I know this is hard. I know you two...three...whatever, you and the Northcotts went through some things together while you were searching for me. And I don't mean to sound ungrateful for what they did, but—"

Cate stopped as they reached the stairs leading to the kitchen. She raised her gaze to his, her features pinching. "There's something else."

Jack's face went blank, concern flashing through his eyes. "All right."

"I, umm..." She shook her head, unsure she wanted to get into all of it. But she'd made no sense of it on her own. Maybe an outside insight would help. "I have a future memory..."

"The vision, yes."

She winced. "No. When Anna started teaching me how to deal with my visions, she told me to find a comforting vision."

Jack burst into laughter. "Are any of them supposed to achieve that? Aren't they all gloom and doom?"

"No," Cate answered, shifting her weight from foot to foot. "Let's go into the sitting room."

He nodded, following her to the set of double doors. They slipped inside, shutting out the rest of the castle. "You're scaring me."

"I'm scaring myself," Cate answered. "I can't make any sense of this."

"Okay, so you were supposed to find a warm, fuzzy future memory. Did you?"

Cate bobbed her head. "Yes. I did."

“Okay. Congratulations. At least we know there’s something positive in our future.”

“The thing is...” She hesitated again as she perched on the edge of the couch. “The warm, fuzzy memory involves Marcus.”

“I take it back. There is nothing positive about our future.”

Cate pressed her lips into a thin line as she shot him an unimpressed glance. “Very funny, Jack. Although, you’re striking at the heart of my point. How is Marcus still in my future? And why he is my warm, fuzzy memory? If he’s lying to me...”

Jack collapsed onto the loveseat across from her, his hands clasped. “Why are you still with him?”

“Exactly.”

“When does this memory occur?”

Cate shrugged. “I don’t know. That’s the other problem. This could be five minutes from now, five years from now...” She let her head fall into her hands. “I asked Anna if they could be fake.”

“And?”

“She said no.”

Jack bobbed his head around. “Well, we do think she’s lying to you. Maybe she’s lying about this.”

Cate sucked in a sharp breath. “Maybe she planted the future memory. Like Amanda’s.”

“Ohhh, Cate. Maybe.”

Cate furrowed her brow again, wondering why the Northcotts would do this? What did it gain them? “There’s more, too. And again, this could be more lies but...”

“Do I want to know?”

Cate wrinkled her nose. “Probably not, but I’m going to tell you anyway. Anna says her warm, fuzzy vision is of me.”

“What? Anna had a vision of you? When?”

Cate flicked her eyebrows up as she recalled the tale. “When she first held Marcus.”

“As a baby?”

Cate nodded.

Jack leapt from his seat, pacing the floor. “Hard to imagine that fellow as a helpless babe.”

“Baby, yes. Helpless, apparently not. Anna says he could conjure fireballs from birth.”

Jack screwed up his face as he shot her a glance.

“Yeah. A frightening thought, right? I can’t imagine what I’d do if I had a baby who could do that.” Cate rose, drumming her hands against her leggings.

“Anyway, there you have my entire convoluted story. Now you see why I can’t make heads or tails out of any of this. Nothing makes sense, and nothing adds up.”

Jack grabbed Cate’s hand and squeezed it. “As soon as we finish this nonsense with my murder charge...we’re working on this. We’ll figure it out, Cate.”

“Thanks,” she said with a weak smile.

“Now, let’s go return this poor lady to her own time and...erase her memory. That’s...” Jack’s features settled into a concerned expression. “I don’t like that he can do that.”

“I asked him if he’s ever done to me,” Cate said with a tentative grin.

“Has he?”

“He says no, but...how would I know? He could have erased my memory and then just lied about it.”

Jack rubbed at his temples. “I can’t take this. I wonder if we can go back and pretend we live in a time before we knew any of this.”

“Sorry,” Cate answered with a grimace, “but I’m sure Gianna would find us.”

“That woman.”

“I suppose we need to keep reminding ourselves that she’s the real enemy here.” Cate crossed to the door, her fingers lingering on the doorknob.

“Yes, she is...but I can’t help but wonder who is in league with her. And have they infiltrated this house.”

“I really hope not.” Cate’s features pinched as her stomach twisted into a knot. Had she invited the enemy into her home?

“Me too, but...if The Agency will go to any lengths.”

“You think this is all a ploy, and the Northcotts really are Agency?”

Jack bobbed his head in answer. Cate’s shoulders slumped at the agreement. “Wait...I wonder if Damien would know.”

“Do you think? I mean, maybe they keep things close to the vest.”

“I’m sure they do, but come on, Celine nearly married him. She may have some idea.”

“It’s worth a shot. Ask him when we get back from returning Amy Grace. But let’s get through that bit first, okay?”

“Yes, I agree. She’s been a good sport, and she really helped with the investigation, but...time for her to go back to her normal life.”

“I’m ready to ask if she wants a roommate. Maybe Northcott can wipe my memory, too.”

“Do you like poodles?”

“I love them,” Jack said with a grin as they stepped into the hall, nearly running into Amy Grace.

“Oops, sorry. I hope you don’t mind, but I took it upon myself to wander downstairs for a snack,” she said.

“You’re welcome to wander anywhere,” Cate said, plastering a smile on her face as she shoved her concerns to the back of her mind. “We were just looking for you though.”

“Oh? You need me to play bad cop again with what’s-her-name?”

Cate chuckled. “No. We’ve got that solved.”

Amy Grace’s eyes went wide. “Did you? You caught the murderer?”

Cate wrinkled her nose as she shook her head. “No. Not quite. We actually prevented the murder.”

“You did? Won’t that...mess everything up? I mean...David was supposed to die, and now he didn’t.”

“We’re hoping it doesn’t,” Jack answered. “There wasn’t a good way around it.”

Amy Grace’s forehead creased as she stared at him.

“Things happened, and there wasn’t a choice,” Jack said.

“We couldn’t leave him there to die. I had to save him,” Cate added.

“I wonder how different things will be. Have you noticed any ripples yet? Maybe some people won’t be born. Or maybe they will be born. Or what if—“

“We haven’t noticed anything yet, so our fingers are crossed. Anyway, given that things are settled, we now can finally take you home.” Cate grinned at the woman.

Amy Grace’s lips tugged into a slight frown. “Oh.”

“You can see your poodles again. I know you’ve been worried about them.” Cate kept the smile plastered on her features.

“Yeah, I do miss them. But...”

“But?”

“Well...I thought I could stay here and help you solve crimes.”

“Oh,” Cate said, screwing up her face as she shot Jack a glance, “that’s sweet of you, but I really hope we don’t have many more crimes to solve.”

Amy Grace shifted her gaze between the two of them. “Do you really believe that?”

“Yes?” Jack said, his voice questioning.

“Well, if you need any help, you know where to find me. I’d be happy to help. Although, I’ll be older, so maybe come back to get me at this age.”

“We will do that,” Cate said with an awkward laugh as she reminded herself that the woman would have no memory of them. “Anyway, Marcus is waiting for us in the library, so we should go.”

“Right.” Amy Grace bobbed her head before they set off down the hall to the library to collect Marcus.

Within fifteen minutes, they’d returned to the Oxford area over two decades earlier. Amy Grace pushed through the door of her charming townhouse. Three poodles bounded toward her as though she’d been gone for years.

“I know,” she said as she petted each one. “It’s been a long time, hasn’t it? No, actually, it’s only been fifteen minutes. That’s odd.”

“You never get used to that,” Jack said.

“Can I offer you some tea?” she asked.

“No, we need to be going, but...thank you so much for your help with all of this. We couldn’t have done it without you.”

Amy Grace grinned at them. “You’re welcome. I’m glad to have been of assistance. And if you ever need help in the future—“

Marcus touched her cheek before she could finish the statement, and she slumped into his arms.

“You could have let her finish,” Jack complained.

“She won’t remember it anyway,” he answered as he lifted her into his arms and carried her to her bedroom. After murmuring a few words and a swipe across her forehead, he fixed his gaze on Cate. “She’ll think she’s had a fantastical dream.”

Cate stared down at the sleeping woman. “I feel sort of bad. She was very helpful. And a good sport.”

“Yes, she was,” Jack agreed, “but she’ll be far better off without us than with us.”

“I agree. The Agency is no picnic. I don’t want anyone else exposed to them.”

“I guess we should return and deal with Amanda and David. Let’s hope that goes as smoothly as this did.”

Cate nodded. Marcus stretched his arms out before Cate batted them down. “No! Not in the house.”

He rolled his eyes. “You are as bad as Mother.”

“Someone has to keep an eye on you,” Cate answered as they made their way out of the house. “And I don’t want to leave her house a mess from all that wind.”

They found a suitable spot and returned to the present, arriving at the mausoleum across the property.

“Now, on to the other problem,” Jack said.

Cate nodded at him before her eyebrows pinched together. The castle in the distance morphed and twisted in front of her. She blinked her eyes, certain she was seeing things.

“Cate?” Jack asked, his voice sounding miles away.

Marcus placed a steady hand on her. “Catherine?”

She reached for him but before she could latch on, her knees buckled and she plunged into darkness.

CHAPTER 27



Cate's heart hammered as she glanced around, finding herself in her darkened bedroom. What had happened? She'd felt herself collapsing, but she'd expected to wake up in the mausoleum, not in her bedroom what seemed to be hours later.

She wrapped her arms around herself as a chill cut through her. A scream sounded from another part of the castle. Her heart plummeted as she realized she wasn't in her bedroom. At least not in the present time. She was somewhere else, living through her vision again.

Before she could think, her feet were already moving, pushing her toward the sound. A drive deep inside told her she needed to be there.

She flung the doors open to her bedroom suite and sprinted down the hall, turning the corner and heading for the double doors at the end.

"Laura!" she called as her fingertips wrapped around the doorknob and twisted.

She pushed into the room, her heart pounding. She'd never gotten this far before. What would she find?

The moon cast long shadows across the bedroom. She searched the space, finding a figure huddled in the bed, covers pulled tight around them as they stared at the window, their back to Cate.

Cate's forehead crinkled as she crept forward, her trembling hand outstretched. If she could see the face, she may be able to determine who Laura was.

Her fingers wrapped around the figure's shoulders, and the woman whipped around to face her with terror-filled eyes.

Cate's stomach twisted into a tight knot as she stared at her own face.

She fluttered her eyelashes, trying to process it, but the world began to fall away around her, cracking into pieces and leaving her floating in the darkness.

After falling for a moment, she opened her eyes, gasping as she vaulted upright.

"Easy, Catherine, you've had another vision," Marcus said, holding her tightly.

She sucked in deep breaths. "I know. I know, I saw..."

"What, Cate?" Jack asked, his features pinched.

"Me. I saw me again. I called out to Laura, but when I went into the room, the woman's face was mine. I don't...understand."

Marcus heaved a sigh as he rubbed her shoulders. "Let's go back and discuss it with Mother."

"Yes, I would very much like to discuss it with both of you," Cate said, her mind regressing to the conversation she'd overheard earlier.

"And we want answers," Jack added as Cate rose.

"Can you walk?" Marcus asked.

"Yes," she snapped, "I don't need to be carried."

"Need or want. Those are two different things."

"Need," she answered, her nerves raw from the emotion in her vision.

Jack wrapped his arm around her shoulders. "It's okay, Cate. Let's head back."

They made the trek across the property to the castle, warm lights glowing from within as it welcomed them back.

Cate heaved a tired sigh as they entered through the towering oak doors.

"You okay, Cate?"

"Yeah, just tired."

"But walking and talking. You are improving, dear."

"I still don't know anything," she shot back.

"It will come in time."

"Or you could tell me. You know something, don't you?"

"Catherine—"

"I heard you talking to your mother earlier. You know who Laura is, and you won't tell me."

Anna descended the stairs, her eyebrows shooting up. “What’s going on here?”

Cate shifted her weight, exhaustion coursing through her.

“Cate had another vision. She saw the person in the room, but it was herself. She’s confused and upset, and you’re holding back on her. That’s not helping!” Jack shouted.

“We are not holding back on purpose,” Anna answered. “But we cannot deal with that now. We have trouble.”

“Trouble?” Cate asked, her stomach clenching.

“Yes, trouble. A great deal of trouble.”

“What happened?” Jack’s eyes went wide. “The murder. It still happened somehow, didn’t it? I’m still in trouble. Have the police come for me?”

“No,” Anna said, “Mr. Reid, try to stop making things all about you.”

“What is it, then?” Cate asked.

“Something is disturbing the timeline. There is a temporal anomaly that I can sense.”

Marcus’s eyes went wide. “From?”

“I don’t know.”

“Is it related to what we did? We prevented a murder,” Cate said, her stomach twisting into a tight knot. “What if we changed things so much that the world is just catching up?”

“No. No, it’s not that. Something is happening now. But I don’t know what.” Anna pressed her lips together into a thin line. “But I think we had better very quickly fix the situation with David and Amanda before this unravels. It needs our full attention.”

“Right,” Cate said with a nod. “But I don’t know how to fix that.”

“I’ve moved them to Rosenberg,” Anna said. “Just in case. But we’ll need to travel there and convince them to live a quiet life somewhere.”

“Do you think they’ll go for it?” Cate shifted her gaze to Jack. “You know them best.”

“David? I don’t know about that. He was a pretty prominent businessman.”

Cate’s shoulders slumped as she heaved a sigh. “Great. So, this will be an uphill battle.”

“And that’s only the first of it,” Anna answered.

Cate’s features pinched. “What’s the next?”

“Where do we put them? We’ll need to hide them in time somewhere.”

“Perhaps the late nineteenth century. They will be much harder to track before the advent of mass media,” Marcus suggested.

Cate scoffed, shaking her head. “Oh, please. That makes our job ten times harder. We have to convince them to slink off and live a quiet life in an era that lacks all modern conveniences.”

Cate slapped a hand against her forehead as she paced back and forth.

“Maybe they’ll be more open than we think,” Jack said. “Amanda loved reading those historical romances back in the day.”

“Reading it and living it are two very different things,” Cate answered.

Jack shrugged. “Maybe we’ll get lucky.”

“Let’s hope so.” Cate chewed her lower lip. “Otherwise, I don’t know what we’ll do.”

“I have another idea,” Anna answered. “But you won’t like it.”

“Oh, boy,” Cate groaned.

Jack wrinkled his nose. “I’m almost afraid to ask, but what is it?”

“We don’t have to prevent the murder. We can let them go back if they want to. But we will need to kidnap the former version of Mr. Reid so he cannot appear anywhere near the event nor marry Amanda.”

“Ohhh,” Jack murmured.

“But she’s programmed to think he’s done it. Won’t they do that again?”

“They cannot if he is nowhere near that pub or that hotel that night. In fact, we’d need this Mr. Reid to appear somewhere else. Maybe a sudden trip home to Dunhaven, and he’s spotted a fuel station miles away, thus giving him an appropriate alibi.”

Cate pressed her lips together as she processed the idea. It could work. But she hated to be responsible for a man’s death. She flicked a questioning gaze to Jack. “What do you think? It’s you who stands to lose the most if we don’t play our cards right.”

“I don’t know, Cate. I mean, on one hand, convincing them to stay put and out of sight is a big gamble, especially with The Agency.”

“But on the other, we’re sending a man to his death,” she answered.

He nodded, his features twisted with the agony of the difficult decision.

“You are not sending him to his death,” Anna answered. “He has already died. He died in every timeline so far. Someone killed him. He is merely fulfilling his destiny.”

“Then why does it feel so wrong?” Cate lamented.

“These choices always are,” Anna answered. “It’s extraordinarily difficult to know what’s best. And whichever you make, you must be sure about it so you don’t spend your life second-guessing.”

Cate’s features crinkled as she slicked a lock of hair behind her ear. Anna’s comforting words were helpful, but with her current suspicions about her mother-in-law and husband, she wondered if following their advice was prudent. “Can you give us a minute to talk?”

Anna arched an eyebrow before she sucked in a breath and nodded. “All right.”

Jack followed Cate into the sitting room, and she closed the doors behind them. “This is a mess.”

“Yes, I know. And I don’t know what to do.”

“Neither do I. My mind just keeps going round and round. And I don’t know who to trust.” Cate clapped a palm over her forehead as she sank onto the couch cushion.

“Oddly, the Northcotts didn’t have a suggestion they seemed to be lobbying for,” Jack answered, perching on the edge of the armchair next to her.

“You’re right. I just...the whole thing about them knowing who Laura is and not telling me is really throwing me.”

“Maybe we ought to ask them.”

“I asked. You heard their response. They aren’t doing it deliberately. What does that even mean?”

Jack rose from his seat. “All right, well, I think you need to settle your mind with that before we do anything else.”

“No,” Cate said with a shake of her head. “No, we need to solve this before that time anomaly or whatever Anna is sensing causes more problems.”

“*If* she’s sensing anything. What if that’s a ploy?”

Cate’s breathing turned ragged as she tried to sort through the possibilities. Everywhere she turned, something was going wrong. “I don’t know.”

“Cate,” Jack asked, easing onto his seat again, concern etched into his features, “are you all right? Are you having another vision?”

“No,” she answered. “I mean yes. Oh, no, I’m not having a vision, yes, I’m all right. But we need to make a call here. This affects you the most, so whatever you’re comfortable with is okay with me.”

“Oh, sure, put it on me, the lowly gardener.”

“Oh, now you’re the gardener, huh?” she asked, levity returning to her voice.

“I am.” He grinned at her before the expression slipped from his features. “In all seriousness, I’m not certain I can return David to be murdered.”

“Neither can I. Okay, I think we have our decision, then. We need to convince them to go live somewhere quietly.”

“Right,” Jack said with a nod. “Okay. Let’s hope this works out.”

“Believe me,” Cate said as she rose, “my fingers are crossed. I want this to be over for you.”

“Admit it, you just want your gardener back.”

“I also want Molly to be happy.” She wagged a finger at him. “If you hurt her...”

Jack held his hands up. “I promise I won’t. I like Molly...a lot.”

Cate smiled at him. “I’m happy for you. And her. She deserves it after that idiot she just divorced.”

“Oh, my, Cate Kensie’s getting salty.”

“Cate Kensie Northcott. I’m allowed to be salty now. Actually, it’s encouraged.”

“Oh, right. I forgot. Now that you’re a duchess,” he said with another grin as they stepped to the door.

Anna whipped around to face them, her features questioning. “Have we made a decision?”

“Yes. We’re going to try to convince them to live a quiet life somewhere,” Cate said with a nod. “Neither of us felt comfortable sending them back knowing he’d get killed.”

“All right, then we should speak with them right away,” Anna said. “Before this other issue...explodes. Marcus—”

“No,” Cate said with a shake of her head. “We’ll do this. Jack and I.”

Anna raised her eyebrows again. “All right. We will await word in the library.”

Cate nodded and they parted ways. Her stomach twisted into a tight knot as they approached David’s bedroom.

“You ready?” Cate asked.

Jack nodded. “No, but go ahead.”

She offered him an amused glance before she knocked on the door.
“David? David, it’s Cate and Jack.”

They waited for a moment before she tried again, calling once more. No one answered and no one opened the door.

Cate and Jack shared a questioning glance before Cate set her fingers on the knob and pressed her ear to the door.

“Do you hear anything?”

She shook her head before she twisted the knob and pushed it open. Her heart skipped a beat as she scanned the darkened space. No one was there. David Hensley was gone.

CHAPTER 28



Cate's knees wobbled as she raced across the room to peer into the bathroom. Empty.

She twisted to face Jack. "Where is he?"

"Maybe he's with Amanda," Jack suggested.

"Let's check." Cate's heart hammered against her ribs as she raced from the room to the next bedroom.

With ragged breath, she pounded against the door, but no one answered.

"Maybe they went for a walk?" Jack asked, his features twisting as he rubbed the back of his neck.

Cate plowed into the room, finding it empty, too. "Oh, no. Even if they did go for a walk, we need to find them and get them back here so we can convince them to leave."

"Wow, that sounded...odd but you're right. I can head out to see if they're here."

"Okay, I'll—"

Cate's voice cut off. Jack snapped his gaze to her. "What?"

She hurried across the room and snatched a tented paper from the nightstand. "There's a note addressed to us."

Jack hurried to her side, peering over her shoulder as she flicked it open and read aloud. "Dear Cate and Jack. Thank you so much for helping us. David and I now realized the grave danger we faced from The Agency. My life would be tied to them in constant service while David's would be gone if it hadn't been for your help."

“With that said, we have decided to leave and live a quiet life off the grid. You will never hear from us again. Good luck to you, and thank you for all you’ve done.

“Signed, David and Lucy.”

Cate glanced at Jack, her eyes wide. “Seriously?”

He rubbed his neck with a shrug. “I suppose we should be glad, but...”

“You’re worried.”

“A little, but maybe it’s best this way. We didn’t have to convince them to go somewhere. And if they ever do turn up...it won’t be because we forced them to stay away.”

“I wonder if we should still send someone back to keep you away from the pub that night,” Cate mused.

“Wait, let’s check the news.” Jack fished his phone from his pocket and searched for David Hensley.

No articles about his murder turned up.

“Could we be this lucky?” Cate murmured.

“Maybe,” Jack answered. “Did your husband say something about The Agency giving up on certain aspects?”

“He said they are only distractions to us while they work on something larger. Do you think this is what that was?”

“Could have been,” Jack said with a nod. “I’m not that important.”

“Of course, you are,” Cate answered.

“You know what I mean, Cate. I can’t give them Dunhaven. They were working on something else.”

“I wonder if it has to do with the disturbance Anna sensed.”

“Or your visions.”

Cate’s shoulders slumped. “If it has to do with my visions, we may be sunk. In each one, I’m terrified. So, they’re winning.”

“Let’s hope not,” Jack answered. “We should update the others.”

“First, I think we should check on the other Amanda. Or...”

Jack’s face drained of color. “Oh...I wonder if she’s disappeared, too?”

“Let’s find out.” With the letter in hand, Cate crossed to the door and stepped into the hall. They crossed to the other side of the castle where the other Amanda’s room now sat empty.

Cate sank onto the edge of the bed. “I guess that’s that. She never came here.”

“That...boggles my mind. So...I wonder if I’m off the hook with Molly?”

“That’s easy enough to check, I guess,” Cate answered.

“Mind if we make another stop before we visit your loving husband?” Jack asked.

Cate shook her head, her lips curling into a smile. “Let’s go see if this problem is actually fixed.”

Cate’s stomach twisted as they wound through the halls of the castle to the kitchen downstairs. Molly grinned at them as they entered. “Hey, there you are.”

She leaned forward to kiss Jack’s cheek. “All done for the day?”

“Oh, uh, just a bit of discussion on a few projects,” Jack said. “I’m only here to snag a biscuit.”

“Hey,” she said as she batted his hand, “you’ll spoil your dinner.”

“Miss Molly is right, young Jack. Best you go discuss those projects so you don’t spoil Her Grace’s dinner.”

“I’ll be fine,” Cate answered, catching Andrea’s eye and motioning for her to leave with them.

They retreated into the hall a safe distance when Cate leaned closer to Andrea. “I need to ask you something about Molly, and you have to be completely honest.”

“Of course, Your Grace,” Andrea said with a nod.

“Is there any reason Molly may be upset with Jack?”

Andrea flicked her gaze to Jack before her features scrunched. “Not that I’m aware of, Your Grace. She seems very happy with him.”

“Has she mentioned him being married or someone named Amanda?”

“No,” Andrea answered. “Is this...has there been some change in time?”

Cate bobbed her head as Jack heaved a sigh of relief. “Yes. For the better. No one seems to remember now, which is good.”

“Would you like me to check further on it?” Andrea asked.

“No, we should be okay. Thank you, Andrea. And I’ll see you later.”

Andrea offered her a bright smile before she returned to the kitchen.

“Well, seems like I really dodged a bullet, mostly thanks to you, Cate.”

“Happy to help. I’ve certainly dragged you through enough since I’ve arrived.”

“Now, let’s go focus on you and your problem. Time for the Northcotts to be honest about what they know.” Jack smacked one fist against his palm.

Cate nodded, though her stomach twisted into a tight knot as they climbed the stairs.

Would she finally have answers? And would she like them?

By the time they reached the library, her knees wobbled.

“Well? Have you convinced them?” Anna asked.

Cate waved the note in the air. “No need. They’re gone.”

Anna slid the paper from between her fingers, scanning it before she shot Marcus a glance. “Well, it seems they have solved our problem.”

“Should we leave it at that?” Jack asked. “Or should we try to find them and make certain they’ll stay gone?”

“We haven’t the time to find them. The anomaly is growing stronger. We need to focus on it.”

Cate sank into her armchair. “What is this anomaly?”

“Some problem. Something wrong. Something that needs tended to.” Anna eased onto the sofa, her features pinched. “But we must determine how and what.”

“So, you don’t know anything more than that?” Jack asked.

She shook her head. “No. I’m sorry. I would venture to say it is related to Catherine’s visions, but we haven’t much progress on that.”

Cate stiffened, her eyebrows pinching as she frowned. “No, I haven’t made much progress. But I suspect you know a lot more than you’re saying.”

“Catherine, we do not *know* anything. Though I have my suspicions. But you should know that giving away the future can be...dangerous. Especially if I am wrong.”

“I’d like to know either way. You have some guess. Maybe telling me would be the key to unlocking everything.”

“You would reject the idea immediately, Catherine,” Marcus answered before he offered her a brandy.

“No, I don’t want a brandy. I want answers. Whether I will reject them or not. You two have been keeping things from me this entire time. And I’d like to know why.”

Anna flicked her gaze to Marcus.

“Fine,” she answered, “I will tell you.”

“Mother—“

“She should know. Perhaps it’s better this way. Perhaps she will be more prepared even if she doesn’t accept the answer.”

Marcus pressed his lips into a thin line, shaking his head.

Anna wagged a finger at him. “This would be easier had you done what I told you to do in the first place.”

“Mother, I—“

“Don’t Mother me. This is your fault, Marcus. I have told you time and again what must be done. Instead, you slink off to Maine to bury your head in the sand. That was always your problem.”

Cate’s gaze bounced back and forth between the two of them as they argued about something she couldn’t quite understand. What should Marcus have done that would have made this easier? What did they know?

“Fine. Tell her. When she doesn’t accept it, you’ll see.”

She rolled her eyes at him before she twisted to face Cate. “I must apologize for my son who is a hopeless case.”

Cate offered her as warm a smile as she could muster.

Outside, lightning tore through the sky and thunder boomed. All eyes turned toward the window, and Jack took a few steps toward it. “I didn’t think it was supposed to rain today.”

Anna leapt to her feet, her fingers twisted into fists. “It was not. This isn’t a rainstorm. This is the anomaly.”

Cate’s heart sped, and she swallowed hard. “Anomaly? What’s happening? Will it be some kind of a vortex? Like when we had the universal time portal emerge?”

“No, it will be—“

Another crash of thunder and flash of lightning interrupted Anna’s statement, followed by frantic banging on the front door.

Cate’s pulse quickened as she hurried toward it with the others in tow.

She tugged open the door to find Damien collapsed against the jamb. He spilled inside, clutching his stomach.

Cate’s eyes went wide as she stared at the blood splotch on his shirt and the red stains on his fingers. He gasped for breath as he collapsed with a wince.

“Damien!” Cate dropped to her knees next to him. “Oh my goodness. He’s shot.”

“Cate,” he said, reaching for her cheek. Blood smeared across her skin as he grabbed her roughly. “You have to go.”

“What?”

Marcus tugged at her arm. “You have to leave now, Catherine. This is the trouble Mother sensed. You must go.”

“Go where?” she cried as she struggled against him.

“Twenty years,” Damien gasped as Jack pressed his hand against his wound. “Future.”

Cate’s eyes went wide. “What?”

“Catherine, now.”

“Go, Cate, she wasn’t far behind me.”

His statement was punctuated by a bullet buzzing past and smacking into the banister of the grand staircase. Cate ducked instinctively as a spray of wood exploded.

“Take her, I will tend to Damien,” Anna said.

“No! What about Jack? And Damien could die.”

Marcus dragged her as she fought him before he scooped her up into his arms. “Damien is an immortal, he will heal. I will ensure Mr. Reid is safe. You must go, Catherine.”

“No!” She kicked her feet as she craned her neck to study the scene unfolding in the foyer. Jack and Anna dragged Damien into the safety of the sitting room before slamming the doors closed.

A second later, Gianna appeared. She scanned the space, her eyes locking on Cate.

She raised her weapon, but before she could fire, Marcus ducked into the library. The doors slammed shut behind him, and he set her down.

“Break down the doors!” Gianna’s voice commanded.

A loud bang sounded against them as Marcus stretched out his arms. “The moment the portal opens, you must go.”

Cate bobbed her head, and her knees wobbled as the wind picked up, papers swirling.

The dark hole opened in front of her. “It’s open, go!” Marcus shouted.

She glanced back at him, her breath catching in her throat before she stepped inside the portal. As she entered the dark space, the crack of the doors splintering sounded behind her, followed by a single gunshot.

Cate held her breath as the portal snapped shut. She froze, stuck in darkness as she realized she was trapped between time.

* * *

THE END

RECKONING AT DUNHAVEN CASTLE



A CATE KENSIE MYSTERY

CHAPTER 1



A sharp banging against her front doors sent Cate's heart spiraling higher. Her chest constricted, breathing turning difficult as she struggled to focus on the matter at hand.

"Break down the doors!" Gianna's voice commanded from outside Dunhaven Castle's library.

Time stood still as she pressed a hand against her sweat-beaded brow. Her mind swam and the room spun. Damien lay bleeding on her foyer floor after imparting the fateful news that she needed to travel twenty years into the future.

She's wanted to know more, but Marcus had carried her—kicking and screaming—to the library, bolted them inside, and demanded she leave in the time portal.

Marcus stretched out his arms, a twinkling sparkle glowing to life in front of her. "The moment the portal opens, you must go."

Cate's lower lip quivered, her knees buckling as the portal's wind scattered papers around her in a chaotic swirl. She nodded, tears welling in her eyes.

The dark hole yawned in front of her. "It's open, go!" Marcus shouted.

She glanced back at him, her features pinching in anxiety. Taking a deep breath, she turned toward the shimmering veil of the portal. The air thickened as she approached, the boundary between her world and the unknown manifesting as a curtain of swirling mist and pulsing light. With a

hesitant step, she crossed the threshold, the familiar world fading into a corridor of eerie luminescence and shadow.

The dark space surrounded her, but before she could navigate it, the sharp crack of the doors splintering sounded behind her.

But what followed made her heart plummet. A single gunshot pierced the air.

The bullet whizzed past her, somehow entering the portal.

She held her breath as suddenly, everything shifted. The portal snapped closed.

Cate froze, stuck in the darkness. In every other instance, Cate had moved forward briefly until she'd stepped into the new time. But Marcus had warned her of the dangers of becoming stuck between times.

She knew the consequences of the portal closing while she remained inside, stuck between two time periods. She may never find her way out. She could be trapped here forever.

Cate gasped, her eyes searching the darkness for a sign of any help. But there was nothing.

Her breathing turned ragged, her stomach lurching. She would never get out of here alive.

She fluttered her eyelashes, a sob escaping her as she pressed a hand against her forehead. The type of death she would die haunted her. Would she starve? Freeze?

A shiver snaked down her spine as the chilly air, normally nothing more than a quick sensation set in.

With her arms wrapped around her, she glanced over her shoulder. She couldn't go back. But would Marcus come through? Could he find her?

She licked her lips, forcing herself to remain calm. She had to think. She couldn't just resign herself to death in between time periods. She had to fight back.

She couldn't wait for Marcus Northcott to find her. She wasn't even certain he could find her.

Her fingers found the wedding ring on her finger, rubbing it. He had no reason to risk his life to come after her. They were married in name only. Perhaps he'd rather she disappear so he could be rid of her.

She let go of the warm gold band, her fingers brushing the diamond ring she sported as the Duchess of Stratfordshire.

The events of her life from the time she'd spoken with William Smythe in her tiny apartment flashed before her. She'd gone from a simple college professor to a countess, and then a duchess. She'd solved murders, thefts, and found her best friend when he'd been taken by The Agency.

Cate lifted her chin. She could find her way out of this. If there was a way, she'd seek it out and escape.

"You have to move forward, Cate. You have to find the way out."

She inched her foot forward, pushing herself to move through the darkness. Tears stung her eyes as she crept forward, finding nothing—no way out, nothing.

"Hello?" she called out, wondering if anyone—or anything—lurked in the darkness.

Nothing answered her. She wasn't certain if that was a good or a bad thing.

She stretched her fingers out in front of her, blindly feeling in the blackness. With a hard swallow, Cate tried to find something, anything to tether herself to the world between times.

There had to be a way to break free from this portal. "Why didn't I ask Marcus about what to do if this happened? I'm certain he would have had some advice."

As she moved forward, her mind returned to the time she'd left behind. What had happened to cause the portal to snap shut?

She'd heard a gunshot. Marcus couldn't have been hit; she'd felt the bullet buzz past her in the time portal. Where had it gone?

Did it disappear into the future, or was it trapped inside here with her?

With a huff, she shook her head. "Does it matter, Cate?"

It didn't, she decided. Her mind was merely searching for anything she could use to distract herself from the terror building within her.

She swallowed hard as emotion finally overcame her. Tears spilled to her cheeks, and she sank to her knees, covering her eyes with her hands as she sobbed.

She doubled over, curling over her legs tightly as she cried until something stopped her. Her heart skipped a beat as she raised her head, her cheeks tear-stained.

Sucking in a sharp breath, sniffing before she strained to listen for the sound she'd heard.

Her eyes widened as the noise cut through the quiet blackness again. Voices.

Her skin puckered into goosebumps. Wiping at her cheeks, she climbed to her feet and held her breath as she waited to hear it again. If she could find the source, maybe she could find her way out.

“Hello?” she called, a new urgency in her voice.

No one answered her, but the voices continued. With her other senses deprived, the echoing voices seemed easier to follow, even with the distortions from the reverberation off the wallless, seemingly endless space.

Her footsteps made no sound as she broke into a light jog. The voices became louder and clearer with every step.

Her breath caught in her throat as she recognized one voice. Her lips curled at the corners, tears filling her eyes again. “Damien,” she whispered.

She raced forward as she heard him speak again. A glimmer of light appeared in the distance.

Cate raced toward it. “Damien!” she shouted.

She hurried toward the glow of light, her features scrunching as she approached it. Her lips parted, and she reached toward the glassy window that separated her from the world.

Her fingers pressed against it, a strange tingling shooting through her body as she touched it. “No,” she murmured as tears fell again. “Oh, no.”

She pressed her hands against the window, staring at the scene on the other side of the window. Damien paced the floor in front of the fireplace in the library. “Was it totally necessary?” he asked someone seated in the armchair.

“Damien! Damien!” Cate screamed, pounding her fists against the glass. “Damien, please hear me!”

“You know it was,” a crisp British voice answered him.

“But...” Damien heaved a sigh. “Sometimes this feels wrong.”

“Stop being a child. You know very well it is not wrong.”

“It feels wrong. She wasn’t that bad.”

“But she wouldn’t marry you, would she?”

Damien flung his arm in the air. “No. But that was on principle. She didn’t want to be tied to The Order.”

Cate crinkled her brow. *The Order*? She recalled the name of the supernatural organization more powerful than the The Agency. Why was

Damien discussing being tied to The Order?

Her eyes widened, her heart skipping a beat as the woman in the chair rose. “Celine?”

Celine flicked a lock of her hair over her shoulder, arching an eyebrow as she sipped at her brandy. “That was Cate’s problem. She should have given in. You would have made a nice husband for her. But she just couldn’t give up those precious principles, could she?”

“And it cost her Dunhaven Castle.”

Celine curled her lips into a devilish smile. “Yes, it did. More for me.”

Cate stared, her heart hammering at the scene. When did Celine side with The Order? And why had she stolen Dunhaven Castle?

Cate shook her head, her fingers digging into her hair. She stumbled away from the window before she backed into another. With a gasp, she twisted to stare into it.

In the scene, Jack stared at a portrait of Cate. “Oh, Lady Cate,” he said with a shake of his head, “you were taken from us too soon.”

Molly wandered into the room with a cup of tea. “Talking to her again?”

“I was. I still can’t get used to the idea that she’s gone.”

Molly offered him a consoling smile. “It’s not your fault, Jack. You couldn’t have prevented that accident that took her from us.”

“Accident?” Cate cried. “I’m dead? What is going on here?”

She shook her head, stumbling away from the window to another. Another nonsensical scene played out where Cate still worked at Aberdeen College, barely scraping by. Still another showed her at Dunhaven Castle but married to Jack.

Her mind swam as she tried to piece together everything she’d seen. What were these places?

Cate raced away from them, her lips forming a grimace as she fought to get into her constricted chest.

She was trapped in a nightmare. And there was no escape from it, it seemed.

Perhaps nothing she’d seen was real. Maybe she’d lost her mind. Could she have been running longer than she realized? Maybe she was dehydrated, suffering from exhaustion.

It could have triggered some strange side effects where she had delusions.

When she no longer heard voices coming from all directions, she slowed, coming to a stop and collapsing to her knees. Her lower lip began to tremble. She reached down to grasp the timepiece hanging around her neck.

Her hand hit the other object now on the chain. Her heart lifted as her trembling fingers lifted the compass closer to her face. In the near blackness, she could barely make out the spinning needle.

"The compass," she said, her voice breathy. "I can use the compass to navigate."

She swallowed hard, sliding her eyes closed as she focused on Dunhaven Castle twenty years in the future. With measured breaths, she slowed her mind, focusing on where she needed to be.

Her breathing turned rhythmic, and she opened her eyes, finding the needle steady and pointing in a specific direction.

She slowly rose to her feet, the needle wobbling. She stiffened, desperate to keep it steady. With a lick of her lips, she managed to stabilize it.

Blowing out a shaky breath, she inched forward in the direction it indicated. Her muscles began to ache as she held them taut, reminding herself to breathe with every step she took.

Light grew in the distance, and her lips curled into a smile. It must be the other time. She continued forward toward it, dropping the compass as the pinpoint grew stronger and brighter.

As she approached it, she noted the flickering flames of torches and the stretch of long stone walls. Cate's footsteps slowed, her lips parting.

She studied the opening in the stone when movement caught her eye. She shifted her gaze to the side of the gaping black hole.

A cloaked figure floated toward her. She backed up a step, her eyes going rounder.

"Welcome, traveler," the creature said.

"Hi," Cate breathed.

"You wish passage."

"Yes, I need to get to—"

"The labyrinth knows your destination. But in order to arrive, you must pass through it. Solve it and find your freedom. Fail to do so, and you will remain my prisoner forever."

Cate swallowed hard, her heart hammering against her ribs. “What do I need to do?”

CHAPTER 2



Cate licked her lips as the wispy figure floated closer to her. Red eyes pierced through her as she swallowed hard, curling her fingers into fists.

“The answer is simple,” the creature growled. “You must traverse the labyrinth of time.”

Cate glanced over the cloaked figure’s shoulder, her stomach plummeting as she stared at the opening in the stone wall. Shrieks sounded from inside, making her tremble. “Is there any other way?”

“You may stay here forever as my prisoner.”

“That’s not an option,” Cate said with a shake of her head. “How do I know this isn’t a trap? How do I know that I won’t walk into that labyrinth and become trapped. Or that if I make it out, you’ll make good on your promise.”

“I have no reason to lie.”

“I don’t know that. I need a contract. Something that binds you to your word.”

The cloaked figure remained silent for a moment before he reached into his robe, removing a scroll. As he let it unravel, Cate’s eyes widened. “Why is it so long?”

“It outlines the details of what you are accepting. You must complete the labyrinth and emerge on the opposite side before you will be permitted to leave this realm.”

“And you? What must you do?”

“Let you go *if* you can make it,” the hooded figure said.

Cate stared at the contract before she nodded. She had no other choice—she had to go through the labyrinth. She had to make it to the other side so she could make it to Dunhaven Castle in the future. She needed to save her friends. She needed to defeat The Agency. And she needed to find the source of her visions.

“Fine. I agree.”

The hooded figure produced a quill, thrusting it toward Cate. “Sign your name, then I will make my mark.”

Cate scribbled her name across the leathery paper before the creature scrawled his.

“It is done. You may begin.”

Cate nodded before she stepped forward toward the entrance, her stomach twisting into a knot. She glanced over her shoulder, eyeing the creature again.

The words sent a shiver snaking down her spine as she returned her gaze to the blackness between the two stone walls. Her breath caught in her throat, and she struggled to stop her lower lip from trembling. But she had to move forward. She had to defeat this labyrinth. She had to make it to the future.

She sucked in as deep as breath as she could manage and stepped forward, disappearing into the maze of stone. She navigated the labyrinth's twisting corridors, her footsteps echoing on the damp, cobblestone floor. Each turn revealed walls cloaked in creeping vines that whispered secrets of the past. Shadows danced at the edge of her torchlight, forming shapes that seemed almost human, only to dissolve into the mist when she dared look directly at them.

As she hit her first dead end, her shoulders slumped. She twisted to return in the direction she'd come, suddenly finding herself unable to move.

She jerked her body, but it felt like she was in quicksand. Cate swallowed hard. Had this been the trick? Was there no way out of the labyrinth?

Noise bombarded her as she fought to free herself from whatever had a hold on her. As she struggled, her features pinched. She held her breath, realizing what she was listening to. The awful screech of metal on metal following by the forlorn sound of a horn blaring through the quiet night

made her stomach churn. This was a memory from another time. Her parents' death.

Tears welled in her eyes, spilling over onto her cheeks. She slid her eyes closed, pressing her lips together. The memory replayed over and over and over again. And she found it more and more difficult to move from the spot she was stuck in.

She screamed, a raw, guttural cry that echoed off the labyrinth's uncaring walls. As she struggled, the quicksand grip of her fears tightened. With each desperate tug, memories flooded her mind more violently — the crunch of metal, the shattering of glass, the last time she saw her parents' faces. Panic clawed at her chest, her breathing ragged.

She chewed her lower lip, summoning the future memory that usually soothed her when she suffered from visions.

She sucked in slow steady breaths, navigating the maze of her mind to find it and latch onto it. Her mind filled in the spaces of her private sitting room at Dunhaven Castle. She felt the smooth, polished wood of the mantel under her fingertips.

Her gaze shifted across the room, focusing on the man there. Her lips curled into a soft smile.

As her mind played the memory over and over, the grip on her muscles lessened. Finally, she found herself able to move away from the dead end.

When she turned the corner, Cate collapsed against the cold stone. Her pulse still raced from the experience.

"Don't run into another dead end, Cate," she chided herself before running her fingers through her hair.

She reached down, grabbing her timepiece again to steady her when she shifted her hand to her compass. She lifted it, wondering if it could lead her through the labyrinth with limited frustrations.

"Come on, come on," she said, willing the compass to steady and point in the direction she needed to walk.

She struggled to steady her breathing, forcing her heart rate lower until the needled stopped its wobbling and pointed in a single direction.

Cate swallowed hard, attempting to keep her focus as she tried to move along the correct route. It was harder than she expected. She found herself unable to move forward along the correct course, running into walls at every turn.

She skirted around an opening in the wall, moving forward toward her goal only to find herself stuck again. She backtracked before another horrible memory could hit her and make her lose focus.

As Cate turned the corner, the stone walls disappeared, replaced by something more familiar. She reached out, her brows furrowing, to touch the walls of the hallway containing her bedroom at Dunhaven Castle.

“What is this?” she breathed.

She glanced down at the compass, its needle gyrating in a frantic dance. Clutching it tightly, she shut her eyes, drawing deep, measured breaths to calm the storm within her. The labyrinth seemed to pulse with a life of its own, the stones whispering ancient curses. Just as she centered her focus, a piercing shriek sliced through the silence, a sound so despairing it seemed to claw at her very soul. Cate’s heart thundered against her ribcage, a primal fear rising as the echo of the scream reverberated off the unseen labyrinth walls.

She dropped the compass, racing toward the sound with an urgency that panicked her. “I’m coming!” she shouted, uncertain as to why she’d spoken the words.

She rounded the corner, barreling toward the double doors at the end. She recognized the scenario as the one from her visions. Would she actually make any sense of it this time?

As her fingers wrapped around the cold door handle, she hesitated, puffing for breath as she pushed the door open.

“Laura?” she called.

A figure huddled in the bed across the space. A light bloomed to life, and she found herself staring at a face very similar to her own, only younger.

The girl’s mouth opened, starting to speak, when the entire image disappeared from her view.

“No!” Cate called, her fingers curling into fists. “No! I need to see more.”

With a shake of her head, she leaned against the wall, frustration roiling inside her.

“Focus, Cate.” She thought of a future memory, using it to calm her nerves before she forced herself to focus the needle on the compass.

“All right, come on. You can do this,” she encouraged herself.

As she stepped forward, she consciously tried to move in the direction of the needle despite any obstacles she found. She didn't want to run the risk of becoming trapped in another memory or vision.

She used every available resource to move only along the route the compass pointed, including scaling a dead tree and leaping across one of the stone walls to maintain her course.

The number of passages became more and more confusing as she passed the center point of the maze.

"Halfway there, Cate. Keep moving," she murmured to herself.

The needle wobbled as she was faced with two parallel corridors that went in opposite directions at their ends. "Which one?"

She pressed a hand against her forehead, before she finally picked the one on the right. As she moved forward, the compass needle pointed forward. The corners of her lips curled until she turned the corner at the end.

Her smile faded, replaced by a wide-eyed stare. In front of her stood a snarling wolf, crouched and ready to attack.

Cate slowly backed toward the corner. The wolf stalked forward, ready to give chase.

She'd never outrun him. She'd never get away.

As she smacked into the corner, she crouched down into it. Could she slink away before the wolf got to her?

The growl turned more menacing, and the wolf sprang forward, galloping toward her. Cate covered her head with her arms, waiting for teeth to sink into her skin.

She peered out between her arms, her breath catching as the wolf leapt toward her. He disappeared a moment later, dissolving into the wall behind her.

She glanced over her shoulder before she flicked her gaze down the corridor, finding the wolf snarling at her again.

"It's fake," she said.

With a shaky breath, she rose to her feet, slowly walking toward the animal. It growled menacingly before he crouched lower.

Cate held her ground, moving forward until the wolf raced toward her, passing through her before he leapt into the wall and disappeared.

She picked up the compass, a grin forming on her features as she used it to navigate the final few corridors and step out of the maze.

As the stone walls fell away, she whooped. "I did it!"

The cloaked creature appeared in front of her. "You cheated."

"I did not. I made it through the labyrinth."

"You did not inform me you had the compass."

"You didn't ask, and that contract didn't say I couldn't use it. I made it through your labyrinth. A deal is a deal. I want out of here."

The creature growled before he waved a bony hand into the blackness. A glowing portal formed. "Be gone."

She raced toward it without another word, entering through the sparkling portal and walking straight through the blackness.

Bright light seared her eyes seconds later, and she lifted an arm to shield herself.

Through tears, she spotted the distorted form of Dunhaven Castle in the distance, and her heart leapt with joy.

"Catherine?" Marcus called.

She shifted her gaze away from the castle, finding him striding toward her. Had she gone to the wrong time? He looked no different. But why would he be at Dunhaven Castle twenty years in the future?

"Marcus?"

"Catherine," he said, relief in his voice as he reached her and pulled her closer. "You made it."

She settled against him, finding unexpected comfort with him after her ordeal. "I did. Barely. But I made it. Is this the right time? Twenty years...I was supposed to come forward twenty years."

"Yes," he said as he pulled back from her, staring down at her.

"Good," she said with a sigh of relief.

As heat washed over, awkwardness swirling within her, she skirted around him, hurrying toward the sprawling form of Dunhaven Castle on the hill ahead of her.

"Catherine, wait," Marcus warned as he followed close behind.

"Wait for what?" Cate called over her shoulder as she continued her hard pace toward the comfort the castle promised.

"There are things we should discuss."

Cate bobbed her head. "We can discuss them once I've settled inside. I just want to sit down and take a breath."

"But—"

“But what?” Cate interrupted, flinging her hands out. “It hasn’t been *that* long, right? I still own Dunhaven Castle, don’t I?”

“Yes, you do,” Marcus conceded, “but– “

“That’s all I need to know,” Cate said with a curt nod. “We’ll discuss everything else later.”

She reached the castle, pushing through the front doors and into the familiar foyer, breathing a little easier. Her lips turned up at the corners as she strode across the marble floor, ducking into the hallway on the right.

Her muscles began to relax, the familiarity of her home soothing her. Dunhaven Castle still stood, and it was still hers. She’d deal with the rest later.

She breathed in the familiar scent of her home as she hurried down the hall, seeking the comfort of the library’s leather armchairs.

When she reached the double doors, she swung them open. As she stepped inside, a young man rose from one of the chairs. No more than seventeen, his chiseled jaw and dark hair reminded her of someone.

He peered at her with wide blue eyes. “Mother!”

Heat washed over Cate at the greeting. When had she had a son?

CHAPTER 3



The boy took a few steps toward her, his features pinching. “Mother!” he exclaimed, his blue eyes fixed on her. “You’re back. We did not expect you.”

Marcus caught up to Cate as she hesitated in the doorway, her lower lip bobbing up and down as she struggled to make sense of the situation. Why was he calling her mother?

“Father!” the boy said, shifting his gaze to Marcus.

Marcus held his hand up, nodding. “Logan, give us a minute, won’t you? Your mother isn’t feeling well.”

Logan shifted his weight from foot to foot, his eyes falling on Cate, concern etched in his young features. Cate studied him, her knees wobbling. Of course, he looked familiar. He looked like Marcus, only without the man’s dark eyes.

He’d called him father. And her mother. But...that couldn’t be.

Their marriage wasn’t real. They were on the verge of a divorce in her time.

Marcus grasped Cate’s arm and led her down the hall and across the foyer to the sitting room. Her stomach twisted with every step as logic defied her.

She pressed her palm to her forehead as she stood in stunned silence while Marcus closed the door behind them.

He strode across the room and poured her a brandy, holding it out toward her. She licked her lips, accepting the proffered glass with a shaky

hand.

“You should sit,” he suggested.

She stared blankly ahead before she flicked her gaze to him. The resemblance between him and Logan was unmistakable. The teen boy in the library had the same chiseled features, the same dark hair. The only difference was his eye color, reminiscent of the blue eyes of the MacKenzies. Closer to Cate’s own eye color.

The words echoed in her mind again. *Mother. Father.* No, it couldn’t be. She must have taken a wrong turn. Or the time wraith had tricked her. Perhaps he had sent her into one of the places she’d seen when she’d explored the time portal—the ones where nothing made sense.

Cate slid her eyes closed, shaking her head. “Sit down? Are you serious?”

“You are likely in shock. Both from the time portal and the experience with Logan. I told you there were things to be discussed.”

“Things to be discussed?” she repeated, her voice trembling as much as her hand, causing her brandy to dance dangerously close to the rim. “Are you joking? Marcus, there is a child in the library. My child!”

She paused, her mind reeling before she sank onto the edge of the loveseat, her voice turning breathy. “Our child.”

Marcus remained silent as she stared into the brandy before downing it in on gulp. She waved a shaky finger at him. “Wait, when I was in the time portal, I ran into a bunch of worlds where things were all mixed up. One where I’d died, one where Celine owned Dunhaven Castle and had a British accent, and one where Jack and I were married. Is that what this is? One of those mixed-up worlds?”

Marcus shook his head. “No. This is the correct time band.”

“Are you sure?” She wrinkled her nose as she waited for the answer.

“Yes,” he answered. “This is the same time band you left twenty years ago after Damien told you to come here.”

“Oh,” she murmured, covering her open mouth with a still shaking hand. “We have a child?”

“No,” Marcus answered with a shake of his head as he leaned against the mantel.

Cate’s brow furrowed as she clung to the momentary idea that it had been a big mix-up, and her life wasn’t spiraling out of control. Perhaps the blue-eyed boy’s exclamation in the library was not meant for her.

“We have three children.”

The statement rendered her speechless, her jaw falling open as she stared at him, the words not making any sense to her.

“How did this happen?” she finally managed, her voice just above a whisper.

Marcus arched an eyebrow. “Really, Catherine, I thought you more learned than that.”

She pressed her lips together, shaking her head at him. “That’s not what I meant. I mean, how did we stay married and have three kids?!”

Marcus opened his mouth to answer when the doors to the sitting room burst open. Cate’s eyes widened as a teen resembling her stepped inside, followed by a younger girl, her dark hair and dark eyes a match to Marcus’s.

“Daddy!” the older girl exclaimed, a broad grin on her face.

Cate’s eyes widened as the younger version of herself sprinted across the room and flung her arms around Marcus’s neck. She pulled her chin back to her chest as the man kissed her cheek and pulled her into a fatherly embrace. “Hello, darling.”

The smaller child raced to Cate’s side, interrupting her slack-jawed watch of the events between Marcus and the other girl.

“Mummy!” the child cried, leaping into Cate’s lap and flinging her arms around Cate’s neck in a tight hug.

“Oh!” Cate exclaimed as she set her empty glass down on the coffee table and wrapped her arms around the child who very clearly wanted her attention.

“When did you arrive?” the older girl asked Marcus. “We weren’t expecting you.”

“Mummy, will you play a game with me?” the child in Cate’s lap asked.

“Not now, Anna,” Marcus answered. “Your mother is rather tired from traveling. We should let her rest.”

“Ohhh,” the child groaned with a pout. “But Daddy—”

“Stop whining, dear. Laura, take your sister to the nursery, please,” Marcus said.

Laura’s lips formed a pout, her shoulders slumping slightly, though she complied with Marcus’s request, holding her hand out to the younger girl. “Come on, Anna.”

“No.” Anna shifted in Cate’s lap, an exaggerated frown on her features. She crossed her arms and leaned into Cate.

“Anna!” Laura cried, impatience in her voice.

“Anna, be a good girl and go with your sister to the nursery. Mummy will spend time with you later.”

Anna wrinkled her nose, shooting Cate a glance. Cate nodded, offering her a fleeting smile, making a promise she wasn’t certain she could keep. The child gave in and slid off Cate’s lap, grabbing her sister’s hand. “Fine.”

“Good girl,” Marcus said as Laura led the child from the room. The older girl glanced over her shoulder one last time as she hovered in the doorway, her crystal blue eyes focusing on Cate before she pulled the child into the foyer.

Marcus crossed the room and closed the doors behind them. Cate slumped back against the couch, covering her face with her hands. “Why is this happening?”

“You traveled twenty years into the future, and you refused to discuss the changes that had occurred in that span before storming into the castle,” Marcus answered, matter-of-factly.

Cate let her hands fall to her thighs with a sigh. “That’s not helpful.”

“Helpful or not, it is the truth. I’m surprised, Catherine, given your cautious nature that you expected life to remain unchanged after nearly two decades.”

“Again, not helpful. I did not expect *this* to have been the change. I’m surprised given my cautious nature that we have three children. Maybe I should leave. I can’t handle this. I don’t even know their names!”

“The oldest is Logan, after your father. He is seventeen. Then Laura, after your mother, who is fifteen, and then Anna after mine. She is eight. And I would not advise leaving now that they have seen you.”

Cate crinkled her brow. “Why not?”

“Had you not come inside, we could have had you stay elsewhere, and the children would have been none the wiser. But you cannot disappear now that they have seen you.”

“Why? Where am I?” Cate shook her head, pressing a hand against her forehead. “Where is there real mother?”

“You are their real mother, Catherine. If you are asking where your counterpart from this time is, she is in Germany. There have been some... complications with a supernatural issue. She is recovering there. Perfectly

fine, just in need of Mother's care. We did not tell the children all of the details."

Cate let her head fall back against the pillows, her eyes squeezing shut. "Perfect."

"Laura, in particular, would be devastated if you left now."

Cate popped her eyes open, focusing on Marcus. "What's wrong with Laura?"

"She is quite in need of her mother."

Cate slapped a palm to her forehead. "Oh, great. Too bad her mother isn't here."

"To Laura, her mother is here."

"I am *not* that poor child's mother. I barely know her."

"Catherine, she does not realize that," Marcus answered. "And she misses you terribly."

"Why not? Surely, I look different. I should look younger to them, right?"

Marcus offered her a soft smile, his thumb caressing her cheek. "You did not think I would allow time to ravage any of your beauty, did you?"

Before Cate could answer, the doors popped open. A redhead, her hair pulled into a French twist wearing a chic business suit, stepped inside.

Cate's eyes went wide. "Molly?"

"Welcome home, Your Grace," Molly answered with a broad smile. "I hope I'm not interrupting, but I wanted to check with you about dinner. Will you be dining as a family this evening or would you prefer a tray in your room?"

"Uh—" Cate mumbled, trying to imagine sitting down to dinner as a family while she struggled to remember her children's names.

"Her Grace will take a tray in her room. I am not certain she's feeling up to dining with the children."

Molly nodded. "Of course. Is there any unpacking I can assist with?"

"No, Molly, I—" Cate started when Marcus interrupted her.

"That will be all, Molly. Her Grace can discuss further plans with you later. And as soon as I have her settled, I would like a word."

Molly smiled and nodded, reaching out to squeeze Cate's hand. "Good to have you back."

Cate collapsed onto the couch again as Molly left the room. "Please tell me we at least hired someone to help Molly with the meals since she now

has three children to feed.”

Marcus arched an eyebrow. “Molly oversees a staff of twenty, dear. She is now Head Housekeeper. She rarely makes meals, though she does bake cookies with the children on occasion.”

Cate sat in stunned silence, trying to fathom the depth of the changes that had occurred in the last twenty years. Not only had she stayed married to Marcus—why, she still didn’t know—but she’d also had three children with him, and her once-simple staff of three had grown into a team of twenty, all of whom were overseen by Molly. “I’m a stranger my own life.”

“You should rest.”

Cate stared at the woodgrain of the coffee table as she gave a slow nod. “Yes, I think I will.”

Slowly, she climbed to her feet. “Am I at least in the same bedroom?”

“Yes,” Marcus answered as he snaked an arm around her, his hand resting gently on her back.

“Thank goodness for small things,” she said with a shake of her head.

“I’ll walk you up.”

She rubbed her temples while she considered declining. Fear of running into the children again as she snaked through the halls made her change her mind. She still wasn’t certain she trusted herself enough to deal with them. Was Laura the older or the younger?

She nodded in response to his statement and allowed him to lead her to the foyer. “So, Laura is the older girl.”

“Yes, dear,” Marcus said with a nod.

Cate bobbed her head as they climbed the stairs. “Okay, and she’s fifteen. And the boy...Logan...he’s seventeen. Almost an adult. Is he going to college?”

“Of course, Catherine. He is going to Oxford after he finishes his final semester at Eton.”

Cate’s eyes went wide. “Like where the royals go to school?”

“Certainly,” Marcus answered. “What else would you expect for a Northcott?”

“Right,” she said, her mind still wrapping around the situation. As they wound through the halls, Cate glanced out over the property. Five children frolicked in the yard.

Cate stopped, her hand falling to the stone sill. She recognized the three she’d already met. She shook her head, correcting herself: *her children* not

the children.

But the two others, one red-headed girl and one red-headed boy who both to be around the age of her middle child, ran around with them.

“I thought you said we had three kids.”

“We do. Logan, Laura—”

Cate waved a hand in the air. “And Anna. Yes, but who are the other two?”

“Those are the twins. Malcom and Maggie.”

“Whose twins?” Cate asked.

“Perhaps we should discuss it later.”

Cate raised her eyebrows, her lips parting. “Are you joking? It can’t possibly be more of a shock than finding out we have three kids together.”

Marcus offered her an unimpressed stare, his lips drawn into a thin line. “Fine. They are Molly and Jack’s children.”

Cate snapped her gaze back to the children playing outside. “So, Molly and Jack got married and had twins?”

Marcus guided her away from the window. “May I remind you that you insisted...again.”

“It’s fine. I’m not shocked. I knew they were seeing each other. I just...twins. Everything is so different. When I left, both Molly and I were single and childless. Now...”

“They live in the east wing. You were not single.”

“Marcus, I practically was. We were nearly divorced.” Cate’s forehead wrinkled as she considered the changes at Dunhaven Castle in two decades. Her head spun, and her stomach somersaulted.

He led her into her suite. “We will discuss it later. You should rest. I will see that you are not disturbed.”

Cate nodded, and Marcus departed from the room, closing the doors behind her.

She scanned the space. It looked so much the same, yet so many things had changed. Pictures littered the mantel.

She picked up the closet, smiling at it. The picture of her and Molly cheek-to-cheek at her first New Year’s Eve party in the castle warmed her. She pressed it to her chest as she eyed the rest of the framed photographs on the mantel finding a picture of her and Marcus in front of a large Christmas tree in formalwear. The stunning diamonds around her neck, and the massive ring on her finger sparkled.

In the next picture, her three children beamed at the camera while sitting in the library.

Another showed the Reid children with her three in front of a Christmas tree in the sitting room. Her youngest hugged Jack and Molly's daughter, while their son first bumped with Logan.

The last picture was a large, framed photo of Cate and Marcus with their three children. The smiling family appeared happy with Marcus and Logan standing tall behind an armchair while Cate grinned from her seat in the center, her arms wrapped around her two daughters who each perched on the arms.

Her eyes gravitated to the gold band on her ring finger, eclipsed by the massive diamond in front of it. She grabbed the photograph, tracing her smiling face.

She looked so happy. But how had it happened?

Marcus was in love with another woman. How had they built a family together?

The thought plagued her as she stalked to her chaise and collapsed onto it. Her stomach churned as too many thoughts crowded into her mind. With the photo of her and Molly still clutched to her chest, she closed her eyes, drifting off to sleep.

Her dreams were filled with frightening images of the time labyrinth, her children hating her once they found out she was a fraud, and all her happy pictures being nothing more than a fraud.

When she opened her eyes to a darkened room, she found a figure looming over her. Her breath caught in her throat, and she stifled a scream as she stared up at the dark person.

Who was in her bedroom?

CHAPTER 4



Cate's muscles stiffened as she pushed herself sit higher, her trembling hand searching for the light. Her heart rose into her throat as her chest constricted.

Light bloomed to life, blinding her for a moment before she stared up into her own face. Her features twisted as she desperately tried to make sense of what was happening.

"Mummy?" Laura asked, her features pinching with concern as she eased onto the edge of the chaise. "Are you okay? Are you sick?"

Cate slid her eyes closed, a long exhale escaping her as everything flooded back to her. She was twenty-years in the future, and that wasn't her face, it was her daughter's.

With a lick of her lips, she shook her head. "I'm not sick. I'm sorry, I was asleep. You startled me."

Laura's forehead creased more as she stared at Cate, her features turning pained. The door to the hall creaked open further, and Marcus strode in, his footsteps faltering as he spotted Laura.

His eyebrow arched. "Was I unclear that your mother was not to be disturbed?"

"I'm sorry, Daddy, but—"

"No buts, Laura. When I said your mother was not to be disturbed, I meant she was not to be disturbed."

Laura's features pinched, her lower lip trembling.

“It’s all right,” Cate said, brushing a lock of hair over her daughter’s shoulder. “I’m afraid I was asleep, though, and Laura startled me.”

“Which is exactly why I gave specific instructions for you to allow your mother to rest. Now, Laura, it is time for you to get ready for dinner.”

Laura shifted her gaze from Marcus back to Cate. “See you at dinner, Mummy.”

“Oh—” Cate said as Molly flitted into the room with a tray and a grin.

“Your dinner, Your Grace.”

Laura’s lips tugged into a frown as she tilted her head, staring at Cate. “You’re not coming to dinner?”

“Your mother is very tired, Laura. She needs to rest.”

Laura’s voice cracked with quiet defiance. “I’ll stay here, with her.”

“No, you will not,” Marcus answered, his voice firm. “You will go and ready for dinner. We will dine as a family.”

“Without Mummy,” Laura retorted, her voice strained.

“Laura,” Marcus warned.

Anna lingered at the doorway, her small frame dwarfed by the hall’s expanse. “Mummy, aren’t you joining us for dinner?” Her voice was a blend of hope and worry, tugging at Cate’s newly awakened maternal instincts.

Marcus heaved a sigh, his jaw clenching. He opened his mouth to reply, but Cate answered first, trying to diffuse the situation. “Uh, not tonight. Tomorrow, I will. I promise.”

Laura stared at her with glassy eyes. Cate stroked a lock of her hair. “I promise.”

“Girls, you should ready for dinner,” Marcus said as he pressed a hand against Laura’s back.

She frowned but rose and headed for the door, taking Anna’s hand in hers. “Come on, Anna.”

Molly set the tray down on Cate’s side table. “I’ll check on them,” she said with a wink. “You rest.”

Cate clicked her tongue as she swung her legs over the chaise, letting her head fall into her hands with a long exhale. “Ohhh, this is not going so well, is it?”

“It will be fine, Catherine. You are overwhelmed. You will adjust.”

“I’m not so sure. Marcus, I still don’t understand what happened. We were about to get a divorce. You’re in love with someone else. The only

reason we didn't get divorced was because your mother showed up."

"That is not true, Catherine."

"What?" she asked, her features pinching. "It's all true."

"Yet, it is not."

Cate leapt to her feet, pacing the floor. "We had the divorce papers in our hands. Your mother showed up. I said we couldn't get divorced with her at Dunhaven Castle, and then you said, I'd prefer we did not with my mother here."

"That is not what I said."

Cate slid her head forward, prodding him to explain.

"I said I would prefer not to divorce. Period. There was no caveat."

Cate pressed a hand to her forehead. "What? No, that's not—"

"It is, dear. I did not wish to divorce you, I only would have had you preferred it."

"What about Celine?"

"What about Celine?" he echoed.

"You love her."

He shook his head. "No. I did not. I never loved Celine. And she is happily married to that idiot Buckley."

Cate arched an eyebrow.

"What? I still do not like the man," Marcus said with a shrug as the door creaked again, two little dogs racing in.

Cate's eyes went wide as she stared down them. "Riley? Bailey?"

She collapsed on the chaise as they leapt up to lick her cheek. She gathered them in her arms. "How?"

"I could not bear to see you saddened by their deaths. They will live as long as you do, dear." He offered her a slight smile, his finger tracing her chin.

Her eyebrows knitted as she studied her husband, her entire perspective suddenly shifting. All the emotions she'd felt, everything that she'd tried to deny about her growing affection for him, he'd felt the same way about her?

"You should eat. I will ask the children to allow you to rest for the evening. Now, I must go to dinner."

"Of course," she said with a nod as she rubbed the soft fur of her dogs' heads.

He strode to the door, and before he stepped out, she called to him. "Hey, Marcus?"

He twisted to glance at her over his shoulder.

"Thanks." She offered him a smile, and expression that he returned before he stepped from the room.

Silence pervaded the space, and she smiled down at her dogs before she pulled the tray onto her lap and grabbed her fork.

With things slightly clearer, the tension between her shoulders relaxed a little. She still had a long road ahead of her, an uphill battle as she struggled to learn everything she'd missed in the last twenty years and figure out why Damien had sent her here.

Why this time? Why now?

A burst of cinnamon and brown sugar mixed with yam exploded on her tongue as the edges of her vision darkened. She sucked in a breath, the vision of her racing down the hall racing through her mind.

She focused on her future memory, one that now made far more sense than it had before as she fought to stay conscious.

She managed to keep her eyes open, despite exhaustion coursing through her, but the pieces of the puzzle fell into place. She hadn't seen herself in that room. She'd seen her daughter. It was her daughter's scream that called to her, it had been her daughter's room she raced to, and it had been her daughter's frightened face that had greeted her.

"Laura," she whispered. Marcus's words echoed in her mind. *Laura is quite in need of her mother.* "Why?"

She'd have to ask Marcus about it later.

For now, it was all she could do to move the fork from her plate to her lips. She pushed through, finishing the meal and shifting the tray onto her table.

With a deep sigh, she rose from the chaise and shuffled into her bedroom. Before she could search for her pajamas, a quiet knock sounded at the door before Andrea let herself into the suite. "Your Grace."

"Andrea," Cate said with a broad grin. "Oh, I'm so glad to see you."

"Well, that is wonderful to hear. I hope you were not able to rummage through that wardrobe on your own."

"Heavens no," Cate said with a chuckle as Andrea tugged open the tall door and removed her pajamas.

"Now, let's get you changed."

As Andrea helped her switch from her clothes to her pajamas, soothing her nerves with the familiarity, Cate relaxed a little more. When she finally

climbed into bed, the shock of what happened had already begun to wear off.

Maybe after a good night's sleep, she could tackle the reason she'd been sent here. She relaxed back into the pillows when the door to her suite creaked open. She assumed it would be Molly collecting her tray, but instead, she spotted her daughter, now wearing her robe and pajamas. The girl peered into the bedroom, her hands clasping and unclasping. "Mummy?"

"Laura," Cate said, pushing herself a little higher in bed.

The girl inched closer to the bed. "I know Daddy said we should leave you alone but—"

She licked her lips, her gaze sliding sideways as her eyes turned glassy again.

Cate shifted over, patting the bed next to her. "Sit down."

She hurried to claim the spot Cate offered, her fingers toying with the ties of the robe she wore. Cate glanced sideways at her daughter, trying to be supportive in some way. She reached out to stroke her hair. "Is everything okay, Laura?"

Laura didn't answer, her lower lip trembling.

"Laura? What is it?"

Laura pressed her lips together before she twisted to face Cate, a tear falling to her cheek. "Are you and Daddy getting a divorce?"

"What?" Cate asked, her head shaking. "No. Why would you think that?"

"Because you were gone. And now you're back, and Daddy keeps telling us not to talk to you. And earlier when Anna and I left, I came back, and I overheard you say you had the papers already." A sob escaped her daughter as she wiped at her cheeks, more tears falling.

"Oh, sweetie, what you heard...you misunderstood."

Laura studied her face.

"We're not getting a divorce, I promise."

Laura collapsed into Cate's arms, and Cate snuggled her closer, stroking her hair. "It's okay, Laura. You can stop worrying, okay?"

"Mummy?" a new voice said.

Cate glanced to the foot of her bed, finding Anna in her pajamas. The child glanced from Laura back to Cate before she sniffled.

Cate held her free arm out, and the little girl scrambled up onto the bed, snuggling into Cate's other side.

With a deep exhale, she cuddled the two girls closer. Within minutes, they'd both fallen asleep in her arms.

She shifted her gaze from one to the other. Maybe parenting wouldn't be as bad as she thought.

A smile curled her lips as the door to her room creaked again, thudding softly closed. "Catherine, I have—"

Cate shushed him, waving a finger in the air.

Marcus froze in the doorway, his eyes shifting between the two girls.

"They just fell asleep," Cate whispered.

"I am sorry," he answered in a low voice. "I told them specifically not to come. I will take them back to their own beds."

"It's okay," Cate said. "Leave them here."

"Are you certain?" Marcus asked as he stroked a lock of Anna's hair after easing onto the edge of the bed.

Cate bobbed her head. "Yes. Leave them. You were right, they don't understand."

Marcus eyed the two girls in her arms. "I think they understand perfectly. Their mother is home."

"I think I know what was wrong with Laura," Cate whispered as Marcus leaned back against the pillows, leaning closer to rub Anna's arm.

"She confided in you? She wouldn't tell me anything," Marcus said.

"She thought we were getting a divorce."

Marcus puckered his lips as he glanced at Laura before he focused his dark eyes on Cate. "Are we?"

"No," Cate answered. "Right? Did I misunderstand the conversation earlier?"

He shook his head as he let his arm fall around her, tugging the group of them closer. "No, you did not. And if I have my way, we will not divorce."

"If Laura has her way, too. And I told her she did."

"And what about your way?" Marcus asked, shifting a lock of Cate's hair away from her face.

She studied his face, pressing her lips together as her features pinched. "I had those papers drawn up because I thought you wanted to return to your life—to marry Celine."

"Mother was correct about her bringing out the worst in me."

“You could have said something. Remember how we were supposed to be honest and open?”

“That applies to us both, dear,” he said as he tapped her nose affectionately.

Cate laid her cheek against Laura’s hair. “There is something else we need to discuss.”

“What is that?”

“The visions I have been having. They’re about Laura. I finally understand now that I’ve met her. It’s her room I’m running to, it’s her frightened face I’m seeing.”

Marcus’s fingers gently stroked her hair. “Yes, I told you there is something going on with her. But she refuses to confide in me.”

Cate knitted her brows. “Do you think it was the divorce thing?”

Marcus narrowed his eyes. “Sadly, I do not believe so.”

“And she’s said nothing?”

“Nothing,” he answered. “Not even to your counterpart from this time. She refuses to speak of it.”

Cate glanced down at her sleeping daughter. “What could it be?”

She stroked Laura’s hair, wondering if the girl may confide in her. Had Laura’s problem been the reason Damien sent her to this time or was it something else?

CHAPTER 5



Cate paced the floor of her suite, the late morning sun streaking the floor with long shadows as she chewed her lower lip. The conversation she'd shared with Marcus last night still echoed in her mind.

Her visions of Laura had been terrifying, and she hadn't yet faced that moment. Would it still occur now that she was in the future or had her trip through time changed everything?

She spun on her heel, ambling in the opposite direction, her brows knitting tightly. It couldn't be her fear over Cate and Marcus divorcing. Both she and Cate had been terrified in her visions. The reaction seemed far too extreme for something like divorcing parents.

Despite it being a big thing for a teen, she doubted it struck that much terror into Laura's heart.

So, then, what could it be, she asked her as she huffed out a breath.

While she'd felt a strong maternal connection to the children when she'd met them, she felt woefully inadequate to tackle any problems with them. After all, they may be her children, but she didn't know them. She hadn't raised them.

Laura hadn't even confided in her counterpart in this time. What made Cate think the girl would confide in her?

She slapped her thighs with a heavy sigh as she returned to the mantel to study the pictures, her heart heavy as she tried to determine how she could help the poor girl.

As she rubbed at her forehead, the door popped open, and Marcus strode inside. "Catherine, you have barely come out of this room. Is something wrong?"

"No," she said, tugging back one corner of her lips. "I'm just...you know, avoiding our kids."

He wiggled his eyebrows, his features curving into an amused smile. "And here I thought we had combatted that issue last night."

She leaned an elbow against the mantel, fluttering her eyelashes. "Well, we had until I started to overthink everything."

"Overthink what?"

Cate rolled her eyes. "Everything. I must be here because of the visions I had about Laura, but how can I get her to confide in me when she won't even talk to her real mother."

"You *are* her real mother, Catherine."

"You know what I mean. The other version of me, the one who raised her, who knows her. She won't say a word to her. There is no way she's going to tell me what's wrong. She's going to be able to tell that I'm a fraud from a mile away."

"That did not seem to be the case last night. She slept quite soundly with you back home."

Cate furrowed her brow. "She hasn't been sleeping?"

"No. She awakens in the middle of the night screaming."

Cate pressed her lips together, the detail fitting with her vision. "That is exactly what my visions are like. I'm running to her because she's screaming in the middle the night."

"You should not doubt your ability to get through to her. It is obvious how deeply you care about her."

"But I don't *know* her, Marcus. You do, the me from this time does, but I don't. I don't know her favorite food or her favorite show. I don't know if she was afraid of monsters under her bed as a kid or the dark. I don't know anything about her." Cate held back the sob forming inside her as she shook her head.

"I am not certain you need to know her favorite food to comfort her, Catherine. She loves you, and she can feel that you love her, too." He stalked closer to her.

"You love her, and she won't confide in you."

“No, she will not,” he answered. “But she has always been closer to you.”

Cate arched her eyebrows as she stared up at him. “Really? She seemed closer to you, yesterday.”

“She is uncertain of you at the moment. Laura has struggled with her magic. For a long time, she detested it because it made her different from you. She is only coming out of it now.”

Cate’s forehead creased. “Did I make her feel that way?”

“No, you always encouraged her. Logan had no difficulty accepting his powers. He only wishes they were stronger. Anna...well...”

“What?” Cate prodded.

“Anna enjoys her powers, but she only uses them when *she* chooses. She’s quite difficult. A bit too much like her father.” He grinned at her. “But Laura is very much like you. Quite sensitive, and very eager to be accepted.”

“I guess she’s the typical middle child,” Cate said with a sigh. “All right, I’ll try my best. But I don’t make any promises.”

“I have no doubt that you will manage to reach Laura. You are her mother.”

He slid a lock of hair behind her ear as he smiled down at her. She wrapped her fingers around his hand, her lips curving. She recognized the moment about to occur. It was her future memory. The one she found so comforting.

Even now, it brought a sense of peace washing over her as they stood together, tucked in the privacy of her bedroom suite.

“I know, this moment...well...the one that’s about to happen is the future memory that I see when I touch the rose you gave me.”

“The one Mother taught you to use to calm your painful visions.”

Cate nodded. “Yes.”

“Well, then I suppose we should make it a good one. I love you, Catherine,” he replied before he leaned closer to press his lips against hers.

She leaned into the kiss, recalling the moment feeling exactly like this in the vision she’d had. She hadn’t expected it to happen, doubted that it would come true, but living through the moment brought both a measure of comfort and worry to her.

If this moment had come to pass, when would the terrifying vision with Laura rear its ugly head.

Marcus pulled back, stroking her cheek with his thumb. "Feeling better?"

"Yes and no. I will feel better when we solve this issue with Laura."

"So will I. Before you go to her, I came to tell you that Celine, Damien and Michael should be arriving later today."

"Oh, okay," she said with a smile. "It'll be nice to see familiar faces."

He grinned at her before kissing her forehead. "Good luck with Laura."

"Thanks," she said, her hand lingering in his. "I'll need it."

She finally tore her fingers from his and left her room behind. She knew the way to her daughter's room by heart, having traversed the route many times before in her visions.

Her stomach twisted into a tight knot as she rounded the corner. Memories of her visions flitted through her mind. She shoved them aside, her fingers curling into fists as she approached the door.

With a shaky exhale, Cate raised her hand, hesitating before she finally forced herself to knock.

"Come in," Laura called.

Cate pushed inside, her breath catching in her throat as she stepped into the now-familiar space. Her eyes went directly to the bed. She found it empty.

With a hard swallow, she searched the rest of the room, finding Laura on the window seat with a book in her lap. Cate forced a smile onto her face as she approached her daughter, clasping her hands behind her back. "Hi. Mind if I sit?"

Laura quickly moved her legs, curling them under her to allow Cate room on the loveseat. "How are you feeling, Mummy?"

"Uh, better," Cate answered with a nod as she slicked a lock of hair behind her ear. "What about you?"

Laura offered her a smile, but Cate read it as fake. She wondered if that was the case or if she just didn't know her daughter well enough yet. "I'm fine, Mummy. And I am very sorry about last night."

"There's nothing to be sorry about, Laura," Cate said as she reached for her daughter's hand. "You were upset. And I was glad I could be there for you."

Laura nodded before she shifted her gaze out the window.

Cate tilted her head to catch her daughter's eye. "Is there something else upsetting you?"

Laura fluttered her eyelashes as she glanced at Cate. She shook her head, her eyes darting everywhere except to Cate. “No. Just...you’re definitely not divorcing Daddy, right?”

“Definitely not,” Cate said with a shake of her head.

Laura bobbed her head. “Okay.”

“Laura...I feel like there’s something you’re not telling us. But you know you can tell me anything, right?”

Laura avoided her gaze again, pressing her lips together. “I know. I just...there’s nothing, Mummy.”

“Are you sure? Daddy said you’re having nightmares.”

“It’s nothing,” she answered. “Just a few bad dreams.”

“Well, sometimes those mean something is going on that’s bothering us deep down. Maybe talking about the dreams will help us figure out what’s bothering you.”

“Really, Mummy, it’s nothing.” Laura squeezed her hand. “I’m just so happy to have you home.”

“I’m happy to be home.”

“Maybe we can read a book together like we used to?” Laura asked.

“I’d like that,” Cate said with a kiss to her daughter’s forehead. “Why don’t you pick one, and I’ll order us two copies, and we can discuss it over tea and cookies?”

Laura grinned a little more genuinely as she nodded. “All right. I’ll look on my list.”

Cate sat for a moment, wondering if she should push a little further, but before she could, a knock interrupted them.

“Yes?” Cate called.

Marcus poked his head inside. “Catherine, they have arrived.”

“Oh, thanks. I’ll be right down,” Cate said before she twisted back to Laura.

“Go, Mummy.”

“Come down,” Cate said as she rose. “Say hello.”

“I will as soon as I put my book away.”

Cate rubbed her cheek before she pressed her lips to her forehead again and left her daughter behind. Marcus slid an arm around her shoulder as she stepped into the hall. “Any luck?”

“No,” Cate said with a sigh, “but we did agree to read a book together, so maybe she’ll open up after that.”

Marcus smiled at her. "You're doing well with her. You and her often read books together before you left."

"Wait, I didn't leave. Future Cate left. And how long ago?"

"Three months. Laura has fretted the entire time."

"Maybe that's all that's bothering her," Cate answered as they reached the stairs and descended them. "Maybe it'll all clear up with me here."

"I would like to believe that, Catherine, but I do not think that is the case. Something else is happening here. We must determine what it is."

Cate bobbed her head as Marcus led her to the library. She pushed open the doors, finding Celine, Damien, and Michael inside. Her features twisted into a smile as Damien grinned at her.

"Cate." He opened his arms as he came toward her, scooping her into an embrace. "Hey, it's good to see you."

"It's good to see you, too. And to see you're not shot."

"Yeah, I'm totally fine, though," Damien said. "Not even a scar. Being immortal is great."

"Seems so," she said with a grin as she reached to pull Celine in for a hug, then Michael.

"Thank you all for coming," Cate said with a nod.

"No problem. So, there's something going on with my goddaughter?"

Cate's eyebrows shot up as she glanced at Marcus.

"Damien and Celine are Laura's godparents," he answered.

"Oh, wow," Cate said with a smile. "I made a good choice, didn't I?"

"I think so," Damien said with a raise of his chin.

"She has not yet confided in Catherine about what it may be."

"Maybe one of us. Someone...not her parent," Celine answered with a shrug. "Maybe it's something she doesn't want to share with Mom and Dad."

Marcus groaned. "Oh, heavens," he murmured.

Cate crossed to him, looping her arm through his. "We don't know if it's anything worrisome."

"I could try—"

"What is she doing here?" Laura asked from the doorway.

Cate twisted to find her daughter, her features pinched, staring at Celine.

"Hey, sweetie," Celine said with a grin.

Laura's gaze hardened the moment her eyes met Celine's, a storm of unspoken words swirling between them. Cate noticed the tension, the way Laura's hands formed into fists at her sides, her breath quickening. "You shouldn't be here," Laura said, each word dropping like a stone into the silence of the room.

"Laura!" Cate exclaimed.

"She shouldn't," Laura said with a shake of her head. "Go away and leave us alone."

Laura stormed from the room, her fingers curled into fists as Cate stared after her. She glanced at Marcus. "I'm going to assume that was not normal behavior."

"No," Marcus said with a shake of his head. "I will—"

"No, I will go after her," Cate said. "Celine, I'm so sorry."

"Don't worry about it. Teen girls are tough. I know. I was one of them." She offered Cate a warm smile as Cate hurried to the doors.

She spun as she faced them. "What is her middle name. In case I need it?"

"Victoria," Marcus answered.

"Go all Mom on her, Cate," Damien joked with a lightness she couldn't feel. Inside, Cate flinched. The role of 'Mom' felt like a coat tailored for someone else—familiar in shape but strange in fit. How could she step into this role so suddenly, with all its expectations and nuances?

"I'll be right back." Cate rushed through the halls, climbing the stairs and hurrying to Laura's room. She found the girl inside, sniffing.

"Laura?" Cate questioned, her voice firm. "You need to go downstairs and apologize right now."

"No," Laura said with a pout.

"Laura!" Cate exclaimed. "What you did was exceptionally rude. Now, please go apologize."

Laura drew her knees to her chest, tears spilling to her cheeks. "No. She shouldn't be here."

Cate stared at her daughter, her features pinching. "Okay, tell me why."

Laura licked her lips, sniffing as she bit her lower lip. "I can't."

"Then I am not going to allow this behavior to continue. If you're not willing to tell me why you did what you did, I have to insist you go apologize."

Laura swallowed hard. “You don’t understand,” she sobbed. “You don’t understand what she’s done.”

The words hit Cate like a physical slap. The vision from the time passage of the Celine standing in Dunhaven Castle’s library, cold, unfeeling, passed through her mind. Had something happened that she hadn’t realized?

CHAPTER 6



Cate's stomach twisted as she stared at her daughter, tears streaming down her cheeks as she pleaded with Cate to understand. Had something happened in the last twenty years that caused a rift? But how would Laura know Cate wasn't aware of it? Did she suspect Cate wasn't really her mother?

Cate swallowed hard, wiping her sweaty palms against her leggings.

"O-okay, umm, Laura, you're right. I don't understand. Can you explain it to me?" Cate eased onto the window seat across from her daughter.

"No," Laura said with a shake of her head. "No, I can't. I don't want you to know."

Cate pressed her lips together, trying to think of a way to encourage her daughter to confide in her. "Laura, you can tell me anything. You know that right?"

Laura shook her head. "No. I can't tell you this. Mummy, I can't."

"Why not?" Cate prodded.

Laura wiped at her cheeks, sniffing. "Because...Mummy, I just can't. Please try to understand."

She leapt from her seat and stalked across the room, leaning her head back as she blinked in a desperate attempt to get her tears to recede. Cate rose, grabbed a handful of tissues, and crossed to her daughter.

She held them out in a silent offer of support.

Laura grabbed them, pressing them to her cheeks as she sniffed again.

Cate rubbed her daughter's shoulder, clicking her tongue. "Oh, Laura. I really wish you weren't taking this all on yourself."

Laura flung her arms around Cate's neck, collapsing against her as she started to sob again.

Cate pulled her closer, stroking her hair as she gently rocked her. "Shh, Laura, whatever it is, we can face it together, okay?"

"No, because it will ruin everything."

"No, it won't," Cate said as she guided Laura to the bed and eased her onto the edge. "Whatever it is that you think is so terrible, I'm certain I can handle it. And it would be a lot better if we both faced it than you dealing with something this upsetting alone."

Laura wiped at her nose with the tissue, shaking her head. "No, Mummy. I can't tell you."

Cate sucked in a breath, frustrated by her daughter's secrecy. As she vetted new ways to gain her trust and get her to open up, a knock sounded at the door.

Marcus poked his head inside. Laura turned toward the window, her silhouette framed against the pale light of the setting sun. The garden below was ablaze with the last golden rays, a stark contrast to the storm brewing in her eyes. She clasped and unclasped her hands, each movement a ripple of the turmoil inside.

Marcus raised his eyebrows, silently prodding Cate for information. She shook her head, indicating that she hadn't been able to gain any explanations.

Marcus sucked in a deep breath. "Laura, your behavior downstairs was incorrigible. You are to apologize to your Aunt Celine at once."

"Don't call her that. She's not my aunt."

Marcus heaved a sigh, crossing his arms. "Laura, I will not tolerate this childish behavior nor the rude comments you spewed at our guests."

"She shouldn't be here," Laura answered with a sullen pout.

"You keep saying that," Cate said as she rose from the bed, "but unless you tell us why, we can't understand your point of view, Laura."

"There is nothing she has done that would warrant what you said to her. Now, enough with this foolish behavior, go apologize," Marcus insisted.

Laura spun to face him, a tissue clutched tightly in her fist. "Of course, you'd defend her."

Marcus fluttered his eyelashes at his daughter. “Laura, my patience is growing very thin with this behavior. You have been taught better.”

“What’s your excuse?” she retorted.

His eyebrows raised toward his hairline at the words.

“Whoa!” Cate exclaimed. “Laura, you can’t speak to us that way. That is not okay.”

Laura’s features twisted into an angry pout, her lower lip trembling.

“Your mother is correct. If you will not apologize to Aunt Celine, then you will remain in your room until you choose to do so.”

Her eyes went wide. “You’re punishing me because I told the truth?”

“You aren’t telling us any truth,” Cate said with a shake of her head. “If you want us to understand your side, you have to tell us what it is you think you know.”

Laura shook her head. “I don’t *think* I know it. I know it.”

“All right,” Cate said, trying to keep her voice steady as her patience thinned, “what do you know?”

Laura’s lips pressed together as she flicked her gaze to Marcus before she focused on the floor with a shake of her head.

“Laura, please, whatever it is, just tell us,” Cate pleaded.

She curled her fingers into fists, her lower lip jutting out in a pout.

“There is no reason for that behavior whatsoever. Aunt Celine is your godmother—”

“Why?” Laura asked, heat in her voice.

“Because she is a very close friend of ours,” Marcus answered, “and a very powerful woman to whom you can look up to.”

“Ha!” Laura barked out. “More like she is a very close friend of *yours*.”

Cate pulled her head back, her eyes widening.

“Laura, I do not know what it is you are hinting at here, but I will not tolerate this.”

“No, you wouldn’t. You don’t want your secret coming out.”

Marcus’s jaw tightened as he eyed his daughter.

“Okay, okay,” Cate said, stepping between them. “Let’s all take it down a notch here. Laura, you can’t make veiled statements like that. You need to explain.”

“I think Daddy needs to explain,” she retorted.

“There is nothing I need to explain,” Marcus answered.

Laura bit into her lower lip, her forehead creasing. "Fine. Is it true that you were engaged to Aunt Celine. That you almost married her?"

Marcus narrowed his eyes. "Where did you hear that?"

"Is it true?" Laura's voice cracked a little as emotion burned through it.

Marcus shifted his weight, one eyebrow arching. "Yes. It is."

"And then you kept bringing her here even after your married Mummy," Laura said with a shake of her head. "Even now, after she's been away for so long."

"Laura—" Marcus began when she shook her head interrupting him.

Laura paced three short steps back and forth, her breath quickening. She stopped abruptly, turning to face Marcus with eyes glistening with unshed tears. "No, Daddy. I understand what's happening." Laura shifted her gaze to Cate. "Mummy, I didn't want to say because I don't want you to get a divorce. I just...want things to go back to the way they were."

Laura stood rigid, her body trembling. The room seemed to hold its breath. Slowly, with a hesitant step, she reached toward Cate before collapsing into her arms, her sobs echoing painfully in the quiet room.

Cate stumbled back a step before she wrapped her arms around her weeping daughter. "Oh, Laura. We are not getting a divorce."

"But now that you know—"

"There is nothing going on between your father and Aunt Celine," Cate said as she stroked Laura's hair.

"Really?" Laura shuddered as she sucked in a shaky breath.

"Of course, there is not," Marcus answered. "I would never do that to your mother."

"See?" Cate said as she eased Laura onto her bed, fluffing a pillow before she encouraged her to lean back into it. "It's all just a misunderstanding."

"But you were engaged to her," Laura said, her eyebrows furrowing. "You loved her."

"No," Marcus answered with a shake of his head. "We were engaged, but not because of love. Neither of us wanted to marry the other. Aunt Celine met Grayson Buckley and married him, and I met your mother."

Marcus rested his hand on Cate's shoulder, and she threaded her fingers through his as she smiled at Laura.

Laura stared at her lap, frowning as she thought through the situation.

“Laura, the first person you are in a relationship with may not be the person you marry,” Cate said.

Laura sniffled, swallowing hard. “But that’s not what she said. She said Daddy was having an affair with Aunt Celine.”

Cate’s features crinkled. “Who told you that?”

Laura glanced up, her features surprised. “N-No one. I...just assumed.”

“Laura, you heard the information about the engagement from somewhere,” Cate prodded. “Where?”

Her daughter shook her head. “No. I...overheard Grandmother talking about it once. I just assumed because she doesn’t like Aunt Celine at all.”

Cate’s mind whirled as she tried to piece the puzzle together. Something wasn’t right about this, but she couldn’t put her finger on it. She glanced at Marcus behind her. He shrugged, looking equally unconvinced.

“No matter where you heard it,” Cate said, “you need to apologize to Aunt Celine.”

Laura bit her lower lip, nodding as she refused to meet their gaze.

Cate rose and leaned forward to kiss Laura’s forehead. “I’ll send her in to see you.”

“Am I still grounded?” Laura asked as Cate and Marcus crossed to the door.

Marcus hesitated for a moment. “No, so long as you apologize and continue to behave in an acceptable manner, you are not grounded.”

Marcus wrapped an arm around Cate as he led her through the door and into the hall.

Cate heaved a sigh as she shot Marcus a glance. “I sort of wish the other Cate would have been here for the teenage years. This is rough.”

Marcus shook his head. “I have never seen her like that.”

Cate studied him for a moment. “She was pretty hard on you. Are you okay?”

“I am fine, Catherine,” he answered.

“Really?” she prodded.

He wrapped his hand around hers, pressing it to his chest. “Really. Although, I would like to know who told her this. Mother never mentions it around the children for this very reason.”

“Maybe she did overhear it, but that doesn’t seem like your mother. There would be no reason for her to bring it up after all this time.

Although, I can't imagine she was happy with our choice in godmother for Laura."

"She was not entirely enthused by it, no, but she did understand. Particularly after you championed her."

Cate inhaled a deep breath, her mind spinning. "Then I don't know who she could have heard it from. It's strange, though, because I think she's still somewhat convinced something is going on between you."

"There is not."

"I know...well, I do now." Cate's eyes widened. "Do you think she got that vibe from me?"

"No, you have known since before she was born," Marcus answered.

"Oh, right," Cate said with a bob of her head. "I forget. Time travel is really confusing sometimes."

Marcus grinned at her, pulling her closer to kiss her forehead. She smiled up at him as Celine rounded the corner.

"Hey," she said with a smile. "Any luck with her?"

Cate heaved a sigh, offering Celine an apologetic glance. "Yes. It seems someone has told Laura about your past with Marcus. And she somehow misconstrued it as you two having an affair."

Celine burst into laughter before she glanced at Marcus and winced. "Sorry, it's just ridiculous."

Marcus wrapped a protective arm around Cate. "I agree. My love for Catherine eclipses any emotion for any other woman."

"Uh, also, until recently, we couldn't even stand to be in the same room with each other. This person didn't let that one slip, huh?" Celine asked, shoving her hands into the pockets of her jeans.

Cate scrunched her features. "I'd like to know who this person is."

"Laura didn't say?" Celine asked.

"No," Cate answered with a shake of her head. "She claims she overheard it from Anna, but I don't believe that."

Celine flicked her gaze to Marcus. "Well, your mother isn't exactly my biggest fan."

"But she has never spoken about what happened between you two anywhere near the children for this exact reason."

Celine puffed out her cheeks. "Well, maybe she'll give you a little more soon. At least you got to the bottom of it."

“Oh, if you don’t mind, we told her we’d send you in. She owes you an apology,” Cate said.

Celine shrugged it off. “Nah, she’s an angsty teen.”

“She really needs to apologize,” Cate answered.

“All right, I’ll head in now,” Celine said as she skirted around them. “But first, I just want to say how glad I am that Gray and I don’t have kids because—wow. You two are way better at this than I would be.”

“You’d be a great mom, too, Celine. But it’s not easy,” Cate answered.

Celine smiled at her, her fingers lingering on the doorknob. “Don’t worry, Marcus, I’ll make sure she knows how ridiculous you and me together in any way is.” Celine chuckled again as she pushed into Laura’s bedroom.

Marcus heaved a sigh. “How did I ever pursue that woman?”

“Simple,” Cate said with a grin. “You didn’t know me.” She patted his chest. “And now I think I’ll go back to my room before dinner.”

Marcus pulled her closer, kissing her cheek. “All right, dear.”

They parted ways, and she threaded through the halls, pushing into her suite with a tired sigh.

She stopped dead as a man rose from the armchair there. His hair grayed a little at the temples, and his face had more lines than she remembered.

He grinned at her. His warm smile hadn’t changed.

“Lady Cate,” Jack said, spreading his arms to the side. “It’s good to see you.”

CHAPTER 7



A grin spread across Cate's face as tears welled in her eyes. She opened her arms wide and strode toward him. "Jack."

He wrapped her in a tight hug. "Oh, it's been too long."

"Not that long," Cate said with a chuckle as she pulled back. "You've seen the regular me recently, right?"

"Actually, our Cate left months ago, so it has been far too long for any version of Cate," he said with a chuckle.

She studied him, the gray at his temples, the lines that crinkled around his eyes when he smiled.

"And you look great. Of course, the Cate from this time does, too, thanks to Marcus's magic." He wiggled his fingers in the air with a grin.

"So, I've heard. The kids didn't even question what I thought would be a younger look."

He shook his head. "You look exactly the same. It's amazing really. I keep getting older and grayer. You just stay the same."

"That's sort of strange. And I'm not certain I like it." She frowned. Of course, she had immortal friends who would also be with them, but watching Jack and Molly grow old, pass away, all while she remained the same wouldn't be easy.

"Hey, before you go getting upset, you should know, it's my choice. Your spouse offered. I declined." He crossed his arms, shuddering. "There's something unappealing to me about the entire thing, but I do have

a standing offer from the man himself. So, if I ever change my mind, I, too, can live forever.”

Cate smiled at the words. “Well, I am selfishly going to say I hope you change your mind, but I understand if you don’t. It’s...odd. It was odd to find out that I’d chosen it when I came here.”

“Oh, right. You haven’t even seen me and Molly get married or any of that.”

“At least I have something to look forward to.” She motioned to the pair of armchairs near them before collapsing into one. “And I can’t wait to meet your kids. Sorry, I haven’t been avoiding you or them. I just...”

“Am a little overwhelmed?” Jack asked as he settled into his seat.

“Yes, exactly,” Cate answered with a chuckle. “And a little is putting it mildly. I mean...when I left, I thought Marcus was in love with Celine. I thought we were going to divorce but had to put it off because his mother arrived.”

“And the nasty business with my former wife.”

“Right,” Cate said, her eyes widening.

“But you didn’t want a divorce, did you?”

Cate tugged a corner of her lips back into a half-smile as she shrugged. “He’s grown on me.”

“Uh-huh,” Jack said, cracking a smile. “Cate, I think he’s more than grown on you. I think you’ve been in love with him for quite a while.”

“Probably,” she said. “When we searched for you, he was so...attentive. I just kept ignoring my feelings because I thought he was interested in Celine.”

“Bah, she can’t hold a handle to you, Cate Kensie.”

Cate offered him an amused glance, raising a finger in the air. “Uh-uh, Cate Kensie—”

“Northcott,” they said at the same time.

Cate chuckled, pulling her legs up underneath her as she curled up in the chair. “Anyway, it seems I’m not the only one who thought Marcus was interested in Celine. We just came from Laura’s room where she accused him of having an affair with Celine.”

“No,” Jack said, his eyes going wide.

“Yes,” Cate said, pressing a hand to her forehead. “I’ll tell you, I have been thrown into the deep end of motherhood, and I am not at all convinced I’m good at it.”

“Aww, Cate, you’re a fantastic mother. The way you’ve raised those kids to be kind, compassionate, and patient...why I think you’ve even rubbed off a little on Marcus himself.”

“He’s not that bad,” Cate answered with a shake of her head. “But I can’t figure out who is telling these tales to my kids. When I find them, though...” Cate cracked her fist against her open palm.

“I don’t doubt it. I’ve seen you go all mama bear on more than one person. Whoever is spreading these rumors is just wrecking Laura’s peace. She’s a child. She deserves to be a child.”

“Well, she’s a teen, not a child, and they’ll tell you the difference right away,” Jack said with a wag of his finger.

“Oh, right,” Cate said. “Fifteen going on forty, right?”

“That’s right. We’ve been there with Maggie, and we’re still there.” Jack shook his head. “I mostly leave it to Molly. Oh, by the way, she knows about the whole time travel thing. We told her.”

Cate wrinkled her nose. “How’d she take it?”

“Pretty well considering. In fact, better than when I leave Maggie’s teen temperament to her.”

“I bet she loves that.”

Jack held his hands up. “Pop doesn’t understand a thing, don’t you know?”

A chuckle rumbled in Cate’s chest as she licked her lips. “I’m not sure any parent understands anything. But on a serious note, if you or Molly know of anyone who has been hanging around and filling her head with this stuff, let me know. She claims she overheard it from Marcus’s mother, but I don’t buy it.”

“It’s no secret Anna doesn’t care for Celine at all,” Jack answered.

“No, I know that, but, according to Marcus, she doesn’t speak of it in front of the children, so they aren’t aware.”

“Maybe Damien, Michael?” Jack suggested.

“She said ‘she,’” Cate said, her features pinching.

“And she wouldn’t tell you who?”

Cate shook her head. “No. Marcus says she’s been secretive lately, uneasy. I just feel so out of my depth here because I don’t know what is normal for my own kids.”

“Maybe Maggie could talk to her? You know, they’re close. We could ask her and see if maybe Laura would confide in her.”

Cate pressed her lips together, sucking in a breath. "That's a very kind offer. I just...gosh, I feel terrible dragging your kids into my family troubles."

"Cate, we're pretty entwined in your family troubles. You and I have solved so many problems together already. Plus, like I said, the kids are close. They all go to school together...another thing I need to thank your spouse for. My kids go to the most exclusive schools in the world because of him."

"Aww, that's great that they go to school together." Cate beamed at him.

"They're getting an excellent education. And the old sourpuss insisted. You know, I really thought he'd be insufferable, but he's done quite a bit for us."

"Well, that's good. I know you weren't sold on him back in my time, so it's good to hear he's grown on you."

"He has, but I'll tell you this, if he hurts you, I'll still make my best effort to kill him. I don't expect success, but I'll try."

Cate giggled, shaking her head at him. "Your sense of humor hasn't changed, and your jokes haven't gotten any better."

"Ahh, come on, Cate, I haven't even tried out one of my puns on you yet."

"Well, I can't wait to hear them," she said with a grin as the clicking of the door drew her attention.

She glanced at it as it opened.

Marcus arched an eyebrow as he stepped inside. "Mr. Reid. I did not realize you were visiting."

"You see how far we've come. Mr. Reid now...not the gardener."

Marcus heaved a sigh, shaking his head at Jack as he crossed to Cate's armchair, placing a hand on her shoulder. "I came to see if you would prefer your meal here."

"The kids will be disappointed if I do that," Cate answered.

"Yes, they will be, although I can handle it," Marcus said.

"No, I'll come down for dinner. Jack and I were just discussing having Maggie talk to Laura. Maybe she can ferret out whoever made Laura think that you and Celine were a thing."

"I would like to get to the bottom of it, yes." Marcus nodded.

"Right, I'll talk to her."

“Why don’t you all join us for dinner,” Cate said as Jack rose.

“Oh, uh...” Jack’s eyes flicked from Cate to Marcus. It seemed in the twenty years they’d spent living under the same roof that they’d learned to communicate and become friends.

“That would very nice. It would help take some of the pressure off of Catherine, who is feeling quite like a fish out of water.”

“Well, then I’ll inform Molly who will inform the staff,” Jack said with a grin. “And we’ll see you for dinner.”

“Don’t forget we dress,” Marcus said. “Do not wear that flannel thing you call a shirt to the dining table.”

Well, maybe they’d become friends, Cate thought with a shake of her head.

“Right. I’ll put on my fancy red one just for you Marc.” He clicked his tongue as he winked at him before he disappeared into the hall.

Marcus heaved a sigh. “Sometimes that man tries my patience.”

“I’m sorry,” Cate said as she stood. “But—”

“You are close friends. And I will tolerate him because it will make things easier on you.” He slid a lock of hair behind her ear.

“I really hope Laura will confide in Maggie. We need to figure out who is putting these crazy ideas in her head.”

Marcus nodded. “I agree. Let us hope for the best.”

The door to her suite popped open again, and Andrea entered.

“Good evening, Your Graces,” she said with a nod. “Will you be dining with the family tonight or here?”

“With the family,” Cate said. “So I need to change before Marcus gets fussy about my sweater and leggings.”

“They are a far cry from the horrid attire Jack Reid considers appropriate,” Marcus answered, “but I will leave you to it.”

He kissed her cheek before he left her behind.

“So, dinners are a formal event, huh?” Cate said as Marcus left them alone.

“Yes, they are. His Grace insisted on keeping tradition. He says it’s important for the children.”

Cate plopped into the chair at her vanity. “Well, I suppose family dinners are important.”

“Oh, His Grace is very serious about them,” Andrea said as she brushed Cate’s hair. “And how are things going for you, Your Grace? Have you

adjusted to the new environment?”

Cate sucked in a sharp breath. “I’m not sure. I feel like I’m not doing a very good job. I don’t even know my own children.”

“But you love them all the same.”

Cate tugged one corner of her lips back. “I’m not sure that’s going to be enough. Laura seems to be struggling quite a bit, and I have no idea what to do.”

“I am certain you will figure it out, Your Grace,” Andrea said as she swept Cate’s hair into a swept-up style.

“Gosh, I hope so. I feel terrible not being able to help my own kids.”

“You will help them. I know you will. You always find a way.”

Andrea finished with Cate’s hair before she preceded her into the bedroom to find a selection of dresses for her to choose from.

“How did I let Marcus talk me into formal dinners? I would much rather be in my leggings,” Cate said with a sigh.

Andrea laughed as Cate picked a burgundy dress. Within minutes, Andrea had her pulled together and ready for dinner.

“Enjoy your meal, Your Grace,” Andrea said. “I will see you afterward.”

With butterflies in her stomach, Cate left her room behind, uncertain she was ready for a family dinner. She wasn’t even certain the addition of Jack, Molly, and their two children would ease the tension.

So many things had changed.

Marcus met her at the top of the stairs, offering his arm to lead her down to the dining room. “Thanks for agreeing to have Jack and his family at the table. I think it may help.”

“Of course, dear,” he said as he led her into their formal dining room. Their children waited for them, and Logan raced to the chair at the head of the table, pulling it out.

“Mother, how wonderful that you could join us.”

“Thank you, Logan,” she said as he helped her into the chair.

The dining room glowed under the soft light of crystal chandeliers, each flicker reflecting off the polished silverware laid meticulously around fine china. The heavy curtains parted slightly, letting in the haunting whisper of the wind that roamed the castle grounds at night.

“And thanks for inviting us, Your Grace,” Molly said with a pat of Cate’s hand. “We haven’t had a dinner together in far too long.”

“It’s great to see you, Aunt Cate,” Maggie said with a grin.

“And it’s wonderful to see you again, Maggie, and you, Malcolm,” Cate said as their first course was served.

She spent the dinner marveling over how much life had changed, but how some things had remained the same.

She grinned as Jack recounted the story of them being in the nineteen forties. Laughter filled the air.

“And then your mother, no joke, shot down a German fighter. She grabbed the gun and shot down the plane on our tail.”

Her children’s jaws unhinged. “No,” Logan said, shooting Cate a glance. “Mother, really?”

“Really,” Cate said with a nod. “I couldn’t just do nothing.”

“Your mother is the bravest woman I know,” Marcus answered as he raised his wine glass to her.

The meal continued with more stories and laughter before they parted ways. Cate headed to her bedroom, exhausted but more comfortable than she’d been earlier. It seemed she and Marcus had built a wonderful life together with family and friends.

After Andrea helped her change into her pajamas, she crawled into bed, exhausted from the drama of the day.

When she woke, her features pinched. Something had pulled her from a restful sleep. What was it?

A shriek split the night air, and Cate flung back her covers, racing across her sitting room to fling open her doors. She sprinted down the hall, a sense of dread settling over her as she realized she’d done this dozens of times before. This was her vision. This was the terrifying thing that had been haunting her for months.

This was the start of the end.

CHAPTER 8



Cate raced down the hall, her heart hammering as she skidded around the corner. One more hall stood between her and determining why this moment was so pivotal, so dreadful.

Her features pinched with concern as she reached the door, the sounds of her daughter's sobs filling the air.

She burst into the room, and the scene matched her future memory exactly—only now, it all made sense. All the pieces of the puzzle had fallen into place except one. Why was this moment so important?

Cate hurried across the room, flicking on the antique brass lamp, casting a soft golden glow that battled the shadows creeping around the corners of Laura's room. Each familiar object seemed sinister in the half-light, transforming the room where Cate had once told bedtime stories into a stage for nightmares.

Laura sat on the bed, her small frame hunched over, sobs shaking her shoulders. The sight pierced Cate like a knife, her resolve hardening. She needed to fix this—now.

"Laura, what happened?"

"Laura?" Marcus asked as he rushed into the room. "Another nightmare?"

"Go away," Laura cried, burying her face in her knees.

Cate rubbed her daughter's shoulder, shooting Marcus a pained glance. "Sweet Pea, tell us what's wrong? What's upsetting you so much?"

"Oh, Mummy," Laura said with a sob as she reached for her.

Cate inched closer, wrapping her arms around her daughter and pulling her close. "Shhh, Laura, it's okay. Whatever it is, we'll fix it."

"I don't know if you can," Laura said, her voice breaking.

"Laura," Cate's voice was more pleading than she intended, her words echoing slightly in the high-ceilinged room. "Please, talk to me. Whatever it is, we can face it together. You don't have to carry this alone."

But Laura's response was to bury her face deeper into her knees, her voice muffled but fierce, "You can't help. You won't understand."

Frustration and fear twisted in Cate's gut as she sat beside her daughter, her hand reaching out to smooth back hair damp with tears. The physical connection seemed to thaw some of the ice between them, Laura's body no longer rigid, leaning into the comfort tentatively.

"Laura, love, I understand more than you know," Cate whispered, each word infused with all the warmth she could muster, trying to bridge the gap with a daughter she didn't know. "And I promise, no matter what it is, it won't change how much I love you. It won't break our family."

Her daughter clung to her as Cate stroked her hair, sniffing. Cate waited until Laura's crying had slowed to just a few shudders here and there before she slowly eased her back into her pillows.

"Mummy, don't leave yet."

"I'm not leaving, Laura," Cate said as she rose. "But I think maybe a nice warm cup of tea and some of Aunt Molly's cookies may make you feel better."

Laura licked her lips, nodding. "As long as you're staying here."

"I am," Cate assured her with a squeeze of her hand before she crossed to Marcus, lowering her voice. "Could you bring the tea and cookies?"

"We have servants for this sort of thing, Catherine."

"I understand that, but I think she may be more open without you here," Cate whispered. "Give me some time with her."

"All right. I will fetch the tea and biscuits. Good luck." He squeezed her arm before he kissed her cheek.

"Thanks," she said, squeezing his hand before he left. She twisted to face her daughter, skirting the bed before she grabbed the covers and slid underneath them, shimmying close to Laura.

She slid an arm around her daughter's shoulders and pulled her closer. Laura snuggled against her, and Cate kissed her hair before she laid her cheek against her daughter's head. "Feeling any better?"

“A little,” Laura murmured, her arms tightening around Cate.

“You know, Sweet Pea, it would be so much easier for you if you just told someone what was happening.”

Laura buried her head in Cate’s chest. “I don’t want to, Mummy.”

“Laura, it will only be painful for a minute, and then it’ll be so much better.”

“But it won’t be,” she said, her sobbing resuming. “Something is very wrong, Mummy, and I just have to figure it out on my own.”

“No, you don’t, Laura,” Cate said as she stroked her hair. “Whatever is wrong, we’ll figure it out together.”

Laura shifted next to Cate, wiping at her cheeks. “But it could change everything. I have this terrible feeling.”

“Well, then it’s all the more reason for you to tell me. Because I have a secret to tell you.”

Laura pushed away from Cate, her eyes wide and glassy. Her lower lip trembled as she studied Cate’s face. “Oh, Mummy, is it about you and Daddy? Were you lying earlier?”

“No,” Cate said, her voice incredulous. “No, Laura. There is nothing wrong between Daddy and me.”

“You’re not sleeping in the same bedroom. I heard Daddy ask to make up the other room.”

Cate heaved a sigh, shaking her head. “That has nothing to do with our marriage.”

“But...that’s not...” Laura shook her head, her features pinching.

“Who is telling you these things? I know it’s not Grandmother. Who is it?”

Laura bit into her lower lip, her eyes lowering to the soft sheets on the bed.

“Whoever it is, she is lying to you. She’s upsetting you for no reason. And I, for one, would like her to stop because you should be enjoying your time off from school instead of worrying about things that are never going to happen.”

“But she said...she said you and Daddy didn’t get married because you loved each other. And she said now you were getting divorced. She was right about Aunt Celine and Daddy’s engagement.”

“We explained all of that. And it was a very long time ago. And, in fact, you can thank your Aunt Celine because she is the reason I met your

father.”

Laura’s eyebrows furrowed as she studied Cate. Cate grabbed the tissue box and held it out toward her. Laura grabbed a few tissues, wiping her cheeks.

“Did you know that I met your father right here in Dunhaven Castle?”

“Really?” Laura asked.

Cate offered her a soft smile, holding out her arms as she coaxed her closer. “Yes. In the sitting room downstairs, the one where we put the Christmas tree every year.”

“Was it Christmas?”

“No,” Cate answered as she recalled the moment she’d first set eyes on Marcus in person. “No, it was summer. 1792. Uncle Jack and I were visiting Douglas MacKenzie. And Aunt Celine and Uncle Gray were visiting. Daddy came unexpectedly to see Aunt Celine, but he ended up sitting next to me at dinner.”

Laura sniffled. “Did you fall in love with him at first sight?”

“No,” Cate said with a chuckle. “I wasn’t entirely certain I liked him, actually.”

Laura craned her neck to glance up at Cate, her eyes searching. “It was much later when Uncle Jack disappeared, and Daddy helped me find him that I fell in love with him. He was very brave and very selfless. He traded himself for Uncle Jack.”

“He did?” Laura asked, her voice a quiet squeak.

“Yes. Uncle Jack was being held by some very bad people, and he was very sick. Daddy traded himself for Uncle Jack.”

“How did Daddy get away?”

Cate stroked her daughter’s hair, a smile crossing her lips. “That’s a funny story.”

“Funny?” Laura asked, a bit more levity in her voice as she shifted in Cate’s arms, her muscles relaxing. “It doesn’t sound funny.”

“Well, Daddy had fully expected those people to keep him, but I had a different idea in mind. I woke up in the middle of the night at Rosenberg Palace, and I woke the poor stablehand and made him ready a carriage and take me to where your father was. And I went inside, got into a fight with someone to get the key to his cell, and rescue him.”

Laura pushed away from her, her head tilting. “You rescued Daddy?”

“I did. And I don’t let him forget it very often,” Cate said with a chuckle.

Laura offered her a wavering smile.

Cate pinched her chin. “There’s that smile I missed so much.”

Laura pressed her lips together, her amusement fading a little. “I’m sorry, Mummy, I just...”

“Are taking things on yourself that you shouldn’t. Someone is filling your head with stories that aren’t accurate. And I think you should tell me who it is because they need to stop doing this.”

Laura swallowed hard, her gaze falling to the hand that propped her up. “She said...she said she knew you very well. She said you didn’t like her, so I shouldn’t say anything.”

Cate furrowed her brow. “Laura, who? And where are you meeting her? Why do you keep meeting her?”

“I don’t go to her—she comes to me. She just...comes in my sleep.”

“She comes in your sleep? Maybe it’s just a dream.”

Laura shook her head, wadding the tissue into a tight ball in her fist. “It’s not a regular dream, it’s...different. One minute, I’m asleep. A normal, natural sleep. And then the next thing, I’m in a new place. And she’s there. And she says all these things to me. Terrible things. She told me you would leave, and you did. Then she told me about Aunt Celine, and she was right. And then she said you and Daddy would get a divorce, and now I’m so afraid that’s going to come true.” Her eyes squeezed shut as her voice broke again.

“It’s not,” Cate said, pulling her into a hug. “It’s not going to come true. Now, Laura, I really must insist that you tell me who is tormenting you like this? Because that’s all she’s doing.”

Laura sniffled. “You said you had a secret, though. And you never told me.”

Cate took her daughter’s hand in hers. “You know that I am a clairvoyant.”

Laura nodded as she wiped at her nose with the tissue again.

“Well, I have visions of various things. And your nightmares were one of my visions. That scream that sent me scrambling in here? I have been seeing that moment since before you were born.”

“Really?” Laura asked.

Cate nodded, squeezing her hand. "This is important, Laura. Very important, so please, tell me, because I need to do whatever it takes to protect you and this entire family."

Laura's features pinched before she raised her gaze to Cate. "Her name is...Gianna. Gianna Caruso. Do you know her?"

Cate stared at her daughter, heat washing over her as a shiver snaked down her spine. Gianna Caruso was terrorizing her daughter. The Agency had finally made this personal. They'd gone after her child.

"Mummy?" Laura asked, her face creasing with worry. "Mummy, is something wrong? Are you mad at me?"

"No, Sweat Pea, I'm not mad at you," Cate said, her voice trembling a little even as she tried to infuse strength into it.

Cate pulled her daughter closer to her, squeezing her tight to her chest. "I am so sorry you had to deal with that woman."

"You know her then?" Laura asked.

"Yes," Cate said, her voice laced with venom as memories of Gianna's actions toward her in the past rushed into her mind. She would take any one of them again and again for the rest of her life over that woman bullying her child. "She is a horrible woman, Laura. You cannot listen to anything she says."

"But she was right—"

"Laura, she isn't. She's not telling you everything."

"Like what?" Laura asked.

"Did she tell you she was one of the people who took Uncle Jack? Who kept your father in that cell?"

"No," Laura said, her muscles tensing again.

"Well, she is. She is part of an organization that wants to do very bad things in the world. And she's upsetting you just to upset your father and me." Cate rubbed Laura's arm. "And I am so sorry we didn't protect you from this, but now that we know, we're going to stop this."

"Thank you, Mummy," Laura said.

As Cate held her closer, Marcus entered, carrying a tray of tea. His eyes fell to Cate, his eyebrows raising in a silent question. She offered him a slight nod, indicating she had the answers they needed.

He set the tray on the bed and poured Laura a cup of tea. "Feeling better, darling?"

“Uh-huh,” she said with a nod as she pulled herself away from Cate to accept the tea, stirring in milk and sugar before she took a sip.

Cate pushed back the covers, but Laura grabbed her hand. “Mummy, no, don’t leave.”

“I’m not leaving. I just need to talk to Daddy for a minute. I’ll be right back.”

Laura offered her a panicked glance.

“I promise. I’ll be right back.” Cate kissed her forehead.

She climbed off the bed and wrapped her robe tighter around her as she grabbed Marcus’s arm and guided him into the hall.

“I assume you learned something from her?” Marcus asked.

“Yes,” Cate said, trying to stop herself from trembling as she ran a shaky hand through her hair.

“Catherine, what is it?” Marcus asked.

Cate pressed her lips together, shaking her head before she raised her gaze to his. “It’s Gianna. She’s after our daughter.”

CHAPTER 9



Cate's stomach twisted into a tight knot as she pressed the palm of her hand against her forehead. Heat washed over her. Gianna had done so many terrible things to them, but this was the worst thing she'd ever dealt with. Watching someone torment your child was like having someone rip your heart out.

"She is using a dream curse," Marcus answered with a deep sigh. "I should have seen this coming, but The Agency has become difficult to track."

Cate pressed her lips together as she groaned. "Why is this happening?"

"She said she would break you," Marcus answered. "This is what she meant. This is what your visions have been showing you."

"I know," Cate said, tears welling in her eyes. "Why couldn't I figure it out earlier? If only I had been able to, maybe this wouldn't have happened."

"You are not shown them to prevent them entirely, Catherine."

She slid her eyes closed, a tear falling to her cheek. "Then what's the point?"

"The point is, Catherine, that you are here, prepared, and ready to deal with it." Marcus rubbed her arms.

She shook her head, the gesture not comforting her at all. "I don't feel prepared or ready at all."

Her features pinched as the tears burning her eyes started to escape to her cheeks.

“Catherine,” Marcus soothed, pulling her closer as she started to sob, “need I remind you of the lecture you gave Laura not one hour ago?”

“Maybe,” Cate said as she pressed a damp cheek against his chest.

“We will face this together.”

Cate sniffled, pulling back from him. “She has done horrible things to both of us, not to mention Jack. And now she’s doing it to Laura. And we have never been able to outsmart her or stop her or even slow her down. We’re never a step ahead of her.”

“We know what she is doing now,” Marcus said, refusing to let her go. “We will stop her. We will find a way, and in the meantime, we will take care of Laura.”

“Is there anything we can do to protect her from this while we’re trying to ferret out the roots of The Agency? She’s terrified.”

“Yes, I believe there is something we can do. However, what she really needs is her mother. She is comforted by your presence alone.”

Cate licked her lips, blowing out a shaky breath as she tried to pull herself together. “I don’t feel very comforting right now.”

“She adores you. She opened up to you after months of not speaking about what is happening with her nightmares. Your presence alone is a comfort.”

Cate sniffled, bobbing her head. “I just need to pull myself together. I don’t think me sobbing is going to be very comforting to her.”

“But you need comforted, too.”

Cate threaded her fingers through Marcus’s, wiping away the last tear from her cheek. “I am.”

Marcus smiled at her, rubbing her cheek. “Well, I am pleased to hear that. You spent a lot of time refusing my comfort.”

Cate pressed her lips together, shooting him an unimpressed glance. “When I thought you were in love with Celine.”

“Oh, Catherine. If you could not tell I only had eyes for you...”

“Quiet,” she said with a wag of her finger. “My skills of perception are fantastic. You were just confusing.”

He chuckled at her. “I was not. I was very obvious about it. I merely did not wish to push myself onto you if you did not prefer it.”

Cate shook her head at him, a coy smile on her features. “If you couldn’t tell that I was in love with you—”

“Do not say it,” Marcus warned.

“You know who knew we were in love with each other? Your mother.”

“Yes, I know,” he answered. “Mother is very wise.”

“She is. Maybe we should consult with her over Laura.”

“I plan to now that we know what is happening.” Marcus rubbed her arms again. “Now, are you feeling up to returning to Laura?”

“I’d better before she wonders where I went. I’ll spend the night with her, and I think maybe we should stick closely to her for now.”

“Yes, I think she would benefit from that greatly, Catherine.”

“When will you talk to your mother?”

“I will visit with her now,” he answered. “Will you be all right for a short while?”

“We will be,” she said with a nod. “I’m anxious to hear what she has to say. And say hello to me for me, will you?”

“I will,” he answered with a smirk before he kissed her cheek. “I will come to you as soon as I return.”

She squeezed his arm, warmth spreading through her at the idea of them tackling the problem together. “And tell your mother hello, too.”

“I will.”

They parted ways, and Cate took a moment to prepare herself, hoping it didn’t look like she’d been crying. She pushed into Laura’s room, finding her perched on the edge of the bed. She snapped her gaze up to Cate, her features turning concerned. “Mummy? Is something wrong?”

“No, Sweet Pea,” Cate said as she hurried to her daughter’s side. “Now, what are you doing out of bed?”

“I was worried. I wanted to come find you, but I heard you and Daddy talking. I didn’t want to interrupt.”

Cate pulled back the covers and motioned for Laura to climb back into bed, but her daughter shook her head. “Laura, you need to go back to bed.”

“Mummy, I don’t want to go to sleep. I’m afraid I’ll see her again.”

“I’ll be right here if you do,” Cate said with a caress of her cheek.

Laura grabbed Cate’s hand. “You’re staying with me?”

“I will stay with you tonight and every night until we solve this.”

Laura grinned at her, climbing back into bed and patting the spot next to her. “Anna will be upset.”

Cate chuckled as she grabbed a cookie and skirted the bed to climb in next to Laura. “Well, you need me right now.”

She stroked her daughter's hair as she bit into the cookie. "Plus, I will take any excuse to have one of Aunt Molly's cookies."

"I know," Laura said as she snuggled against Cate with a giggle.

"Oh, do you?" Cate teased as she poked her daughter's side.

They laughed together before Cate polished off her cookie and wrapped her arms around her daughter, squeezing her tightly. "Do you think you can sleep?"

Laura stiffened against her, not answering.

"Laura?"

"Mummy, I don't want to. I'm afraid."

"I will be right here. And remember, she is lying to you, Laura. There is nothing to be upset about, okay?" Cate kissed the top of her daughter's head.

Laura tightened her grasp around Cate's waist.

"All right, why don't we watch a movie together?" Cate asked.

Laura nodded, her cheek still pressed against Cate's chest.

Cate reached for the remote on her nightstand, flipping on the television and selecting one of her favorites.

Laura twisted to lay her back against Cate. "You always remember my favorite, Mummy."

"Because it's one of my favorites, too," Cate said as she settled the covers over them a little higher.

They settled in together, and by the time the movie was half over, Laura was soundly asleep in Cate's arms. Cate switched off the television and the light, slouching down next to Laura.

She slid a lock of Laura's hair behind her ear, studying her features, soft from sleep. "My poor baby."

A mix of concern and anger roiled inside of her. She twisted the sheets over them in her fist as she imagined Gianna's smug face lording things over her poor daughter.

If Cate could find the woman right now, she wasn't certain she could be responsible for her own actions. She'd come to blows with the woman once before, and she'd do it again to protect her child. It seemed her motherly instincts had kicked in despite only having known Laura for a short period of time.

Cate gently rubbed her daughter's arm as she slept, her mind whirling despite her eyelids growing heavy.

Before she could fall asleep, though, the quiet click of Laura's door awoke her. She snapped her gaze toward it. Marcus strode inside, and she pressed a finger to her lips.

Marcus smiled at the scene as he rounded the bed and eased onto the edge, taking Cate's hand in his.

"Well?" she whispered.

"Mother and I are researching how to protect Laura from the dream curse. We hope to have an answer in a few hours. How is she?"

"Terrified to go to sleep," Cate answered, "but I managed to lull her there with a movie."

"The one about the mother and daughter who move to the seaside?"

Cate smiled and nodded. "Uh-huh. She fell asleep about halfway through, and she's been out ever since."

"This is the most peaceful I've seen her since all of this started," Marcus said, reaching out to shift a lock of Laura's hair behind her ear. "Even when I sat with her, she slept fitfully."

Cate shifted her gaze to her sleeping daughter, rubbing her shoulder. "Poor baby. She's probably exhausted."

"I am certain she will recover now that her mother is here to care for her."

"She said Anna will be upset."

"She will be. Anna is...difficult."

"Like her father," Cate said with a coy grin.

Marcus shifted to lean against the pillows, pulling Cate and Laura closer to him. "I have a feeling you are going to end up with both children in your bed until this is solved."

Cate settled against him. "That's okay. Although, poor Logan seems to be just as upset, but he just keeps pushing ahead."

"Logan is very much like that. It's nothing that a lovely afternoon game of chess with his mother won't fix."

Cate's lips parted before she winced. "No, not chess."

"I'm afraid so. He enjoys it far more with you than with me."

"Probably because he can easily win. I'm awful at chess."

"You are not, you simply lack the desire to engage in games that long."

"Like the game Gianna is playing," Cate said with a sigh.

"I am already working on a plan to fight back against her. I hope to have the cogs in place by morning, and then we will form a plan." He

kissed her temple.

She gripped his forearm, leaning her forehead against his cheek. “Good. We need to solve this. I need to get back home to my real husband.”

“I hope you don’t tell him about the other dashing charmer who you claimed to be in love with during this trip.”

“Somehow, I think he’ll know since he often receives visits from the future.”

They chuckled together before Cate’s eyes started to close. She relaxed into him, her head lolling as she drifted off to sleep.

When she awoke the next morning, bright sunshine filtering through the curtains, she squinted against it, stretching. Laura still slept soundly next to her, curled into a ball on her side.

Cate lifted her arms over her head before she climbed out of bed, crossing to the windows to glance out over the back gardens with a yawn.

“Mummy?” Laura said, sleep in her voice.

“I’m right here, Sweet Pea,” Cate said, returning to the bed and sliding between the sheets. “How are you feeling?”

“Mm, better,” Laura said as she cuddled next to Cate. “That’s the first time I’ve slept that well in a while.”

“Aww,” Cate answered, rubbing her thumb against her daughter’s cheek. “I’m so glad you confided in me. We’re going to stop this from happening to you.”

Laura grabbed Cate’s hand, squeezing it. “Did you tell Daddy?”

“I did. And he asked Grandmother for help. With any luck, we’ll have this cleared up for you very soon.”

Laura sat up, reaching for her robe. “But you’ll stay with me until it does?”

“Of course. If you’re getting up, though, I’m going to get dressed and go see if Daddy made any progress on settling this.”

Laura nodded, and Cate kissed her forehead before she rose from the bed, threading through the halls to her bedroom suite to find Andrea waiting for her.

“Your Grace, good morning. His Grace said you had a difficult night, so I was just tidying up a little while I waited for you. How is Lady Laura?”

“Better after getting some peaceful sleep. I, on the other hand, am a wreck.”

“Perhaps you ought to lie down now and get some rest.”

Cate shook her head as she slumped into the seat at the vanity. “No. I couldn’t sleep if I tried. I’m more upset over the fact that this is Gianna doing this. She has given us so much trouble, but now she’s going after my kids.”

Cate’s lower lip trembled before she broke into tears.

“Oh, Your Grace,” Andrea said as she hurried to her and wrapped her in a warm embrace.

“I’m sorry,” Cate said, wiping at her cheeks as she pulled back.

“It’s all right, Your Grace. This is very stressful, and you are understandably upset.”

“I need to get it together,” Cate answered with a sniffle. “I need to be strong for Laura.”

“But you do not need to be strong for me. So, I am the place where you can cry, yell, scream, whatever makes you feel better.”

Cate sucked in a deep breath as she nodded. “Thank you. All right, well, actually, right now, I want to get dressed and get downstairs to see if Marcus or anyone else has an idea about getting rid of Laura’s nightmares or Gianna and The Agency.”

“Of course,” Andrea said, grabbing the hairbrush and gently brushing her hair.

Within the hour, Andrea had her pulled together in her usual chic style. With worry gnawing in the pit of her stomach, she descended the stairs and made her way to the library.

She pushed inside, finding Marcus, Celine, Damien, and Michael already inside. “Good morning,” Cate said, receiving greetings from the others.

“How is Laura?” Marcus asked as he poured her a cup of tea.

Cate accepted the cup with a sigh, sinking into her armchair. “Better. She says she finally had a good night’s sleep. I’m hoping that continues.”

“Cate, I’m so sorry,” Celine said. “Marcus told us what’s going on. This must be so difficult on you, too.”

“I never thought Gianna could do something this low, this vile. Laura is a child.”

Damien patted her on the shoulder, offering her a smile. “We’ll get through it, Cate.”

“Thanks,” she said as she lowered her teacup into the saucer. “Is there any news on that front, Marcus?”

“There is. My plan has come to fruition. With any luck, I hope to have Gianna on the run soon while we fix Laura’s dream curse.”

“What is the plan?” Cate asked.

Marcus flicked his eyebrows up, hesitating. “Gianna is quite contemptible. We need to fight fire with fire.”

“I’m not sure I could ever be as despicable as her,” Cate answered with a shake of her head.

“I know. And that is why I have enlisted help on that front.”

Cate raised her eyebrows before she creased her forehead. “Who is that vicious?”

The doors to the library burst open behind her. Cate twisted to stare at the woman who stepped inside, a grin on her pretty face. She stretched her arms to the sides, the leather of her jacket squeaking as she did. “Fam, what’s up?”

Cate’s jaw unhinged as she stared at her before she snapped her gaze to Marcus. The memory of being tormented by this woman, kidnapped, taunted, and more, flashed through Cate’s mind. “You must be joking. You brought Dominique?”

CHAPTER 10



Cate stood in stunned silence as she stared at the leather-clad woman hovering in the doorway to the library. After the debacle she'd lived through in Maine, Dominique had only added to it when she'd burst into the bedroom in the Buckley house and snatched her straight from her bed.

What was the woman doing standing in her home right now?

She twisted to search her husband's features for an answer, but as usual, he betrayed nothing.

"Seriously, Marcus, is this some kind of joke?" Celine asked with a click of her tongue.

Dominique smirked at her. "Aww, what's the matter, cousin? You aren't happy to see me?"

"In a word, no," Celine answered, crossing her arms. "How did you even get out of prison?"

Dominique grinned at her, wiggling her eyebrows as she set her gaze on Marcus. "Do you want to tell them or should I?"

Marcus heaved a sigh. "I have already explained that we need someone who is as ruthless and amoral as Gianna."

As Dominique strode into the room, a cold shiver ran down Cate's spine, unbidden and sharp. Memories flooded her—the tightness of ropes around her wrists, Dominique's mocking laughter echoing off cold walls, the despair. She forced a calm exterior, but inside, a storm of anxiety and old fears churned.

Dominique perched on the edge of Cate's armchair. "And here I am. Ruthless and amoral, as requested. And definitely way cooler than Gianna. I think we can all agree on that."

She leapt from her seat, stalking closer to Michael. "Hey, handsome, how's it hanging?"

"Still not interested, Dominique."

"Your loss, kid." She stalked closer to Damien, clapping him on the shoulder. "Damien, buddy."

"Really not interested," Damien said, shoving his hands in his pockets as he avoided her gaze.

She leaned closer, whispering in his ear. "Neither am I. Just wanted to say hello."

"Marcus, she shouldn't be here. How is she even here? You're supposed to be serving an eternal sentence."

"Yeah," Dominique said as she crossed to Marcus and patted his chest. "The big guy pulled some strings and here I am."

She grinned at them.

"You can't be serious," Celine said, cocking a hip as she stared at Marcus.

"We need someone who can fight as dirty as Gianna does," Marcus answered.

"And we all know I know how to fight dirty, am I right?"

"Why would you help us?" Cate asked. "Why would we trust you?"

Dominique frowned with a shrug. "You don't have to. I'll happily skip off into the sunset and let you let the little hellion run all over your family."

"No, you will not, Dominique," Marcus answered. "I had you released for this purpose, not to disappear."

"Your wife isn't appreciative. And I don't feel welcome. She hasn't even offered me tea."

"Tea? You want tea," Cate asked, her eyes wide. "Fine, I will pour you a cup of tea. My sincerest apologies, Dominique, the last time we spent time together, I was tied to a chair."

"Aww, and we're still sore over that, are we?" Dominique pouted, crossing her arms. "And here I thought we had a lovely time together."

Cate poured a cup of tea and thrust it toward her. "Here."

"Thank you, Cate. I really appreciate your hospitality so much. Now, maybe we can discuss the crux of the problem."

“The problem is that we don’t trust you, and we have no reason to,” Cate said.

“The reason is simple,” Dominique answered with grin after a sip of her tea. “I hate The Agency. Those poser wannabes running around all over the globe ferreting out magical power and pretending they know how to use it, that they could control the world. Please.” She rolled her eyes. “I would do this for free any day of the week just to see Gianna go down. But to get a favor owed from the big guy? Well, that’s just too good to pass up.”

Cate slid her eyes closed as she sank into her chair again. “I can’t believe this. Marcus, we can’t do this.”

“This is our best option. Dominique has abilities no one else has. And a burning desire to remove The Agency from existence.”

Dominique lifted a shoulder as she smirked at the group. “So, what do you say, fam? Are we all in?”

Cate let her head fall into her hands as she struggled to get on board with the plan of trusting this dangerous woman. She could provide them with an edge that no one else here could. Dominique had no scruples, no boundaries. She would do things the rest of them couldn’t even fathom to try to get ahead of Gianna and her Agency.

Before anyone could answer, the door to the library opened again. Cate twisted to find Laura in the doorway, her eyes scanning the room.

Cate leapt from her seat, her eyes widening.

“Wellll,” Dominique said, setting her teacup in her saucer and sliding it onto the coffee table before she strode across the room, “you must be the lovely Laura.”

Laura’s features pinched. “Do I know you?”

“We’ve never met before. I am your Auntie Dominique.”

“Laura—” Cate began but a wave of Dominique’s hand cut her off.

“Are you Aunt Celine’s sister?”

“Close. We’re cousins. But really, it’s your dad and I who go way back. We’re really close. So close that he and I almost—”

“That’s enough, Dominique,” Cate said with a shake of her head as she crossed to wrap an arm around her daughter. “Laura, you should go upstairs and—”

“No,” Dominique answered with a shake of her head. “No, no. Laura should not go anywhere without me. Really neither of you should.”

Silence met her words, and Cate flicked her gaze to Marcus. He pressed his lips into a thin line, his shoulders lifting into a shrug.

“Gianna is after you both. Am I not correct?”

“That is correct,” Marcus answered.

“So, then it looks like us girls will be spending some time together. Gosh, I can’t wait. Maybe we can braid each other’s hair and do our nails.” Dominique grinned at them.

“Mummy?” Laura asked, her features crinkled as she stared at Cate.

“It’ll be fine. Stay with Aunt Celine for a minute.”

“And me,” Damien said as he crossed to her and wrapped an arm around her. “How have you been, kiddo?”

“Hi, Uncle Damien,” she said as Cate crossed to Marcus.

“Marcus, you can’t be serious. You can’t actually want us to spend our time with Dominique as a solution to this problem.”

“Catherine, there is no one better at the moment. I am very sorry, but this solution is the only one possible. She is the best equipped to fight Gianna, or at the very least to get her somewhat frightened.”

Cate sucked in a deep breath, shaking her head. “I’ll do my be—”

An arm wrapped around her shoulders and Marcus’s. “Hi, kids, what are we talking about? Is this special spouse-to-spouse stuff or can anyone join in?”

“I’m really going to need you to back off, Dominique. And I don’t want you talking to Laura.”

“Well, that’s kind of an over-the-top request, Catie. I am going to be spending an awful lot of time with her. Being in the cone of silence...” Dominique tugged her lips back into a wince. “Total vibe killer.”

“I don’t want you vibing with my daughter, Dominique. You are here for one purpose, and one purpose only. To protect her from harm, not to vibe with her, not to talk to her—”

“Not to live at all.”

Cate pressed her lips into a thin line. “The last time we saw each other, I was tied to a chair.”

“Whoa, whoa, wait a minute...you’re not the Cate from now? You’re Cate from then?” She made a rumbling sound as her fingers stretched. “Mind blown. Wow. So, you’re not even her real mom.”

“She is in every way Laura’s mother,” Marcus answered.

“Except she’s not. Not yet. Come on, Marc, you know how this all works.”

Marcus’s jaw firmed, his eyes sliding closed. “Dominique, you are making me regret with a furious passion ever rescuing you from that prison.”

She turned the corners of her lips down. “Except you need me. I am literally the best person for this job. And I’m totally here for it, friends. The chance to take Gianna Caruso down is just too tantalizing.”

“Try to keep your running commentary to a minimum,” Marcus answered. “You are here for one purpose.”

“I understand my purpose here. And I plan on keeping my end of the bargain. You just make sure you keep yours. You’ve got a beautiful family, Marcus. I’d hate to see that ruined.”

Cate’s heart skipped a beat as Dominique shot him a finger gun as she winked and backed away. “What was that supposed to mean?”

“Ignore her. It is Dominique and her usual threats. Again, Catherine, I am sorry, but while I work with Mother to find a solution to Laura’s dream curse, you need protection.”

“Are you sure Celine isn’t enough?”

Marcus’s eyes drifted to Celine, then to his daughter with Michael and Damien. “As powerful as Celine is, she is nowhere near as unscrupulous as Dominique.”

“It’s exactly those scruples I am concerned about,” Cate said with a rub of her temple.

“She should behave herself. She hates The Agency with a burning passion. Her antipathy toward them assures her loyalty to us.”

Cate let her gaze slid to the woman. “All right. Please try to find a solution fast. I fear her influence on this household, especially our kids.”

“I will,” he said as he kissed her on the cheek. “No one wants her gone from our lives more than me.”

“You’re leaving now?” Cate asked.

“I am. I will return for dinner regardless.”

Cate huffed out a sigh. “Maybe we should cancel dinners for now. I don’t know if I can handle dining with Dominique.”

“If it is any consolation, she has excellent table manners.”

“Very funny,” Cate answered, giving him a peck on the lips and a squeeze on his arm before they said a final goodbye.

“Daddy, are you leaving?” Laura asked as he strode to the door.

“Oh-ho,” Dominique said with a clap of her hands, “sorry, but it’s just wild to hear someone call you Daddy. Never thought I’d see the day.”

Laura wrinkled her nose at the woman.

Marcus ignored her, sighing before he answered. “Yes, darling, I will be back for dinner.”

She smiled and nodded at him before her eyes went to Cate who crossed to her. She slid an arm around her daughter. “I’m staying with you, Sweet Pea.”

“And me,” Dominique said with a devilish grin. “Now, why don’t you show me your room, kid?”

Laura glanced at Cate, her features questioning. “It’s fine. You should rest, anyway. You’ve barely been sleeping.”

“At your age, kiddo, you should be partying all night long. I know I was,” Dominique answered as they headed toward the door.

“Dominique,” Celine called. “Behave yourself. I’m still as powerful as you are.”

“Yeah, keep telling yourself that, cousin.” She winked before she strode into the hall. “Lead the way, Laura.”

“Mummy, I’m not sure I like her,” Laura whispered as she leaned closer to Cate. “Why did Daddy bring her here?”

“A long time ago before you were born, we knew Dominique. She is very powerful, just like Aunt Celine, but she is...a little more...crafty.”

Laura’s lips parted as she studied Cate.

“Just...take what she says with a grain of salt. She doesn’t always tell the truth either,” Cate said, kissing her daughter’s temple.

They snaked through the halls, pushing into Laura’s room. Dominique stalked around before she spun to face them. “So, I understand you’re supposed to be pretty powerful, huh, Laura?”

Laura eased onto her window seat, her lips tugging into a frown.

“You don’t need to answer that,” Cate said. “Dominique, you’re here to protect us, not probe for information.”

“Just making conversation, cherub cheeks.”

Cate slid her eyes closed, shaking her head at the woman’s crass demeanor.

“Besides, why wouldn’t she want to answer it. Oh, unless you’re not as powerful as Daddy Warlocks wants to claim you are.”

“My father doesn’t lie.”

Dominique crossed her arms, sucking in a sharp breath. “Ohhh, the kid doesn’t know her daddy used to play for the opposite team.”

“That’s enough, Dominique,” Cate retorted, fire in her eyes.

“I just never understand why you goody-goodies can’t just take ownership of your power and wield it in a way to take charge? I mean, honestly, what’s with this mopey attitude? ‘Gosh, I’m so powerful, but I hate it.’ Complete stupidity.” She whipped a fireball into existence. “Own your power.”

Cate bit her lower lip. It was going to be a long day with this woman.

They settled into a comfortable conversation about the next book they would read together while Dominique wandered around the room, eyeing various things. When Marcus returned before dinner, he had no new information, bringing a frustrating end to a frustrating day.

They made it through dinner before Cate changed into her pajamas and met Laura in her bedroom.

Dominique eased into the armchair across from the bed as Cate and Laura climbed into it.

Laura stared at her for a moment, her lips forming a pout. “Are you going to stare at us all night?”

“No, you’ll be even more boring asleep than you are awake,” Dominique retorted.

“Don’t you sleep?”

“I do. But I don’t need to. See what I mean about owning your power?” Dominique kicked her feet up on the side table.

“Just try to pretend she’s not here and go to sleep.” Cate fluffed her pillow and settled back, holding her arms out.

“Right. Plus, the light will be off anyway,” Laura said.

“I can see in the dark,” Dominique answered.

Laura’s lips parted. “No, you can’t.”

“Can so. Turn out the lights and hold up a few fingers and test me.”

Laura switched off the light and held up three fingers.

“Three. See, I told you.”

“It’s okay, Laura, just relax,” Cate said. “And try to get some sleep.”

They settled back in the bed, adjusting the covers. Just as they relaxed, a rogue breeze ruffled Cate’s hair. Her muscles stiffened as she tugged on the pull chain.

Light bloomed in the room, and her breath caught in her throat as she found Gianna standing at the end of the bed, a wicked grin on her face.

CHAPTER 11



Cate stared at the woman at the end of her daughter's bed, the cruel expression on her features as she flicked her gaze between mother and daughter. Her heart hammered hard against her ribs. She pulled Laura closer as her daughter gasped.

"Mummy?" Laura choked out.

Cate's heart ached as she held Laura closer. Every sob from her daughter tore at her, a vivid reminder of every danger she'd hoped to shield her children from. In that moment, her resolve hardened. No threat would go unanswered; no enemy would get past her unwavering guard.

"Gianna," Cate growled.

"Cate," she purred. "So lovely to see you again. And saddled with three children now." Gianna clicked her tongue. "How boring. I wonder if Marcus is still interested in you or if he's finally ready to move on."

The moonlight spilled through the open window, casting long shadows across the room that seemed to dance menacingly as Gianna spoke. The walls, once a protection, now felt like they were closing in, each of Gianna's words echoing off them with a sinister hiss.

"Gianna," Dominique's voice said from behind the woman.

Gianna's features pinched as the new voice entered the conversation. The smug smirk disappeared from her features as she realized they weren't alone.

Cate lifted her chin, feeling somewhat triumphant for the first time in a very long time. It was obvious that Gianna had not anticipated this.

She spun slowly until her eyes locked on Dominique. She licked her lips, her posture stiffening as she curled her fingers into fists.

“Dominique.” Gianna huffed out a sharp breath. “What are you doing here? I thought you were in prison.”

Dominique gave her a hearty laugh. “Well, guess what...I’m out.”

“And you came to Dunhaven Castle? I thought you and the illustrious Duke had parted ways long ago.”

“And then he came running right back when you started poking your nose where you shouldn’t have.” Dominique poked a finger at her.

Gianna scoffed. “Are you serious? The Queen of Mean is going to lecture me on poking my nose where it doesn’t belong?”

“Ohhh, Queen of Mean. I like that. But it’s a bit juvenile, don’t you think? Then again, what would I expect from a two-bit organization like The Agency.”

“The Agency is powerful. We can offer you things. We can—”

“Save the brochure, babe. The Agency is of no interest to me. I have no desire to join up with a bunch of self-important posers who can’t actually *do* magic.”

Gianna arched an eyebrow. “I didn’t think your previous organization wanted anything to do with you. I thought maybe you’d prefer to belong to something that could...get you closer to where you are supposed to be than where you are?”

“And, uh, where exactly is it that you think I am?” Dominique asked.

Gianna shrugged, her firsts unfurling a little. “A soldier without a country. You’re powerful, smart, and willing to do whatever it takes. Those are skills The Agency is very much in need of. And you could be rewarded handsomely. Very, very handsomely.”

Cate’s stomach twisted into a tight knot as she tightened her hold on Laura. Would Dominique betray them? Would they be left at the mercy of both of the women?

Dominique had no moral compass. She could easily defect. And Cate had no ability to do anything to protect her or her daughter.

She swallowed hard, wondering if they would end up in more trouble than they’d started with.

“Very handsomely,” Dominique said, bobbing her head. “Uh-huh.”

She crossed her arms, the leather of her jacket creaking. “That’s so interesting. Gosh, tell me more.”

Cate's heart skipped a beat. Dominique was about to sell them down the river.

Cate pushed back the covers, swinging her legs over the side of the bed. "Laura, get your robe, we are leaving."

"Sit down, sweetheart," Dominique said. "You're not going anywhere. Neither of you."

Gianna smirked at them. "Yes, Cate, sit down. This was a cute trick, but this was nothing more than a temporary delay. A tiny bump in the road. But The Agency can deal with all of that. You have nothing to offer than we can't top."

Dominique strode forward to the foot of the bed where Gianna stood, clicking her tongue. "See, that's not exactly true, Gigi. Do you mind if I call you Gigi?"

"I do," the woman answered.

Dominique wrinkled her nose. "Eh, well, tough luck. I want to do it."

"Respect is something The Agency insists upon, Dominique. We respect you, you respect us."

Dominique shrugged. "Yeah, well, I like to do what I want, Gigi. Like annoying you by calling you Gigi. Honestly, I thought cherub cheeks was uptight, but dang, you got it all over her."

Cate slid her eyes closed, shaking her head at Dominique's abrasive nature.

Gianna's jaw clenched, her nostrils flaring. "Let's get on with this, shall we? I, for one, would like to destroy Cate Kensie once and for all."

"Yeah, about that," Dominique said, clapping Gianna on the shoulder. "Thing is...I'm not interested in your stupid club."

"The Agency isn't exactly a 'stupid club,'" Gianna retorted. "We would welcome you with open arms, unlike the Order, who shunned you. Who do you have, Dominique? No one. Your family will not speak to you, no friends. Nothing. We could be your new family."

Cate shifted her gaze to Dominique. Judging from the look on her face, the speech may be working to join them. Were they about to lose their ally?

Dominique puckered her lips, her head bobbing. "Again, not entirely true. See, I have the little goody-goody there."

She poked a finger at Cate before she skirted the bed and patted her on the shoulder. "We're besties. We even had dinner together last night. Me,

her, Marc, the kids. Can you believe Marcus Northcott with three kids? I mean, who saw that coming?”

“Cate Kensie is not going to give you anything like we can.”

Dominique sucked in a sharp breath. “I’m not interested in anything The Agency can offer me. Like literally nothing. I’m worth way more to The Agency than The Agency is worth to me.”

“You’re making a huge mistake siding with her.”

“We’ll see. I don’t think so, though. She serves a mean three-course dinner.”

“Joke all you want. You’ll find out when you are on the losing end... again.”

Dominique winced. “Me? The losing end. Babe, I always come out a winner.”

“You won’t this time. But you stay here and play family with Cate Kensie and her misfit crew. When she rejects you just like everyone else has, you’ll regret every choice you made, and this avenue will be closed to you.”

Dominique narrowed her eyes at the woman before she suddenly lunged at her, slamming her against the wall behind her. With one hand, she grasped Gianna around the throat and lifted her with superhuman strength.

“You’ve talked enough, Gianna. My turn. I will have no regrets. Because I am going to dismantle your little Agency piece by piece. And after I’m done, I’m going to destroy you.”

Gianna groaned and grunted against the attack, tugging at Dominique’s hands before she gave up. “Then do it,” she said through clenched teeth. “Do it. Destroy me if you dare.”

“Not yet. I still need you.”

“For?” Gianna grunted.

“I need you to deliver a message. Tell the powers that be at The Agency that we’re coming for them. And we’re going to destroy them. There will be no mercy, and no opportunity to surrender.”

She dropped Gianna in a heap on the floor before she took a few steps back. “Now, run along. You have an important message to deliver.”

Gianna scrambled to her feet, her chest heaving as she rubbed at her throat. “This isn’t over, Dominique. You don’t scare me.”

Dominique narrowed her eyes. “Then you’re more stupid than I thought.”

“We’ll see who has the last laugh,” Gianna growled before she disappeared from their sight.

Dominique spread her arms to the sides. “Seriously? She used a magic trick to do that. What an idiot.”

Cate huffed out a sigh of relief as she cupped Laura’s cheek in her hand. “Are you okay?”

“Uh-huh,” Laura said with a nod.

“I’m okay, too, Cate, thanks for asking.”

Cate pressed her lips together, shaking her head. “She hasn’t been terrifying you for months.”

“No, but she was pretty mean to me. All that stuff about having no family, no friends. That hurts, you know? I would have appreciated you two gals speaking up to tell her how I’m like a member of your family.”

Cate huffed out a breath as she climbed from the bed. “I had to spend most of that conversation wondering if we could trust you.”

“Ouch,” Dominique answered, pressing her hands against her heart. “That hurt, Catie. Of course you can trust me. I may not have the same moral compass you operate under, but I hate The Agency, and that’s almost the same.”

“Mummy, where are you going?”

“To find you father. He needs to know what happened.”

Dominique plopped onto the bed. “Don’t worry about us. We’ll be fine. We’re just going to gab about boys.”

“She’s coming with me.”

“Honestly, Cate, leave the poor kid here. She’s fine.”

“I don’t trust you,” Cate answered with a shake of her head.

Dominique wrapped an arm around Laura’s shoulders, pulling her closer. “Well, you’d better start. Because I don’t like working with people who treat me like this.”

“Mummy?” Laura asked, her features pinched with concern.

Cate slid her gaze between her daughter and Dominique. “I’ll only be a few minutes.”

“That’s the spirit,” Dominique said with a grin.

Cate kissed her daughter’s cheek. “I’ll be right back. You’ll be okay.”

She shot Dominique a warning glance before she hurried from the room. Her stomach turned over with each step she took away from her

daughter's room. She raced through the halls to Marcus's bedroom and banged on the door, frantically.

He opened it a moment later. "Catherine? Has something happened? Where is Laura?"

"In her room with Dominique. Yes, something happened."

"What?"

"Come on," she said with a nod of her head, "we should get back there. I left her with Dominique."

Marcus bobbed his head as he tied his robe closed and followed her through the halls back to Laura's bedroom.

Cate rushed inside, finding Dominique with her feet kicked up on the window seat and Laura still in bed. She hurried to her side, giving her a tight hug. "You okay?"

"Yeah," Laura whispered.

"Marcus, good of you to drop by," Dominique said as she rose. "You just missed our good friend, Gianna."

He snapped his gaze to Cate. "Gianna was here?"

"Yes," Cate said with a nod.

"What happened?" he asked.

"I handled it. Just like I promised I would," Dominique answered.

"Catherine?" Marcus prodded.

"Uh, is my voice not working? Have I been sucked into a Shadowveil? I said I handled it." Dominique scoffed.

"Gianna offered Dominique a place in The Agency which she turned down," Cate answered.

Marcus arched an eyebrow. "She offered you a place in The Agency."

"The standard spiel," Dominique retorted. "I'm sure you've heard it, too. They want real magic instead of the little trinkets they like to collect."

"The trinkets seem pretty powerful," Cate said. "They give them lots of different abilities."

"None of which they have organically," Dominique answered. "You take away their toys, you take away their power."

Cate shifted her eyes from the woman to her husband.

"It is not as simple as that," Marcus said with a shake of his head.

"No, but it's a start. Imagine Gianna without the ability to disappear whenever she wants, hmm?" Dominique said.

“But we can’t possibly track all their resources and destroy them, right?” Cate asked.

“Well, we should. But we should also come up with a plan to counteract these little trinkets she’s so fond of.”

“Also, not easy,” Marcus answered.

Dominique chuckled, glancing sideways at him. “Wow, when did you get so soft?”

“I have not gone soft,” Marcus answered. “But this is not quite as cut and dried as you make it.”

“Was it when the first kid came or the second? Or maybe it was the last one. I haven’t met Anna yet, but I feel like we’re going to hit it off.”

“You do not need to meet any more of our children, Dominique, but if you have a plan to solve this, I’d like to hear it.”

“She has no plan,” Marcus answered. “She is merely spouting off like she so frequently likes to do.”

Cate held back a sigh. “We need to do something, Marcus.”

“I know that, Catherine. I am working on it. But this will take some time. Until then, we have all the necessary things in place to protect Laura. That is our primary concern.”

Cate pressed her lips together, nodding her head. “All right. I’ll try to be patient. But you know that’s not my virtue.”

“I know,” Marcus answered teasingly with a kiss on her cheek. “You always want to solve things quickly. I do not blame you.”

Cate squeezed his hand.

“Would you like me to stay?” Marcus asked.

“Nah, we’re all good. You should really go get some sleep. Gianna won’t be back tonight.” Dominique clapped him on the back.

He slid his eyes closed, shaking his head. “All right. We will all try to get some sleep.”

“Except me. I’m on watch,” Dominique answered.

“Good night, Catherine, I hope you sleep well. Laura, darling, get some rest.”

“Good night, Daddy,” she said with a soft smile.

Marcus left the room, and Cate sank onto the bed again. “Let’s try to get some sleep, okay?”

Laura slid down and leaned back into her pillows. Cate pulled the covers higher over her before she skirted the bed.

Dominique grabbed her by the arm as she passed, whispering, “We need to talk.”

Cate offered her a subtle nod before she climbed into bed with Laura. She flicked off the light and waited for Laura’s breathing to turn rhythmic. When it did, she crept from the bed, crossing to Dominique.

“Let’s step into the hall,” Dominique said.

“We shouldn’t leave her alone,” Cate hissed back.

“The kid’ll be fine.” Dominique grabbed Cate by the arm and dragged her to the door, opening it and shoving her into the hall.

“What do you want?” Cate asked.

“Marcus is wrong. I do have a plan. He just doesn’t want to execute it,” Dominique said. “But I think you might. What do you say, cherub cheeks? Are you ready to do what it takes to take down The Agency?”

Cate’s stomach clenched at the words. A plan Marcus didn’t agree with? Should she take the chance for her child? Or was this far too dangerous?

CHAPTER 12



Cate shifted her weight, her teeth digging into her lower lip as she stared at the woman in front of her. Dominique was not the most trustworthy person in the world, but if there was a chance to spare Laura further pain, she wanted to try it.

But could she get on board with a plan her husband didn't agree with in conjunction with a woman who had kidnapped her to make a statement?

Dominique leaned closer, her eyes going wider. "Hello?"

She snapped her fingers in front of Cate's face. "Are you in there? Is anyone alive?"

Cate smacked her hand away with a shake of her head. "Stop it. I'm thinking."

Dominique rolled her eyes at Cate. "What's to think about, precious? Afraid you may anger the hubs?"

"Afraid I can't trust you," Cate shot back. "You aren't exactly the most trustworthy person in the world, Dominique."

Dominique crossed her arms, shaking her head. "Are we still sore about the little incident all those years ago?"

"It wasn't years ago for me, Dominique, and it doesn't matter how much time has passed," Cate shot back. "What matters is you did it. You kidnapped me, you tortured Marcus, you tried to bring the world to its knees when you brought those Dracopires to earth."

"Have you never made a mistake in your entire life?"

“Of course I’ve made mistakes. Trying to destroy the world hasn’t been one of them.”

“It’s not my fault you’re boring,” Dominique retorted.

Cate heaved a sigh, sick of dealing with the woman already. She couldn’t possibly deal with her for much longer.

“Look, Catie, why don’t I tell you the plan here, and then you can decide. I just figured I’d give you the chance to save your kid ahead of schedule.”

“Why doesn’t Marcus agree with this plan?”

Dominique shrugged. “How should I know? The man is a shadow of his former self. The old Marcus, the one before he met you and turned into the wimp of the century, would have been all over this plan. I don’t know what you did to him.”

“I didn’t do anything to him. Marcus is usually cautious. You never are. You are always a hothead. So, forgive me if I am a little suspect of your little plan.”

Dominique offered her a devilish grin. “Oh-ho, my plan is not little, I can assure you of that.”

Cate shifted her weight, trying not to roll her eyes. “What is it? Bring some frightening creature to earth to terrorize Gianna and the rest of the world.”

“No, but I like the way you think, Cate.” Dominique poked a finger at her. “Now, you’re coming alive.”

“That was not a serious suggestion,” Cate answered with a sigh. “Okay, fine, just tell me your plan so I can shoot it down, and we can go back in with Laura. I don’t want her to wake up and think she’s alone.”

“The kid will be fine. She has to grow up sometime. Plus, having to fight back is what’ll teach her to embrace her powers.” Dominique wagged a finger at Cate. “Which she should be doing.”

“I haven’t stopped her.”

“You don’t know what you did, mama. You aren’t her real mom.”

Cate firmed her jaw, clenching her teeth. “Stop saying that.”

“I’m serious. Okay, so you saw the little squirt and got all warm and fuzzy inside. Technically, she *is* your kid. But you don’t know what the other Cate did to the poor kid. Obviously, she’s got a complex.”

Cate glanced at the carpet below their feet. “I don’t know how that happened.”

“It happened because somebody’s uptight about magic.”

Cate snapped her gaze up to Dominique. “I doubt that. Marcus clearly isn’t shy about his magic. I don’t think anyone taught the children to be. Logan isn’t and neither is Anna.”

Dominique narrowed her eyes. “Maybe it’s middle child syndrome. I don’t know, but clearly that kid has some issues with her identity.”

Cate pressed her lips together, the truth of the statement cutting her like a knife. “I don’t know how to fix that.”

“I do. Encourage her to let loose once in a while. I could help.”

“No,” Cate said with a shake of her head. “Definitely not. I don’t want her corrupted.”

“Corrupted, woooo,” Dominique said with a chuckle. “Okay, Mom, I won’t give her a nip of the scotch or tell her to kiss the redheaded kid that’s wandering around here.”

“I really wish you wouldn’t talk to her at all,” Cate answered.

“But I could teach her so much about owning her own power, accepting it, thriving with it.”

“Using it for evil.”

“I mean, I could definitely weigh in on that, but I figured we’d start small.”

Cate offered Dominique an unimpressed stare. “We do not need your help parenting our daughter, thank you.”

Dominique shrugged. “Okay, but it’s a bad move on your part. I mean, after all, you are the ones who came crawling to me to help you. Then, you’re tying my hands at every turn.”

“Marcus got you out of jail to help protect Laura, not to teach her the ways of The Order, not to influence her, and certainly not to mentor her.” Cate wagged a finger at Dominique with every item on the list.

“Wow, somehow, you’re even more uptight than you used to be. It’s like going all Insta-Mom made you way more boring.”

Cate’s nostrils flared as she huffed out a breath. “Look, let’s stop talking about how you want to play aunt of the year and go back to this supposed plan you have.”

“Oh, there’s no supposed about it. I have a plan. We need to find their cache of magical toys and burn it down...literally.”

Cate crossed her arms. “No kidding. Clearly, if it was as easy as that, we would be doing it.”

“It is as easy as that. I don’t know why you seem to think it’s not that easy. There are several known Agency locations, we just need to figure out which one has the biggest cache, then we sneak on in there, we blow it up, we laugh in Gianna’s face.”

“And how do you propose we do any of this?”

Dominique shoved her hands into her back pockets. “I have a few friends who owe me some favors. We can check with them, then we can map out a plan on getting inside.”

Cate’s stomach twisted into a tight knot. The plan made sense, but she couldn’t trust Dominique.

“Come on, Cate. Don’t you want to laugh in Gianna’s face the next time you see her? This would be a monumental blow to them.”

She leaned forward conspiratorially, a wicked grin on her features. “Imagine slipping past their wards, planting explosives right beneath their noses, and watching their cache of magical trinkets go up in smoke.”

"And if we're caught? We wouldn't just be facing retaliation; we'd be starting a war we might not win."

Cate fluttered her eyelashes. She desperately wanted to hand The Agency a blow after everything they’d done to her and her family and friends—especially the latest blow. But was this risky move worth the reward?

"Look, if we don't cripple them now, think about Laura. Next time, they might not just scare her in her dreams. They could come for her in reality."

Cate’s fingers curled into fists. "And what if your plan backfires? Laura could be in even greater danger. We need a foolproof method, not a reckless gamble."

“Okay, forget it. Clearly, you don’t want to put a quick end to this.”

“This is risky, Dominique. Obviously, Marcus thinks so or you’d be discussing this with him. And how do you think The Agency is going to react? They’re not just going to take this lying down.”

“No, they won’t.” A laugh bubbled up from Dominique. “But you know what...they won’t have much to fight back with, will they? Imagine Gianna Caruso completely powerless.”

“What if she ups her attacks on Laura? I don’t want things getting worse for my daughter.”

“The dream curse won’t be gone, but this is a step in the right direction. Taking away some of their power will severely limit them. Oh, forget it.

I'm not going to work this hard to convince you that removing The Agency's little toys severely deflates their ability to operate."

"I understand the general concept, and I don't disagree. I just..."

Cate shook her head, her eyes going to the ceiling.

"You're scared. I get it. If I wasn't so awesome, I would be scared, too. But I lost my fear a long time ago. You want to know how?"

"I suppose you're going to tell me whether I like it or not," Cate answered.

"No. If you don't want to hear my story, I won't tell it. I'm not going to overshare."

Guilt roiled through Cate at the words at dismissing the woman. "Fine, just tell me the story."

Dominique crossed her arms. "Nah. You don't want to hear it."

"I do. I...I want to hear your story," Cate said, her frustration at an all-time high with the woman.

"All right. Since you're so eager to hear it. When I was a little girl, about five years old, my father—he was a warlock—he told me I needed to stop being afraid of the dark. See, I used to light a fireball after he'd blow out the candles and leave it floating in my room while I dozed off."

"You were afraid of the dark? Interesting considering that you live on the dark side."

Dominique narrowed her eyes. "Are you going to listen or comment?"

"Sorry," Cate said with a shrug. "I'm listening."

Dominique offered her an unauthentic smile. "My father told me I had to stop being afraid. So he took me one night, and he put me in a cell. But I wasn't alone. There was a bear, one he'd starved for days."

Cate's stomach rolled at the words. "No, he—"

"Yes, he did. My father did not tolerate weakness. And I was too weak. He had to make me strong. And I became strong. I had to use everything I had to fight off that bear. I barely survived. When he found me the next morning, the bear was dead, and I almost was."

Cate's eyes soften momentarily, the harsh lines of judgment fading as she considers Dominique's brutal childhood. It doesn't excuse everything, but it adds a layer of tragic understanding to the woman's ruthlessness. But was any of it true? "Do you expect me to believe this?"

Dominique stared at her. "I don't care what you believe. But I really don't think we should sit on our hands and do nothing."

Cate licked her lips. “I don’t either, okay? I want to do something to. They hurt my child. I want to rip her limb from limb.”

Dominique clapped her hands together. “That’s the spirit, Cate. That’s the fire we need you to bring.”

Cate considered it. She wanted to stop The Agency, mostly from hurting her children, but she wanted to stop them from destroying the world, too. And she didn’t care how they did it. But it needed to end.

With a deep inhale, she lifted her gaze to Dominique, steeling her nerves. This risky move could save her family, but it could also lead to far more trouble. But she had to take the chance. She had to take the first step toward destroying The Agency, even if it scared her. “Tell me what I need to do.”

CHAPTER 13



Cate paced the floor of the library, gnawing on her lower lip. She'd lay awake the night before after agreeing to Dominique's plan second guessing everything.

She had been so desperate to stop the attacks on her family, especially her daughter, that she'd gone along with Dominique's crazy plan.

But hadn't that been what they'd brought Dominique here for? To sprinkle a little insanity into the mix and keep The Agency off guard?

She heaved a sigh, spinning on her heel as she ambled in the opposite direction. She curled a lock of hair around her finger as she flicked her gaze out the window.

Laura, Logan, Anna, and the Reid twins meandered across the property on horseback. Laura grinned at her brother as they set their horses to a gallop, racing to the folly on the property.

A slight smile curved the corners of Cate's lips as she watched her daughter who seemed to be much more at ease. She'd hesitated before she'd allowed her to go out with the others, worried that Gianna may appear while she wasn't being monitored.

"Mummy, I really want to ride. And Logan will be with me."

Logan nodded, wrapping a protective arm around his sister. "Yes, I will keep a careful eye on her. I won't let her out of my sight."

"Please, Mummy?" Laura pleaded with a wrinkled nose. "I love to ride. It clears my mind."

“Yeah, please, Mom?” Dominique said, clasping her hands together as she pretended to beg.

“All right. But if there is any sign of Gianna—”

“I will blast her, Mother.” Logan whipped up a fireball in his hand with a grin.

“Now, he is my kind of kid,” Dominique said, patting him on the back.

Cate waved the children away, shooting Dominique a warning glance.

“Great job getting rid of the kiddos, Mom. We need to talk.”

“Yes, we do,” Cate answered. “I’m—”

“I have a lead. I just need to check it out. While the kid’s out playing equestrian, I’ll hop over and see what we’re working with here.”

Before Cate could stop her, Dominique wiggled her eyebrows and disappeared from her sight, leaving her to pace the floor as she waited.

The doors to the library opened, and Cate’s heart rose into her throat.

Marcus slipped inside with a fleeting smile. “Good morning, darling.”

“Good morning,” she answered. “Did you get any sleep after what happened?”

“I managed some. I should be asking you that question. You are still human at the moment.”

Cate puffed out her cheeks as she glanced at Riley and Bailey, lounging near the cold hearth. “It’s just weird when you refer to me as human.”

He chuckled as he poured himself a cup of tea and sipped it. “So, did you sleep?”

“I can never distract you, can I?”

“No,” he answered as he closed the gap between them. “You cannot. Are you avoiding the question?”

“Maybe,” she answered. “I didn’t sleep that well after that visit.”

Marcus set his cup of tea down and pulled her closer. “Perhaps you should rest now.”

“I can’t,” she said with a shake of her head. “I can’t relax. Not until this is settled—at least for Laura. Are you going back to Rosenberg?”

“I am. Would you like to join me? Perhaps you could speak with yourself, gain some reassurance.”

Cate’s heart skipped a beat at the words. “Uhh, maybe another time. I’m still not sure how I feel about talking to myself.”

He furrowed his brows. “Did it not help when you were trapped in the 1950s?”

“Yes, it did, but it’s still...weird. Maybe another time. I also feel like I should stick close. Laura is still fragile, and I feel like disappearing on her right now would be a bad thing.”

Marcus flicked his gaze outside to the children. “She is doing so much better than she has without you here.”

“Even though I’m not her real mom?” Cate asked with a roll of her eyes.

“I see Dominique has been at it with her running commentary,” Marcus said with a shake of his head.

“She never stops talking. Ever. Hey, do you know anything about her childhood?”

“Not much. Celine may know better about when she was a small child. They are the same age.”

“Did they spend a lot of time together?”

“Enough to make Celine unhappy with her even before their supernatural battles started.” Marcus picked up his teacup again. “Why do you ask?”

“Nothing. I just...wonder how she got to be the way she is.”

“Dominique likes power. She has always sought it in any way she can. Try not to let her bother you, darling.” Marcus finished his tea and kissed her on the cheek.

“Did you just guzzle down that tea?”

“I am in a hurry. I do want to find a solution to that problem.”

“Do you think it will still bother her now that Gianna is being more aggressive?”

“Yes, definitely,” Marcus said as he strode to the door. “It may even intensify.”

Cate’s stomach rolled at the words.

“I will be back by dinner,” he said as he stood in the doorway. “If you need me, call.”

“I will,” she said with a brief smile before he stepped from the library.

With a heavy sigh, she plopped into the leather armchair near the fireplace. Riley lifted his head, staring at her. “I don’t know, Riley. Life here is so different, but so much the same.”

The little dog flopped his tail before he laid his head back down.

She stared down at her wedding ring, her thumb rubbing the warm metal. She had to protect her family. And with nothing helping on the

dream curse front, she had to take Dominique up on her offer to strike The Agency.

Behind her, the doors creaked open again. Cate glanced over her shoulder, the rows of ancient tomes casting long shadows in the dim light of dawn that spilled through the stained-glass windows, giving the library a somber, timeless feel. “What did you forget?”

“How comfortable these chairs were,” Jack answered as he strode in and collapsed into the same armchair he’d always sat in.

“Really? You haven’t been sitting in them for twenty years?”

“I have. At every chance I get. We always have to unwind here after solving our problems.”

Cate sucked in a deep breath, her gaze falling on the coffee table in front of them. “I wish we’d solve this problem.”

Jack pressed his lips together, leaning forward as he reached for her hand. “Oh, Cate, I’m so sorry this is happening. It was one thing when they were ruining our lives, but poor Laura.”

Cate’s eyes brimmed with tears. She raised her eyes to the ceiling, blinking. “Yeah, that’s exactly how I feel. I could redo everything we’ve been through multiple times if it saved Laura.”

“I would, too. I’d go back into that cell if I thought it would help.”

Cate squeezed his hand. “It won’t help.”

She shifted in her seat, wondering if she should confess her wild plan to him.

“Cate? Is there something else?”

She swallowed hard, flicking her eyes to Jack. “You know Celine’s cousin is here, right?”

“Dominique?” He shook his head, his eyes widening. “Wow, she’s a character, isn’t she?”

“She’s more than a character. She’s very dangerous. Do you remember when I went to Maine?”

“Which time?”

Cate tugged her lips into a wince, realizing he’d had twenty more years of time spent with her than she’d lived. “Uhh, twenty years ago, just after everyone found out I was married to Marcus.”

“When Gianna tried to take Dunhaven. Yes, you went to Maine afterward.”

Cate nodded. "Yes. Not to rest. I actually went there to remove Marcus from The Order. While I was there..." Cate swallowed hard as the memories flooded back to her. "Dominique kidnapped me."

Jack's lips formed an O as he blinked rapidly. "Are you joking?"

"No...she is definitely Dark Side," Cate said. "She's been in prison for almost twenty years after she killed an adjudicator."

"An adjudicator?" Jack asked, his brows furrowing.

"An adjudicator," Cate said before she waved her hands dismissively. "Never mind. You don't want to know."

"You still know me so well, Cate. I don't want to know what that is. Anyway, so, she's a murderess."

Cate nodded. "And an all-around bad apple. I know you've had some issues with Marcus in the past, but...she makes everything he's ever done look tame."

Jack settled back into his seat, rubbing his lips. "So, why is she here?"

"Marcus got her out of prison to help. She does have some pretty insane skills when it comes to magic. And she *hates* The Agency." Cate raised her eyebrows, the scene from last night unfolding in her mind. "You should have seen her with Gianna."

Jack snapped his gaze to Cate. "When did you see Gianna?"

"She was here last night."

"She was in this house last night?" Jack asked, his voice raising with panic.

"She was. Dominique got rid of her pretty easily. Apparently, she really hates her. Which is good for us."

"If we can trust her."

Cate pressed her lips together as the doubt bubbled to the surface again. "That's the question I have been asking myself all morning. Especially since...I...I may have done something really stupid."

Jack's features twisted with concern. "What did you do?"

"It's not..." Cate grimaced.

"Cate?"

"Ummm..." She pressed her lips together as she searched for the words.

"Caaaaate," Jack said, a warning in his voice.

"I just..."

“Cate! What’s going on? Come on, you can tell me. I’m not judgy like your husband.”

Cate shot him a glance. “He’s not judgy. He’s just...set in his ways. Anyway, I really want to end this war with The Agency. And I want the attacks against Laura to stop. So...I may have agreed to one of Dominique’s plans.”

“You agreed to a plan from a woman who is evil and kidnapped you once?”

“Marcus was evil and kidnapped me once and look how well that worked out. We’re in love, and we have three kids now.”

“Unless you’re planning on falling for Dominique, I don’t think it’s going to work out the same way, Cate.”

Cate shook her head, pressing her lips together at his bad joke. “You know what I’m saying. She promises we’ll deliver a decisive blow to The Agency. It was just too juicy of an opportunity to pass up.”

“What’s the play?” Jack asked.

She offered him a slight smile. “Thank you.”

“For what?”

“For accepting this so readily. Marcus would never have agreed.”

“I haven’t agreed yet either. I just want to know so I can object.”

She settled back in her chair, the leather squeaking as she pressed into it. “Still the same old Jack.”

“Just a few more gray hairs,” he said with a grin. “But seriously, Cate, if you’re going to go after The Agency, I want to help.”

“Jack,” she said with a shake of her head, “this is going to be dangerous. I can’t–“

“Don’t say you can’t ask because you’re not asking, I’m offering. After what they did to me, I want to deliver a decisive blow. I can’t pass up this opportunity either.”

Cate gave him a grateful smile. “All right. Well–”

The doors burst open, and Dominique strode inside. She stopped dead, her hands falling to her hip. “Who’s the lumberjack?”

Cate and Jack rose to their feet. “Dominique, this is Jack Reid, my estate manager here at Dunhaven. Jack, this is Celine’s cousin, Dominique.”

Dominique narrowed her eyes at Cate. “Please never introduce me as Celine’s cousin again. I’m Dominique Laurant. I don’t need to be anyone’s

sidekick.”

“Right, sorry, well, anyway, Jack wants to help.”

Dominique’s lips parted as she leaned forward. “What now?”

“Jack wants to help deliver that decisive blow to The Agency. They did some pretty nasty things to him, and he’s on board to help us.”

Dominique crossed her arms. “I kind of thought this was going to be a girls’ thing, you know?”

Jack arched an eyebrow. “Why would you object to help? Unless there’s something you aren’t telling us.”

“No offense, but I usually work alone. And when I don’t, I only work with people I trust. I don’t trust men who wear plaid flannel shirts as a rule.”

Jack crossed his arms, shaking his head. “You’re going up against The Agency, and you don’t want help because of my wardrobe?”

“Was I unclear in some way?” Dominique asked.

“Yes, in the way that makes any semblance of sense. And whether you like it or not, I’m in on this. Or I’ll take my plaid shirt over to Marcus and tell him what you’re planning.”

Cate’s heart skipped a beat at the threat, which she hoped was only for Dominique’s benefit.

“And this is why I don’t trust men who wear plaid flannel shirts. You little tattletale. Let’s see how well you talk once I whip this at you.” Dominique conjured a fireball in her hand.

Cate stepped between them, her eyes widening. “No. Stop it. We’re all on the same team here.”

With a flick of her wrist, Dominique extinguished the fireball, her expression amused as if the deadly flames were no more than a party trick. “The goody-goody is right. Anyway, we don’t have time to waste. We need to go meet my contact now. So, let’s get going. We’ll location hop.”

“No,” Cate said with a shake of her head as she backed away from Dominique. “We can’t leave now. I have to stay here for Laura.”

“Seriously?” Dominique glanced out the window. “The kid looks fine. We’ll make it quick.”

“No! If she finds out I’m gone...or Gianna comes after her...”

Jack wrapped an arm around Cate as her features pinched.

Dominique rolled her eyes. “Where is Marcus when you need him? Can’t he watch the kids? They’re his, too.”

“Marcus is in Germany with Anna...and the other me trying to find a solution to the dream curse.”

Dominique heaved a sigh. “I can’t believe this. We’re finally going to get The Agency on their heels, and you can’t go because you have to play Mom of the Year.”

“I’m not...” Cate pressed a hand against her forehead. “Okay, how long is this going to take?”

“Not long. We’ll be back in minutes. We just need to find the contact, get the location, pop back. Super simple.”

Cate shifted her weight, her eyes flicking out the window to her children. Something gnawed at her, but she knew they needed to do it if they wanted this information.

“Come on, Cate, time’s a-wastin’.” Dominique tapped an imaginary watch on her wrist.

“All right, fine.”

Dominique offered her a wicked grin. “Now, you’re talking.”

She stepped forward, eyeing Jack. “Do we have to take the Scot?”

“Yes,” Cate said with a nod.

Dominique rolled her eyes as she sighed. “Unbelievable. I don’t like Scots. All right, here we go.”

Dominique reached out, clamping a hand down on each of their forearms. The room around Cate disappeared, and a new location replaced it.

A dizzying rush enveloped Cate, the ground beneath her feet seemed to dissolve, and a sudden gust of heat choked her as they materialized in a starkly different landscape.

Cate glanced around, a sinking feeling in the pit of her stomach as oppressive heat wafted over her. She twisted to eye Dominique. “Where did you take us?”

“To meet my contact,” Dominique said, already walking away. “Oh, did I forget to mention he’s in Hell? Sorry.”

Cate’s stomach plummeted at the words. She’d been here once before, and she’d barely survived it. Was this a death sentence for both her and Jack?

CHAPTER 14



Jack's eyes went wide as sweat beaded on his brow after only seconds in the intense environment. Cate's stomach turned over, not recognizing the realm despite having been there once before. It had been a difficult journey, one that had been exceptionally dangerous. Between the heat, the head games, and the creatures, she'd nearly lost her life more than once. Had it not been for Celine, Damien, and Michael—all immortals—she wouldn't have made it through as a human.

This time, there were two humans and only one immortal—and a sketchy one at that. The odds were against them. And Cate would never forgive herself if something happened to Jack. She did not want to leave the twins fatherless.

"Dominique!" she shouted as she stormed after her.

"What?" Dominique called over her shoulder, her figure silhouetted against a skyline of jagged, molten cliffs that seemed to bleed into the crimson sky, utterly unfazed by the suffocating waves of heat that warped the air around her.

"How could you bring us here?" Cate's voice cracked, her eyes scanning the perilous terrain that had once nearly claimed her life, the weight of her responsibility for Jack pressing down on her."

Dominique glanced at her, her eyebrows furrowing. "With a location hop. I thought I was clear about that."

"That's not what I meant, and you know it."

“I didn’t,” Dominique retorted. “I almost never know what you mean. You and I are really *not* on the same wavelength.”

“I don’t mean the logistics of how we ended up in the Hellscape, which I still wonder about because I thought location hops were earthbound.”

“Not when you have skills like mine, cupcake,” she answered with a grin.

“Anyway, that wasn’t the genesis of the question. I meant how could you bring us to the Hellscape? We could die here.”

“We could?” Jack asked as he puffed with effort to breathe in the thick, hot air.

“Yes, we could. If not from the extreme elements, from the many, dangerous creatures that lurk here, or that crazy place where your own thoughts attack you.”

Jack’s jaw dropped open, a bead of sweat trailing down his temple as he gasped for air that felt like inhaling through an open oven door. “What? That’s... that’s not possible, right?” His voice was a mix of disbelief and rising panic.

“We’re not going to that part,” Dominique said with a sigh. “It’s not far from here. You’ll be fine.”

“I don’t believe you. Plus, a little warning would have been nice. I would never have agreed to bring Jack here.”

“Whoa, but you would have come?” Jack asked.

“Yes, I would have because I want to hear what this so-called contact has to say. Plus, I’ve been here once before.”

Dominique shot her a narrow-eyed glance. “That’s right. You’re the jerk who freed Marcus from his contract with The Order. Gosh, you were annoying back then.”

Cate shook her head at Dominique as they passed a burning bush. “You’re annoying right now. I can’t believe you brought us to Hell.”

“I really never wanted to come here, even for a visit,” Jack said. “It’s hot, right?”

“Yep, it’s hot, all right. It’s an oppressive heat, like breathing through a blanket soaked in scorching sand,” Cate explained, her throat parched as she spoke, the heat wrapping around her like a suffocating shroud. “And it’s only going to get worse. The last time, Damien had to carry me part of the way. I barely made it. And I definitely wouldn’t have made it past the Serpedes.”

“The what now?”

“Don’t ask,” Cate said with a shake of her head. “I still have nightmares. “

Dominique let her head fall back. “First of all, we’re not going near the Serpedes, and second, even if we were, I could easily get rid of them.” Dominique whipped a fireball into existence and pitched it away.

“That didn’t exactly work out the last time I was here.”

“Well, you came with idiots the last time, so that would explain it. I mean you’ve got Michael—he’s hot, but hardly powerful. Damien, powerful—he is a Laurent, after all, but he was a newbie, he didn’t know his fireballs from a hole in the ground.”

“We had Celine.”

“Pfft,” Dominique said with a roll of her eyes. “First of all, powerful, yes—again, Laurent blood runs through her veins, but she spent so much time not cultivating her power, that she’s hardly as strong as she could be. Second, she didn’t have the modifications I made. I magnified my power, don’t forget.”

“You are toying with our lives, Dominique,” Cate said with a wag of her finger. “You had no right to do this.”

Dominique sucked in a breath. “You’re really a total drag, Cate.”

“Sorry to rain on your parade, but this is serious. How much farther is your so-called contact?”

“Just above, hidden in those hills.”

“Great. This is close to the plain where those Hellwolves nearly killed us.” Cate shuddered despite the heat.

“Stick close to me, kids. We won’t run into any trouble.”

Cate’s heart thrummed painfully against her chest, echoing the thud of Dominique’s feet hitting the ground. Each heartbeat was a stark reminder of their peril.

Cate’s heart hammered against her ribs, sweat slicking her skin and making her clothes stick to her.

Next to her, Jack trudged along, his face beat red.

“How are you doing?” Cate asked.

“Oh, I’m just dandy. I’m following a crazy witch through Hell. This is...exactly what I’d thought about doing today when I woke up.”

Cate patted his shoulder. “You probably shouldn’t have worn the flannel if you’d planned on this.”

“You’re right. I’ve blundered my wardrobe choice for two different reasons today: the extreme heat and the fact that what’s-her-name apparently hates flannel plaid.”

“She’d be very disappointed in your closet,” Cate said. “If you get too tired, let me know so we can sit down, okay? But not for too long because you may never get back up.”

“Okay. I’m just hoping this place that’s so close is pretty close,” he said, wiping at his brow.

They strode across the field toward the rock face in the distance.

Cate instinctively pressed closer to Jack. “The last time I was in this field, we were attacked by horrid wolves.”

“I hope they’re asleep this time.”

Cate scanned the tall grass in search of any trouble. As they reached the midpoint of the field, her heart stopped. The grass parted in three separate places as creatures made their way toward them.

A pack of Hellwolves. She swallowed hard, worry consuming her. “Oh, no.”

“What is it?” Jack asked.

“Hellwolves.” She poked a finger in the direction of the shifting blades of grass.

She twisted to call out to Dominique, but before she could, Dominique flung her hand in the direction of the wolves. A reddish-purple bolt shot from her hand, snaking through the grass and blasting the spot directly in front of the wolves snaking toward them.

Dominique continued marching forward, undeterred.

“Dominique!” Cate called as the wolves hesitated only for a moment before they started toward them again.

She shot out another bolt, this time a longer barrage, driving them back. The trails of crushed grass now moved in the opposite direction.

Dominique twisted to grin at them. “See? I told you things would work out. I’m way cooler than my cousin.”

Cate licked her lips, threading her arm through Jack’s as she pulled him forward. “I don’t care what she says, I don’t want to be here a second longer than we have to be. Come on.”

“It’s just ahead. His cave is at the base of the mountain.” Dominique spun back around and continued toward the rock face.

The heat made Cate feel lightheaded as they neared the mountain, and she's worried that either her or Jack wouldn't be able to handle this place for much longer.

"Right up here," Dominique called, poking her finger at a dark hole yawning in the rock face.

Cate dragged Jack forward to the mouth of the cave, ducking into it. "Dominique?" she called, her voice echoing off the stone.

No one answered.

"Dominique!" she shouted again.

Her heart sank as no one answered. Had they entered the wrong cave, or had she ditched them here?

Had this been an elaborate trap designed to kill them both?

Cate licked her lips as she tried to think of a way out of the situation they'd found themselves in.

They inched their way forward, worry twisting Cate's stomach into a tight knot.

As they came to a cavern, Dominique popped out from behind a wall. "Boo!"

Cate screeched, throwing her arms in the air as Dominique doubled over in laughter.

She poked a finger at Cate as she snickered. "Oh-ho-ho, that was so awesome. Oh, I always wanted to do that to someone, but I never had anyone as naive as you two."

"This isn't the time for games," Cate scolded.

"Oh come on, Cate. Man, you were uptight before but now that you're in Mom mode, you're like annoyingly uptight. I'm just trying to lighten the mood."

Cate glared at her. "My mood will be lightened once we have this information in hand and are safely back in the library where we are in no danger of dying from excessive heat."

Dominique shook her head and twisted on her heel, scanning the cavern. "Tobther? Hey, Tobther? Are you here?"

"If we just walked through Hell for this guy to stand us up..." Jack wiped at his forehead as sweat ran down his face.

Across the room, a hunched over figure in a ragged robe crept into the space. "Dominique," he hissed, his voice barely above a whisper.

"Yep, it's me, pal. How you been?"

With his head still bowed, he spoke again. "Please, what is it that you require?"

"Information," she answered. "I hear you have some, and I want it."

"What information?" The strange man, his skin stretched over his bones in what looked like a painful manner, still refused to raise his gaze to her.

Dominique set her hands on her hips. "I need to know where The Agency keeps the bulk of their little toys."

This statement finally made him snap his gaze up to Dominique. With terror floating in his black eyes, he searched her face. "What?"

"I need to know where The Agency keeps the vast majority of their little magical trinket collection." Dominique spoke slowly, as though he couldn't understand her.

"I cannot disclose that information," he answered.

Dominique puckered her lips, wrinkling her nose. "Aw, shucks."

Cate's heart dropped. They'd risked their lives to get here and all for nothing. What would they do now?

"My apologies, Dominique. I cannot help you."

"Yeah, that really stinks, Tobther. Because my friends and I were counting on you."

"Sorry," the man answered with a bow of his head.

"Yep, you will be," Dominique said as she lunged forward, grasping the man by his scrawny neck.

Cate's stomach flip-flopped as the scene unfolded. Dominique slammed him against the stone as he wriggled in her grasp, trying to break free. "See, I need that information, and I will do whatever it takes to get it."

"I have a pact with them. I cannot betray it."

"Ohhh, I know all about the pact," Dominique hissed. "I know you helped them build that little magical menagerie. And now, I want to destroy it. So, I need to know where you worked as their curator."

He cried out, squirming. "I can't, I can't."

"Can't or won't?" Dominique asked.

"Can't," he choked, "can't. You know that."

"What I know is my hand is closing, fast...soon, I'll choke you until you pass out, and then I will dismember you limb from limb. And after that, I'll burn every piece of you until you're nothing but ash. And then your contract will be canceled, because you'll be gone."

"Please," he cried.

“You know me, Tobther. I have no mercy. Tell me or die, it’s as simple as that.” She narrowed her eyes at the creature in her grasp, her features unyielding.

Cate held her breath, wondering if they would find the information they needed or if this would all be for naught.

She grabbed onto Jack, her knees feeling weak as she waited for an answer.

Time seemed to stand still. But before the creature could speak, Jack fell against her. She snapped her gaze to him, her heart skipping a beat.

Jack plunged to the ground, his skin peppered with sweat as he passed out.

Cate dropped to her knees next to him, her eyes going wide as they welled with tears. Would Jack wake up or had the intense heat been enough to kill him?

CHAPTER 15



"*J*ack?!" Cate's voice cracked, sharp with panic. She swiveled to Dominique, her words tumbling out in a rapid, breathless stream. "Dominique! Jack's collapsed!"

Cate sank to her knees, rolling his bulky form over. As her own pulse raced, she pressed two fingers to his neck, feeling for a pulse.

A thready beat announced the beat of his heart, and she watched carefully for the rise and fall of his chest.

Dominique shot her a glance over her shoulder. "Uh, I'm a little busy right now, in case you hadn't noticed."

"We need to get him out of here!" Cate shouted as she patted at Jack's cheeks.

"Jack, come on, wake up," Cate urged, her voice echoing oddly in the thick, sulfurous air that reeked of brimstone and ash mingled with the oppressive heat.

Dominique screwed up her face as she dropped the creature on the ground and twisted toward Cate, her hands on her hips. "Seriously? I am in the middle of extracting information, and you want to leave *now*?"

"He's dying."

"He's overheated. Blow on him or fan or something. Think, Cate. Use your brain. I'm a little busy."

Cate's gaze fell on Tobther as he crawled away toward the yawning entrance of the cave he'd come from.

Dominique twisted to follow the line of her gaze, shaking her head. “Now, see what happened? He almost got away.”

She thrust a hand out, capturing the creature in some sort of invisible lasso and pulling him backward. “Uh-uh-uh, we weren’t done with our conversation yet.”

“Please, Dominique,” he cried as she lifted him in the air again, his feet dangling. “I can tell you nothing.”

“Except you know everything. Now, are you going to make this easy and just tell me, or do I need to do something you’re not going to like.”

Cate hauled Jack into her arms, trying to fan him with her hand, but it was a losing battle. She stared at the scene unfolding in front of her, terrified of what she may see happen next.

“I can’t tell you—” His voice cut off as a gurgling cry escaped him. “Please...” he whispered.

“Please what?” Dominique asked. “Can’t quite hear you over that painful rattle you’ve got going on.”

“Stop,” he choked out.

“Ohhh, okay. I will. The second you tell me what I want to know.”

“I can’t,” he answered again, his features twisting with a pathetic pleading stare.

“Gianna’s wrath and the punishment from The Agency will look like a walk in the park compared to what I’m about to do to you. I already explained the physical torture, but you know what else? I *really* need this information, so I may have to hop into your mind and do a little digging. And let me tell you...I won’t be gentle.”

Cate’s eyebrows raised at the threat. Was Dominique merely toying with the creature in an attempt to get him to confess, or could she really crawl into the man’s mind?

“You can’t!” he shouted.

“Can’t isn’t a word that exists in my vocabulary. I assure you, I can, in fact go into your mind. I’ll have to incapacitate you first, obviously, and that’s not going to be pleasant. For you, I mean. I’m looking forward to it.”

His lower lip trembled as she gave him a moment before she let him fall to the ground. “Okay, fine. We’ll do this the hard way. Do you have a preference on which leg I break first?”

“No, please, please. All right. Okay. They often move their artifacts around. But the bulk of them—at least when I was curator—were kept in a chalet in the Swiss Alps.”

“The Swiss Alps, huh?” Dominique questioned as she conjured a fireball and tossed it back and forth between her hands like a toy. “That shouldn’t be too hard to track down.”

The creature shook his head, a hand raised to protect him in case she tossed the weapon his way.

“I assume I’m going to need some sort of passcode or key to enter?”

The man licked his lips as he nodded. “Both.”

“Both. Well shucks, that stinks. Who has a key?”

“Only upper echelons, a handful of them.”

“Gianna?” Dominique asked.

The creature winced a little, but didn’t answer.

Dominique raised her eyebrows, prodding him until he nodded. “Yes. Gianna has a key.”

“Of course, she does. And how does the passcode work?”

“It’s unique for each key. You’d have to know Gianna’s passcode if you use her key. If you use someone else’s, you’d need theirs.”

“Do you know them?”

He didn’t answer.

She leaned closer, narrowing her eyes. “Tobther? Don’t hold out on me, buddy?”

“There is a listing of them kept in the London files.”

Dominique sucked in a breath. “Looks like we have our work cut out for us, don’t we? Well, gosh, it’s been a real pleasure working with you again, Tobther. I can’t tell you how nice this has been.”

The man-like creature lowered his hand a little, his eyes widening. “Now that I have given you the information, can you...help me?”

Dominique screwed up her face. “Do I look like the Sisters of Charity to you?”

The creature set his watery eyes on Cate. “Please.”

“What do you want?” Cate asked.

“Don’t listen to her. She can’t do anything for you. She’s still a human.”

“But...she is here.”

“Thanks to me. And look at her pathetic friend...still passed out like a total wimp. Anyway, I need to cut the chitchat short. We have to get going before this one bites it.” Dominique crossed to Jack and hauled him to his feet with superhuman strength. “Toodles, Tobther.”

She clamped a hand around Cate’s wrist, and the oppressive heat of the otherworldly realm faded away.

A shiver snaked down Cate’s spine as the normal temperature of the library surrounded them before the details of the space filled in.

Dominique dropped Jack as they arrived, and he crashed to the floor with a thud.

“Jack!” Cate exclaimed, bending to check on him.

Dominique crossed the room, grabbing the pitcher of water before she returned to them and dumped it on Jack’s head.

He coughed and sputtered as his eyes snapped open. “What happened?”

“You went down hard, pal. I told you not to wear that horrible shirt, but you just *had* to play lumberjack,” Dominique answered as she returned the empty pitcher to the drink cart.

“You passed out,” Cate told him, “but we got the information we needed.”

Jack pushed up to his elbows, wiping at his wet face. “Ugh. Good. Can we move on it.”

“We have some things to collect,” Dominique answered.

“The passcode and the key,” Cate said with a nod as she helped Jack to his feet, walking him to the armchair to sit down. “How do you propose we get them?”

“Well, we’re going to have to do some fancy footwork here, but I propose we break in and steal them.”

Cate offered Dominique an unimpressed glance. “Cute. I understand that. How are we going to get into this London office, then get Gianna’s key, and then find the Swiss chalet?”

“I know where the chalet is, that’s the least of our problems. The London office shouldn’t be too hard. A little after-hours recon should give us what we need there. Gianna’s key...well, that’ll take some doing. She doesn’t like to let things out of her sight.”

Cate bit into her lower lip, recalling the last time she had to retrieve a key from Gianna. It had led to a knock-down, drag-out fight between the

two of them when she'd tried to steal it from around the woman's neck as she slept.

"But I trust we'll figure it out," Dominique answered. "Now, when do you want to leave for London? Oh, wait, are you still on babysitting duty?"

"I am not babysitting Laura. She is in grave danger from The Agency."

"Why isn't she hanging out with Grandma in Germany? It's the perfect place for her," Dominique asked as she glanced out the window at Laura outside with the others.

Cate crossed her arms with a sigh. "The other me is there recovering from some sort of supernatural problem. I guess we didn't want to tell the kids."

"Can't she go to Stratfordshire?"

"How does that help?" Cate stretched her arms to the side.

"She's not quite as accessible if Gianna doesn't know where to find her." Dominique screwed up her face. "You know, I really thought you were smarter than this. I don't understand why Marcus always brags about your brilliance. You're not that smart."

"Gianna will easily find her there if she is not at Dunhaven."

Dominique tilted her head. "What if we could stash her in a place where Gianna couldn't find her easily?"

Cate wagged a finger at Dominique, her features going taut. "You are not taking my daughter to the Hellscape and leaving her there."

"Calm down, Catie, no need to get your knickers in a twist. I have another idea." Dominique strode to the door and peered into the hall. "Never around when you need her. Be right back."

As she left the room, Jack scrubbed his face. "I'm not sure how much more I can take of that woman."

Cate collapsed into her chair, shaking her head. "Same. I cannot believe this was Marcus's solution. Although, at least we're moving forward somewhat."

Dominique returned a few minutes later with Celine. "I present my brilliant idea."

Cate wrinkled her nose. "It's Celine."

Dominique's features tugged into an unimpressed glare and her shoulders slumped. "Wait, I'll explain it like you're five. Celine and her intrepid little Slayers take her to the Buckley house in Maine. Celine casts

a shroud spell over the entire place. Bada-bing, bada-boom, the kid's hidden."

Cate's eyes widened, and she flicked her gaze to Celine. "Can that happen? Is that a thing?"

"Yes, and no," Celine answered. "It can happen. It's not as clear-cut as it sounds, but if you don't need her shrouded for an extended period of time, we could probably create enough confusion for Gianna that she couldn't readily find her."

"Would it stop the dream curse, too?" Cate asked.

"No," Celine said with a shake of her head. "She could still enter her sleep, but she wouldn't be able to appear to her until she'd dismantled the shroud."

Cate rose to her feet, pacing the floor. "Wait, why didn't Marcus suggest this?"

"I don't think he wanted to take Laura away from you while you sorted this situation," Celine answered, "particularly since she wasn't being very forthcoming. And...there is some danger to it."

Cate's heart skipped a beat as she tried to weigh the odds. Her daughter was already in danger from The Agency. Would this be more or less danger? "What danger?"

"Shroud spells can...make her invisible even to those who want to see her. Basically, we run the risk of her turning into essentially a ghost."

Cate's jaw flopped open, her heart tearing in two as she tried to make the decision.

"That's not typical," Dominique answered.

Celine shook her head. "It's still a risk."

Cate slid her eyes closed, easing into the armchair. She bit into her lower lip, trying to determine what was worse: Gianna harming her children or them turning invisible.

"The invisibility may not be permanent. Besides, Celine wouldn't let that happen. There are signs you can watch for, you know."

"I know. And I would monitor her very closely, but I do want to make you aware of the risks, Cate."

Cate opened her eyes, her lips tugging into a grimace. "What would you do?"

Celine shoved her hands into her pockets with a shrug. "I think you need to work on solving this problem without Laura as a distraction."

Because this is what Gianna does—she distracts.”

Cate bobbed her head. “Can you take all the children, hide them all?”

Celine puffed out her cheeks but nodded. “I can. It’ll be trickier, but I can.”

Cate pressed her lips together, finalizing the decision in her mind before she fixed her gaze on Celine. “Then, let’s do this. I want you to take the kids to Maine and shroud them.”

CHAPTER 16



“No!” Laura shouted with a frown as she crossed her arms and plopped into the armchair in the library.

Her sharp voice broke through the quietness of the library. The gentle rustle of leaves outside created a soothing backdrop to the dramatic reaction as the soft afternoon light filtered through the curtains, casting long shadows across the rows of ancient books.

“Laura,” Cate said, her voice soft and soothing as she shook her head.

“Mummy, no! I don’t want to be sent away when I’ve only just gotten you back.” Her words were choked by a sob.

Cate crossed to her, rubbing her shoulder. “Laura, it’s just for a little while to keep you safe while we work on getting rid of this threat.”

“I don’t want to go away from you, Mummy,” Laura sobbed.

Cate’s features melted with concern, and she pulled her daughter closer.

“It will be fine, Laura,” Damien said. “We’ll have lots of fun. You’ll love Maine.”

Laura’s lower lip trembled as she unfurled a tissue and pressed it to her nose.

“Yeah, totally,” Michael said. “There’s plenty to explore. We’ll have an adventure a day.”

“But I want to stay here with Mummy. Why can’t she come with us?”

“Sweet Pea, I need to stay here and make sure that Gianna doesn’t bother you anymore.”

Laura licked her lips, frowning.

"Come on, sis," Logan said with a grin. "We have never traveled to Maine before. It will be fun."

Laura stared at him for a moment before she shook her head.

"Well, you have got to snap out of this because we are going," Logan answered. "And Anna will be cross with you if you ruin our vacation."

"It is not a vacation," Laura sniffled.

"It can be," Celine answered. "There's a huge house to explore, and Alexander's house, and all of the trails and caves. You'll love it."

"And one of the neighbors has horses. I'm sure he'd let you ride," Damien added.

Laura flicked her gaze up to Cate, her eyes still red and watery. "You will be here when we return?"

"Of course, I will be, Laura. I won't leave. But I need to know you are safe while I'm working to rid our family of this problem."

Laura chewed her bottom lip before she finally nodded. "All right. I will go."

Damien clapped his hands together, rubbing them. "Good. You're going to have so much fun, I promise. Maine is the best. I really enjoy being by the sea, too. I'll show you all my favorite spots."

"Thanks, Uncle Damien," Laura said with a weak smile.

Cate stroked her daughter's hair as she smiled down at her. "Now, go with Aunt Celine and pack a few things, okay? She'll know what's best to take."

Laura grabbed Cate's hand, squeezing it. "You won't go anywhere before we leave?"

"No, I won't. I'll be here."

She nodded. "All right. I will pack, and I will help Anna pack, too."

"Thank you," Cate said as Laura rose.

Celine wrapped an arm around her, leading her from the room as Laura glanced back at Cate over her shoulder. Cate smiled warmly at her, trying to hide the heartbreak she felt at sending her away.

"It's for the best, Cate," Jack said with a nod.

"I will take good care of them all, Mother," Logan added.

Cate took his hands in hers, smiling up at him. "I know you will. You are so much like your father that way."

Logan beamed at her, lifting his chin.

“Now, you’d better go back, too. Uncle Damien and Uncle Michael can help you and Malcolm.”

“Come on, pal,” Michael said, clapping Logan on the back. “Let’s go.”

“Thanks, guys,” Cate said to them as they left the room behind.

She flicked her gaze to Jack. “I’m so sorry you have to send the twins away, but I think it’s for the best.”

Jack offered her a reassuring smile. “Aw, Maggie and Malcolm are excited to go. Molly’s helping them pack. We’re just grateful the Buckleys are willing to take all five.”

“I think once they get there, they’ll have a nice time together.” Cate hoped saying the words aloud gave her more reassurance that she’d made the right call.

“I’m sure,” Jack answered. “Laura will be fine, Cate. She’s a sensitive kid, but once she’s in Maine, she’ll forget all about it and enjoy herself.”

Cate nodded, trying not to let her eyes well with tears.

“And you will be able to work here without worrying about the children and what’s happening to them at every second.”

Cate eased into the armchair, the leather squeaking underneath her as she puffed out a long breath. “Yes. That is a relief.”

The doors burst open behind her, and she twisted to find Dominique striding into the room. “Well? Did we ditch the kids or what?”

Cate rubbed her forehead, wondering if she should have spoken to Marcus before making the decision. But it was too late now. She had to act to protect them. “They are packing for Maine as we speak. They should be leaving in a few hours.”

Dominique grinned at them, spreading her arms to the sides. “Oh goody. While the kids are away, the adults will play. Now, are we ready for some London fun?”

“I think we need to have a serious conversation about this,” Jack answered as he crossed toward Dominique. “We cannot break into an Agency stronghold.”

Dominique set her hands on her hips, shrugging, her expression blank. “Why not?”

Jack shot Cate an incredulous glance. “Because it’s dangerous.”

She grinned at him. “And that’s what makes it fun, right? What’s life without a little danger?”

“Look, you may not care because you’re immortal, but the rest of us are human.”

She screwed up her face. “How is that my problem? I can’t help it you made poor life choices.”

Jack huffed out a sigh as he crossed his arms. “I haven’t made poor life choices. I’m not the one who was in prison for a quarter century.”

Dominique’s expression turned angry, her lips tugging into a frown. “Oh, we’re going to go there, huh? Cate, I would highly suggest we ditch the wet blanket and proceed on our own.”

“We’re not ditching Jack,” Cate answered as she rose to her feet, pacing the floor. “But we do need a plan. We can’t just show up and let ourselves in.”

“Well, I can,” Dominique said with another shrug. “I can unlock a door without a key.”

“There could be alarms, cameras. This is a nightmare,” Jack answered.

Dominique shifted her weight, shaking her head. “Fine, fine. I have another idea.”

“Unless it’s your doing this yourself and taking all the risks, I’m not sure I want to hear it,” Jack retorted.

Cate flicked her gaze to Dominique. “I’d like to hear the plan.”

“The Agency has been using these security measures for decades. We don’t need to go in now when there are all the bells and whistles. Why don’t we pay a visit to your favorite time period and have a little talk with your good friend, Ginger?”

Cate’s lips parted as she ran the scenario in her mind. “Ginger could get us into the office. Then, all I’d need to do is access the file, take a picture of the code or memorize it, and off we go.”

Dominique bobbed her head.

“Whoa, what’s the chances they’re using the same passwords all these years later?” Jack asked.

“Guess we’ll find out,” Dominique answered.

“It’s the best plan we have. And if worse came to worst, we could access the vault in the fifties, destroy it there, and then return.”

Dominique poked a finger at Cate. “I like the way you think, Cate. You’re making this plan work no matter what.”

“All right,” Cate said with a curt nod. “Then we’ll leave right after the kids, get that code, then work on getting the key.”

Dominique screwed up her face. “We can’t leave now?”

“No,” Cate said, her voice incredulous. “I promised Laura I would wait for her to pack and see her off.”

Dominique let out a groan as she let her head fall back between her shoulders. “Ugh, I’m so glad I’m just the fun aunt and not the mom.”

“We’ll leave as soon as they do,” Cate answered. “I’ll go check on them now.”

Cate left them, making her way upstairs as she clenched her fists. None of this felt like it was going to come together. There was still too much up in the air, too much that needed to be done.

Sending the children away still made her nervous, but she knew it needed to be done. She snaked her way through the halls to Laura’s room, finding Anna inside skipping back and forth at the foot of the bed.

“We’re going to Maine. We’re going to Maine. We’re going to Maine,” Anna chanted.

“Not if you don’t finish your packing,” Laura said with a shake of her head as she folded another sweater.

“Come on, Anna.” Celine held her hand out to the child. “Let’s go make the last selections for the trip.”

Cate smiled at them as they passed her before she slipped inside. “Almost ready?”

“Yes,” Laura said as she focused on folding her sweater. “Aunt Celine said the weather should still be nice, but I’m taking a few heavier things because mornings will be chilly.”

“Laura...”

“Mummy, please don’t,” she said, her voice breaking again.

Cate crossed to her and pulled her into her arms. “If there was another way, I would have taken it. But I want you to be safe.”

Laura buried her face in her mother’s shoulder as Cate stroked her hair. “I know, I just...”

“I know it’s been hard since I have been away, and you’re afraid that it will be a long time without me again, but Laura, that’s not true. We’re working to make sure The Agency can’t hurt us anymore. We’re going to start the moment you leave. Plus, you’ll be spending some time with Aunt Celine, Uncle Damien, Uncle Michael. They can help you with your magic.”

Laura pulled back, her features pinching.

“And I think you should.” Cate said, stroking Laura’s hair. “You should learn more about your skills and how to maximize them, Laura.”

“But...”

“No buts,” Cate said with a smile. “Dominique is correct about one thing. You are incredibly powerful, and you really should use all of your potential.”

“All right, Mummy. I’ll ask Aunt Celine about it when we get to Maine.”

“Good. But remember to have a good time, too. Not all work.”

Laura finally cracked a smile. “All right.”

“It won’t be that bad, Laura. I promise. And you can call and talk to me anytime.”

“Okay,” she said with a nod as she placed the last of her sweaters into her suitcase. “I guess I’m all packed.”

“Let’s see if everyone else is ready.”

With Laura’s suitcase in hand, they traversed through the halls to collect Anna, Logan and the twins before they gathered in the foyer. With a shaky breath, Laura said goodbye again to Cate before they all joined hands, and Celine pulled them away from Dunhaven to Maine.

Cate’s heart sank as they disappeared from her sight. Jack wrapped a comforting arm around her. “It’s all right, Cate. They’re safe now.”

She sucked in a shaky breath and nodded. “I know. And now our work begins.”

She shoved the grief from her mind, focusing on delivering the blow to The Agency.

Dominique strode down the hall to them, her heels thudding dully against the thick runner. With a grin, she raised her eyebrows. “Time to make the magic happen.”

Cate pressed her lips together, determination filling her as her heart thudded hard against her ribs. They were about to make their move against The Agency. Would they deliver a commanding blow, or would they be the ones on the defensive?

CHAPTER 17



“Wait, wait,” Jack said with a shake of his head as Dominique spread her hands in front of her. “We can’t open a time portal here.”

“Why not?” Dominique asked, her features pinching.

“He’s right. We have a certain place we use to travel so no one else is aware, and we don’t make a mess.” Cate motioned for Dominique to follow her. “Come on. We’ll leave from the mausoleum. We can discuss where we’ll appear on our way there.”

Dominique heaved a sigh as she followed them from the front door into the warm summer air. “Where we’ll appear? I’ll use the secret room in the London house.”

Jack raised his eyebrows. “You know about that?”

Dominique offered him an incredulous look. “Of course. I was on Marcus’s team for a long time. Do you think I don’t know most of his secrets?”

“You didn’t know he actually had a heart, so I wasn’t certain,” Jack said with a shrug.

“No, I didn’t know he’d go all soft on us when he met cherub cheeks here, and then he really sank low when the kiddos were born. This is why I don’t have children.”

“Oh?” Jack asked. “I thought there was another reason.”

Dominique narrowed her eyes at him. “Go ahead and say it out loud and see what it gets you.”

“Pass,” Jack answered as they reached the mausoleum.

The gate creaked open as Cate pulled on it. “Let’s just focus on getting to the London house, contacting Ginger, and getting our hands on this information. I still don’t know how we’re going to do that. We have no idea where they keep it.”

“You don’t think your good buddy, Ginger, has access to it?” Dominique asked.

“I’m sure she does, but I can’t just ask her where she keeps it.”

“Nope. You’re going to have to search the office while she’s busy doing something else like...fetching or something.”

“Fetching coffee? How do you expect me to pull this off?”

“Come on, Cate. Ginger loves you. And you’re pretty scrappy. You’ll figure something out.”

Cate heaved a sigh and motioned for Dominique to proceed. “All right, let’s get this show on the road.”

“That’s the spirit.” Dominique stretched her hands in front of her. “Oh, don’t forget, go straight through and—”

“Don’t stop until we’re in the 1950s, yeah, I know. Believe me, I’ve already been stuck in one of these things. I don’t want to do that again,” Cate said with a nod.

Dominique completed the process for opening the time portal. Wind whipped around them as Jack disappeared into it, followed by Cate. They arrived in the darkened, windowless room of the London house. Dominique appeared seconds after them, lighting a fireball to illuminate the space.

“Time for you to change and call Ginger,” she said as she tugged open the secret panel and exited in the hall.

Cate nodded as she climbed the stairs to what was quickly becoming as familiar a bedroom to her as her own at Dunhaven Castle. “I’ll be right back.”

“Nothing fancy, just any dress will do.”

“Speak for yourself. I am a duchess. I have a reputation to maintain,” Cate called as she took her first step down the hall.

She shut herself inside her bedroom, leaning against the door behind her as she slid her eyes closed. She had no idea how she would pull this off.

Despite Ginger being helpful in the past, she did not relish the idea of sneaking around the office while Ginger fetched her a cup of coffee. But she didn’t know what other choices she’d have.

She gnawed on her lower lip as she forced herself to the closet to find something more appropriate to wear than her leggings and tunic.

After switching outfits, she pulled her hair into a low ponytail, wish Andrea had been here to do something nicer. With her handbag in hand, she left the safety and security of her room behind and headed downstairs.

“Ready?” Dominique asked. “Time to call your friend.”

Cate nodded, setting her purse down on the foyer table and lifting the receiver. After a few minutes, she was connected with Ginger at the office where she worked.

“Ginger, hi, it’s Cate Northcott.”

“Cate!” Ginger exclaimed on the other end of the line. “In town again? The husband dragged you along while he completed his business, huh?”

Cate chuckled. “Actually, I’m here alone this time. Marcus has business in Germany, but I fancied a little shopping. Any chance you could get away from the office for a lunch or maybe a little trip to Selfridge’s?”

“Well, I haven’t got anything on my schedule this afternoon. The boss is out of the office today, but I happen to have his credit card at my disposal. Meet you there in half an hour?”

“Perfect,” Cate answered before she replaced the receiver.

“Well?”

“We’re meeting for shopping then lunch. Do you think you could get into the office and find the passcode while I have her distracted?”

Dominique raised her eyebrows. “Oh, sure, leave all the hard work to me.”

“You’re magic. This should be easy, right?”

“I’ve got it covered, cupcake. Just keep her out of the office for an hour or two. I’ll get that passcode.”

Cate bobbed her head. “I can do that.” She twisted to face Jack. “I think you should wait here.”

“Wait here?” Jack cried. “Cate!”

“Ouch. She thinks you’re not capable. I don’t blame her,” Dominique said.

“That’s not it at all. But there’s no reason for you to go to Selfridge’s with me. And there’s also no reason for you to go with Dominique. I don’t want to come back to find out she’s turned you into a toad.”

Dominique burst into laughter. “That’s funny, Cate. I should try it.”

“Don’t,” Jack warned with a wag of his finger.

Dominique clicked her tongue and sighed. "Fine."

Jack shifted his gaze back to Cate. "I don't like this. You shouldn't go alone."

"And I can't go with you. Jack, that would look...odd for me to show up with you while I'm in London alone."

"Oh, like Ginger should judge. Isn't she someone's mistress?"

"Maybe so, but the rules were different for men in this era. I'm not taking the chance. Just...wait here. We won't be that long."

Jack huffed out a breath, his nostrils flaring. "Fine. I'll pace the floors here, but don't holler at me if I wear His Grace's carpet thin."

"I promise not to tell him who did it," Cate said as she grabbed her purse and poked the corner at him. "See you soon."

She headed into the warm sunshine with Dominique following her. As they parted ways, with Cate heading to Selfridge's and Dominique going to Ginger's office, Cate said, "Don't screw this up."

"I'll do my best, princess," Dominique said with a roll of her eyes. "Have fun spending Marcus's money."

Annoyed, Cate stormed her way toward the store. Her aggravation waned, and a smile spread over her face as she spotted Ginger waiting out front.

"Cate, so good to see you. And you're looking so well."

"Thank you," Cate said as they hugged. "You look great, too. Is this a new hair color?"

"Just a little spruce up. The old man likes it brighter for the summer. So," she said as they entered the store, "are we spending in the name of revenge or just flexing our duchess muscles today?"

"Just a bit of fun," Cate answered with a shrug.

"Oh?" Ginger asked, her eyebrows raised high. "No juice tidbits to share? Come on, then, I won't judge."

"Sadly, there are none to entertain you. Marcus and I have a good relationship."

Ginger wiggled her eyebrows as they hit the women's section, and she pulled a burgundy dress from the rack. "I see. Well, I must admit, I have not heard any rumors about your duke around the usual places."

Cate offered her a smile, grabbing a navy-blue dress and holding it up. "Are you just telling me that so you don't upset me or is that true?"

“Course it’s true,” Ginger answered. “If I heard about him with another lady, I’d let you know if only so that you could score a new fur or a diamond necklace. But it seems he is quite devoted to you.”

Cate offered her a warm smile. “That’s nice to hear.”

“I’ll bet. A man like that, money, power, and loyal to boot? Tell me, Cate Northcott, how did you get so lucky?”

Cate chuckled a little. “I really don’t know. I wasn’t even certain I liked Marcus when we first met. He sort of grew on me.”

Ginger threw her head back with a laugh. “Grew on you. Oh, dear. I know so many ladies who would have snapped him up in a shot. But I suppose making him prove his love to you is what sets you apart.”

They spent another two hours trying on various dresses with Cate making a few purchases including one for Ginger.

With their haul, they headed out for lunch, enjoying a few cocktails complete with the local gossip from Ginger.

They parted ways with Cate promising to return soon for another shopping trip. As she carried her bags back to the house, her mind turned from the light-hearted chatter she’d shared with Ginger to the desperate plan to save her family. Had Dominique gotten the passcode?

She turned onto the quiet street leading to the townhouse when a rogue wind suddenly shot past her, sending a shiver down her spine.

She glanced behind her, her brows furrowing as she scanned the street, making certain no one was following her.

The street remained empty, the leaves rustling only a little in the gentle breeze.

She continued to the house, pushing inside and slamming the door closed behind her. “Jack?”

“We’re in here,” Jack called from the living room. She set her bags down on the floor and hurried inside, eager to know if Dominique had found what they needed.

The woman stared out the window with a brandy cradled against her collarbone.

“Well? Did you find it?”

Dominique heaved a sigh, shaking her head.

Cate’s stomach lurched. “Are you kidding?”

Dominique slumped her shoulders. “Yes. Of course, I found it. I’m not an idiot.” Dominique waved a paper in the air. “Even figured out how to

make a photocopy. Look out, Ginger.”

Cate snatched the paper from her hand and scanned it. “We have everyone’s passcode. Good work.”

Dominique offered her a haughty grin. “Yep. Now, time to get the key from Gianna. That should be fun.”

“Can’t you just...hit her with a fireball and take it?”

“As much as I’d love to slam her into the ground with a continuous barrage from my ultra-powerful brand of weaponry, we want to be a little more discreet than that.”

“Dominique’s right,” Cate said. “We can’t let her know that we’re doing this. They’ll go back in time and remove all of the artifacts before we ever get a chance to destroy them.”

Dominique bobbed her head. “Yep, what cherub cheeks said.”

“So, we need to find a way to get that key from Gianna. And I have a sneaking suspicion, I’m the best one to do this.”

Jack’s eyes widened. “Cate, that’s a suicide mission.”

Cate swallowed hard. “Jack, there is no other choice. I’m going to have to do it. I just need a way to get close to her and steal it.”

“We can track her. It may be easier in this time,” Dominique answered.

“Fine. Find out where she is, and I’ll do my best to get that key.”

Dominique nodded.

“In the meantime, I need to put away the clothes I bought. I’ll be right back.” Cate disappeared from the room, grabbing the bags of purchases and mounting the stairs.

Her stomach twisted and turned as she tried to think of a way to safely steal the key from Gianna.

She pushed into her room, sucking in a breath. A faint scent of perfume lingered in the air—a perfume she didn’t wear.

Her heart skipped a beat, but she realized too late what was happening. As she twisted to tug the door open a female hand slammed against it, stopping her. She turned to find Gianna, a wicked grin on her features as she stared down at her. “Hello, Cate.”

CHAPTER 18



Cate pressed her back against the door, her heart pounded hard against her ribs as she eyed the woman. “Gianna, what are you doing here?”

“Thought I’d drop in and say hello. We really need to catch up.”

Cate frowned at her, her nose wrinkling. “We don’t. And one scream will have Dominique up here in an instant.”

“Ah, yes, your newfound little friend. I wonder how long it will take for her to turn on you.”

Cate arched an eyebrow. “She won’t turn on me until she’s destroyed you. I’d back off if I was you. Dominique doesn’t seem too stable.”

“No, she really doesn’t. I’m surprise you aligned yourself with someone so...dark, but then again...you married one of them.”

Cate narrowed her eyes at the woman. “And that just kills you, doesn’t it?”

“Not really. If Marcus Northcott is as weak-willed as he seems to be, you may have saved me.”

Cate let out a derisive laugh. “Marcus is hardly weak. And if you were so uninterested, why have you done nothing but attack my family for years?”

“I told you we wanted Dunhaven Castle, and we wouldn’t stop until we got it. And speaking of your family...where is little Laura? She seems to have...disappeared.”

“Somewhere you’ll never find her,” Cate shot back. “Good luck searching.”

Gianna raised her eyebrows. “We’re mighty confident, aren’t we? Who’s to say we haven’t found her already?”

“You wouldn’t be here if you had.” Cate pushed past Gianna, knocking into her shoulder as she crossed the room and dumped her packages on the bed.

“Wouldn’t I?” Gianna swung around to face her. “Not even to gloat? Poor little Laura, all alone in a magic keeper cell, crying for her mummy. But her mummy is too busy pretending to have the upper hand.”

As Gianna’s words sliced through the air, Cate felt a cold dread wash over her, a stark contrast to the warmth from the sunlight streaming through the window. Each heartbeat thudded loudly in her ears, a drumbeat of rising panic.

Cate bit into her lower lip as she pulled a dress from the bag and crossed to the closet to hang it. Worry twisted her stomach into a knot. What if Gianna had located Laura? If this wasn’t a bluff, her daughter could be suffering.

But if it was a lie, she could give away Laura’s location inadvertently.

She tried to keep her cool despite the turmoil roiling inside her. “I don’t believe you, Gianna.”

Gianna grinned at her. “Come and see for yourself.”

She held out a hand, flicking her eyebrows up.

Cate huffed out a laugh. “I wouldn’t go anywhere with you.”

“All right, then poor little Laura will have to suffer. I wonder how Marcus will take it when he finds out you left his precious child to the wolves.”

Cate crossed her arms, shaking her head as Gianna shifted closer to her. The warm sunlight glinted off a chain around her neck as she moved.

Cate’s heart skipped a beat. The thick gold chain that slipped below Gianna’s blouse likely contained the key they needed for the magical vault. Could she manage to get it from around the woman’s neck?

She’d need a distraction in order to pull it off.

“You know,” she said as she took a step closer to Gianna, closing the gap between them even more quickly, “I’m really getting sick of you.”

“Ohh, I’m scared,” Gianna answered with a laugh. “The little mouse roars.”

Cate smirked. “This little mouse was worth quite a bit to your Agency. Enough that I was treated like a queen the last time we were together. I

wonder how interested they would be if I told them we'd join your little party if you were removed from it."

Gianna's nostrils flared though she tried to play it off nonchalantly. "You think you're so smart. Well, I don't think that would fly."

"I do," Cate answered. "I'm not sure you're as invaluable to The Agency as you think you are. Especially with this one-tracked focus on my daughter."

Gianna's jaw quivered as she stared at Cate. "You're so smug. But you will not be the one laughing when we destroy that sweet little girl."

Anger boiled inside of Cate as the woman threatened her daughter. She lunged forward and wrapped her hands around Gianna's throat, her features twisting with rage.

"Leave Laura alone!" she screamed as she drove her back into the dresser behind her.

The lamp on the top wobbled before it smashed to the ground, pieces of glass and ceramic scattering everywhere as Gianna grabbed Cate's shoulders and pushed back.

"I'll take great pleasure in destroying her myself," she growled.

Cate lost her balance as Gianna pushed against her, and they tumbled to the floor in a tangle of limbs. Gianna rolled on top of her, wrapping her fingers around Cate's throat.

"Cate?" Jack's voice called as footsteps pounded toward her.

As Gianna glanced at the door, Cate shifted her hand, wrapping a pinky around the necklace before she lifted a hip, shoving Gianna off of her to the side. The quick motion ripped the necklace from around the woman's neck.

Cate quickly flung it under the bed skirt as she pretended to scramble to her feet. Gianna barreled into her, grabbing her arm and twisting it behind her back.

The door burst open a second later.

"You!" Dominique shouted as she whipped a fireball at Gianna.

The woman dove to the side, releasing her hold on Cate as she fled from the magical assault.

Gianna climbed to her feet, her lips tugged into a deep frown. "We're not done with you yet."

After issuing the threat, she disappeared from their sight.

Dominique screeched in frustration, slamming her hands against the dresser. “I’m going to get her one of these days.”

Jack raced to Cate’s side, his features taut with worry. “Cate, are you okay?”

“Yeah,” she said. “More than okay, actually.”

“What?” He screwed up his face as he helped her to stand. “Are you hurt? Did she do any damage?”

“Not enough to bother about. But I did some.”

Dominique glanced at Cate, arching an eyebrow.

Cate grinned at them, crouching to lift the bed skirt and pull out the broken gold chain. “I picked a fight with her. And look what I managed to grab.”

She dangled the keys in the air, raising her eyebrows.

“Cate!” Jack exclaimed. “You did it.”

She nodded. “I did. I got the keys. And Dominique got the code. Now, all we need to do is get to that chalet...right after we check on Laura.”

“Check on Laura?” Dominique said, her features melting with upset. “Why do we need to do that?”

“Because Gianna said she had her, and I want to make sure she was lying. Please, we need to check on her.”

Dominique huffed, wrinkling her nose. “Ugh, are you kidding me? We finally have the keys to the kingdom to do some damage, and we’ve got a delay in game.”

“Dominique, if they have Laura—”

“They don’t. She was bluffing.” Dominique raised her arms in the air. “But fine, fine. We’ll hop over to Maine in the future and take a look.”

Cate bobbed her head. “Thank you.”

“But as soon as you see the kid’s fine, we’re out of there, got it? No Mommy and me time.”

“I don’t even need to talk to her. Just see her or confirm that she’s okay with Celine,” Cate answered with a bob of her head.

“Good. Because I don’t want to dally. We need to crush them. Send them scurrying to handle this.”

“I’m all for that,” Cate said with a nod.

“All right. Then, I’ll open the time portal.” Dominique stretched her hands out in front of her.

“Not here,” Cate said, batting them down.

With a roll of her eyes, she followed Cate and Jack to the secret room, and within minutes they were on the rocky coast of Maine almost one hundred years in the future. The salty sea air tossed Cate's hair wildly as the waves crashed on the shoreline below.

"Come on, we'll go to the house and see how she is," Dominique said with a wave as she trudged away from the cliff where they'd appeared.

Jack wrapped his arm around her as she strode through the thickly wooded area toward the rambling Buckley house on the hill.

Her stomach twisted into a tight knot, worried about what they would find when they arrived at the house.

"Beautiful here," Jack said as he glanced around.

"Yes, it is. Marcus has some lovely views, too."

"Oh, right, you've been here before. I always forget."

Cate nodded, trying to let the conversation ease her mind, but unable to stop thinking about Laura.

"Come on!" Dominique called over her shoulder as she backed her way through the woods.

"She's annoying," Jack said with a shake of his head. "I don't know how you can stand all of this."

"She is, but at the same time, she is being somewhat helpful. I just want to make sure Laura's okay." Cate's voice trembled a little as her daughter's name spilled from her lips.

"She'll be all right, Cate." Jack tightened his grip on her shoulder.

She offered him a tight-lipped smile, but her worry only intensified as the house came into view.

Dominique, far ahead of them, disappeared through the front door. As Cate and Jack crossed the lawn, she emerged with Damien in tow.

"Cate, is everything okay?" Damien asked as he spotted her.

"You tell me. Gianna says she has Laura." Cate tried to stop the tremble in her voice, but she couldn't.

Damien's brow furrowed. "No, Laura's fine. She's learning a little more about her powers. Alexander brought her a bunch of books to read."

Cate offered him a smile. "Okay, good."

"Did you want to see her?" Damien asked, thumbing toward the house.

Cate shook her head, trying to manage her emotions. She wanted to race into the house and ensure Laura was fine with her own two eyes, but

she did not want to upset her daughter. “No, if she’s settled here, I don’t want to upset her.”

“Yeah, she’s doing great. We took them for a nice long walk down by the ocean, visited with Alexander, got some books. And now, she’s having a cup of hot chocolate and some cookies while she reads. Tomorrow, we’ve got a horse all lined up for her to ride. She’s doing great.”

Cate pressed her lips together, glancing at the house again.

“Come on, Mom, will you quit worrying? You heard it from the D-man himself. Damien wouldn’t lie. He’s too much of a goody-goody for that.” Dominique clapped her hand on Damien’s shoulder.

He shrugged it off, shaking his head. “I’m not lying. Cate, she’s really fine. Gianna is lying to you.”

“Okay,” Cate said, blowing out a shaky breath. “Then we’re good. Let’s go finish what we need to do.”

Dominique clapped her hands together, a grin spreading across her features. “Finally. I can’t wait to blow some stuff up.”

“You got the code and key?” Damien asked.

Cate nodded. “We did. And we’re ready to make our move.”

“Wow, good luck. I hope this really hurts them.”

Cate sucked in a sharp breath as his words echoed in her mind. She hoped this sent them reeling, too. But what if it only made things worse?

CHAPTER 19



Cate pressed her lips together, the knot in her stomach still tight despite ensuring Laura's safety. The thick canopy of trees loomed ominously above them, their branches intertwining to form a dark, oppressive tunnel that muffled the distant sound of the sea, infusing the air with an eerie silence as they trudged away from the house.

"This won't take long," Dominique said over her shoulder as she led them down a winding path.

"I hope we're not stopping at this house to fetch another leather jacket," Jack shot back.

"Very funny, lumberjack. We're not. I just want to grab a little surprise for The Agency. A token of my appreciation. I want them to know who did this." She grinned at them, and it sent a shiver down Cate's spine.

While she wanted to send a crushing blow to The Agency, she wasn't certain she'd be on board with Dominique's so-called surprise.

"What is it?" Cate asked.

Dominique raised her eyebrows, her amusement clear. "Just a little fun for whoever discovers that we've neutralized their entire magical collection. You're going to love it when you see it."

Cate shot Jack a sideways glance as another mansion came into view in a clearing.

"Come on in," Dominique said as she mounted the stairs and pushed open the front door.

Cate and Jack followed her, entering the quiet, cold house. Cate wrapped her arms around her midriff as Dominique climbed the stairs.

The last time she'd seen the inside of this house had been when Dominique had held her hostage here. While it was technically over twenty years ago, for her, it wasn't that long.

The memory sent a shiver racing down her spine. She never would have predicted that she would be working with the woman to save her family.

Cate chewed her lower lip as she shifted her weight from foot to foot.

"You okay, Cate?" Jack asked.

"Yeah, just...bad memories. The last time I was here...Dominique and I weren't exactly on the same side." She shook her head. "I know it was twenty years ago, but for me, it's like it happened yesterday. Every corner of this house reminds me of the days when trust was a luxury I couldn't afford, especially with Dominique."

"Right," Jack said. "You're the Cate that this just happened to."

She nodded, offering him a fleeting smile. "Yep. And it's just...weird being on the same side as her when we clearly were not the last time I saw her."

"I understand," Jack answered. "She's not exactly the person I would trust the most."

"Yet, here we are trusting her."

Jack narrowed his eyes at her. "You have second thoughts?"

"Maybe," she murmured before she shook her head. "Not really. I want this to end. We've been fighting The Agency through time for so long now, and it's taking its toll."

"I know. I can't imagine what it's like for you. Poor Laura is getting the worst of it now."

The idea of her daughter being tormented by Gianna and The Agency fueled the fire within Cate to continue forward with their plan. "You're right. And that alone makes me want to burn down every place they have."

"Well, if this works, I'd say we're well on our way to taking their power away. Outside of these artifacts, they've only got their wealth."

"And that won't allow them to manipulate time like they have been."

Jack bobbed his head. "Once they can't do that..."

"They won't be nearly as dangerous," Cate answered.

Jack poked a finger at her. "Exactly. So, I guess we trust Crazy."

Cate raised her eyebrows as her gaze drifted to the ceiling. “Yep. For better or worse.”

Her mind spun again with all the problems they could run into. “Still, I wonder if we should tell Marcus.”

“Do you think he’d go along with this plan?” Jack asked.

“I’m not certain, although, part of me says no.” Cate shrugged. “Which is exactly why I’m not telling anything.”

“Oh, Cate,” Jack said with a shake of his head. “I understand. I just hope we’re doing the right thing.”

“Do you think we’re not?” She turned to face him, her eyes searching his face for answers.

He puffed out his cheeks, his eyes widening. “I think we’re doing the only thing we can do. And I think if I was in your shoes, I’d do it, too. And after twenty years solving things together, I think I’ve learned to trust your judgment.”

A smile spread across her features as she stared up at him. “Twenty years of solving things, huh? Sounds like I have an interesting future ahead of me.”

“You do. But first, we’ve got to finish this with The Agency so you can go back to the past and live it.”

Dominique’s heels pounded toward them, drawing their attention away from their conversation. She appeared at the railing overlooking the foyer with an evil grin. “I got it. Let’s go.”

“So, you know where this place is?” Cate asked as Dominique bounced down the stairs.

“I do. Although, we can’t location hop there because it’s unsafe—”

“You?” Jack interrupted. “Concerned about safety?”

“I’m crazy, not stupid,” she retorted. “But don’t worry. We can hop over to The Order’s chalet, and then we’ll case the joint from there.”

“The Order has a place nearby?” Cate asked, her stomach twisting into a tight knot. Was this a setup?

“Yeah, they do. You know, I’m really surprised Marcus doesn’t have a house there. I mean, he has one everywhere else, but not in the Alps. Really disappointed by that. You should talk to him about getting a nice ski chalet.”

“I’ll get right on that,” Cate said with a flutter of her eyelashes. “Can we please focus on the task at hand.”

“Of course, Catie,” Dominique said with a roll of her eyes as she grabbed hold of both of their arms.

In an instant, the Maine mansion blinked out of existence, replaced by a brief moment of blackness before new details filled in around them.

Cate glanced around at the glamorous, log-cabin style chalet that replaced her view.

Dominique clapped her hands together, rubbing them. “Ah, here we are. Perfect. Now, we’ll just—”

“Wait,” Cate said with a shake of her head, “I think we need a plan on how we’re going to proceed.”

Dominique lifted a finger in the air as she removed something from her jacket.

Jack screwed up his face. “A top? You brought a child’s toy?”

“Not just any child’s toy. This top, once it stops spinning, will neutralize any magical artifact within a five-mile radius. All we need to do is get in, access the vault, spin the top, and we’re done.”

“It’s the getting in part that has me concerned.”

Dominique pressed her lips together, shaking her head. “That’s easy. We’ll just unlock the door with my magic trick, and we’re in.”

“What about alarms?” Jack asked. “Or other people there.”

“It’s summer. Who stays at a ski chalet in the summer?” Dominique asked. “And I can neutralize any alarm there. Now, come on, stop stalling. Let’s get this going.”

“Sorry, you just seem a little too eager and that makes me nervous,” Cate answered as she followed Dominique through the kitchen to an attached garage filled with luxury cars.

“Of course, I’m eager,” she answered as she grabbed the keys and pressed a button on the fob.

The lights on an SUV flashed. “I want to take these people down. You know, I really thought you’d be eager, too, Cate. Considering that they’ve terrorized your family for years, you’d think you’d really be interested.”

“I am interested,” Cate said, an edge to her tone, “I just also want to be alive when we’re done with this.”

“You’ll be fine,” Dominique answered as she climbed behind the wheel of the car, opened the garage door, and fired the engine.

Cate buckled into her seat in the back, her stomach twisting. What if they couldn’t access the vault? What if the top didn’t work?

Too many things shot through her mind, making it a battlefield of worry.

What would happen after this? Would The Agency retaliate? At least their reach should be severely limited, she figured.

Dominique pulled from the garage and down the winding drive toward a set of thick black gates that automatically opened as they approached. “Their place isn’t far.”

“You’re not just going to drive up to it, are you?” Jack’s voice was laced with incredulity, his brow furrowed in concern as he glanced at Dominique’s unfazed expression.

“Yeah,” Dominique answered, her grip tightening on the leather steering wheel. “I’m going to pull up and ask the guard if he minds if we destroy their magical collection.”

“There’s a guard?” Cate asked, snapping her gaze from the scenery outside to Dominique.

“Of course, there’s a guard.”

“How are we going to get past him?” Cate’s voice went an octave higher as panic shot through her.

“We’re going to have to sneak in, duh. We’ll park the car a little bit away from it and climb over the fence.”

Cate shifted on the supple leather of the seat, suddenly more unsure than she had been before.

Jack shot her a glance from the passenger seat, shrugging.

They’d come too far now to back down. They had to try to deliver some sort of setback. She only hoped they could do it and get away.

They drove for a few more minutes before Dominique eased the car to the side of the road and came to a stop. “That’s far enough. We walk the rest of the way.”

They climbed out of the SUV, and Cate rubbed her arms, a shiver shaking her despite the warm air.

“This way,” Dominique said, leading them through the grass. They’d snaked past manicured lawns that fronted prestigious looking cabins until they reached a more secluded area.

Trees shrouded whatever lay beyond the brick wall that surrounded the property.

Cate wrinkled her nose at it. “I thought you said there was a fence.”

Dominique shrugged. “Fence, wall, same thing.”

Jack shook his head, his tone annoyed. “Not exactly. We can’t scale a wall.”

“Speak for your yourself, human.” Dominique crouched, her gaze locked on the top of the wall. With a single leap, she landed gracefully atop the towering structure and spun to face them. “There, easy.”

“Oh, great. Sadly, I forgot my spring-loaded shoes, so—“ Jack’s words cut off as he started to rise off the ground.

His eyes widened, and he glanced around him as he rose in the air. “What’s happening?”

“I’m lifting you up,” Dominique said as she raised her hand higher and higher in the air. She deposited him on the opposite side of the wall before she repeated the process with Cate.

Cate bit into her lower lip as she hovered in the air before she descended on The Agency’s property.

Dominique leapt off the top of the wall. “Now, all we need to do is let ourselves in and find the vault.”

They followed her up the gentle hill toward the house that peeked from the trees.

Cate eyed the place as they approached, still shielded by the woods surrounding it. No lights shone from within. “Looks empty.”

“I told you it would be,” Dominique said. “Come on, this is the exciting part.”

She trudged toward the house with Cate and Jack following behind. They passed a large fire pit, hot tub, and patio furniture as they approached a set of French doors.

With a flick of her wrist, Dominique opened them easily.

An alarm blared as they stepped inside, but it silenced almost immediately with a wave of her hand. “Access to the vault should be in the library.”

Her heels pounded across the wooden floors as she led them through the living room and into an expansive two-story library.

Cate scanned the room in search of any signs of a secret panel or passage. “Tobther said it was behind the third bookshelf on the far wall,” Dominique said as she strode toward it.

After a few minutes of searching, she managed to pull open the bookcase, swinging it back toward them and revealing a secret passage. Stairs led down into blackness.

“We should have brought a—“ Jack began as Dominique whipped a fireball into existence and stepped inside. “Flashlight.”

Cate offered him an amused smile as she followed the woman.

At the foot of the stairs, they reached a thick door with a keyhole and several cylinders.

“Key?” Dominique asked as she spun the cylinders to input the code for the door.

Cate slid the key into the lock and twisted. It clanked, echoing through the space before the door creaked open.

The scent of musty air wafted past Cate’s nostrils as she peered inside, finding herself inside a large storage area filled with shelving units that housed various items.

“Ohhh, it’s so awesome,” Dominique said with a grin. “Look at all their little magical toys. All about to be broken.”

“I don’t think so,” a new voice said.

Cate’s heart skipped a beat, and she twisted to face the door. A figure hovered inside it. *Gianna*.

“Nice try, Cate. But you’re on the losing end again.”

Cate’s heart sank as she realized their brilliant plan had just come crashing down.

CHAPTER 20



With her heart hammering against her ribs, Cate stared at the woman darkening the doorstep to the vault of magical items. “Gianna.”

“Yes, of course it’s me. Did you really think that I hadn’t noticed what you stole from me in the fifties?”

“We were hoping you didn’t,” Dominique answered. “Not that it matters. I’m about to wipe out every capability you have in this vault.”

“Over my dead body,” Gianna growled, raising a small gun and pointing it at them.

Dominique’s features remained unfazed, and she shrugged nonchalantly. “I mean, sure, if you insist. That can be arranged.”

The magical woman whipped a fireball into existence. As Dominique conjured the fireball, its glow illuminated her determined features, Gianna’s reflexes snapped. The gun shifted, and a shot rang out, the bullet striking Dominique squarely in the abdomen, splattering blood against the cold stone floor.

Dominique screeched as she dropped the fireball, doubling over to clutch at the blood spreading across her blouse.

Cate’s heart thrummed painfully against her chest, echoing the thud of Dominique’s knees hitting the ground. Each heartbeat was a stark reminder of their peril.

With blood oozing between her fingers, Dominique thrust the top into Cate’s trembling hands. “Here,” she croaked. “Finish it.”

“I don’t think so,” Gianna shouted, shifting her gun again.

Cate clutched the top tightly and lunged for cover behind a towering shelf lined with ancient, dust-covered objects that held magical secrets.

“Spin it, Cate. Pump it six times, and let it go. Take away their power.”

“Don’t do it, Cate,” Gianna said. “I have my weapon trained on old Jackie boy, and I will not hesitate to kill him. Come out and hand over that top right now.”

Cate’s mind raced, torn between the immediate threat to Jack and the long-term consequences of her decision. Her hand on the top trembled, not just with fear but with the weight of their fate.

She stared down at the small item in her hand, its yellow paint chipping as she wondered if it could really do what Dominique claimed.

And if it could, would using it cost Jack his life?

She couldn’t let him get killed, she couldn’t leave his children fatherless or Molly without her husband. But if she didn’t take away The Agency’s power, this war would never stop.

“Ohh, this is no bluff, Cate. He dies in seconds unless that top is in my hands. Step out now or lose more than just this battle.”

“Spin it, Cate. She’s bluffing,” Dominique shouted.

“I’m not,” Gianna called back.

Cate’s lower lip trembled, heat washing over her as she tried to make her decision. With a shaky breath, she made a call, setting the top on the floor and depressing the plunger six times. It twirled on the floor in front of her, a blue aura emanating from it as she slowly rose to her feet, holding her hands in the air.

With every beat of her racing heart echoing in her ears, Cate emerged from her hiding place, her hands raised in surrender but her spirit unbroken, facing Gianna with defiance flashing in her eyes.

“Give me the top,” Gianna growled.

“After you let Jack go.”

“Don’t do it, Cate,” Jack said. “Go back between those shelves and use the thing.”

Cate shook her head. “I won’t risk your life. I won’t leave your children without a father.”

“Aww, it’s so sweet. You really give me a toothache, you know that?”

Dominique glanced at her, her features pinching.

Cate shook her head, her lips tugging into a frown. "I'm sorry, Dominique, I'm not like you."

"Obviously," the woman shot back. "You're a real disappointment, do you know that? Like on a scale of one to ten, it's like a fifty for me."

She rose to her feet, blood still staining her shirt, but clearly not wounded.

"Well, I'm sorry, but I won't risk Jack's life. Not while she's holding a gun on him."

"Cate," Jack tried but her plan had already been set in motion.

Dominique had understood her perfectly. The woman whipped a fireball into existence and lobbed it at Gianna.

It hit her directly, and she screeched in pain as it exploded, electricity running over her body before it dissipated. Cate used the diversion to lunge toward Jack and push him to safety, slipping between two shelves.

Dominique dove in behind them, peering around the shelf. A bullet whizzed past, smacking into the shelf behind them.

"Ooh," Dominique said with a giggle. "She's mad."

"Cate, you shouldn't have done that to save me. This needs to end," Jack said, his voice taut with worry.

"And it will. I already started the top. As soon as it spins down, all of this stuff will be just...useless junk." Cate poked a finger toward the shelf she'd hidden behind where the yellow top continued to spin, the blue magic swirling around it.

Jack cracked a smile at her, despite the tension. "Good work, Cate."

"Yeah. We just have to make sure she doesn't stop the top. And she's going to try. In fact—" Dominique's words cut off as another bullet whipped past, and closer this time.

Her features twisted with disgust. "Seriously? That's it."

Dominique conjured a fireball and hurled it in Gianna's direction.

"You missed me. And you can't keep holding me off with those things. They sting, but nothing worse than that," Gianna called.

"I'm not trying to kill you. If I was, you'd be dead," Dominique answered. "But I *really* want you to be here when all your toys are ruined."

"That's not going to happen. I'm going to kill Cate, Jack, and stop that top from spinning."

"Uh-huh," Dominique answered. "Sure, you are. Did you forget about me? The woman who cannot be killed?"

"I haven't. You see, you think you're healed, but you aren't," Gianna answered. "That bullet was—"

"Dipped in crymeline poison?" Dominique retorted. "Yeah, I know."

"Which means you only have a few more minutes to live," Gianna said. "And once you're dead, I'll easily pick the two humans off and stop that top. Looks like we win again, Cate."

Cate's heart stopped for a moment, her eyes widening. If Dominique died, they would never make it home. Not only would the twins be fatherless, but her own children would be motherless. Actually, her own children would cease to exist.

Tears filled her eyes as she glanced at Jack, clutching onto his arm as her knees went weak.

"Except, sadly," Dominique said as she lobbed another fireball blindly around the corner of the shelf, "I won't be dying anytime soon."

Gianna let out a sharp laugh. "Oh, you always love to play the big shot. But even your immortality is no match for crymeline."

Cate's lower lip trembled as she slid her glassy gaze to the top, still spinning but starting to wobble.

"That's where you're wrong, you dimwit. Most people's immortality isn't a match for crymeline. Mine, on the other hand, is. See, I'm part Dracopire and werepanther now. It didn't make me as powerful or untouchable as I'd hoped, but it helps me with immunity toward some of those pesky poisons. One of those is crymeline."

"You're lying," Gianna answered, but her voice quivered just slightly.

Cate's eyes went wide, and she glanced at Dominique. "Are you lying?"

"No," she said, her features incredulous. "Are you serious? You're the one who made the discovery about what I was doing, remember?"

"Yes, I remember, but I didn't know if the rest of it was a lie. The part about the poison immunity."

Dominique whipped another fireball around the corner. "It's not. I'm fine."

She grinned at them. "And soon, this little fault will turn into useless junk. Shelf upon shelf of it."

"Not if I can help it," Gianna shouted.

Cate's pulse quickened as the woman raced past them in a desperate attempt to get to the spinning top as it started to wobble, slowing as it

threatened to stop entirely.

“Nope,” Dominique said, but before she could fire on the woman, Cate lunged at Gianna, tackling her to the ground.

Gianna let out a high-pitched squeal, wriggling under Cate as she tried to break free.

“I don’t think so,” Cate growled. “Not after what you’ve done to my daughter. I’m not letting you go until that top stops spinning.”

“Sorry, Cate, but I can’t let that happen.” Gianna tried to throw Cate off of her, but Dominique grabbed the woman’s ankle and dragged her back with superhuman power.

Cate tumbled off her, rolling across the floor as Gianna flew across the room, smacking into a wall and sliding to the floor in a crumpled heap.

She scrambled to her feet, searching the space for the gun she’d dropped earlier.

Cate’s heart stopped as she spotted it merely feet away from the woman. “No!”

She pushed up, trying to climb to her feet and reach the gun before Gianna. A well-timed fireball by Dominique drove Gianna back against the wall.

“You’re not going to win, babe. Give it up.”

“No,” Gianna growled, her features twisted with anger as Cate reached the gun.

Gianna kicked it from her hands, sending it flying across the room before she lunged at Cate, twisting her hair as she whipped her backward.

Cate clamped a hand over Gianna’s hand to stop her from yanking her around before she stomped on Gianna’s instep.

She released her hold on Cate, screeching as she grabbed hold of her foot, hopping around.

Cate spun to face her, ready to fight again, but Gianna grabbed hold of Cate’s neck, squeezing tightly.

“Get off of me!” Cate screamed.

“Fat chance, Cate,” Gianna shouted. “I’m going to remove you from the picture, then stop that top from destroying our collection.”

“Wouldn’t do that if I were you,” Dominique said from across the room.

Gianna spun Cate around, wrapping an arm around her neck. “I would. You can’t stop me. Throw a fireball, you’ll hit precious Cate. Do you want to do that?”

“Maybe,” Dominique said with a shrug. “She’s not my favorite person, you know? Sometimes, I really don’t like her. She’s just so...perfect. So...sweet. Just like you said.”

“But I still don’t think you’re going to cross her, are you? Sweet or not, she’s on your side, so I doubt you’ll—”

A fireball burst from Dominique’s hand before she fired it at them. It struck Cate square in the chest, taking her breath away.

Cate’s heart seized as pain shot through her, radiating from her chest to every extremity.

The pressure on her neck released as Gianna’s eyes went wide, and she backed away.

Cate flopped to the floor, the pain making her eyes water.

“I can’t believe you did that.” Gianna’s voice was barely above a whisper.

“Yeah, a real zinger, too, as you can tell. Pretty sure some of it transferred to you, but you felt only a touch of what she’s going through.” Dominique poked a finger at Cate who writhed on the floor.

“You’re crazy,” Gianna’s voice said, her tone shocked.

Dominique shrugged. “I know, right? My methods are offensive, but they work.”

Cate slowly began to recover, the pain ebbing away when a bright flash of blue light seared her eyes. She rolled onto her other side, curling into a ball as the arc reverberated over her, making her hair stand on end.

She squeezed her eyes closed, wondering if whatever this was would be the end of her...and her entire future.

CHAPTER 21



The blue wave shot over her like an electrical impulse, searing into her closed eyes with its brightness as it sent a wave of gooseflesh over her entire body.

As she recovered her senses after the blast both from Dominique's fireball and the blue arc, she rolled onto her back. A fireball sailed over top of her, slamming into Gianna again and sending her slamming into the wall behind her.

Jack raced forward and slid his hands under Cate's arms, dragging her backward as she kicked her feet to propel herself.

He pulled her to safety between two shelves. "Cate, are you okay?"

"I think so," she answered as she glanced down at her body to determine if there were any lasting effects from the hit she'd taken. "It just stunned me."

"Me too, and I didn't even get hit with it," Jack answered. "But I did get hit by that blue arc."

"Yes," Cate said with a nod, her features still pinched, "me too. What was that?"

Jack poked a finger across the space at the top. It lay on its side, having finally finished its rotations.

Cate sucked in a breath, her eyes widening. "Did it work?"

"I think so. That's what the blue arc was. I guess it removed all the magic from the items in this room."

Cate scrambled to her feet, her eyes fixed on the small yellow top. She reached for one of the dusty objects on the shelf, blowing away a thick layer of dirt as she lifted it. "I wonder what this did? I'd like to test it."

"No idea," Jack said as he eyed the silk fan she'd picked up.

Dominique flicked another dismissive fireball, her casual brutality a stark contrast to the tension constricting Cate's chest, before she joined them.

"We ready to scram, kids? I'm kind of done playing with what's-her-name. It's fun blasting her and all, but now, I'm bored."

"Wait, we have to make sure that top worked," Cate said.

"It did," Dominique answered as she backed her way toward it, tossing another fireball in the Gianna's direction. She scooped it off the floor and shoved it into her pocket. "All of this stuff is useless junk now."

She grinned before she froze mid-step on her way back to them. "Oh, I almost forgot my surprise."

She shoved her hand into her pocket, pulling out a small, round object that looked like a bomb. She pulled a pin out of the top and tossed it toward Gianna before she dove toward Cate and Jack. "Let's go. We don't want to be here when that goes off."

Dominique clamped her hands around their forearms, and the world melted away, replaced by the library at Dunhaven Castle. "Home again, home again, jiggety-jig."

Cate stood with her jaw agape; shock etched into her features. "Why did you do that? We needed to make sure that top really worked."

"It did." Dominique yanked the fan from Cate's hands and waved it in the air. "This is intended to manipulate the weather, form sudden storms, that sort of thing. See? Now, all it does is cool you down, and not even that well."

She tossed it to the side with a shake of her head. "It's over, Cate. We have dealt a crippling blow to them. We should sit back, have a drink, and pat each other on the back."

"Excuse me for not being ready to celebrate. We still have several more things to deal with before The Agency is truly dismantled, including Laura's dream curse."

Dominique rolled her eyes and shook her head. "You two are no fun."

"I, personally, would like some answers before we celebrate this so-called win," Jack demanded.

“Such as? It seemed pretty clear what happened there. We disabled a good number of their magical toys. That severely limits their ability to wreak havoc.”

“What was that thing you threw at Gianna at the end?” Jack asked. “Is she dead? Did you kill her?”

Dominique’s lips curled into a satisfied grin, a slight chuckle escaping her. “No. She doesn’t deserve to die before she sees The Agency crumble and all her power disappear. It was just a glitter bomb.”

Dominique’s laughter ramped up. “She’ll be trying to remove glitter for the next twenty years. That stuff never goes away.”

Jack screwed up his face. “A glitter bomb? What are you, ten?”

Her features twisted from amused to angry. “A gentleman never asks a lady’s age. Haven’t you ever learned that?”

Jack offered her an unimpressed stare.

Cate heaved a sigh as she stalked across the room to her armchair. “That was...whatever. It doesn’t bear discussing, but what does is our next steps.”

“Right,” Dominique said with a bob of her head. “Now’s the time to make another bold move and crush them into oblivion.”

She smashed a fist into her palm and ground it.

“But how?” Jack questioned. “We’ve taken away some of their power, but not all of their power. Should we be looking for more of their magical stashes and destroying them all?”

“We could, but they’ll be so limited and reeling right now, it’s the perfect time to strike with something a little bigger,” Dominique said. “Actually, we should do both—remove all of their power, but also, we need to destroy the big wigs. Bankrupt them, remove their power.”

“How in the world are we going to do that?”

Dominique sucked in a sharp breath, her lips curling into a grin. “Well, I would say since we’ve removed most of their ability to manipulate time, we go back to the very beginning and destroy The Agency at its inception. Oh, we should probably destroy the other magical caches, too, but maybe we can leave that to Marcus. After all, he’s kind of been doing nothing lately.”

“He is searching for a solution to Laura’s dream curse, which is vital.”

“Yeah, I know, but can’t the other you and Grandmommy dearest do that? Why does Marcus need to be there? I’m telling you, having kids

really ruined that man.”

Cate sucked in a breath. “Laura is a priority. I do not want her suffering.”

Dominique plopped into an armchair, her leather coat squeaking against the chair’s material. “She’ll live. And we’ll fix it as soon as we’re finished. Why are we arguing about this? You brought me here to do a job, I’m doing it.”

“She has a point,” Cate said with a shrug, her gaze landing on Jack.

“I suppose she does, but do we even know the inception of The Agency?”

Dominique raised her eyebrows. “Lucky for you, I know. See, I’ve hated them for a really long time. And I’ve found it’s always good to know as much as you can about your enemy, so I did some extensive research. It’s one of the reasons Marcus brought me here.”

Cate’s ears perked up as she considered ending The Agency once and for all. Could they really do it?

“All right. Tell us what you know,” Jack demanded, crossing his arms as he stared at Dominique.

“All right, but now I’m thinking we hit those other caches first. Really cut off any ability they have to do anything.”

Cate rubbed her temples, wondering if she should run this past Marcus before they proceeded. “Won’t they just use all the items that we just destroyed the moment they find them to change all of this?”

“Wow,” Dominique said, raising her eyebrows, “look at the cupcake coming up with a relevant question instead of just whining.”

“She makes a good point,” Jack said. “They could be doing that as we speak.”

“They could be. Although much of what they acquired was later in the twentieth century. That’s when they really rose to power. If we’re able to remove them before they even start, though, they’ll never amass anything. This needs to be a two-pronged attack.”

“Fine,” Cate said. “I’ll call Marcus and see what he can do while we handle stopping their formation. How do we do that?”

“Simple. This all arose during the time of King Louis the fourteenth. Maybe you’ve heard of the three musketeers?”

Jack scoffed, pacing the floor in front of the fireplace. “You’re joking, right? The three musketeers were the start of The Agency? Weren’t they

the good guys?”

“I didn’t say they started it, but they allowed it to happen. We need to go back to Versailles, right around the end of the sixteen hundreds and stop this from forming.”

Jack let his head fall back between his shoulder blades. “Why is it never a time with comfortable clothing?”

“Do you always complain this much?” Dominique asked.

“Usually, yes,” Jack answered with a nod.

“All right,” Cate said. “We’ll do whatever it takes. I’ll call Marcus and see if I can get him on destroying the other magical caches.”

“Awesome,” Dominique said with a grin as she leapt from her seat. “I’ll find clothes for us. Wow, this going to be fun. I’ve spent some time in the sixteen hundreds, but going with you two...priceless. Be back soon.”

She strode from the room, leaving them behind in silence.

Jack collapsed into the armchair Dominique had just sat in, shaking his head. “I don’t know if I’m going to survive this. That woman is absolutely insane.”

“I know, but she’s actually making progress on this.” Cate let her head fall into her hands. “I can’t believe I just said that. Dominique is actually helping us.”

“I know. Well, I suppose at least we should be thankful for that.”

Cate nodded as her stomach tightened into a knot. “Now, I need to call Marcus, and I know he’s going to be unhappy with the bold moves she’s making, but at least we’re getting somewhere.”

She pulled her phone from her pocket and scrolled to his contact information, her trembling thumb hovering over the call button.

“Good luck,” Jack said as she pressed it, turning on the speakerphone as she balanced her elbows on her knees.

“Catherine,” he answered a moment later, “has something happened?”

“A few things, yes,” she said. “Can you come home? We need to talk.”

“I will be right there.”

The line clicked, and Marcus appeared in the library a second later.

Jack startled, pressing a hand against his chest. “Oh, that was...not what I was expecting.”

Marcus offered him an unimpressed frown. “What did you expect? Me to dally when my wife calls and asks to speak?”

“Maybe,” Jack said. “Look, I’ll let you two talk—”

“It’s okay, Jack, you can stay” Cate said, waving him back into his chair.

“Catherine, what has happened? Is it Laura? Is she worse?” His voice strained, his concern obvious.

She shook her head. “Laura is fine. We...sent her to Maine with Celine.”

“You did what? Why, Catherine?”

“To protect her,” Cate said. “Because Dominique has been...making some moves.”

Marcus stared at her with a blank expression. “What does that mean? What has she done?”

Cate licked her lips, wrinkling her nose. “We...found the largest cache of magical items The Agency owns and...destroyed them.”

Marcus’s eyebrows shot up. “You did what?”

Cate winced as she lifted a shoulder. “Took away some of their power?”

“Catherine!” Marcus shouted, his voice incredulous. “Do you know what kind of danger you put yourself in?”

“Yes,” she said with a nod, “but we took as many precautions as we could to protect the children. We sent all of them to Maine, and Celine is masking them.”

“Celine is—” Marcus pressed his lips together, his nostrils flaring. “That is not easy and sometimes dangerous.”

“I know,” Cate said. “But we had to do something. Marcus, this can’t go on. We need to put a stop to it.”

He sucked in a deep breath, shaking his head. “Yes, I know, but...we need to move quickly now that you have done this. They will retaliate.”

Cate’s stomach twisted into a tight knot at the words. He confirmed the urgency Dominique had spoken of. Would they be able to move fast enough to finish this without a severe retaliation?

CHAPTER 22



With a sharp breath, Cate shoved her fear aside, focusing on moving forward.

“I know,” Cate said with a nod. “That’s why we called you here. We have a plan, but we need your help to make sure it works.”

Marcus heaved a sigh as he poured himself a drink. “You have a plan or Dominique has a plan?”

“Both,” Cate answered.

He twisted to face her, narrowing his eyes. “Explain, Catherine. What does that mean?”

“Dominique has actually been incredibly useful,” Cate answered with a shrug.

“As I knew she could be given the proper motivation,” Marcus answered.

“What motivation did you give her?” Jack asked.

Marcus slid his eyes sideways to the man, over the rim of his glass as he sipped his brandy. “Not your concern.”

“I think it may be,” Jack retorted.

“Look, it doesn’t matter,” Cate said with a shake of her head.

Marcus strode to the fireplace, glancing into the cold hearth. “Catherine is correct. And it does not matter because she is going to return to prison after this. She just does not know that yet.”

Cate’s heart skipped a beat. “What? You’re sending her back to prison?”

“She is a criminal, Catherine. I could only convince them to allow her out if I promised to return her.”

“What happens if she gets away?” Jack asked.

Marcus shrugged. “It poses no problem to us.”

Cate’s stomach clenched as she considered it. “And she doesn’t know this yet?”

“No,” Marcus answered as he refilled his brandy. “Now, what is it that she suggests?”

“Destroying their other caches while we return to The Agency’s Inception and destroy them once and for all.”

Marcus’s eyebrows knitted. “A bold plan.”

“One you disagree with?” Jack asked.

“Not entirely, no. And if we are certain the children are safe, we should move right away. Especially after what you’ve just managed.”

“All right, then you’ll destroy the other magical caches while we go back and handle stopping The Agency,” Cate said with a nod.

Marcus arched an eyebrow. “I do not care for this plan, but yes, that is what would work best.”

“What’s your objection?” Jack asked.

“Catherine’s involvement in the royal court of Louis the fourteenth.”

“I won’t change anything outside of The Agency’s formation,” Cate promised.

Marcus shook his head. “You misunderstand. I couldn’t care less if you change something. I merely object to you being faced with the people who formed this organization. Not to mention the king.”

“Oh, right,” Jack said with a chuckle. “Old King Louis outranks you. Cate could marry up.”

“Do not joke about it, Reid.”

Cate heaved a sigh, shaking her head at them. “I am not leaving you for the King of France.”

“I don’t know, Cate. He has a lot more money.”

“I don’t care.” Cate patted Marcus’s chest before she kissed his cheek. “I’m not falling for him. I just want to end this with The Agency.”

“I will make the arrangements to destroy the other magical caches,” Marcus said. “And your current counterpart and Mother have discovered a way to remove the dream curse. With any luck this will be wrapped up soon.”

Cate focused on the words, pressing her lips together as she tried to imagine a world without The Agency. Would they succeed in finally removing the threat?

“All right, kids, I—” Dominique burst through the doors, stopping short as she spotted Marcus. “Marcus, you’re here.”

“I am,” he answered, lifting his chin. “And I hear you have been making some major moves.”

Dominique recovered from her surprise quickly, thrusting her arms out to the sides. “You didn’t bring me here to stare at your kid. You didn’t actually think I’d just sit on my hands while Gianna Caruso ran all over you like a treadmill.”

“That is hardly an accurate description of what has been happening,” Marcus answered.

“Seemed accurate to me. Here she is twenty years after she started messing with poor cherub cheeks, making life miserable for child number two. But you’re right, you totally had this.”

Marcus’s jaw clenched as he shook his head. “Please do not make me wish I hadn’t rescued you from that horrid pit I found you in.”

Dominique scoffed. “I seriously have delivered everything promised on my end and then some. You can’t possibly be upset.”

“Your methods have risked my children’s lives and Catherine’s.”

“Also mine,” Jack said with a wave of his hand in the air.

“Yes, even Reid’s, whose life is the least of my concern, though still of some concern.”

“Aww, poor Marcus. He got married and had babies, and now he can’t take the pressure. Grow up, buddy. If you want big results, you gotta make big moves. I’m willing to do that. And surprisingly, so is little Catie. You know, she actually spun that top to remove the magic from all the elements in that archive while Gianna had a gun on the lumberjack.”

Marcus arched an eyebrow, his gaze sliding to Cate’s.

She nodded with a wince. “I’m sorry, Jack, but—”

“You did what you needed to do,” Jack said with a nod. “I understand.”

“And now we have to finish doing what we need to do to wipe these people from the face of the earth. To remove this threat once and for all. To turn the clock back and reset everything back to normal.”

Cate’s heart skipped a beat. “Wait...if we do this...won’t everything change? “

Marcus slid a lock of hair behind her ear. “No, dear. Everything will still have played out as it should have as long as you return to the correct moment in time. And life will proceed from there.”

Cate stared up into his dark eyes, searching them for any sign of a lie. She knew she’d remember her family, and she couldn’t let it be ripped away from her.

“Don’t worry, babe, you’ll still be a duchess.” Dominique winked at her.

Cate heaved a sigh, shaking her head as the woman ruined the moment. “That was not my concern.”

Dominique rolled her eyes. “Oh, please. Tell me you’re concerned about the warm, fuzzy love you share with Marcus and making sure you still have those three brats.”

“Maybe you shouldn’t comment on our lives and just do what we brought you here to do,” Cate said.

“I agree,” Marcus answered. “By the way, how did you glean the location of the artifact chamber? My father searched for it until his death.”

“I asked a friend.” Dominique crossed her arms and shrugged.

“What friend?” Marcus pushed.

“Nobody you know.”

“It was a man-like creature named Tobther,” Cate said.

Dominique’s jaw fell open as she stared at Cate, her hands dropping to her hips. “Thanks a lot, tattletale.”

“You took Catherine to the Hellscape?” His eyes widened as his voice took on an incredulous tone.

“She’s fine, Marcus,” Dominique retorted, poking a finger at her. “Clearly.”

“And what about when you take her to the royal court, hmm? Can I trust that you will return her without a detour through Hell?”

“I can’t believe you are treating me like this. I have single-handedly taken down The Agency, and all you can do is lecture me because cherub cheeks may have gotten a little hot under the collar. Well, fine! If that’s the way you want to be then forget it. I’m not going to help you anymore.” Dominique twisted on her heel and stormed from the room, slamming the door behind her.

Cate stared after her, her lips parting and her stomach twisting into a tight knot as she glanced at Marcus. “Now what?”

“She is merely being overly dramatic. She will cool off. That gives me time to devise my own plan to remove all of the magical artifacts from The Agency’s existence.”

“I’m still a little nervous about this plan. What if they use an artifact from a previous time to go back and reinstate themselves?” Cate paced the floor. “And I still don’t see how things will work out to become the way they are now.”

“Catherine,” Marcus said, stopping her pacing by stepping in front of her, “you must trust me. Others may have a different remembrance of what happened, but you will not. You will still remember searching for Jack together, finding Gertrude, and visiting this time. You will still remember your children.”

Cate pressed her lips together as she stared up at him, her eyes turning misty. “Are you sure?”

“I am positive, dear. Believe me, I would not risk losing you or our family.”

She offered him a weak smile through her tears as she nodded.

Across the room, Jack cleared his throat. “Still here, so...you know, keep the affection to a minimum, if you could.”

Cate wiped at a tear that had fallen to her cheek as she chuckled. “Sorry.”

Jack waved a dismissive hand in the air. “Perfectly fine, just...in case.”

“All right, then I guess someone needs to go talk to Dominique and get her back on board with the plan.”

“I will do it,” Marcus said, setting his empty brandy glass on the drink cart.

Cate placed a hand against his chest. “No, you’ll just argue with her. I’ll talk to her. She’s actually...not that bad.”

Marcus arched an eyebrow. “You must be joking.”

“I’m not. She has protected us from Gianna multiple times. And I probably can play penitent a little better than you can.”

“You know me so well, Catherine,” he said with a coy smile.

She kissed his cheek. “I’ll be right back.”

With her stomach fluttering, she left the library behind, snaking her way through the halls to Dominique’s room upstairs—as far from anyone else’s room as they could make it.

With a quiet knock, Cate pressed her ear against the door. “Dominique?”

“I’m not here, so go away.”

With a gentle roll of her eyes, Cate pushed into the room, finding it dark with the shades drawn. She flicked the light on, and Dominique’s eyes flashed red for a moment before she squeezed them closed. “Turn that off.”

“Sorry,” Cate said as she turned off the lights and sauntered into the room. “Just would like to be able to see you while we talk.”

“There’s no reason for us to talk.” Dominique flicked her wrist, turning all the lights on in the room as she leapt from her seat. “I’ll be out of your hair in a jiffy. I just need to finish packing.”

“That’s not necessary,” Cate said.

“I think it is. Marcus clearly doesn’t trust me at all, so the plan is off.”

Cate pinched her eyebrows together. “That really bothers you, doesn’t it?”

Dominique tossed a dark-colored blouse into her bag. “Nope.”

“You know, I told him you have been very helpful.”

She shrugged. “Doesn’t matter.”

“It does to me,” Cate said. “You defended Laura, you got answers about The Agency, and now you’re about to help us eradicate them. Dominique, you’re a big part of this plan, and I’d really like to continue it.”

“Well, Marcus doesn’t think we should.”

“He does,” Cate answered. “He’s tracking down the other locations and making a plan. We should continue forward with our plan.”

Dominique tossed a pair of leather pants into her suitcase, twisting to face her. “Look, Cate, it’s over.”

“But it doesn’t have to be,” Cate said. “Please, Dominique. We need your help.”

She crossed her arms, puckering her lips. “I don’t know.”

“I’ll sweeten the deal a little.”

Dominique shifted her blue eyes to Cate, arching one eyebrow. “What’s that mean?”

“Once we finish this, you can stay at the castle as long as you’d like. You’re a welcome member of this family.”

Dominique drew her chin back to her chest. “Are you joking? That’s not...that’s...a stupid offer. Completely stupid. Why would I want to live here?”

Cate shrugged. "Because it's better than slinking away to be alone somewhere or worse...get hauled back to prison."

"Oh, and you think I'm lonely. That I want to stay here and play aunt of the year to the brats. Hang out with the lumberjack after hours and do puzzles in the library."

"Jack hates puzzles."

"Well, then hang out and do whatever it is he does. That's what you think I want?"

Cate lifted a shoulder. "I don't know what you want, I'm just telling you what you could do afterward if you wanted. That's all."

Dominique narrowed her eyes at Cate. "All right, fine. Maybe I will hang around after...just to get on the old man's nerves and corrupt your kids."

Cate offered her a slight smile. "Well, you are welcome. And if you want to leave, you're welcome to do that too. I just...really want to finish this. What do you say, Dominique? Are you game to finish this?"

CHAPTER 23



Cate's heart hammered against her ribs. Had she read the woman correctly, or had she just killed any chance they had of wiping out The Agency from the earth?

She held her breath, trying to portray confidence, but she felt anything but. Without Dominique's help, they may never finish this, but with her...

The entire nightmare could come to an end.

Dominique lifted a shoulder in a shrug, eyeing Cate. With an arch of her eyebrow, she tossed a scarf into her suitcase and shrugged. "I mean, I guess I already got the clothes and stuff. Would be a waste of my time if I just had to trash it all."

Cate offered her a subtle smile, pleased that she'd managed to convince the woman to help them. "You're right. It would be a huge waste if we didn't use those clothes."

"Yeah," Dominique said with a lift of her shoulder. "Plus...honestly, I was kind of bored. I mean, you can only throw a fireball at the wall so many times a day in that cell."

"Of course," Cate said with a warm smile.

Dominique wagged a finger at her. "Don't think for a second that this means that I actually...like you people or anything like that. I'm doing this purely to satisfy my own vengeance. Got it?"

Cate held her hands up, removing the grin from her features as she nodded. "Got it. Only because you hate Gianna. Nothing to do with us."

“Exactly. I just hate Gianna Caruso way more than I dislike you. That’s it.”

“Noted,” Cate said with a nod. “I’ll inform Jack. Marcus is working on his end. We should be able to leave as soon as we’ve changed.”

“Good,” Dominique said with a nod as she crossed the room. “I have your clothes right here.” She handed Cate a giant ball of fabric before she piled a second set of clothes on top. “Yours, then Jack’s...obviously. And don’t take forever to say goodbye to Marcus and get dressed. I want to get going on this. We need to find those founders and make sure they never form this organization.”

“Time is of the essence,” Cate answered. “And I, too, would like to finish this.”

“Yeah, well, I couldn’t care less about what you want. So...”

“Right,” Cate said, playing along with the woman’s game. “All right. I will see you soon.”

Dominique nodded as she pulled a blouse from her suitcase and shuttled it back to a drawer. With a slight smile, Cate left her behind, carrying the clothes to her bedroom and dropping off her set before she grabbed Jack’s and slipped into the hall.

As she made her way downstairs, she faced the task ahead of them. How difficult would it be to prevent history from progressing the way it had already? Would it leave any lasting ripples?

With a deep breath, she pushed into the library, Jack’s clothes in hand.

“Well?” Jack asked.

“Clothes for you for the trip,” she said, handing them over.

“Dominique has agreed?” Marcus asked.

Cate bobbed her head. “She has. And she has asked that we dress right away and meet her to leave. She said you should handle your end quickly, too.”

“Of course, she has,” Marcus said with a sigh. “She is awfully demanding, isn’t she?”

“Seems like she’s always like that. Oh, umm, also...” Cate winced a little as she wrinkled her nose. “She’s...probably going to stay with us after for a while.”

“What?” Marcus stared at Cate with widened eyes.

“I may or may not have offered that as incentive,” Cate said with a slight shrug.

“Why?” Marcus retorted, his voice incredulous.

“And why did it work? She can’t actually want to stay here.”

Cate shifted her weight from foot to foot. “Well, I think...I think she’s lonely.”

Marcus scoffed, shaking his head. Jack poked a finger at him. “I agree with Northcott on this one. This is the singular time we will agree on something.”

Cate pressed her lips together. “Come on. You can’t see this? She wants to be accepted.”

“She could have been,” Marcus answered. “She never wanted that.”

“I think she does...at least now she does. Look, maybe she doesn’t, but the offer is out there, just so you know.”

“Oh, heavens,” Marcus said, sliding his eyes closed with a deep sigh. “That woman will be a leech on us. And do you really want her influence on the children?”

Cate chewed her lower lip as she considered it. “She sort of helped Laura.”

With a disgusted sigh, Marcus stepped toward Cate and kissed her cheek. “We can argue about it later, dear, after everything has been taken care of.”

“Right,” Cate said with a nod. “We all have to get going.”

“Yes,” Marcus agreed as he headed for the door.

Cate grabbed his arm, tugging him back. “Be careful.”

“You, too. Especially around Dominique. She takes far too many risks for my taste.”

“I’ll keep her in line,” Cate promised.

He pulled her into a kiss before he squeezed her hand. “I will see you soon.”

She nodded as she let her fingers slip from his, then turned to face Jack as Marcus left them behind. “Well, we should get dressed.”

Jack held up a lacy cravat with a wrinkled nose. “If we must.”

“Stop,” she said with a chuckle. “I can’t believe you still complain about the clothes for time traveling.”

“I can’t believe you still don’t,” he retorted with a teasing grin. “Meet you outside of Dominique’s room when we’re ready?”

“Sounds good,” she said.

They parted ways, and Cate made her way to her bedroom, ringing for Andrea. Within a few minutes, she had assistance for getting into the get-up she'd have to sport while trying to end The Agency.

With her puffy sleeves and large skirt, she struggled to make it through the halls, not used to the weight of the clothing.

When she reached the faraway hallway, she found Jack already pacing in his seventeenth century fashion. He grinned at her as she hobbled toward him.

"This dress is a little much. I don't know how I'll do anything in it, let alone stop The Agency from forming." Cate sighed as she knocked on Dominique's door.

She pulled it open a second later, still in her leather pants and jacket. "Ready?"

Cate scoffed. "You're not!"

Dominique glanced down at her outfit. "This is my signature look no matter what era I'm in."

"You can't wear that to Versailles in the sixteen hundreds. Come on, Dominique." Cate shook her head at the woman.

"It'll be fine," she said with a shrug.

"Just change," Cate answered, her voice firm.

Dominique rolled her eyes. "You're annoying."

"We need you to blend in so you can help us," Cate said with a shake of her head as she shuffled into the room with her skirt lifted up above her ankles. "Now, hurry up. You're holding everything up here."

"Wow," Dominique said with a scrunched nose. "Suddenly, you're so demanding. You wait outside, Jackie boy. No free peep shows today."

"I wasn't—" he started as she slammed the door in his face

"Come on," she said, grabbing the garments from the wardrobe, "let's get this over with."

With Cate's help, she was dressed and ready in less than a half hour. Cate tugged the door open for Jack with a heavy sigh. "We're finally ready. Let's go—"

"From right here. I'm not traipsing all over creation in this dress."

Cate wrinkled her nose. "Aren't you used to it? Didn't you grow up in these sorts of dresses?"

Dominique leaned forward, her lips tugging into a tight grimace. "And I hated them. *Hated.*"

“All right, all right. It won’t be long. Let’s just do what we have to do and finish this.” Cate rubbed her forehead as Jack closed the door behind them. “Besides, it’s your room that’ll be a mess.”

“I don’t care,” Dominique said, stretching her hand out in front of her. “It’s worth it.”

As the wind picked up, the light twinkling in front of her turned into a wide black hole until it yawned in front of them. As the portal opened, Cate swallowed hard and stepped inside.

Her heart thundered against her ribs as she emerged on the opposite side in an elaborate garden. For a second, she stood alone, her pulse racing. Why was no one else here?

Her mind raced. Would she need to find help? Where?

Before she could answer those questions, Jack appeared.

She reached for him, leaning against him as she breathed as high of relief. “Thank goodness. I thought no one else was coming.”

“Dominique should be right behind me,” he answered before he flicked his gaze to the palace ahead of them. “Wow.”

“Yeah,” Cate said with a nod. “Impressive. I’ve never been here before.”

“Me either,” Jack answered as Dominique stepped through the portal next to them.

“Took you long enough,” Cate said.

“Sorry, princess, don’t get your knickers in a bunch. These dresses aren’t the easiest to move around in.” She raised her eyes to the palace in front of them, clapping her hands together and rubbing them. “All right. Who’s ready to infiltrate the palace and stop the formation of The Agency?”

She grinned at them both before her expression faded. “Why is no one excited?”

“I’m excited,” Cate said with a shrug, “I’m just...also very nervous.”

Dominique pressed her lips together and shook her head. “Humans.”

She pushed between Cate and Jack, storming her way to the palace. With a glance over her shoulder, she called, “You coming?”

Cate sucked in a breath, glancing at Jack. “We better go.”

He bobbed his head, offering his arm as they strode toward the sprawling palace. “How are we supposed to find these people and make sure they don’t start The Agency?”

“Dominique must know them—or of them. Making certain they don’t start The Agency...” Cate shrugged. “Maybe...make sure the people who start it never come together?”

“Ah, good idea. That could work. How long until we can do that, I wonder?”

“Can’t be that long,” Cate answered. “Dominique wants to get out of here.”

They came closer to the palace, and Cate’s heart hammered harder against her ribs. Would they stand out like a sore thumb the moment they walked in?

She hurried to close the distance between them and Dominique.

They slipped inside the palace, and Cate’s eyes rose to the ceiling, taking in the opulence. “Wow,” she whispered, her voice echoing.

“Where is everyone?” Jack murmured.

“Probably with the king,” Dominique said. “He’s hosting a large party tonight. The one where the founders of The Agency meet. We need to get to that party.”

“And make sure the founders don’t speak?” Cate asked.

Dominique lifted her skirt and hurried toward an unknown destination. “Something like that.”

Cate and Jack exchanged a glance before they followed her. They approached a set of open double doors. Laughter and chatter floated from inside.

As they entered, the grandeur of Versailles unfolded before them. Golden chandeliers hung from high ceilings painted with celestial scenes, casting a soft glow over nobles adorned in silks and satins. Laughter and the delicate clink of crystal filled the air as masked attendees flirted in the shadows of ornate columns.

How would they find The Agency’s founders in this sea of people?

Cate glanced at Dominique, her eyes wide with panic.

“Mingle,” Dominique said. “Look for a man wearing a purple flower on his lapel. He’s one of them. I’ll search for the other.”

“Wait, what do we do when we find him?” Cate asked, grabbing hold of Dominique’s arm.

“Watch him, duh,” Dominique said with a frown before she yanked her arm away and left.

“We should stick together,” Jack murmured as he scanned the crowd.

“Right,” Cate said with a nod, her stomach twisting into a tight knot. “And I guess we should...mingle.”

“I’m not mingling. I’m going to keep to the fringes and search for this flowered fellow.” He offered his arm, and Cate slid her hand through the crook of his elbow, allowing him to guide her along the edge of the room.

As they scanned the crowd, she searched for any hints of purple. “I don’t see anything.”

“Me either,” Jack said with a shake of his head. “Where is this guy?”

“Wait!” Cate’s heart skipped a beat as she spotted a single flash of purple. “I thought I saw something purple, but now he’s turned.”

“Wait here,” Jack said, pushing her into a corner. “I’ll check it out and report back.”

“Wait, maybe we shouldn’t—” she began, but he was already making his way toward the group of men.

Cate chewed her lower lip, a gnawing sense of unease growing inside of her. She rose to her tiptoes, trying to see Jack as he disappeared into the crowd, but she lost sight of him.

“Well, you seem to be searching for something,” a man said to her left.

“Oh, not really, I’m just—” Cate froze as she twisted to find the King of France eyeing her.

CHAPTER 24



“Your Majesty,” Cate said, her heart thudding hard as her knees wobbled and the room spun a little. She curtsied, hoping she didn’t fall over from the effort given her shock.

He tugged one corner of his lips back in an amused smirk. “Were you then?”

She stared at him with wide eyes. “Was I what?”

“Searching for something—or someone?”

Cate swallowed hard as he stepped closer to her, his eyes fixed on her lips.

“I do not believe I have ever seen you in my court before. Who are you?”

Heat washed over her as she tried to come up with an answer that made some semblance of sense. “Uh, I...this is my first time here. I came with a...cousin.”

“A cousin. And who is this cousin who has kept you from my court for so long?”

“Dominique Laurent?” Cate’s tone turned questioning as he continued to study her, and she struggled not to fidget under his gaze.

“Dominique, what a beautiful name, yet not as beautiful as yours is, I’m sure.”

Cate offered him a fleeting smile. “You are too kind, Your Majesty.”

“She blushes. So becoming. And what is your name, my dear?”

“Catherine,” she answered. “Catherine Northcott.”

She hoped he'd recognize the name, but she wasn't certain how far back Marcus's notoriety went.

The king fluttered his eyelashes, his brows pinching slightly. "The last name sounds familiar, but...it escapes me. Perhaps I am acquainted with your father?"

"Or my husband," Cate answered, lifting her left hand. "Marcus Northcott."

"Marcus Northcott. Hmm, the name is not familiar to me. Is he here tonight?"

Cate licked her lips as she tried to decide whether or not she would lie. "Uh—"

Behind the King, Jack cleared his throat. The man turned, his features unimpressed to study him from head to toe. With a weak, wrinkled-nose smile, he flicked his gaze back to Cate. "Is this your husband?"

"Marcus Northcott, at your service," Jack answered with a bow.

"Marcus, this is His Majesty, the king."

Jack's face paled, his eyes widening in a silent panic. He bowed stiffly, his voice barely a whisper as he managed to choke out, "Your Majesty, of course." Cate's heart pounded louder, her mind racing for ways to defuse the ticking bomb of their fabricated identities.

The king twisted to eye Jack again, wagging a finger at him. "You know, the name Marcus Northcott rings a sinister bell. Weren't you the mastermind behind that dreadful plot against my crown last summer?" The king's voice was light, almost playful, but the threat beneath it was obvious.

"What?" Jack asked, his eyes going wide.

"Yes, I am quite sure. Guards!"

Cate's heart skipped a beat as he waved his sentries closer. "This man has been involved in a plot against my life. Arrest him immediately."

"Whoa, just a second, I have not—" Jack began as the men grabbed hold of him, ready to haul him away."

"Wait," Cate exclaimed. "There has been some mistake."

"There has been none, madam. Never fear, I understand a husband's crimes do not reflect upon his lovely wife. Now, take him away. There is no need to be upset, my dear. I shall see that you are well taken care of."

Another man approached her, gently pulling her away from Jack as they dragged him from the room. "Come with me, madam, and we will be certain you are comfortable."

“Comfortable?” Cate’s mind spun as she searched for a way out of this as the man led her from the room. She glanced back, her features pained, in search of Dominique, but she did not find the woman.

“There is nothing to fear. I shall see that you are placed in a lovely room, and I am certain His Majesty will visit you tonight to ensure you are...well taken care of.”

Cate’s eyes widened as she realized Jack had just been hauled away so she could become the king’s latest conquest. “Really, that’s not necessary, I’m most—”

“Now, madam,” the man said, tightening his grip on her arm, “there is no need for you to fear anything. You have found favor with His Majesty and will be well taken care of. Come along.”

A slight groan escaped her as she allowed herself to be led through the palace halls to an opulent bedroom. The man tossed her inside. The distinct sound of the lock clicking closed twisted her stomach into a tight knot.

She glanced around the room in search of a way out or a weapon. “What is it with the French?” she murmured as she lifted her skirt to cross to the bedroom. “First, Napoleon, and now the King.”

With a shake of her head, she grabbed hold of the fireplace poker, her fingers tightening around it. As she stared at the pointed tip, not wanting to have to use it on the King of France, the door clicked.

Her heart sped up as she twisted, expecting to find the King paying her a visit.

Instead, Dominique slipped into the room. “What are you doing?”

Cate breathed out a sigh of relief as she hurried to the woman. “Thank goodness you’re here.”

Dominique scoffed. “Yeah, no kidding. I’ve really got to keep an eye on you to keep you on track, don’t I. Cate, this is no time to be snuggling up with the king.”

“I’m not,” Cate huffed.

“Not yet. But here you sit in a bedroom waiting for him. We don’t have time for a roll in the hay, babe.”

Cate’s shoulders slumped. “I’m not...I didn’t invite this. I don’t want to be his mistress. They locked me in here.”

Dominique crossed her arms. “Just randomly? You just had to go make eyes at him, didn’t you?”

“I did nothing of the sort,” Cate said with a wrinkle of her nose. “I tried to use Marcus’s name to let him know I was married, but then Jack pretended to be Marcus, and the King had him arrested.”

Dominique stared at her, incredulous. “Are you serious? Jack stole Marcus’s identity? Well, good for him for getting arrested.”

“That’s not the point.” Cate shook her head, her fingers curling into fists. “Dominique, this is serious. Jack is in prison. And we still haven’t found the people from The Agency.”

“Speak for yourself. I did my job. I found them. Then, I had to stop what I was doing to come and find you.”

“And now we have to rescue Jack,” Cate said, pressing a hand against her forehead as a tiny measure of relief coursed through her. She moved toward the door, but Dominique grabbed her arm, tugging her back.

“Uh-uh-uh. We are not going after Jack until this Agency mess is sorted out.”

“But—”

“No buts,” Dominique answered. “Let the lumberjack cool his heels in the cell downstairs. That’s what he gets for stealing identities. Identity theft is not a joke, Cate. We’ll get him when we’re done.”

Cate pressed her lips together, frustration building inside of her. Anything could happen to Jack in the time it took them to track down the men who would form The Agency and...

Her brows furrowed. “Wait...how do we know the men won’t just meet tomorrow or in two weeks or two months?”

Dominique tilted her head, her expression turning annoyed. “Are you serious?”

Cate’s jaw dropped open as she realized what Dominique was implying. “No.”

“What did you think we were going to do? We have to stop this from happening. And there’s one sure-fire way to do that.”

“I’m *not* killing someone,” Cate said with a shake of her head.

Dominique screwed up her face. “What? Who said anything about killing someone?”

Cate shifted her weight, trying to follow the conversation. “Isn’t that what you meant when you said there’s one sure-fire way to stop this?”

“Yeah. Armand Giroux has already started to amass and illegally use magical artifacts. I’m summoning an adjudicator to take him to prison in

another realm. Problem solved.” Dominique shrugged as though the answer was obvious.

Cate stared at her for a minute. “Oh. Well, okay, that’s...that’s way better than murdering him.”

“I’m not a barbarian, Cate. Geez.”

“Well, you were,” Cate said as she followed Dominique to the door. “You kidnapped me because you were mad that I freed Marcus from The Order.”

“That was different. Plus, we bonded. I kind of liked you.”

Cate raised her eyebrows as they threaded through the halls. “No, you didn’t. You tied me to a chair and tormented me.”

“I was nice. I gave you cookies. We drank tea together. And...I’m helping you right now. I don’t say this often, Cate, but I admire you.”

Cate stared at the woman, her features twisted with disbelief. “I don’t buy it.”

“What? I do. I mean, there you were, a human, and you literally walked through Hell to free Marcus. That takes guts. If you had a dark side...wow. We could have been an unstoppable team. We would have definitely taken over the world.”

“I don’t...know what to say,” Cate murmured. “Thanks, I think.”

Dominique clapped her on the shoulder. “Don’t get too excited. I don’t really like you that much. Like I said, I admire your gumption to save Marcus, but that’s where it ends. Outside of that, you’re pretty much a wet blanket. You never want to do anything fun.”

Before Cate could answer, Dominique pushed through a set of double doors and motioned for Cate to follow.

Cate trailed behind her, entering the room, and stopping dead as she crossed the threshold. A man sat tied to a chair and gagged. His eyes were wide with fear as he silently pleaded with Cate to help him.

“Well, don’t just stand there,” Dominique said, “close the door.”

Cate’s heart hammered again as she quickly shut it behind her, spinning back to face the man.

“Hey, buddy,” Dominique said as she pulled the gag from his mouth, “still doing okay?”

“Let me go,” he answered. “You have made a grave mistake.”

“I don’t think so. You *are* Armand Giroux, aren’t you?” Dominique asked.

He bobbed his head, sweat beading on his brow.

“The same Armand Giroux who has been acquiring magical objects. And the same one who is about to meet Robert Laudlam.”

“I...I have only come across a few...curious items. As for Lord Laudlam, he has some interested in them.”

“Uh-huh,” Dominique said with nod. “I’m sure he does. He wants to form a secret organization with you. One that will try to grow its power with these objects. And I just can’t let that happen.”

“No, please. I do not know what you are speaking of.”

“Sure you do, you just don’t want to admit it. Now, because you have been doing some illegal things with those magical artifacts, I’m going to call what we in the supernatural world refer to as an adjudicator. And this adjudicator is going to take you away for a very long time.”

“But—” Armand started.

Before he could say anything else, the door burst open. Cate gasped as she tried to hurry away from the man who burst inside, but he grabbed hold of her, yanking her back toward him.

“I don’t think so,” he growled. As he smashed her against his chest, she spotted the purple flower on his lapel. This must be Lord Laudlam.

Cate struggled against him, but he held her firmly.

“Well, well, well,” Gianna said as she strode into the room. “If it isn’t Cate Northcott and her band of misfits.”

Cate’s heart plummeted at the sight of the woman. Now, they would never be able to stop The Agency from forming.

CHAPTER 25



Cate's breath caught in her throat as heat washed over her. She backed away from Gianna, her knees wobbling. She clearly had figured out their plan and managed to travel back in time to stop Cate from completing the task she needed to complete.

If they didn't stop the formation of The Agency, she'd never get her life back or be able to protect her children.

"Misfits?" Dominique said as she cracked her neck and summoned a fireball. "I don't think so, babe. More like Dominique and her merry band of butt kickers. I mean, first of all, the assumption that Cate is the leader is seriously flawed."

Gianna's laugh was cold, mocking. "We could waste time arguing over trivial details, but I prefer to focus on the inevitable. You're too late. The Agency's formation is already set in motion, and I'm here to see it through."

Dominique let out a harsh laugh. "I'm pretty certain I can."

"No, you cannot. I'm here to make sure you do not, in fact. After your little...game with the archives, I secured the other magical objects—at least the ones that would allow me to ensure a positive result for The Agency." Gianna crossed her arms, lifting her chin.

Dominique arched an eyebrow. "Was that before or after you cleaned off all the glitter from the glitter bomb?"

Gianna's voice dripped with scorn. "You're bound to fail, entrusting your hopes to a lunatic. Cate, it's lamentable that you didn't tackle this on

your own.”

“Hey!” Dominique answered, finally whipping a fireball at the woman. “I’m not insane. I’m just...bold.”

Cate’s gasp echoed in the suddenly tense air as Dominique’s fireball collided with an unseen shield surrounding Gianna, disintegrating into harmless sparks that illuminated Gianna’s smug smile.

Gianna had taken steps to protect herself from the supernatural attacks. They’d never win over her now.

“Surprised, Cate?” Gianna tutted. “It really is a pity that it will all come down to this. I cannot wait until I find Laura so I can break her. Once we do that, we’ll move to the next child. Hmmm, Anna or Logan. Which one will make mommy and daddy hand over Dunhaven Castle?”

“Neither,” Cate shot back. “You’ll never find them or hurt them again.”

“Bold words from someone on the losing end.” Gianna lifted a shoulder, offering Cate a smirk.

“We’re really not on the losing end,” Dominique answered as she pulled a switchblade from her pocket and grabbed hold of Armand’s hair. She pressed the sharply knife to his neck. “I can end this right now.”

Gianna heaved a sigh. “While I assume you can, I am not certain Cate will let you outright kill a man. And on top of that, I can simply form The Agency with Lord Laudlam myself. In fact, I may prefer that. Given my knowledge of what happens, I can guide us to new heights as a founding member.”

“I really don’t think Cate’s going to object. She’s put up with your crap for far too long. It’s time to end this.”

Cate retreated step by step, her heart pounding as the reality of their grim choice weighed heavily on her. Each step felt like wading through thick mud, her mind racing as she considered the severe implications of their actions.

She couldn’t order a man to be killed or even go along with this plan. It wasn’t in her nature. But how could they stop this?

She couldn’t risk her children’s lives either.

“That’s right. Tell her, Cate. Tell her she can’t kill him. Tell her you object.”

“Give us a second, huh?” Dominique answered, yanking the man’s head over as she leaned closer to Cate. “You’ve got to get whatever magical objects she’s using away from her.”

Cate licked her lips as her heart thundered against her ribs. How could she do that? She needed to get closer to Gianna, to try to wrangle away whatever she was using to time travel and protect herself against Dominique's attacks.

Sweat beaded on her brow as she searched for a way. With a raise of her eyebrows, she fought to steady her voice as she spoke. "Actually...I don't object entirely."

She took a step closer to Gianna, raising her chin as she tried to look sure of herself. "This has to end."

"You're willing to allow her to murder a man right in front of you? My, my. Where have your morals gone? You are just as bad as The Agency you fight against, aren't you? Or maybe you're closer to the values of The Order. Tell me, Cate...have they corrupted you?" Gianna cocked her head as she searched Cate's face.

Cate's nostrils flared at the insinuation, and she used the opening to plow into her plan. She lunged forward, wrapping her hands around Gianna's throat as they tumbled to the floor. "No, you have corrupted me. You and your constant power plays. You opened the wrong can of worms when you attacked my child."

"Come off it, Cate," Gianna growled as she grabbed hold of Cate's wrists, trying to pry her hands from her neck. "I broke you when I did that. And now I'm going to take everything I want from you and more."

"I don't think so," Cate said, allowing the woman to pull her hands away and roll on top of her.

She fought to search for the magical items that she may be using, sliding her trembling hands into Gianna's pockets.

"Looking for something?" Gianna asked as she lifted Cate by her neck before she slammed her head against the floor.

Cate struggled to remain focused when she caught sight of a bracelet dangling from Gianna's wrist. She grabbed hold of it and broke the chain, tossing it across the room.

"Sorry, that's not it," Gianna answered.

"The ring, Cate. It's the ring on her thumb," Dominique shouted.

Cate grabbed hold of Gianna's hands as she felt for the metal band.

"You're not going to get that off me," Gianna said with a chuckle.

"Watch me." Cate's face twisted with determination as she let go of Gianna's hands, her own searching for something to be used as a weapon.

She found nothing, so she improvised, bringing the heel of her hand smashing up into Gianna's jaw.

Gianna grunted, temporarily stunned, and released the pressure on Cate's neck.

Cate used the opportunity to yank the ring from Gianna's thumb and toss it across the room. "Got it."

Redness rose into Gianna's cheeks as she stared down at Cate, ready to place her hands around Cate's neck again when a fireball slammed into the back of her.

It propelled her forward, head over heels, and she landed in a heap against the wall.

Cate scrambled to her feet, her eyes trained on Gianna who also rose, her chest heaving.

"That was a very stupid move." She reached into her boot and withdrew a gun, aiming it at Cate.

"Look out!" Dominique shouted.

Time seemed to slow as Gianna's features twisted with hatred. She pulled the trigger, and the gun fired, its sound loud and echoing.

Cate's heart skipped a beat as she stared helplessly at the bullet emerging from the chamber.

She sucked in a breath, bracing herself for the impact, the pain. But it never came.

Instead, Dominique slammed into her, knocking them both to the floor. They skidded to a halt a few feet away from where Cate had been standing.

A gurgling noise sounded behind her, and Gianna's eyes went wide.

"No!" She dropped the gun and raced forward, her gaze flitting around the room in search of something.

She grabbed a pillow and pressed it against a quickly forming blood split on Armand's belly. "No, no, no."

"Oops," Dominique said with a chuckle. "Looks like I didn't have to kill old Armand. You did that for me. There goes The Agency."

"No!" Gianna shouted as Armand's head lolled forward, his chin touching his chest as he expired.

Gianna straightened, tossing the pillow to the side, her hands bloody from her desperate attempt to save the man. "No," she said, her voice

shaky. “No, we don’t need Armand. I can be Armand. I will form The Agency with Lord Laudlam.”

Gianna took a step toward the door. For the first time ever, Cate spotted fear flashing in the woman’s eyes.

Dominique stopped her from moving, firing a fireball at her. “I don’t think so. Laudlam is perfectly fine as he is. He has no interest in magic whatsoever. Let’s keep it that way, shall we?”

“No, he only needs to be—”

Another fireball smacked her square in the chest, stopping her from speaking as she doubled over in pain.

“Hey, Cate, mind waiting for me while I deal with this...person? I won’t be long. Oh, why don’t you find Jack while I do my work?” Dominique cracked her knuckles as she moved forward toward Gianna.

“No,” Gianna said, holding a hand up in front of her to stop Dominique from approaching. “No!”

Dominique offered her an evil grin. “Yeah. And you’re not going to like where you’re going very much at all.”

Dominique clamped a hand around Gianna’s wrist and disappeared from Cate’s sight.

Cate stared at the spot where they’d been before her eyes shifted to the dead man across the room. Killed by Gianna’s own hand, she had been both the reason The Agency thrived in Cate’s time, and its destruction.

She stood frozen for another moment before her senses returned. She needed to find Jack—and get away from the dead body.

With a rapid pulse, she lifted her skirts and hurried to the door, peering into the hallway. It was deserted, so she let herself out, closing the door behind her before she snaked through the halls in search of a way toward the underground cells.

She crept down a set of backstairs, passing a few servants who paid no attention to her before she began her search of the main level, careful to stay away from the party that continued inside of the ballroom.

The last thing she needed was another talk with the King or anyone else from his court. She needed to find Jack and get out of here to make certain things in the future were the way they should be.

Her stomach twisted into a tight knot as she worried about the ripples that would stretch from this murder.

Would this really be over?

As her mind spun, she rounded a corner without checking the hall. Her heart skipped a beat as she ran straight into King Louis.

She swallowed hard, her eyes widening as he arched an eyebrow at her. “Going somewhere, Catherine?”

CHAPTER 26



Cate's lips parted as her chest constricted. The last thing she needed was to be sidetracked by the King, and likely returned to the bedroom to be locked in again.

"Yes, I was...coming to find you," she lied.

His lips curled at the corners. "So very eager...how inviting."

"Actually," Cate said with a shake of her head, "I came to tell you that I do not wish to stay."

His eyebrows hiked high on his head.

"I am returning home at once."

"I'm afraid I could not allow that to happen. Sending a woman into the night alone is not something I am comfortable with. I would suggest you return to your bedroom and rethink your plan."

Cate bit into her lower lip as she struggled to hold her temper. After the night she'd had, she didn't want anything else standing in her way of returning home to determine whether or not things had truly been fixed.

"I'm afraid I cannot—"

The king grabbed hold of her arm, pressing her against the wall as he pushed closer. "I do not think you understand, my dear."

She tried to yank her arm free, but he kept a firm hold on it. "I understand perfectly. You think everything is yours for the taking, but that is not true. I am not."

He frowned at her, his nostrils flaring. "You may think differently about that once your husband is disposed of. I can offer you everything."

He leaned closer, the alcohol on his breath turning her stomach as he pressed his body against hers. She struggled to free herself, but she couldn't.

His hand traveled down her waist toward her skirt.

She squeezed her eyes closed as his lips pressed against her neck.

A second later, the weight of his body lifted.

She snapped her eyes open to see him flying backward, an expression of utter shock on his features before he smacked into the wall and slid down it, landing in a crumpled heap at the bottom.

Cate's jaw unhinged as she stared at him. What had happened?

She glanced down the hall, finding Dominique striding toward her. "Seriously? I'm gone for like two minutes, and you're making eyes at the king again?"

"I wasn't. I was trying to find my way to the dungeon when he appeared and practically assaulted me."

Dominique rolled her eyes as she met Cate. "Yeah, right, sure. I'm telling Marcus when we get back."

Cate clicked her tongue, shaking her head. "Let's just find Jack."

"I'm not the one dragging my feet while I play footsie with King Louis. And he's not even a good kisser. I know from experience."

"Are you serious?" Cate asked as Dominique grabbed hold of her arm and dragged her down the hall.

"Yeah, we had a thing. It didn't last long. Like I said, he's really not that great. Come on, the dungeon is this way. I know that from experience, too."

Cate's eyebrows raised as she stared at Dominique while they marched along.

Dominique slid her gaze sideways and shrugged. "What?"

"Nothing," Cate said with a shake of her head. "I just...hey, where did you take Gianna?"

"Don't ask," Dominique answered as they found a stone set of stairs leading down.

Cate froze, refusing to move as she tugged against Dominique. "I'm serious. Where did you take her? I want to know if there's any chance that she's going to pop back into our lives to ruin them."

"No chance." Dominique lifted the ring Gianna had worn before. "I took this, and I'll destroy it later. And then I delivered Gianna to a nice

place. She's kicking it with my good buddy Bazios right now. She won't be back."

Cate arched an eyebrow as she recalled the snake-like Hellbeast who had once owned Marcus's soul. "Like...the snake guy?"

"One and the same. He'll eat her for lunch. She's never getting out of that situation."

"Gianna can be pretty persuasive," Cate said, a sinking feeling forming in the pit of her stomach.

"Nah. Bazios doesn't like fakers. He only likes the real deal. Witches, warlocks, that sort of thing. Not people who play with magical objects like children. Trust me, Cate, she's not getting out of Hell. Now, can we please go get Jack?"

Cate swallowed hard as she nodded, and they started down the stairs. "What do we have to do to destroy the ring?"

"Take it to Mordor and throw it in the lava," Dominique answered. "It's an arduous journey, but I know a few people who can help out."

Cate slowed her steps, staring at Dominique for a moment. "You're joking, right?"

"Yes, Cate," Dominique answered, her tone exasperated. "Are you really that thick?"

"Sometimes, I can't tell between you and Marcus when you're being serious and when you're joking. You're both so deadpan about it. And also, I'm not sure what's real and what isn't in magic."

"Mordor is *not* a real place. Just in case you were wondering. And sadly, Legolas is very much not real." Dominique sighed as they reached the bottom of the stairs, finding two guards manning the dungeon entrance.

"Party's upstairs," one of them said gruffly. "This place is off limits."

"We won't be long. We just need to pick up a friend," Dominique said.

The guard rose. "I said you can't come in here."

"And I said we needed to pick up a friend." She lifted her arms in the air, and both guards floated upward, their feet leaving the ground.

Their eyes went wide until she shifted her arms to come together, smashing the two guards against each other. They both passed out as their heads smacked into one another, and she let them drop to the floor in a heap.

She casually stepped over their crumpled bodies, glancing over her shoulder at a stunned Cate. "Are you coming?"

Cate hurried after her, hiking her skirt as she climbed over the unconscious guards. Dampness surrounded her, sending a chill down her spine as she entered the dungeon. Unkempt-looking men with gaunt faces peered back at them as they hurried past the cells.

Dominique shifted her gaze back and forth until she finally stopped. Cate's heart skipped a beat as she spotted Jack.

She raced to the bars, wrapping her fingers around them. "Jack!"

"Cate. Thank goodness you're okay. He didn't hurt you, did he?"

"No," she said as she shifted aside to allow Dominique to use her magic to open the cell.

Jack raced out and pulled Cate into a bear hug. "I'm so glad you're okay. Now, we need to find—"

"No," Cate interrupted. "It's done. It's over."

The words, so simple, but so profound, marked the end of an era.

Jack screwed up his face, his eyes silently questioning her. "Over?"

"Gianna accidentally killed one of the founders of The Agency. And then Dominique took her to...well, not a very nice place, but a place she won't get out of. It's over, Jack. It's finally over."

Jack shifted his gaze to Dominique before he focused on Cate again. "You're sure?"

She shrugged. "There's only one way to find out."

He nodded. "We need to go back to our time and make sure everything is okay."

She bobbed her head. "Yes."

They both shifted their gaze to Dominique who stretched her arms to the sides, her features annoyed. "I've been waiting to leave, but you two had to have your moment there."

Jack rolled his eyes at her. "Just open the portal."

Dominique clicked her tongue, indicating her displeasure before she raised her arms. Wind swirled around them before the black portal opened.

Cate entered first, walking through the blackness until she squinted against bright sunshine. As her eyes adjusted, she stared at Dunhaven Castle in the distance.

Her stomach somersaulted. What would she find once she arrived there?

Jack emerged from the portal a moment later, followed by Dominique.

“Ready?” Jack asked after a glance at the castle.

“As I’ll ever be,” Cate answered.

Jack offered his arm, and she slid her hand around the crook of his elbow. Every step they took toward Dunhaven Castle made her muscles tenser. Would The Agency truly be gone? What would this new world look like?

They entered through a side door, slinking through the halls to their respective rooms to change clothes before they sought out anyone else.

As Cate slipped into her normal clothes, a knock sounded at the door.

“Coming!” she called as she zipped up her riding boot.

She hurried across the room, tugging open the door. Her heart stopped as she stared at the person on the other side.

Her eyebrows pinched, her mouth hanging open as she tried to form words. “Hi,” was all she could manage to get out.

The other woman smiled warmly at her. “Hello, Cate,” she said.

“Umm, hello,” Cate answered as she stared at the future version of herself. “I’d ask you to come in, but technically, this is your room.”

Future Cate grinned at her as she stepped inside and eased the door closed. “It’s yours, too. I’ve been expecting you.”

“You have?”

Future Cate nodded. “Yes, I have. I know you’d be back from your trip to rid us of The Agency around now. I remember it all too well.”

“So, we did it?” Cate asked, her heart beating hard as she waited for the answer.

Future Cate smiled at her. “Yes, you did. It’s over. The Agency never formed. Everything is as it should be. Dunhaven Castle is safe, the children are safe.”

Cate stood frozen for a moment before she collapsed onto the chaise, a hand pressed to her belly. “Then it really is over.”

Future Cate eased onto the chaise with her, rubbing her back. “Yes, it is. You did excellent work.”

Another knock sounded at the door, and both Cates shouted for the person to come in.

“Sorry,” Cate said with a wince as Marcus slipped inside the room.

“Have you told her?”

Future Cate smiled at him and nodded. “I just did.”

She rose, and he wrapped his arm around her, kissing her cheek. “It is finally over, Catherine.”

“I can’t believe it,” Cate said with a shake of her head. “I just...can’t believe it’s finally over.”

She glanced up at her future self with her husband. “Can I see the kids?”

“Of course,” Future Cate said with a smile.

“I don’t have to talk to them, I just want to see that they’re okay.”

“You can do whatever you’d like, Cate,” Future Cate said with a smile. “But if you just want to observe, they’re outside playing croquet on the back lawn.”

“I’ll just...take a peek. I just need to see it for myself so this can all sink in.”

Future Cate nodded as she offered Cate her hand. Cate rose, her stomach still fluttering from the excitement.

Hand-in-hand with her future self, she threaded through the halls of Dunhaven Castle to the windows overlooking the back lawn.

Five children laughed and chattered as they played the game. Cate smiled down at them. “They look so happy.”

“They are,” Future Cate said as she stroked Cate’s hair. “And so are you.”

Cate smiled at her as Jack approached, back in his normal attire.

“Well, it seems to have worked,” he answered.

“Of course, it worked,” Dominique said. “Did you doubt me?”

Marcus heaved a sigh at her. “Why did you allow her to stay?”

“Stop,” Future Cate said with a soft smile at him.

“Really, Marc,” Dominique said as she clapped him on the shoulder. “You’re indebted to me. “I’m going to hang out here for a while because of that. Just to really get on your nerves.”

Marcus slid his eyes closed, shaking his head.

Cate let her gaze slide from her future self to Jack. “Well, I guess it’s finally over. I can go home.”

“Yes, you can,” Marcus answered with a nod. “Are you ready?”

Tears formed in her eyes as she glanced at Jack. “Yes, I think so.”

“We’ll see each other soon, Cate. And I’ll be younger, so it’ll be even better. And I can’t wait to solve all those mysteries with you.”

She nodded before she flicked her gaze to Dominique. “Thank you for your help.”

The woman shrugged, refusing to meet her gaze. “No big deal. I really couldn’t stand Gianna, so I would have done it anyway.”

Cate chuckled a little at her response before she turned to her future self.

“Goodbye, Cate. I can’t wait for you to discover everything that’s yet to come.”

Cate squeezed her future self’s hand before she turned to Marcus. “I’m ready.”

“Then, let’s get you back to your life, shall we?”

She nodded as he flicked his gaze to her future self. She smiled at him. “Just this once, you can open the time portal in the house.”

Cate laughed as he spread his arms out in front of him. The winds swirled, and the portal yawned in front of her. With a deep breath, she stepped toward it, toward an unknown future, but a more stable past.

She stepped toward her destiny.

CHAPTER 27



The image of Dunhaven Castle filled in as the portal faded away behind her, snapping shut with a finality that made her heart skip a beat.

She twisted to face the structure, her mind racing as she studied it.

What would she find when she went inside? Would she find the quiet castle she'd experienced when she'd first seen it?

The moment echoed in her mind. The corners of her lips turned up as she recalled stepping from the back of William Smythe's rental car with Riley in her arms. She'd felt an overwhelming sense of home when she'd first seen the gray bricks that made up the facade, and she still did. But the secrets that castle had kept had been beyond what she'd ever imagined possible.

And the other discoveries they'd made had been even more mind-boggling.

She glanced down at her wedding ring, her thumb rubbing it as she started up the hill to the sprawling structure.

As Cate approached the familiar gray facade of Dunhaven Castle, a surge of emotions welled up inside her. Each stone seemed to whisper a welcome, every window flickered with the warm glow of home. The castle had stood as a silent sentinel during her tumultuous journey, and now, it embraced her return, enveloping her in a blanket of security she hadn't realized she'd missed so desperately.

She pushed inside through the front door, finding the castle quiet.

Cate hesitated at the threshold, her heart pounding with a mix of anticipation and fear. What if her actions hadn't changed anything? What if the shadows of The Agency still lingered? She took a deep breath, steadying herself before stepping inside, her eyes scanning for any sign of discord.

Her eyebrow arched as she peered into the living room, then down the hall toward the library. Where was everyone?

With her hands shoved in her pockets, she took a step toward the library when Anna appeared at the top of the staircase. Cate slid her eyes closed as relief washed over her.

"Catherine," she said with a broad smile, "you're back."

"I am," Cate said, her voice trembling with trepidation.

Anna descended the stairs toward Cate, drawing her into a warm embrace as she reached the foyer. "Damien is fine, as is everyone else. And...how did you find the future?"

Anna arched an eyebrow as she pulled back to glance at Cate.

"Illuminating," Cate answered.

Anna offered her a tight-lipped smile. "And do you understand now?"

Cate nodded. "I do."

"All of it? Even the reason I kept it from you?"

Cate squeezed her hand. "I assume it was because I wouldn't have believed it without seeing it for myself. Even then, I was a little stunned."

Anna shifted a lock of Cate's hair over her shoulder as she chuckled. "Yes, that's quite right. Had I simply told you Laura was your daughter, you would have had questions. Questions that I could have answered, but you would have staunchly rejected those answers."

"I almost did that anyway," Cate said with a laugh as Anna guided her down the hall toward the library. "Three kids later, I still didn't think Marcus loved me."

"Oh, darling, how could you believe anything else? It's quite obvious how very enamored with you he is. I could see it the moment I saw you both together."

"But you knew our marriage was fake."

"You can lead a horse to water, Catherine, but you cannot make it drink. You two thought your marriage was fake. I knew the truth all along. You needed to come to it on your own...with a little encouragement." She grinned.

Cate pressed her lips together as she nodded, the corners of her mouth curling. “I appreciate that encouragement, Anna. And all of the help you’ve given me so far—and in the future.”

“That is what mother-in-laws are for, darling.”

Cate pulled the woman into a tight hug as Marcus appeared in the doorway. She smiled at him as she pulled back from the embrace.

Anna kissed her on the cheek. “I will leave you two to talk.”

“Thanks,” Cate said with a squeeze of the woman’s hand.

Marcus kissed his mother’s cheek as she passed him in the doorway.

“We’ll talk soon, darling,” she said.

He stepped inside the room and closed the doors behind him.

Cate studied him as she sucked in a deep breath. “So, do you know what your future self knows or not.”

“I do. I know that we have three beautiful children, and that I happen to be married to quite the heroine.” He narrowed his eyes at her. “And I am fairly certain that the lady in question loves me.”

A smile spread across her face. “She does. And she had no idea how you felt until you told her.”

He clicked his tongue. “Oh, Catherine, how could you not have known how much I loved you?”

“You kind of play things close to the vest,” she said with a slight shrug of her shoulder.

“As do you. You gave me divorce papers,” he answered.

“Yeah, sorry,” she said as he pulled her closer to him. “I thought you wanted out and were just being polite.”

“There is nothing I want less.” He slid a lock of hair behind her ear before he pulled her into a kiss.

She savored the moment, just as she had in the future with the memory that could always comfort her. When they parted, she flicked her gaze up to him. “So, everything here is fine, right? No Agency? No one trying to steal Dunhaven Castle?”

“Not a single disturbance. Life may become downright boring, Catherine.”

“Somehow with you around, I doubt it. Besides, Future Jack told me we solved a lot of things, so it looks like I still have a very interesting life to lead.”

“With your visions, I would say yes. You have a talent. And I’m certain you will use it to help others.”

She smiled at him. “I will.”

He kissed her forehead as a knock sounded at the door before it burst open. Molly, pink in the cheeks and grinning from ear to ear, flitted into the room, tugging Jack along with her.

“Oh, oops, sorry to interrupt.”

“You didn’t,” Cate said with a shake of her head. “We have a lifetime to spend together.”

She slid her hand into Marcus’s and squeezed it as she stared expectantly at Molly. “And it looks like you have something you’d like to share.”

Molly raised her left hand, a sparkling diamond on her ring finger. “I do. We’re engaged!”

“Aww, Molly,” Cate said as she crossed to her friend and pulled her into a hug. “I’m so happy for you.”

She pulled back and shifted to Jack. “And you.”

“Thanks, honey,” Molly said as Marcus offered her his best wishes. “I had to tell you first. None of this would have happened if it hadn’t been for you offering me a new life here. I can never thank you enough for that.”

“There’s no need to thank me, Molly. I’m just glad you found happiness here, just like I did.”

Marcus wrapped his arm around her and pulled her closer. Cate smiled at him before she shifted her gaze to Molly. “Well, it looks like we’ll be busy in the next few months.”

“We will be?” Molly questioned.

Cate bobbed her head. “Uh-huh. We have to plan. We’ll be having a wedding at Dunhaven Castle.”

* * *

THE END

WEDDING AT DUNHAVEN CASTLE



A CATE KENSIE MYSTERY

CHAPTER 1



Cate ducked past the waving arm of Mrs. Campbell as she directed the workers who delivered the wedding arch to be set up outside of the ballroom in the castle's back garden. The late afternoon sun cast long shadows as they worked.

"Oh, Lady Ca—" Mrs. Campbell winced and shook her head. "I am so sorry, it's going to take a bit of getting used to remembering to call you Your Grace."

"Really, Mrs. Campbell, I don't need any titles."

Mrs. Campbell's eyes went wide as she stared at Cate as though she'd asked her to cut her arm off. "But, Your Grace—"

"I know, I know," Cate said with a chuckle as she held her hand up. "It's not proper."

"I quite agree with that," Mrs. Fraser answered as she wrapped a sweater around her shoulders and stepped from the ballroom. "Your Grace is the appropriate term. And you don't hear Miss Andrea calling you anything different. She knows having come from His Grace's household."

Cate offered them both a warm smile. "And she also has been told that I am not partial to titles. I never have been."

"His Grace feels differently," Mrs. Fraser said with a lift of her chin.

"His Grace is not me," Cate said, shaking her head. "But anyway, I'm not here to debate the proper form of address with either of you. I just wanted to check on the preparations. I know Molly wants an update, but she's trying so hard not to ask."

“Why not snap a few pictures for her,” Mrs. Fraser suggested. “Oh, that wedding arch is just lovely, Isla.”

Mrs. Campbell lifted her chin, raising her eyebrows in triumph. “Thank you. I’ve outdone myself, if I do say so. I’ve had this in mind for just such an occasion...although, I must admit...”

Mrs. Campbell hesitated, a nervous chuckle escaping her. “I always thought the wedding we hosted at Dunhaven Castle would be Her Grace’s. Your marriage came as quite a surprise, though.”

Cate smiled at her as the same thought went through her own mind. Her marriage to Marcus had been nothing but surprises. “Well, we are not the most traditional couple. But I think it’s lovely that Molly’s getting married here. She loves it so much, and so does Jack.”

“Yes, but...the housekeeper and estate manager just aren’t quite the same as the mistress of the castle herself. Perhaps one day you and His Grace would consider renewing your vows in a large ceremony?” Mrs. Campbell raised her eyebrows in anticipation of another party to plan.

“If we do, you will be the first call I make.”

Mrs. Campbell opened her mouth to object, but it snapped shut as Mrs. Fraser’s eyebrows raised. She jabbed a finger toward the arch. “Isla, you’d better get over there. That arch does not look centered with the aisle.”

Mrs. Campbell gasped, her eyes going wide. With her clipboard clutched tightly to her chest, she hurried down the aisle created by the tulle-decorated chairs, waving a hand in the air. “No, no, no! You’ve got it wrong!”

“That took care of that,” Mrs. Fraser said to Cate with a smile.

“Thank you for the save, Mrs. Fraser. And how are things going on your end for the wedding preparations?”

“Excellent. The cake that Miss Molly and young Jack will cut for their pictures will be picture-perfect.”

Cate patted Mrs. Fraser’s arm. “It was so nice of you to bake her cake.”

“Miss Molly means quite a bit to me. It’s my pleasure. It was also my pleasure to get rid of that uncouth woman trying to push you and His Grace into a public ceremony.”

Cate chuckled at her. “Thank you again, although I’m certain I could have handled declining. Public ceremonies are not really my thing.”

Mrs. Fraser offered her a knowing smile. “And I have everything all ready for Molly’s uncle. I was surprised when she told me he was the only

one staying at the castle.”

Cate wrapped her arms around her midriff as she watched Mrs. Campbell directing the men to move the arch mere inches to the left without disturbing the flowers woven through the rungs. “I don’t think she gets along well with her sister.”

“Still, you’d think she’d want her to see her new home. Speaking of, Your Grace, it was terribly kind of you to offer them the East Wing.”

“Well,” Cate said with a shrug, “Molly and Jack will need more space than Molly’s room can provide, and it’ll be nice to have Jack on hand for all those leaky pipes and other problems.”

“Of which there are many,” Mrs. Fraser said with a chortle. “Young Jack may prefer his cottage to castle living.”

“I wouldn’t be surprised,” Cate answered. “Anyway, just Roger will be here for the weekend, so it should be an easy party to manage. Molly said he’s not picky.”

“I’ve already learned all of his favorite dishes from her so I could prepare something welcoming. And I’ve got his bedroom made up. It will also be nice to have Ms. Pearson and Mr. Smythe back in the castle again.”

Cate bobbed her head. “Yes. I’m looking forward to their arrival, too.”

She glanced at her watch before she clapped her hands, calling the dogs back to the castle. “Speaking of, I’d better go wait for them. Roger should be arriving at any minute.”

“Aye,” Mrs. Fraser said with a nod. “I will go prepare the snack plate for his arrival. Mr. Smythe and Ms. Pearson won’t be here until later, but don’t worry, I’ve got a snack plate for them, too.”

Cate squeezed Mrs. Fraser’s arm. “I can always count on you, Mrs. Fraser.”

She stepped into the ballroom, her eyes adjusting to the dimmer light. As she took a step to cross it, Molly burst into the room.

“Is there a problem with the arch?” she asked, her eyes wide.

“No,” Cate said with a wince. “No problem. Mrs. Fraser was just trying to distract Mrs. Campbell with something so she’d stop asking if she could plan my second wedding to Marcus.”

Molly’s eyebrows raised before a giggle escaped her. “Are you serious?”

“Yes,” Cate said with a curt nod. “Apparently, Mrs. Campbell always dreamed of planning a wedding for the mistress of Dunhaven Castle. She’s

like a dog with a bone about these things, and I am positive I do not want to remarry Marcus in front of a crowd of people.”.

Molly tilted her head. “Are you sure? You two seem like you’re still smitten with each other.”

“We are,” Cate said, color rising into her cheeks. “But I don’t need to tell all of Dunhaven that.”

“Aww, I certainly understand wanting to keep things private. Although, I don’t want to. I can’t wait to marry Jack in front of everyone in Dunhaven *and* my family, too.”

“Speaking of, are you sure you don’t want more of them to stay with us? It’s perfectly fine, Molly. They’re welcome here.”

Molly lifted her chin, shaking her head. “No. My sister and her family are perfectly fine stuck in that town’s sole bed and breakfast. She is *not* staying here. When I was getting divorced, she wouldn’t help me out at all. No castle for her.”

“As long as you’re sure,” Cate said with a chuckle.

“I am,” Molly said before her shoulders slumped and her nose wrinkled. “You think I’m being way too mean, don’t you? You’re so nice, Cate. You’d never do this.”

“Ohhh, I might,” Cate said. “I’m nice up until a certain point. Then the gloves come off. And anyway, it’s your decision. If only Uncle Roger is invited, then that’s who gets to stay here.”

Molly slid her arm through the crook of Cate’s as they made their way toward the foyer. “Uncle Roger is so nice. You’ll like him. I can’t wait for him to get here. He’s just going to *love* staying in a Scottish castle, even if it isn’t from our clan.”

“That’s right,” Cate said with a nod. “You’re Campbells too. I wonder if—”

“Don’t say it,” Molly warned with a wag of her finger. “We are *not* related to Mrs. Campbell. She’s from another branch.”

Cate pressed her lips together to suppress a laugh as they snaked their way to the front of the house.

“Why don’t you wait in the library? I’ll bring Uncle Roger down once he arrives.”

“Okay,” Cate said with a nod.

She left Molly behind, patting her thigh to call the dogs with her. They trotted down the hall after her to the library. As she pushed inside, both of

them ran for their usual spots near the fireplace where Jack poked at the wood already burning.

“Figured I’d make it cozy in here for Uncle Roger’s arrival,” Jack said as he rose, dusting his hands.

“And it adds to the ambiance,” Cate said with a grin.

“That, too. I’m so glad we finally have a warm ambiance in this place instead of The Agency hanging over our heads.”

“And a wedding to celebrate.” Cate slid into the leather armchair with a satisfied sigh.

“Aye, that too.” Jack checked his watch as he shifted his weight from foot to foot. “I suppose Uncle Roger will be here any minute. I should get out there and wait with Molly before I don’t have a fiancée left.”

Cate tittered at the comment as Jack strode to the door. Left alone, she heaved a sigh, staring into the flames that danced inside the fireplace. So much had changed since she’d first arrived at Dunhaven Castle. While much of it had been difficult, most had ultimately been for the better.

She had two dogs now instead of one, she had a husband, and Molly and Jack had found each other.

Cate leaned her head back against the plush pillow and let her eyes slide closed.

A second later she startled awake as someone whispered in her ear. “You look rather comfortable, dear.”

She pressed a hand against her heart, beating hard from the surprise. “Will you stop sneaking up on me like that?”

Marcus smirked at her as he strode across the room to pour a brandy. “Stop napping in the library.”

“I wasn’t napping,” she answered, rising and crossing over to him. “I wasn’t napping just relaxing.”

“Are you certain you do not wish to be whisked away to Rosenberg Palace whilst the wedding plays out?”

“Yes, I’m certain. Jack and Molly are my best friends. I want to be here for them.”

Marcus arched an eyebrow at her.

“Oh, you may want to avoid Mrs. Campbell. She’s on the prowl trying to get us to renew our vows in a massive ceremony.”

“That woman is really intolerable,” Marcus answered.

“I know. I’ve told her no several times, but you know Mrs. Campbell.”

"I'd prefer I didn't. Are you certain—"

"Yes, you have to come, too. You can't skip out on this wedding."

He heaved a sigh as he stared into his brandy. "Fine."

Cate cocked her head at him, and he kissed her cheek.

"Anything for you, dear."

"Thank you," she answered as Molly's excited voice carried down the hall.

"...and wait until you see the library, Uncle Roger. You're going to love it here."

"I probably won't want to go home," a man's voice answered before the doors burst open.

Molly stood with her arm threaded through an older man's. He glanced around before his eyes settled on Cate.

"And this is Her Grace, Duchess of—"

"Never mind that," Cate said with a wave of her hand in the air. "I'm Cate. You must be Roger."

She crossed to him and thrust her hand out to shake his.

"Yes, I am. And also, very pleased to be invited to stay in your lovely castle."

"Well, we hope you feel as much at home here as we do, so please treat it like your own house." Cate grinned at him before she motioned toward Marcus. "This is my husband, Marcus."

"Duke of Stratfordshire, in case you are so inclined to use the proper title," Marcus said to the man.

"Right, *Marcus*," Roger said with a smile, and Cate stifled the chuckle at the frown on her husband's features.

"Well, please come in, and sit down. If I know Mrs. Fraser—" Cate began just as the woman entered the room.

"I've got a snack for you, Mr. Campbell," Mrs. Fraser said as she flitted into the room with a tray of meat, cheese, and crackers. "Traveling will leave you famished."

"Aw, thank you so much. You must be Mrs. Fraser. Molly's told me so much about you."

"Aye," Mrs. Fraser said with a nod. "I've heard nothing but wonderful things about you, too."

Everyone settled into seats, except Marcus who remained standing with his brandy.

“So, Uncle Roger, did you bring it?” Molly asked as she loaded a cracker with a piece of beef log and a slice of cheddar cheese.

He chuckled as he sipped at the brandy Jack offered him. “I did, I did.”

He raised a finger in the air as he dug into his pocket. “I carried it on me. I didn’t want the airline to lose it.”

Roger pulled a velvet bag from inside his pocket and worked to loosen the drawstring. Molly inched forward, an eager smile on her face.

As he dumped the contents into his palm, an icy wind whipped through the room.

The fire in the fireplace extinguished, the lights went out, and a dark cloud blotted the sun from the sky. Thunder rumbled in the distance, and the delicate scent of lilac floated in the air.

Roger gasped as the doors to the library blew shut, pointing a shaky finger toward them. “A ghost!”

CHAPTER 2



Cate's heart skipped a beat as she twisted to follow the direction of Roger's trembling finger. Had he seen a time-traveler? The castle's reputation for being haunted was a well-known, but the ghosts weren't actually spirits trapped. They were time travelers who popped in at unexpected moments. But Cate had never seen one randomly appear in the library before.

The room's shadows deepened as the storm outside thrashed against the windows, the flickering of lightning casting eerie, dancing silhouettes that transformed the mundane into specters. In the dim, uncertain light, the line between reality and apparition blurred.

As Cate turned, her eyes locked on a ghostly figure, translucent and shimmering against the dark wood of the library. The apparition, dressed in an ethereal gown that fluttered like mist, slowly faded until only the echo of its presence lingered.

A cold shiver raced down Cate's spine, her breath catching as she stared at the empty air where the ghostly figure had stood. Her heart pounded in her ears, a mix of fear and fascination rooting her to the spot.

As she rose from her seat to investigate, the lights flickered then hummed back to life. She shared a glance with Jack, who furrowed his brow, offering her a silent confirmation that he had seen it too.

Molly grabbed hold of her uncle's hand. "Uncle Roger, this might sound odd, but I'm not exactly shocked. I glimpsed something... or someone... in

that hallway once. A woman in old-fashioned clothing. I haven't seen her since, but I'm still not convinced that this place isn't haunted."

"I'm not sure that's true," Cate said with a nervous chuckle as she eased back into the chair, trying to play it off as nothing. "What exactly did you see?"

"A woman," Roger said with a nod. "In old-fashioned clothing. Red hair, pale skin. She reminded me of Molly."

Molly tugged her chin back to her chest. "Oh, that's not what I saw. The woman I saw didn't have red hair. Maybe there are two ghosts."

Roger's forehead creased as he stared at Cate. "Did you catch sight of her?"

"I didn't, I'm afraid," Cate said with a smile that she hoped conveyed confidence.

Roger glanced around the room at the others. "No one? Jack? Marcus?"

"I saw nothing," Marcus answered. "And I am very sorry to depart from this...interesting gathering, but there is something I need to attend to. Catherine, may I have a word before I go?"

"Of course," Cate said as she rose. "Excuse me for just a minute, then we'll get to the bottom of this, I promise."

With a smile plastered on her features, she followed Marcus from the room into the hall. "Where are you going? You can't skip this wedding, you know."

"I will be here for all the events, Catherine. I don't mind Molly. She is a lovely addition to the staff. Her husband of choice is questionable, but still..."

Cate pressed her lips together in a silent warning.

"I will be here," he promised. "However, I do think you may wish to look into the uncle's claim. He may not just be seeing things."

Cate lowered her voice, her eyes going wide. "You think there was a ghost?"

"I think he saw something. And the mysterious power outage seems to be connected to it."

"Can't you...banish it or something?" she asked with a shrug.

"I am afraid it is not that simple. I will do some digging on my end, but more details from the man would be useful." After kissing her cheek, he stepped past her down the hall.

"Are you seriously leaving?"

“I can’t very well go back inside after I said I had business to attend to. I will visit with Mother. Let me know what the man says.”

Cate let her shoulders slump as he strode away, hesitating a moment before she slipped back into the library. “I’m sorry about that. Now, you were saying you saw a red-haired woman?”

“Yes. Resembled Molly,” Roger answered.

“Hmm, I’m not sure if any of my ancestors had red hair,” Cate answered, “but I’ll certainly look into it.”

The room fell into silence for a moment before Molly rubbed her uncle’s arm. “Well, anyway, let’s not let some ghosts spoil our fun. You said you brought the ring, right?”

Roger nodded as he produced the velvet bag again. “I did, yes.”

He slid a sapphire ring from inside, displaying it in the palm of his hand. Molly’s jaw dropped open as she grabbed it and held it up. The gemstone in the middle sparkled in the light.

As Molly studied it, another icy gust rushed past Cate. She twisted instinctively to glance at the spot Roger had pointed at before but found nothing.

“Oh, it’s even more beautiful in person. Thank you, Uncle Roger.”

“Of course,” he said with a smile. “As soon as I heard you were getting married here, I knew you had to have it. The ring is a family heirloom.”

“Oh, how nice. Has it been passed down through generations to new brides?”

Roger bobbed his head. “Yes, and the legend is, if the new bride doesn’t wear it on her wedding day, she’ll be cursed.”

“Cursed?” Cate exclaimed. “Are you joking?”

“I’m not.” Roger shook his head.

“I didn’t wear it when I married Tom,” Molly said with a wince. “And look what happened.”

“Molly,” Cate chided gently, “you can’t blame that on a curse. That was Tom’s fault.”

“Well,” Molly said, sliding the ring onto her right-hand ring finger, “I’m not taking any chances with this one.”

Cate squeezed Molly’s hand. “It’s really beautiful. So, how did this curse come about?”

“One of our ancestors, Eliza Campbell, was set to wed her beau,” Roger pointed at the ring on Molly’s finger. “That was her engagement ring. She

never married the man, and it's said she cursed all the women in the family. The only way to break it is to pay her homage by wearing her engagement ring."

"Why did she never marry?" Cate asked.

"No one knows." Roger shrugged. "She disappeared, leaving the ring and a note behind. There are all sorts of rumors about what happened—that she ran off with another man, she was jilted, she caught her fiancé cheating, but no one knows what truly happened to Eliza Campbell."

Cate flicked her eyebrows up as he finished the story. "Well, I certainly hope the ring brings you luck, Molly. You deserve it. But then again... marrying this guy, you never know."

Laughter erupted from the group before conversation turned to wedding plans. With Cate promising a tour of the castle before dinner, Roger and Molly excused themselves to get him settled in his room.

As the doors swung shut behind them, Cate twisted to face Jack. "So, did you catch sight of the ghost?"

Jack shook his head, his features pinching. "No, not really. But I felt a coldness. I wonder if someone was time traveling nearby."

"That's not what Marcus thinks," Cate said, her features turning pensive.

"Really?" Jack slouched in the leather chair. "The old warlock believes in ghosts?"

"Apparently," Cate said. "He asked that we find out more from Roger and look into this."

"Did he see something?"

"He says he didn't," Cate answered with a shrug, "but he thought we should look into it."

Jack screwed up his face. "Seriously? I feel like this can be chalked up to the time travel stuff."

"I'm not so sure about that. We've never had a time-traveler in this area. Just the one Molly saw in the hall, but never in the library. And coupled with the power outage, I'm starting to wonder if there may not be something more to this."

"So, you think there may actually be a ghost?"

Cate wrinkled her nose as she shot him a questioning glance. "Well, there is time travel, witches, warlocks, vampires...why not ghosts?"

Jack let his head fall back against the cushion behind him with a deep sigh. “Ugh. Just what I need. Another supernatural creature roaming about. Well, what did the old man say to do about it?”

“Investigate,” Cate said. “He says he can’t magic it away, so I guess we need to look into this presence.”

“*If* there is a presence,” Jack said as he rose from his seat with a heavy sigh.

“Oh,” Cate exclaimed, her eyes falling to the table in front of her, “Molly left her ring. I should return it to—”

As she picked up the sapphire gemstone ring, the lights flickered again before going off. With the sun now below the horizon, they were plunged into darkness.

“Jack?” Cate called as an icy breeze swept past her. Her breath started to cloud in front of her as the room turned cold.

She shivered, glance in Jack’s direction.

“Cate?” Jack answered.

She rose and shifted closer to him as the doors blew open. Her eyes snapped to the doorway, going round as she stared at the ethereal presence hovering there.

“Uhhh, Jack, are you seeing what I’m seeing?”

“If you’re seeing a red-haired woman in tartan who looks a tad like Molly, then yes,” he answered.

“Yep. That’s what I’m seeing,” she said, her stomach turning over. “And she seems to be calling to us.”

“I wish she wasn’t,” Jack answered, his voice just above a whisper.

“She wants us to follow her. Come on,” Cate said as she grabbed his hand, pulling him along with her.

She closed her fingers tighter around the ring still in her other palm as they ventured into the dark hallway.

The lights went out one by one as the ghost approached them, floating down the middle of the hall toward an unknown destination.

Cate and Jack followed behind her, winding through the halls as the ghost led them.

They rounded a corner, approaching the west wing. She disappeared through the double doors closing the wing off from the rest of the castle.

Jack fumbled in his pocket for the keys, but when Cate twisted the doorknob, the door swung open. She shared a glance with Jack, shrugging

before she continued in, finding the red-haired woman waiting for them.

“Where is she taking us?” Jack asked.

Cate shrugged as they ascended a staircase. She swatted at cobwebs that stretched from ceiling to wall as they crept through the darkened halls until they found the ghost waiting outside of a bedroom door.

After the ghost disappeared through the wooden barrier, Cate pushed inside. The spirit of the woman floated near a corner before she motioned for them to follow and disappeared through a wall.

“Well, that’s the end of the line. We can’t walk through walls,” Jack said with a shake of his head.

“I’m not sure we’ll have to,” Cate answered.

She crossed the room and rubbed a hand against the aging blue wallpaper. A breeze seemed to tickle her skin as she stood in front of the wall. Her eyebrows pinched as her fingers searched for a release to open the way.

Her eyes centered on a silver scone hanging on the wall. With an arched eyebrow, Cate pulled on it. A boom resounded, and the wall fell away, revealing a secret passage.

Cate and Jack shared a glance before returning their gazes to the opening yawning in front of them.

“Well,” Cate said with a shrug of one shoulder, “it looks like we can follow her.”

CHAPTER 3



Cate shivered, the cold clawing at her skin as she peered into the dense, oppressive blackness that seemed to swallow the narrow passage ahead. An icy chill wafted past her, tousling her hair and forcing her arms to wrap around her midriff in an attempt to stay warm.

Jack grimaced as he dug his cell phone from his pocket, toggling on the flashlight. “I was kind of hoping this was a dead end but leave it to Cate Kensie to find a way forward.”

“Sorry,” Cate said with a shrug. “But this is...new, and I wanted to follow up on it.”

“I’ll say. Of all the things that have happened within this castle’s walls over all of the centuries, I never expected a ghost.”

“Jack!” Cate exclaimed with a chuckle as they took their first steps into the passage. “Are you kidding? When I first came here, we didn’t know anything about the time travel. Everyone said the castle was haunted.”

“I know what everyone said. But I never believed any of it. I thought they were all making up stories. Ghosts, warlocks, all nonsense.”

“And then I married one.”

Jack wrinkled his nose as they crept forward, shaking his head at her. “I know. I’m still not okay with it.”

“My sincerest apologies,” she said, “but it turns out...I love him.”

Jack heaved a sigh. “We can’t choose who we love, I suppose. Did you always, though, or did something happen in the future?”

Cate ran her fingers along the unfinished walls, squinting into the darkness ahead in search of the ghost. "I loved him before I went to the future. I just didn't know he felt the same way."

"But he told you that in the future? Or was it just the fact that you were still married. At least, I'm assuming that's what you experienced."

She slowed her steps, twisting to face her friend. "I saw a lot in the future. So many things. But yes, he told me, though it was obvious we'd stayed married because of how we both felt."

Jack slid his gaze to Cate, his eyebrows raising. "I shouldn't ask this, but...Molly and I...are we happy?"

Cate bobbed her head, the corners of her lips curling. "I didn't want to give anything away, but yes. You are both happy."

"Whew," Jack said, wiping at his brow. "That's good. I'm glad to know that. I probably shouldn't know any more than that, but at least I know that."

"It's...a whole new world there, Jack. But I'll do my best not to spoil it for you."

Jack swallowed hard, his features pinching as he stared at Cate. "That just sounds...awful. Why does it sound so bad when you say it like that?"

"It's not. I was just a little...shocked, was all."

Jack's lips parted as he stared at her, his forehead creased. "Ohhhh, Cate. That sounds...terrible."

Cate chuckled, covering her lips as she tried to stop. "It's not. I'm sorry. It's not. I just...I learned a lot about my visions. My assumptions about what was happening were so far off base..."

She shook her head as her expression sobered.

"We never did get to talk about those. I thought it may be crossing the line to ask."

She reached out to squeeze his arm. "No, of course not. I did live through the moment I'd been seeing."

"And was it with your mother? Was she in the future?" Jack asked.

"No," Cate said with a soft smile, recalling meeting her children there. "No, the Laura from my vision wasn't my mother. She was...is...will be my daughter."

Jack's features softened, a slight smile crossing his face. "Oh, Cate... that's...wow. I see what you mean now. That must have been...a surprise,

but I hope a pleasant one, meeting your own child that you haven't even had yet."

"Yes. It was quite a surprise to meet all three of them."

"Three?!" Jack exclaimed as they continued down the passage. "Okay, that would have been...mind-blowing. I hope someone broke it to you gently, at least."

"Nope. I went into the library after Marcus tried to warn me and ran straight into my son. I nearly fainted when he called me 'Mother.'"

"I would have fainted dead away if I walked into my son," Jack said.

Cate suppressed another giggle as he recalled meeting Jack's twins. That was a detail she should not let slip.

"Well, we'll make sure you never have to travel to the future. So, sadly, it looks like you'll always be traveling to the past with my uncomfortable clothing."

"Or at the very least, tell me now if I have a son."

Cate drew her chin back to her chest, her eyebrows shooting up. "Really? Do you want me to tell you?"

Jack slowed to a stop, twisting to stare at her. "Wait...you would know, wouldn't you? Molly and I...we're still at Dunhaven. You knew we were happy..."

"I talked to Future Jack. Future Jack and I worked together to get rid of The Agency," Cate answered.

"And Future Jack has to worry about saving for college or Future Jack has boundless money from living a child-free life?"

"Ummm," Cate said, biting into her lower lip. "Future Jack doesn't need to worry about college costs."

Jack huffed out a breath, a slight smile on his lips. "So, we don't have any children. Ah, well, maybe that's for the best."

Cate shook her head. "I didn't say that."

He snapped his gaze to her, his features questioning. "You said—"

"I said you didn't have to worry about tuition. Marcus handled that. Your kids were going to Eton with mine."

Jack staggered back a step, falling into the wall behind him, his features a mask of shock. "Kids? Multiple?"

"Twins," Cate said.

"Ohhhh," Jack answered as he pressed a hand to his forehead. "Twins. That's..."

“They’re lovely children. A boy and a girl,” Cate said. “Molly has them between my oldest and middle child. They all grew up closely.”

Jack peeled himself from the wall, sucking in a sharp breath. “Well, I suppose that’s a good thing. After all the MacKenzies and the Reids need to protect time travel.”

“Yes, they do,” Cate said. “And it looks like our kids will be primed to do that. They’ve grown up friends.”

Jack focused his light further down the passage, and they continued along it. “That’s good. And I suppose I ought to be grateful that your illustrious husband was kind enough to further their educations.”

“You two actually kind of get along in the future,” Cate said with a chuckle.

“Wonders never cease, I suppose,” Jack said as the passage opened into a small room. “What is this place?”

Cate glanced around the space, finding a small writing desk shoved in the corner. A burnt-down candle had melted onto the top of it. She approached it, running her finger over a thick layer of dust that covered the top. “Whatever it is, it looks like it hasn’t been used in a very long time.”

Jack shined his light on the desk. “Or ever. Maybe this was just a storage space.”

“Then why would the ghost have led us here?”

Jack winced, glancing over his shoulder at the passage behind them. “Uh-oh. I hope she didn’t trap us inside here.”

“She seemed like she wanted us to find something, not to trap us.”

“How could you tell that? She could have been beckoning us so she could lock us in here,” Jack retorted, letting the light slide around the room as he searched it.

“Wait!” Cate exclaimed, grabbing his wrist and tilting it. The flashlight’s beam reflected off of something under the desk. She leaned closer, crouching down to study it.

“What is it?”

“Looks like a book or a journal,” Cate answered as she reached for it. She grabbed hold of the dusty tome, thumbing through it.

Dust plumed into the air as the hand-written pages flew by. She landed on the first page, her heart skipping a beat as she read the words.

With wide eyes, she snapped her gaze to Jack. “Jack, this is Molly’s ancestor’s journal. She was here at Dunhaven Castle.”

“Aye,” Jack said with a nod. “It certainly appears she was. And now her spirit is here instead. And that can’t be a good thing.”

Cate pressed her lips together as she stared at the yellowed pages in the journal. “We need to read this and see if it tells us why she’s suddenly appeared.”

“Maybe even ask Roger. I’m sure he’d love to take a look at this.”

“Yes, you’re right. Let’s find him,” Cate said with a nod.

With the journal in hand, they retraced their steps down the passage and into the bedroom. After closing the panel, they made their way back to the main castle, climbing the stairs and snaking through the halls to the Green Room.

Cate’s mind whirled, wondering what stories they may learn from within the aged pages as she knocked on Roger’s door.

Molly pulled it open a few minutes later. “Your Grace, hello. Uncle Roger’s all settled. And he loves the room.”

She kissed Jack on the cheek as both of them entered the large space, finding Roger with a plate of cookies and hot chocolate near a glowing fire in the sitting area.

He rose as they approached. “I do love the room. I didn’t expect it to be this large.”

“Mine’s even bigger,” Molly said with a chuckle, “and wait until you see what I’ve done with the East Wing where Jack and I will be living.”

“And it looks like you also love Mrs. Fraser’s hot chocolate,” Cate said. “I do, too.”

“It’s very good,” Roger answered.

Cate smiled at him before she raised the journal in her hand. “Well, I not only wanted to check on you to see how the room suited, but also, Jack and I made a bit of a discovery. After you spotted your ghost, we went on a fact-finding mission. We think we encountered the same woman you saw in the library.”

Roger’s features pinched as he set down his mug. “You mean...you saw it again, too.”

Molly’s face turned pale as she clutched her uncle’s arm.

“Yes,” Cate said with a nod. “When I picked up the ring you brought, that icy cold came back along with what looked like a woman.”

Cate held up the ring before she passed it back to Roger. “We followed her to a room in the West Wing and found a secret passage.”

“Are you kidding?!” Roger exclaimed. “Oh, I’ve always wanted to explore a secret passage in a castle.”

“I’m sorry to say, we’ve already done the exploring, but we’d be happy to show it to you,” Jack said. “You’re not missing much, though.”

“We brought you the best part,” Cate added. “We found this journal.”

She flipped open to the first page. “And look...it belonged to Eliza Campbell. I think your ghost may be your ancestor. I think Eliza may have been here at Dunhaven Castle.”

Roger’s eyes widened as he peered at the hand-written words in the journal. “I can’t believe it. I didn’t know she was ever here.”

“It appears she was. We thought we could dive into this together,” Jack said. “Give it a read and see why her spirit may be showing up now.”

Roger eased into the armchair, pressing his mouth into a thin line. “I don’t know how you can take this all in stride. I’m a little nervous as to why she’d be here.”

“Oh, well,” Jack said with a shrug, “it’s an old castle. It’s got lots of ghosts.”

Roger glanced up at them, his gaze bouncing between Cate and Jack. “I think we need to read that journal.”

CHAPTER 4



With fresh hot chocolates and a new tray of cookies, Cate, Jack, Roger, and Molly settled into the seats in the living room with the journal in front of them.

“I still don’t understand why this would be here,” Molly said after a sip of her hot chocolate. “I had no idea the Campbells were ever at Dunhaven Castle.”

“Neither did I,” Roger answered. “It’s news to me, too. But Jack and I took a look at the journal while you ladies were gathering the snacks. I hope no one minds.”

“Not at all. Were you able to learn anything useful?” Cate asked, curling her legs under her on the couch.

“Well, yes,” Roger said as he patted the journal. “Much of it is disjointed or unclear, but it seems Eliza had come here to wed one of the Reids.”

Cate pulled her chin back to her chest, her eyebrows raising. “Really? How interesting. And now Molly is about to wed a Reid, too. It’s like history repeating itself.”

Roger wrinkled his nose at the words. “I hope not.”

“Why, Uncle Roger?” Molly asked.

“And which Reid was she marrying?” Cate chuckled as he waved a finger between the two of them. “I hope you’re not related.”

“We aren’t,” Jack answered sharply as Molly’s eyes widened. “I texted Pap the name we found in the journal. Jonathan Reid. He was a great-great-

great uncle or something, not direct in my line.”

“Yes, and more than that,” Roger added, his eyebrows raising, “Jonathan and Eliza never married.”

Molly’s features pinched. “Why?”

Jack shifted uncomfortably on the loveseat next to her. “I’m afraid the tale is rather scandalous.”

Molly arched an eyebrow. “How scandalous?”

“It seems, according to what we could piece together from Eliza’s journal, that Jonathan was quite a rogue. He had been carrying on with one of the maids here at Dunhaven Castle, a place he frequented quite a bit with his brother.”

“Oh, no,” Cate said with a frown. “How awful. I’ll bet Eliza was devastated.”

Roger nodded, paging through the book to a specific entry. He tapped the hand-written words with a finger. “Yes, she says here she is heartbroken. Apparently, Jonathan had stolen her heart.”

Jack nodded, leaning forward to grab another cookie. “And he was set to steal her money, too.”

“Eliza overheard him planning with the maid. He would marry her, then have her declared insane. That would leave him with all of her money. He could then quietly divorce her over the matter and wed the maid.” Roger shook his head at the woeful tale.

“At least, that’s what he claimed he would do,” Jack said with a heavy sigh. “I wonder if he would have simply taken the money and ran.”

Cate’s fingers tightened around her mug, the warmth a stark contrast to the chill of the tale. “What a shame. What happened to them? Did she leave Dunhaven Castle heartbroken?”

“That’s where the story takes a darker turn,” Roger answered. “It seems Eliza Campbell never left Dunhaven Castle at all.”

“What?” Molly cried, her features twisted with confusion.

“Aye,” Jack answered in a low, gravelly tone. “She committed suicide here.”

A shiver snaked down Cate’s spine as he said the words. Thunder rumbled again in the distance as a storm pushed along the ridge.

“How awful,” Cate murmured.

Roger bobbed his head again. “A terrible shame. But there’s more.”

“More?”

Roger flipped to another entry in the book. "According to this journal, she didn't curse the women in her line—she cursed any man carrying the Reid name. If any of them dared to marry at Dunhaven Castle, they were doomed to a short, miserable married life."

Cate's lips parted as she widened her eyes. "Cursed?"

"Oh no!" Molly exclaimed.

Jack patted her knee. "Now, Molly, curses aren't real."

She tugged her lips into a deep frown. "I don't want to take any chances, though. I've already had one bad break. I don't want to tempt fate for another."

"I'm sure Jack's right. They're probably just angry words written by a jilted woman," Cate assured Molly, though in the back of her mind, she was already forming a plan to look into the curse. After everything she'd seen while living at Dunhaven Castle, she didn't want to take the chance either.

Molly groaned as she set her hot chocolate down, her features tightly pinched. She let her head fall into her hands. "I don't know."

"Molly, we're getting married in two days. There's not much we can do about this."

"But we have to," Molly said. "Jack, if this curse is real, we can't get married here. Maybe not at all."

A sob escaped Molly, and she leapt from her seat, racing from the room as tears began to fall.

"Oh, no," Cate said, setting her mug on the tray. "I'd better go see if she's okay."

"I'll go," Roger offered. "Maybe I can give her some hope that this curse is just an old wives' tale."

Cate smiled as the man laid the journal on the table and pushed out of his chair, leaving them behind to search for Molly.

As the door closed behind him, Cate shifted her gaze to Jack. "So, what do you really think?"

Jack shrugged, his lips pressed into a thin line. "I'm not sure what to think. With everything we've seen in the past few years, I wish I could be more definite."

"Same here," Cate said with a wrinkled nose. "I said what I said to Molly because I didn't want her to worry, but...I'm afraid the curse may be real."

Jack sucked in a sharp breath as he nodded. "So am I. Which means in two days...I'll be doomed."

"Not if we can break this thing," Cate said, a glimmer of mischief in her eye as she leaned closer to Jack.

"And how to propose we do that? No, wait, I know exactly how you propose we do it. You want us to time travel."

Cate nodded, the corners of her lips curling as lightning lit the sky in the distance.

"Cate, we can't do that. There's too much—" Jack's words cut off, and he shook his head. "You know what, you're right. This is exactly what we need to do."

Cate pulled the journal closer. "This is dated. We can head back to just days before their wedding and see what's happening. Maybe we can stop her from cursing the Reids entirely."

"Maybe we can. Which would mean the journal would change, and then neither Roger nor Molly would know about the curse, right?" Jack leapt from his seat, pacing as he rubbed his chin.

"Right," Cate said. "We can reset everything so you have a happy wedding day."

Jack stared at the door where Molly had disappeared moments earlier. "All right. I think we need to do this."

"She was here in the 1820s. There are trunks of clothes in the tower room. I'll find what we need. Let's head back tonight."

"All right. After dinner, we'll do our first reconnaissance mission. Just leave my clothes in my usual bedroom."

Cate nodded as she rose. "I will. And we'll meet on the backstairs. With a house full of people, we'll need to be careful not to get caught."

"Thank heavens the universal portal is in the secret passage."

Cate grinned at him, raising her eyebrows. "We can do this."

"For my sake, I hope so," Jack answered.

They parted ways with Jack heading off to find Molly and Roger while Cate greeted Mr. Smythe and Gayle.

"Oh, Cate, it's so lovely to be back at Dunhaven, and for a wedding no less," Gayle said with a warm smile as she stepped into the foyer.

"We're all very excited about it," Cate said. "Although, Molly is having some pre-wedding jitters."

"Oh, no," Gayle said with a concerned frown. "A case of cold feet?"

“Not quite,” Cate answered. “We stumbled upon a journal from one of Molly’s ancestors. Apparently, she’d been here at Dunhaven in the 1820s. She was set to marry an ancestor of Jack’s, but there was an affair, and Eliza took her life.”

“Oh, dear,” Gayle said, shaking her head.

“And, of course, there is the tale that she cursed any Reid who marries on the property.”

“Oh, heavens.” Gayle puckered her lips.

“If there isn’t a problem just before a wedding, is it really a wedding?” Mr. Smythe said with a slight grin. “I do hope the problems work themselves out.”

“I’m sure they will,” Cate answered, “but we may be dining with a slightly smaller party tonight after that revelation.”

Gayle squeezed Cate’s arm. “Well, I do hope Molly and Jack are feeling up to joining us, but even if they are not, the company will be perfectly fine.”

“Will His Grace be joining us?” Mr. Smythe asked as Cate led them upstairs to their bedrooms.

“He had better be,” Cate said with a chuckle.

Mr. Smythe grinned at her as they reached his room. “Oh, excellent. I had hoped for another chess match with him. He is a fantastic opponent.”

“I’m certain he would be glad to oblige you,” Cate answered.

After she left both of them in their rooms to freshen up before dinner, Cate climbed the spiraling stairs to the tower room. After shoving a few trunks aside, she located the appropriate clothing for the period, gathering what she needed for herself and Jack.

She dropped his things off in his bedroom, wondering how the conversation was progressing with Molly, before she returned to her own bedroom.

Andrea met her there to ready her for dinner. Her ladies’ maid arched an eyebrow as she stared at the clothes. “Going somewhere, Your Grace?”

Cate plopped into her chair at the vanity. “Yes. Jack and I discovered a journal earlier written by Molly’s ancestor. She was set to marry a Reid here at the castle, but it didn’t work out. She supposedly cursed any Reid that dared to marry on the property. With Jack set to marry here in two days, we thought it may be prudent to do our best to break that curse.”

Andrea brushed through Cate's hair as she nodded. "I quite agree. Poor Mr. Reid."

"Yes," Cate said with a nod. "I'm really hoping traveling back in time to when this happens will help in some way."

She wrinkled her nose as thoughts of what may happen if they weren't able to solve this problem danced in her mind. "Because if we don't, I'm not sure this wedding should go on."

CHAPTER 5



Cate's nerves tingled as she shifted from foot to foot at the top of the backstairs, the fabric of her period dress rustling softly in the quiet of the corridor. Each rustle echoed the gravity of their mission—breaking a centuries-old curse that threatened to seep into her present.

She fussed with a lace detail on her dress, her fingers trembling slightly. They'd endured plenty at the hands of The Agency, but this struck too close to home. Solving a mystery was one thing—breaking a curse that directly affected those closest to her was something else entirely.

She gnawed on her lower lip as she wondered what they would find when they appeared in 1823. Before she could delve too deep into it, Jack rounded the corner, tugging at his collar.

“Unhappy with the clothing?” Cate asked.

“Yes,” he answered, “although, I’m not going to the future, so I guess I have to get used to it, don’t I?”

She giggled as they crept down the stairs, hoping to avoid the rest of the household who should have retired to their rooms already. “The future was much more comfortable, except for the formal dinners I somehow managed to allow Marcus to talk me into.”

“Formal dinners?” Jack questioned. “Like every night?”

“Sadly, yes. He thinks it’s important for the children.” Cate shrugged. “I would be happy in leggings, but I guess marriage is about compromise.”

“I hope Molly is fond of my flannel shirts because that is a compromise I’m not willing to make,” Jack said with a shake of his head.

Cate chuckled as she patted his arm. "Molly's perfectly fond of them. It's Marcus who dislikes them."

"Well, that's not a surprise," Jack said as they reached the bottom of the stairs. He leaned around the corner, peering up and down the hall. "Clear."

They hurried out of the stairway, their footsteps echoing softly on the stone floor, passing walls hung with oil portraits of stern-faced ancestors and flickering torches that cast ghostly shadows.

Cate crossed to the sconce and tugged on it. The secret panel in the wall slid open, and they disappeared into the blackness.

Jack clicked on the flashlight that he'd brought, and they crept forward in the passage. Cate tugged the timepiece from under her dress, holding it in the palm of her hand.

"It's been a while since we've done this, huh?"

"Aye," Jack said with a nod. "A long while. We really got spoiled with Marcus's magical time portals."

Cate chuckled as the cool metal pressed against her skin while she set the date into the pocket watch. "We did. But they are kind of a pain with all the wind."

"Right. My hair was always a wreck. At least this way, I'll appear in 1823 in pristine condition."

"Good thing. We're showing up just before a wedding. We need to look our best. Ready?" Cate glanced up at him, her eyes questioning.

"As I'll ever be." Jack set the flashlight down and wrapped his hand around Cate's, placing his thumb against the face of the timepiece.

With a rub, they both transported to another time at Dunhaven Castle.

"Well," Jack said as he glanced around, "the flashlight is gone, so I guess we're here."

Cate nodded as she waited for her eyes to adjust to the darkness. "I really wish I had night vision."

"You and me both. I should have brought the blasted flashlight with me and left it in the passage."

"Someone could have discovered it," Cate said with a shake of her head.

"Maybe they'll invent it sooner, then, so we don't have to creep around in the dark," Jack answered.

Cate chuckled at him as she used her fingers to guide her along through the passage. "Soon, we'll be sneaking into the castle and desperately trying

not to get caught while we get the lay of the land.”

“I don’t love this plan, but I also don’t love introducing ourselves to Finlay and Camdyn,” Jack said with a shake of his head. “Family politics isn’t something we can afford to get involved with right now.”

“Maybe another time when we don’t have a curse to break,” Cate said.

Jack poked a finger at her as they approached the panel. “Right. So, for now, we’ll lay low and try to glean any details we can about what happened with Eliza and Jonathan.”

“Yes,” Cate said as she eased the panel back and peered into the hall. “Maybe we can find some detail that will help us break the curse.”

Candlelight lit the hallway beyond the secret passage. “Everyone should be at the pre-wedding ball, so we should be able to sneak through the castle easily.”

“The hall looks clear,” Jack whispered.

Cate nodded and pulled the panel open wider, slipping from the passage with Jack following her.

“According to the journal, Eliza and Jonathan had a row this evening that led to her taking her own life. We should find a good hiding spot outside of the ballroom and see if we can catch sight of them,” Cate suggested.

Jack nodded. “Right. Although, I’m not certain we’re going to be able to break this curse without inserting ourselves into the situation.”

Cate pressed her lips together. She’d already come to that conclusion. Merely observing wouldn’t change anything, and the curse would continue into their time. Unless there was some mechanism that could be used to break it. But would they be able to determine that from merely observing the events in this time?

“I’ve already considered that. But for now, let’s just tackle seeing the events up close. It may give us some idea on how to proceed next,” Cate answered.

They rounded the corner and headed to the ballroom. The sounds of laughter, chatter and music filled the air. The party seemed to be in full swing, except it was missing two key members.

Cate’s eyes went wide as a red-headed woman resembling the spirit they’d followed in their time appeared in the hall.

Cate darted toward a set of double doors that lead to a private sitting room and pushed inside them.

Jack slipped in behind her. “Whew, that was close.”

“Yeah, and—” Cate’s words caught in her throat as her eyes fixed on the doorknob as it started to twist.

She grabbed hold of Jack and dragged him toward the sofa across the space, ducking behind it.

The doors burst open, and Eliza stormed inside, followed by a tall man. She whipped around to face him, her cheeks burning red.

“How dare you, Jonathan!”

Cate’s eyebrows rose toward her hairline. That had to be Jonathan Reid, Eliza’s fiancé.

“How dare I?” He wagged a finger in her face. “No, how dare *you* embarrass me like this.”

“Embarrass you? Embarrass *you*? Do you not think I was embarrassed when Moira warned me about what was happening under my very nose? When your mistress came to me to tell me she owned your heart?”

Cate sucked in a sharp breath, tapping Jack’s arm. “Moira, my ancestor, and the mistress of the house.”

Jack bobbed his head, recognizing the name.

“That is untrue. Moira is merely making trouble.”

“No,” Eliza answered with a shake of her head, her features taut. “No, Elsa confirmed it when I confronted her. And she took great pleasure in informing me that she held the key to your happiness. And if that is the case, fine. I release you of any obligation to me.”

Eliza tore the sapphire ring off of her finger and tossed it at him. “Take your ring.”

Jonathan’s features twisted with surprise as the ring smacked him in the chest before clattering across the floor. His expression shifted quickly, his nostrils flaring, and his lips tugging into a tight frown. “Pick that up.”

“No,” she shot back. “You pick it up. We are finished, Jonathan.”

“We are not, Eliza. You are my fiancée, and tomorrow, you will be my wife. Now, pick up that ring and compose yourself. We have a ball to finish and guests to entertain.”

“I will not.” Her green eyes dared him to argue. “We are finished. Perhaps you can attend the ball with Elsa. She seems most interested in having your attention tonight.”

“I will have no more of this,” Jonathan growled as he stopped to pick up the ring. “Put this on, and let us return to the ballroom.”

“I said no,” she answered, lifting her ball gown and skirting around him.

He grabbed hold of her arm, yanking her backward. “And I told you I will not tolerate this behavior anymore. You are angry. I concede that my behavior has been intolerable, but it is something you will grow accustomed to.”

“I will never,” Eliza answered, her voice a defiant shout. She tried to pull her arm from his grasp, but he tightened his fingers around her.

She cried out in pain as he forced her to her knees. “Jonathan, you’re hurting me.”

“And I will do worse than that if you break this engagement. We are engaged, and we *will* be married tomorrow. You will accept that this is your life. If you do not...I will ensure that you wish you had.”

He grabbed hold of her left hand and roughly shoved the ring onto her finger. “Do not test my patience, Eliza. You will surely end up regretting it.”

Tears rolled down Eliza’s cheeks as she trembled.

The doors across the room eased open and another red-headed woman glanced inside.

“Moira,” Cate whispered to Jack.

Jonathan quickly tugged Eliza to her feet as Moira entered the room. “Is everything all right?”

Eliza spun to face away from Moira, stalking a few steps away as she composed herself.

“Yes,” Jonathan answered with a wide grin, “we merely had to steal away for a few private moments together.”

“Well, you should really get back. Guests are asking about you.”

“I just said the same to Eliza,” Jonathan answered. “Darling, are you ready?”

“I need a moment to compose myself,” Eliza said with a sniffle. “I wouldn’t want people to think anything untoward had happened.”

Moira offered Jonathan a polite smile. “I’ll bring her along. You should go back now. Finlay is looking for you.”

Jonathan cleared his throat as he glanced over his shoulder at Eliza. “I could—”

“Now, Jonathan,” Moira said, leaving no room for argument in her tone.

Jonathan bobbed his head as he strode toward the doors, slipping through them.

“Tell me what happened,” Moira said when they were alone.

Eliza's features twisted with upset. "I broke off the engagement, but he wouldn't allow it."

"Wouldn't allow it?" Moira asked, her voice an octave higher. "What does that mean? He does not own you. You are not his property."

"I am to be his wife, and he seems to consider it the same thing."

"Eliza, there is no reason you cannot break off this engagement. If you—"

Eliza whipped around to face Moira, her features twisted with fear. "Yes, there is. I fear that if I leave him...it will be the last thing I do. Moira, I fear he will kill me."

Cate's heart skipped a beat, her eyes going wide. What if Eliza's death hadn't been a suicide? Could it have been murder?

CHAPTER 6



Cate rose from her crouch behind the sofa, her heart still hammering. She grabbed Jack's arm, her eyes still round. "Did you hear that?"

"Aye," Jack said with a nod. "I heard it. Sounds like Jonathan is a real...well, you know what."

Cate's heart pounded, her stomach tightening into knots as she whispered, her voice tinged with disbelief and fear, "And he could be a murderer, Jack. What if we're standing right in the middle of a story more horrific than we imagined?"

Jack shook his head. "Now, we know Eliza killed herself. So, we can't pin that on him."

"Or can we," Cate answered. "We have no idea what actually happened, Jack. What if she didn't kill herself? What if he killed her?"

Jack pressed his lips together, staring at the door the others had disappeared through moments ago. "But she wrote in her journal—"

"Did she?" Cate asked. "Or did someone else add that to her journal? We have no idea. But I think we need to find out."

"I was afraid you would say that," Jack answered with a shake of his head. "But, sadly, I think you're right. If we want to have any chance at breaking this curse, we need to know exactly what happened."

Cate gnawed on her lower lip, her fingers curling into fists as determination filled her. "Yes. We'll need to find her room—which I am guessing is the one she led us to in the west wing."

"And then what? We can't very well hide under the bed?"

“No, but we can hide in the secret passage.”

Jack’s eyes widened. “What? Somehow, her journal got put in that passage. What if someone catches us there?”

“I don’t know, but we have to do something, Jack. We still have no idea how to break this curse—or even if we can.”

Jack heaved a sigh, nodding as he skirted around the couch. “You’re right. I hate that you’re always right, but you are.”

“I know you hate time travel and risking changing the course of history, but—”

“But according to your husband, it doesn’t really matter,” Jack answered as they approached the door.

“I’m not sure if doesn’t matter is actually correct, but we’d changed history more than once, and so far, everything is okay. And The Agency changed it multiple times.”

“And we’re all still alive,” Jack said with a sigh. “You’re right.”

“Maybe that’s what we need to do here,” Cate said. “Maybe that’s the only way to break the curse.”

“Let’s take it one step at a time. We’ll use this to just gather information,” Jack proposed.

Cate nodded before she inched the door open and peered into the hall. “Sounds like there is some sort of speech being made. Now is a good time to go.”

She flung the door open, and they hurried from the room, snaking through the hall. At every corner, they paused, peering into the next hall to make sure they avoided being seen by any members of the household or staff.

“So odd to see these doors open,” Jack said with a shake of his head as they entered the west wing and climbed the stairs to the bedrooms.

In the quieter wing, they made their way to the room Eliza’s ghost had led them to in their time. Cate pushed inside, scanning the room before she closed the door behind them.

“Looks like someone is staying in this room,” Jack said as he poked a finger at the melted candles and the fire burning in the room’s fireplace.

Cate bobbed her head, crossing to the room’s desk and shuffling the papers around on it. Her heart skipped a beat as she picked up a leather journal. “Jack, look. It’s Eliza’s journal.”

“I assume the fateful entry isn’t in it?” Jack asked as he approached her and peered over her shoulder.

Cate flipped through the pages, finding the last entry dated several days before. “No.”

“So, she hasn’t decided anything yet. I wonder if they have another fight.”

Cate replaced the journal on the desk where she’d found it. “I don’t know, but we’re about to find out. Come on, we’d better get into the secret passage.”

Jack bobbed his head, and they headed for the corner. Cate pulled the unlit sconce on the wall, opening the panel.

Voices sounded in the hall, and Jack’s eyes went wide. “Hurry! I think someone’s coming.”

Cate lifted her skirt and scurried into the passage, followed by Jack. He pushed the panel closed just as the door open.

Through the pinhole of light that appeared in the panel, they were able to view the room.

“Who is it?” Jack whispered. “Is it Eliza?”

Cate shook her head. “It’s Jonathan and another woman. She’s wearing a maid’s uniform. I’d guess it’s Elsa.

“What are we going to do, Jonathan?” the blonde asked, her features pinched with confusion. “If she does not marry you—”

“She will,” Jonathan answered. “She has little to no choice in the matter. What will become of her if she does not?”

“Surely, she can find another,” the woman answered. “But without her money—”

“Yes, I know, Elsa,” Jonathan growled. “I understand the stakes here. Perhaps if you had not opened your mouth to her, she would be none the wiser. You could not even wait for two more days.”

Elsa pouted as she shifted her gaze to the floor. “I could not help it. Jonathan, my feelings for you are so strong that I could not say nothing.”

“You foolish girl.” Jonathan raised a hand and slapped her across the cheek. “If the marriage does not come off, it is your fault.”

“Perhaps we should not try for it,” Elsa cried, her voice raw with emotion. “Perhaps we should run away together. Just us. We can make a new life somewhere else.”

Jonathan arched an eyebrow. "On what money? This was the one chance I had. My family is not wealthy. And I am the black sheep of it."

"Please, Jonathan. I have a terrible feeling if we stay. Please, let us leave from here." Elsa grabbed his hand, tugging on his arm, her features desperate.

"I said no," Jonathan shouted as the door creaked open again. "Now, we need to stick to the plan. We must put something in her journal that will suggest she is insane. Or at least give question to her mindset."

Elsa frowned, and Jonathan arched an eyebrow at her. "I said now."

"But Jonathan—"

He raised a hand and slapped her again, the force of the blow knocking her to the floor.

She sobbed as she pressed a hand to her cheek. Jonathan dragged her to her feet roughly, forcing her across the room to the desk and into the chair. "Write."

"No," she answered, tears shining in her eyes. "No, I won't do it. I don't want this, Jonathan. I only want us."

She grabbed hold of his hand again, her eyes pleading as she begged him silently to abandon his plan.

Jonathan's features twisted with anger as he ripped his hand away. "You are such a foolish woman. I do not know how I ever was interested in you."

"No, Jonathan, please—"

The rest of her statement was never spoken. Jonathan wrapped his hands around Elsa's neck, squeezing as his lips curled back into a terrifying grimace.

She choked, her eyes wide as she clutched at his hands, trying to pull them away from her neck.

Cate grasped hold of Jack, her stomach churning as she watched the horrible scene play out.

Elsa's features finally twisted with anger, and in her dying words, she cursed him and all the male descendants in the Reid line. "I curse you Jonathan Reid, and all the men who follow in your line. Anyone who marries at Dunhaven Castle is cursed to a life of misery. Only the one who finds the hidden locket and returns it to my grave will escape."

Her lower lip trembled as she took her final breaths, her eyes rolling back into her head before she slumped to the floor.

Cate clapped a hand over her lips to stop a cry from escaping her.

In the bedroom beyond their hiding spot, Jonathan loomed over Elsa's dead body, his nose wrinkling. "Foolish woman. Now, I must do everything myself."

He grabbed her arms and pulled her toward the door, but before they reached it, the door burst open.

Eliza stepped inside, her jaw dropping at the sight.

Jonathan's eyes widened as he let go of Elsa, hurrying to Eliza's side.

"Eliza, darling, thank heavens you are here. Elsa...she went mad. She came here to await you, to harm you. It was then that I realized how very wrong I have been. She has no love for me, and I none for her. Please, darling, you must help me."

"Help you?" Eliza asked, her eyes going wide as she stared, stunned, at the body on the floor.

"Yes, Eliza, please, now there is no one between us. And there never will be again. But I need your help."

Eliza stared at him for a moment, and Cate held her breath. Would this be what made the woman take her own life?

Finally, Eliza shifted her gaze back to Jonathan and nodded. "Yes, I will help you. But you must go now. You cannot be here. I will handle everything."

Cate's jaw flopped open. How could Eliza do this?

"Thank you, darling. I knew I could count on you." Jonathan kissed her cheek before he grinned at her. "I will be in my room. You will find me later, won't you?"

Eliza offered him a soft smile, a silent promise as he backed from the room. The moment he left, she whipped around and dropped to her knees, lifting one of Elsa's limp hands into the air, her smile fading.

With a shake of her head, she disappeared from the room.

"Jack!" Cate hissed as she ripped her eyes away from the dead body. "What should we do?"

"Leave?" He shook his head. "This is not at all what we expected. And I cannot believe she is going to help him. Maybe this is what leads her to suicide."

Before they could discuss things any further, the doors burst open again. Eliza hurried in with Moira. The woman gasped as she entered the room. "Poor Elsa."

“Yes,” Eliza answered. “The poor girl trusted that vile man and paid the ultimate price. You must see that she is buried properly.”

“But...”

“There is no proof that he killed her,” Eliza said as she took a seat at her desk. “I must disappear. I will leave a note that says I cannot marry Jonathan and disappear. You will tell the tale that I took my own life.”

“Eliza, you cannot run!”

“It is the only thing I can do. I have enough money. I can make a comfortable life on my own. Away from him in a place he will never find me.”

Moira offered her friend a pitying glance but nodded. “I understand. And of course, I will help you.”

“I will leave you a sum. See that Elsa is buried properly in the village.”

Moira bobbed her head. “I will handle it all discreetly.”

Cate and Jack waited in the secret passage until Moira fetched two footmen. They wrapped the body and carried her out as Eliza finished what would become the final passage in her journal—a passage that would lead others to believe she had cursed Jonathan.

When she’d finished, she gathered a few things, then fled from the room, never to be seen again.

Cate blew out a long breath as silence enveloped them.

“I guess we should go back. Now, we know what happened, and we know how to solve it,” Jack said after a few moments.

Cate nodded, searching for the trigger to release the panel. They knew the origins of the curse. They knew how to break it. But without the lost locket, none of it would matter.

CHAPTER 7



Cate paced the floor of her bedroom, chewing her thumbnail as her mind whirled. What they'd witnessed in the past had left her numb.

They'd witnessed a murder, but now they had more clues to work with to break the curse.

But how could they find the lost locket Elsa had mentioned?

After returning from their excursion to the 1820s, she'd done nothing but vet ideas for finding the locket.

A knock at her door pulled her from her rumination. "Coming," she called, hurrying across the room to pull it open.

Jack greeted her in his normal clothes. "Well, I'm all comfortable again so now I can think."

Cate motioned for him to enter. "I've done nothing but think since we've been back. We need to find that locket, but how?"

Jack shook his head. "I'm not sure. But I wonder if there could be any clues in Eliza's journal."

"How? She didn't know anything about the curse. That rumor must have started from somewhere else." Cate spread her arms to the sides with a shrug.

"No, but Elsa did have access to the journal. It looks like she almost started to write in it before she argued with Jonathan." Jack paced the floor, rubbing his chin.

"You think she put a clue in there?" Cate asked, her voice turning hopeful.

“I sure hope so. Otherwise, I’m not certain we can find this.”

Cate’s eyebrows pinched together. “All right, then we need to get that journal back from Roger.”

Jack winced as he stepped in front of Cate to stop her progress toward the door. “Cate, there’s something I wanted to talk to you about.

A knot formed in Cate’s stomach, a mix of anticipation and dread, as she took in the deep lines of worry etched across Jack’s face. “Sure. Sit down.”

“Thanks,” he said as he eased into one of the armchairs, rubbing his palms against his jeans. “Uh, I want to start out by saying that if you don’t agree, I totally understand. I really do. I just...want to throw this out there because I think it’s important, and it’s been bothering me.”

Cate drew her chin back to her chest as she perched on the edge of her chaise. “Whatever it is, Jack, you can tell me. I’m sure we’ll work it out.”

He bobbed his head, scrubbing his face with his hands before he puffed out a long breath. “With our...time traveling...” He cleared his throat. “I don’t want...it may seem...I’m afraid Molly is going to think there’s something strange going on with all the leaks and whatnot in the castle. I don’t want...”

“Her to think we’re having an affair?” Cate said with a chuckle.

Jack raised his eyebrows, bobbing his head. “Yeah, that.”

“I don’t either.”

“But I can’t see a way around it. In the past, it’s usually been two men who have protected the secret. And so—”

“It would look like they were discussing estate business or handling something professional,” Cate answered with a nod. “Yeah, I get it. With the exception of your grandfather and Mary, and your grandfather and Gertrude, there have been no other male-female pairings.”

“No, and Pap didn’t have a wife around during part of that time.”

“Also, Gertrude didn’t time travel.” Cate poked a finger at him. “Well, I see your point, and I also see your problem. But I think there is a way around it.”

Jack snapped his gaze to her, his eyes going wide. “What way? Cate, if you say you’re going to time travel alone—”

“I wouldn’t dream of it.”

Jack wrinkled his nose, his lips tugging into a frown. “I don’t like the idea of me being replaced by Marcus either, but I suppose that’s our only choice.”

Cate giggled as she shook her head. "I'm not replacing you with Marcus. He has enough of his own magical problems to deal with. Plus, I'm not sure he's really into amateur sleuthing like we are. We make a good team. And we're supposed to be the ones who protect this castle."

"So, what are you saying?"

Cate shrugged. "I think we should tell Molly."

Jack huffed out a shocked breath. "Tell Molly?!"

"Yes. Spoiler alert, I've been to the future."

Jack let his head fall back against the armchair's back. "Ohhh, she knew."

"She did. You told me we told her. And I wholeheartedly agreed with that decision. She should know. And who knows, maybe she'll even want to help sometimes."

"A trio?"

"Well, we could invite Marcus and make it a double date."

"Somehow that doesn't sound appealing, although I'm thinking about that steak we had at the club." Jack rubbed his belly.

Cate rose from her seat. "You and your stomach. Come on, let's go get this over with."

Jack froze, staring at her. "Now?"

"Well, when else?"

"I don't know. Some random date in the future, I thought. You know, to give me time to prepare and panic."

Cate grabbed his hand and pulled him to stand. "Come on, Jack. Let's get it over with. And with this out of the way, it'll be easier to tell Molly what really happened with the curse, so we have another person helping us solve it."

He rose with a sigh. "All right, all right. I guess now's as good a time as any. And I guess she won't leave me. You saw proof of us married, right?"

"I did. And you're even turning a little gray, so...we must be able to break the curse."

Jack bobbed his head. "You know, I'm kind of enjoying this fortune teller version of Cate. It's right handy."

Cate started to chuckle as they entered the hall when a blinding pain shot across her forehead. She dropped to her knees.

"Cate?" Jack's voice sounded far away as he called to her.

Her vision clouded, a new image replacing the familiar hall. Her eyebrows pinched together as she stared at what looked like a secret passage, the space lit only by a flashlight.

“Cate,” Roger said with a grin in front of her, “I think I found it.”

Cate sucked in a sharp breath as the vision disappeared. She flicked her gaze to Jack, reaching for him with a trembling hand.

“Cate, what happened?”

“A vision.”

His eyes widened as he helped her up. “I’ll get you back to bed.”

“No, no,” she said with a shake of her head. “No, I’m okay. I’m getting better at navigating them.”

“Should I ask what the vision was about?”

“I think we were finding the locket. Roger said he found it. We were in a secret passage.”

“Well, that narrows it down,” Jack answered with a shake of his head. “There are only two hundred of them in this sprawling place.”

“Better than the dozens of rooms we’d have to tear apart,” Cate said as he wrapped his arm around her to steady her.

“Who’s tearing rooms apart?” Molly’s chipper voice asked as she approached them, her smile fading as she spotted Cate clinging to Jack. “What happened? Are you okay?”

“I’m fine. I just...Molly, there’s something we need to discuss.”

Molly’s gaze flicked between Cate and Jack before she nodded. “All right. Uh—”

Cate motioned to her bedroom. “Come in.”

They retreated into the quiet space, and Cate closed the doors behind them before she crossed to her chaise and eased onto it. Molly and Jack sat in the armchairs with Molly fidgeting as her gaze darted between them.

“Well, don’t keep me in suspense,” she said with a chuckle.

Cate swallowed hard as Jack took Molly’s hand in his. “Molly...there’s something...about this castle that’s...unique.”

“Unique? You mean, the ghost?”

“No,” Cate answered. “No, not the ghost. But it has to do with the ghost you thought you saw.”

“I’m pretty sure I did see her,” Molly said. “And now that Uncle Roger saw another, it’s possible right?”

“Yes and no,” Cate said. “The thing is, we know you didn’t see a ghost. What you saw was entirely different.”

Molly’s features turned frightened. “Was it something darker? Like a demon or something?”

“No, no,” Cate said with a quick shake of her head. “No, but...there’s no easy way to say this, Molly. This castle contains a magical portal that allows us to time travel when combined with my pocket watch.”

Molly stared at her for a moment before she burst into laughter. “Aw, Cate. If you two are trying to cheer me up after this whole curse thing, really, I’m okay. But thank you.”

“We’re not,” Jack answered. “All those ‘leaks’ and ‘estate problems’ Cate always needs help with. We weren’t discussing that. We were time traveling so we could solve mysteries.”

Molly sat quietly for a moment before her features wrinkled. “What like...Jessica Fletcher in the TARDIS?”

“Umm, yes, sort of like Murder, She Wrote mixed with Doctor Who, yeah,” Cate said with a slight grin.

After a second, Molly shook her head. “No. I can’t—”

“We can show you,” Cate answered, rising and holding her hand out.

Molly stared at her. “What? Like now?”

“No time like the present,” Jack declared as he stood. “Or the past. Or whatever.”

Molly rose, her features questioning as Cate locked arms with her and led her from the room. “If this is a prank, it’s a really good one. I’m almost starting to believe you two.”

“We’re not pranking you,” Jack assured her. “And this is going to blow your mind.”

“I’ll bet. If we end up in another time...”

“We will,” Jack assured her. “And not only that, but there’s a lot more you don’t know.”

“Such as?” Molly asked as they descended the stairs, her features pinching with surprise.

“Cate’s husband is a warlock. So, are most of her friends. They’re immortals who live forever. And Cate is a psychic,” Jack answered.

Cate shot him a glance over her shoulder as they reached the secret passage in the hall. “After not being able to tell her about time travel, you managed to get all that out in one breath?”

Jack shrugged. "Seemed easier when it didn't involve me."

As the panel slid open in front of them, Molly's features turned confused. "Are you two being serious or joking?"

"Serious," they both said at the same time.

"Molly, I'm sorry to dump this on you all at once," Cate answered as they stepped into the secret passage, "but the reason we did is because... well, Jack and I time traveled back to when Eliza was at Dunhaven Castle. We know what happened that night *and* how to break the curse. But we're going to need some help finding the missing piece. We thought it best that you know because of that, and the amount of time Jack and I spend together because of this secret."

Molly's lips tugged into a slight smile. "Aww, Cate. I appreciate that so much. But, honey, I would never have thought there was something between you and Jack. I trust you...both of you. And besides, the way you look at that husband of yours...and the way he looks at you."

Jack grumbled a little. "Hey, I look at you that way."

"Sure you do," Molly said with a pat on his arm. "But His Grace...those smoldering dark eyes, that whole bad boy vibe..."

"Hey!" Jack cried as they used Cate's cell phone flashlight to navigate the passage, "I don't like what I'm hearing."

"Sorry," Molly said with a shrug. "I'm not in love with him, but I see the appeal."

Jack clicked his tongue as Cate came to a stop. Her heart hammered against her ribs as she turned to face Molly. "All right. Now, I'm going to set the watch back to a time period. We'll go to—"

"Go back to the night of the wedding ball," Jack said.

"No, we'll be there."

"Oh right."

"There would be two of you?" Molly exclaimed.

"Yes," Cate said. "I'll go to 1800."

Cate set the time piece. "Now, we all need to touch it and rub the face, and we'll activate the portal to send us back in time."

Molly swallowed hard, her expression dubious. "A-all right."

Cate doused her flashlight, placing her cell phone in her pocket. They placed their thumbs on the watch and rubbed.

"Well, I guess we're here," Jack said a moment later.

“Go ahead and peek out of the panel. But don’t go too far in these modern clothes,” Cate said.

“Right,” Molly answered with a chuckle. “Someone may see us in pants and lose their minds.”

Cate trailed behind Jack and Molly as they made their way back up the passage in the darkness. Jack found the trigger and eased it open a slit.

Molly’s eyes went wide as she stared at the candles lighting the hallway instead of electric lights. A maid in a long uniform wandered down the hall with a bucket before she was called by a woman in an ankle-length dress.

Molly gasped, twisting to eye Jack and Cate.

“See, I told you,” Cate whispered with a grin.

It faded quickly as Molly’s eyes rolled back in her head, and she slumped to the floor.

CHAPTER 8



Cate pressed a cool cloth to Molly's forehead as she lay still unconscious. Jack hovered over Cate's shoulder, worry etched into every line of his face.

"That didn't go as well as I hoped," Jack admitted with a wince.

"No," Cate said, "but hopefully when she wakes up, we'll be able to assuage any fears she has about what just happened."

"I really didn't expect her to faint."

"I don't think she believed us," Cate said, glancing over her shoulder at him. "Especially when you told her about Marcus, my visions, and all the rest of it."

"Well, she seemed to be taking it well," Jack said with a shrug. "I thought it would be okay."

"Until she saw the people from another time." Cate wrinkled her nose.

Molly's head thrashed as she moaned, her features pinching.

Cate rose to lean over her. "She's coming to."

"Molly," Jack said, his voice soft as he clutched her hand.

Molly's eyes fluttered open, and she glanced up at them, her features showing confusion. "Jack? Cate?"

"We're right here, Molly," Cate said as she patted her arm.

"W-where are we?"

"In my bedroom at the castle. You're okay."

Molly pressed a hand against her forehead. "I had the strangest dream. I dreamt that we time traveled..."

Her voice trailed off as her eyes widened. “We didn’t, right?”

“Actually, Molly, we did,” Cate said, her voice soft. “We time traveled to show you that we were not lying.”

Molly’s lips parted as she stared up at Cate. “W-what?”

“I know it sounds strange—”

“Sounds strange?!” Molly exclaimed. “We went to another time. People from another century were walking around. Jack said you were married to a warlock and were a psychic. None of that was a dream.”

“Sadly not,” Cate answered with a consoling smile. “But the good news is because of that time travel, we managed to find a way to break the curse, and I have an idea of where to look of the item we need.”

Molly pushed herself higher, her lips tugged into a tight frown. “I don’t know how I feel about this.”

“I didn’t either at first,” Jack said, perching on the edge of the bed next to her. “Actually, I hated it. But now, I’ve gotten used to it. Cate and I have helped a lot of people.”

Molly’s knuckles turned white as she held tightly to his hand. “It sort of explains a lot.”

“Like?” Cate asked.

“Well, like no one knowing you were married. Were you married or was that a trick of time travel?” Molly asked.

Cate grinned at her friend. “Good catch. No, I was not married. Marcus and I went back in time to make sure I was married when The Agency attacked us.”

“Agency?” Molly asked.

Cate bobbed her head. “A group of people that has now been disbanded, but who were creating chaos all through time. They were responsible for Jack’s disappearance, everything.”

“Jack’s disappearance...” Molly’s eyebrows pinched.

“You don’t remember it because we changed it. Only Cate and I can remember,” Jack answered.

“Wow, that’s unfair,” Molly said with a wrinkled nose.

“It is, and it’s very strange to live with, but you’ll get used to it,” Cate promised as a knock sounded at her door. “Excuse me.”

She hurried out of the bedroom and across her sitting room to pull open the double doors.

“Hi,” Roger said with a smile as she opened them. “Sorry to disturb you, but I can’t find Molly.”

“Oh, she’s inside,” Cate said, motioning for him to come in. “She wasn’t feeling well, and we had her lie down.”

“Oh, no,” Roger answered with a frown. “I hope this doesn’t have to do with that curse.”

“I’m afraid it does.” Cate trailed behind him into the bedroom.

“Oh, Molly,” Roger said as he approached the bed to take her hand, “we’ll figure it out.”

“I know, Uncle Roger.” Molly smiled up at him, patting his hand. “I just got overwhelmed.”

“And she should rest a little more, but in the meantime, Roger, I was wondering if you’d like to check out a lead with me. We recently learned that perhaps it wasn’t Eliza who cursed the Reids, but Jonathan’s mistress. Elsa was a maid in the house, and she died under mysterious circumstances the night before the wedding was set. Based on what Jack and I...read...she may have been the one to curse the Reid family.”

“Aye,” Jack added with a nod, “and it’s her locket that we’re searching for. A comment in a journal we found suggested that it’s hidden somewhere in the castle.”

Jack shot Cate a dubious glance, his eyebrows raising. She lifted one shoulder in a slight shrug. They couldn’t tell Roger the truth, but she thought they’d covered it pretty well.

“While Molly rests, I wonder if you’re up for searching the castle’s secret passages for any sign of this locket.”

Roger’s eyes lit up as he nodded. “I’d love to search some secret passages. Any idea where they may be located?”

“I have an idea where a few of them are, but I think we should start with a few that weren’t frequently used by the castle’s other occupants. They’d be the most likely place.”

“Whatever you think is best.” Roger held a finger in the air. “Let me grab my cell phone so we’ll have a flashlight. And I can snap a few pictures of our adventure.”

“Of course,” Cate said. “Just meet me back here when you’re ready.”

“I’ll just be a minute.” Roger offered a nod before he hurried from the room.

“Wow, that was a really good cover,” Molly said as he left. “You two are good at this.”

“Practice,” Jack answered with a coy smile.

Cate bobbed her head. “We’ve lied about a lot of leaks in the past.”

“I really bought every one of those stories,” Molly said with a rueful shake of her head.

“Sorry.” Cate wrinkled her nose as she frowned. “Necessary.”

Molly shifted in the bed, shrugging. “I guess. And I’m not mad. And is His Grace really a warlock?”

“Oh, yes,” Cate said with a chuckle and a nod. “He most definitely is a warlock. Jack’s still getting used to that idea. He can tell you all about it while I search the secret passages with your uncle.”

“Speaking of, do you have any idea which one it could be?” Jack asked.

“I keep going over the vision I had, and something tells me it’s the one that leads into the east wing. We’ll start there and hope for the best.”

“I hope you find it soon,” Jack answered.

“Yeah, before our wedding is doomed,” Molly said.

“We’ll find it,” Cate promised. “I’ve...been to the future. Everything was fine.”

Molly stared at her, a confused expression frozen onto her features. “You’ve...seen the future?”

“I have. Everything is fine.” Cate gave her a reassuring smile as Roger reentered the room, his cell phone in his hand. Molly wrinkled her nose at the words, remaining quiet.

“I’m all ready,” he said.

“Good, I was just telling Molly that everything is okay, and I have a good idea of where to look for this locket.”

“Oh, good,” Roger said as he followed Cate from the room.

“Good luck!” Jack called after them.

“All my life, I’ve wanted to explore a castle’s secret passages. And now I’ll get to break a curse, too. I feel like a kid at Christmas.”

Cate grinned at him as they walked down the hall toward the portrait gallery with the secret passage. They turned a corner and found Marcus coming toward them.

“Ah, Catherine, there you are. I’ve come to check on your progress.”

“Hi,” she said as he kissed her cheek. “We’ve made good progress. We have a lead on finding a locket to break the curse.”

“Curse?”

“Ah, there have been some more developments. Turns out Jack is cursed, and if we don’t find the locket before tomorrow, and put it on the woman’s grave who cursed him, this marriage may be in trouble. So, Roger and I are off to search the secret passages.”

Marcus narrowed his eyes at her. “I am not surprised that Reid is cursed.”

Roger wrinkled his nose. “Why?”

Marcus raised his eyebrows. “You have met the man. I should think that answer is obvious. Anyway, carry on, dear, and let me know if there is anything I can do to help.”

“I will. Thanks. We’ll talk later.” Cate squeezed his arm before she and Roger set off down the hall.

“I’m not entirely sure I like him,” Roger murmured.

“He grows on you.”

“Hmm,” Roger said, glancing over his shoulder with a frown. “I don’t know about that.”

“Marcus can surprise you.” Cate offered him a grin as they turned the corner toward the portrait gallery.

“Wow,” Roger said as they entered, “this is some room. And I assume these are all your ancestors?”

“Uh-huh,” Cate said with a nod as she smiled up at the portraits of those who had gone before her. She’d met some of them. Maybe one day she’d get to meet more.

Roger studied several of the paintings as he made his way around the room. “And you say there’s a secret passage in here?”

Cate bobbed her head. “I was curious to see if you could figure out where after you’d looked around.”

Roger spun to study the room, his eyebrows pinching. After a few moments, he poked his finger at a space between two portraits. “Here?”

“Very good,” Cate said. “That’s the opening.”

Roger reached over his shoulder to pat himself on the back. “I’m sure opening it is a little trickier.”

Cate chuckled as she crossed to a piece of gold filagree on the chair rail and used it to trigger the panel opening. “Voila!”

Roger raised his camera to snap a quick picture. “I can’t wait to post these on my social media. A real castle with a real secret passage.”

“And let’s hope a locket that can end a curse.” Cate toggled on her cell phone’s flashlight, motioning for Roger to enter the passage in front of her.

“My fingers are crossed, Cate,” Roger said as he stepped into the blackness.

Cate followed behind him, her stomach churning. She hoped this was the passage from her vision, otherwise they may never find the locket.

CHAPTER 9



The narrow beam of Cate's flashlight danced across the walls, casting long shadows as they crept through the musty passage.

She searched for anything that looked like the locket or a container to hold it. Next to her, Roger studied the walls on his side, his eyebrows pinched tightly.

His voice echoed slightly in the cramped space, his tone tinged with curiosity and a hint of unease. "And where did you say this passage leads?"

"To the east wing," Cate said, "a light blue bedroom."

"Maybe the locket is in the bedroom there," he suggested.

Cate slid her eyes closed for a moment, drawing back her memory of the vision. It was fuzzy, but it did not look like the bedroom, but a secret passage.

The details were so few and far between, though, that she couldn't tell which passage it was or any identifying details.

She snapped her eyes open, disappointed by the lack of clarity in the vision. But then again, almost all visions were like this.

With a quiet sigh, she continued forward, snaking around behind the walls until they arrived at the panel.

Roger's voice fell flat as they reached a dead end, his flashlight flickering over the blank walls. "End of the road," he murmured, disappointment heavy in his sigh. "And nothing to show for it."

"We can take a look around the bedroom, but I distinctly saw...er, read that it was in a secret passage and based on the scant details, I really

thought this would be the one.” Cate wrinkled her nose as she released the panel, and they stepped into the bedroom.

Cate smiled at it, knowing it would become Jack and Molly’s daughter’s room years in the future. She’d love the princess-style decorations.

The room remained shrouded in shadows until Cate flipped the switch, flooding the space with warm light that chased away the chill of the secret passage.

“Ah, that’s better for my eyes,” Roger said, toggling off his flashlight. “So, I understand Molly and Jack will be living in this wing.”

“Yes,” Cate said with a smile as she poked around in the few furniture items around the room. “I’m so glad they’ll be staying close.”

“Well, Molly really loves living in the castle, although I can see the appeal. This place is amazing.”

“Aw, thank you,” Cate said with a soft smile. “I love it, too, but I’m biased.”

Roger chuckled, tugging on a scone across the room in an attempt to find another hiding spot. “I’m not biased, and I think it’s fantastic. You’re very lucky this is your home.”

“I agree. And it’s also Molly’s, so you’re welcome anytime.”

“That’s an incredibly generous offer, Cate, thank you. Although...I’m not sure your husband would agree with that statement.”

Cate chuckled, lifting a shoulder into a slight shrug. “Oh, Marcus’s bark is worse than his bite, I promise. I think it’s just that stuffy British thing.”

“Hmm,” Roger answered as he wiggled another scone. “Well, either way, I may just take you up on that offer.”

“Oh, good. Molly would love to have you over, I’m sure. And the castle is big enough that you don’t even have to see Marcus when you’re here.” She grinned at him.

“Good point. He and I may both prefer that.”

“Maybe we’ll plan for Christmas,” Cate answered. “The castle is really lovely with all the decorations, and we have a holiday ball. It’s fun.”

“I may just need to book my ticket the moment I get home.”

“Well, it will give you something to look forward to after your wedding slump.” Cate heaved a sigh as she spread her arms to the side. “Sadly, we’ve found nothing to look forward to in this room.”

“No, but...” Roger’s eyebrows pinched again as he rubbed his chin.

“What is it?” Cate asked.

“Well, I...I don’t want to presume to tell you what to do but—”

“Oh, don’t worry about that,” Cate said with a casual wave. “We’re in crisis mode. Any and all suggestions are welcome before this wedding starts off on the wrong foot.”

Roger bobbed his head, his lips pressed into a thin line. “I don’t generally give in to these types of things, but...I don’t want to see Molly upset on her wedding day.”

“Me either. So, what’s your idea?”

“Well, I thought I saw something in the passage that may look like it could open to another passage or a hiding spot.”

Cate’s heart skipped a beat. Could it be? Her vision flashed in her mind again, a smile curling her lips. Maybe Roger had stumbled upon a secret hiding place in her vision. She bobbed her head, toggling on the flashlight again. “Lead me to it.”

“Now, don’t go getting your hopes up,” Roger said, holding a hand in the air. “I may be way off base.”

Cate couldn’t help but smile. “I’m pretty sure your idea is sound. Let’s just hope once we open whatever you’ve found, we find a locket.”

Roger raised his crossed fingers in the air before he toggled on his own flashlight and motioned for Cate to follow him. She hurried behind him to a spot out halfway through the passage.

Roger shined his light on the wall, pointing a finger at a metal clasp. “This caught my eye earlier. It almost looks like a painting hanger, but what would that be doing in a secret passage.”

Cate narrowed her eyes at the object attached to the wall. “Hmm, yes, I wouldn’t expect they hung a painting in here, but you never know.”

“Well, I’m not sure if it will lead to anything or not. It’s not much to go on now that I see it again.”

Cate stepped closer, her fingernail prying at the edge of the metal. “No, I think you make a good point about this being suspicious.”

With a grunt, she tried to dig underneath it, but it remained firmly attached to the wall. She rubbed her finger over the metal clasp. If only she had seen a vision of how to use this to open whatever it opened—assuming it opened anything.

She puckered her lips, her eyebrows pinching. “Any ideas on how to open this?”

Roger lifted his chin, shining his light on it as he leaned closer. "With your permission, I'd like to tug on it to see if it will open anything."

"Go ahead," Cate said with a nod.

Roger hooked his finger around it, pulling it down. Nothing happened. He frowned.

"Well, I really thought that would work. It always does in the movies."

Cate laughed as she shook her head. "Sadly, this isn't the movies, but I do have another idea."

"It's all yours." Roger stepped back to allow her access to the metal hook.

Cate sucked in a deep breath, wrapping her fingers around it and shifting them diagonally. A loud pop resounded in the passage. Her heart skipped a beat as she waved her flashlight around in search of what had made the noise.

"Here!" Roger called from a few steps ahead of her. "Another panel opened."

Cate's heart hammered a frenetic rhythm against her ribs as she hurried down to him, shining her light into the small space revealed with the panel slid aside. "A room."

"Let's hope it holds a locket inside."

She smiled at him, nodding. "After you. It was your find."

"Oh, no," Roger began, but Cate gave her head a vehement shake. "I insist. Go."

His smile beamed off his face at her before he slipped into the room in front of her. He waved his flashlight around the small space. The light glinted off of something in the corner, and Roger rushed toward it.

"There's a small box here," he reported, his fingers trembling as he reached to open it.

Cate peered over his shoulder as the lid swung open.

Roger spun to face her. Her heart lifted as she recognized the moment from her vision.

"Cate," Roger said with a grin, "I think I found it."

She pressed her lips together, hoping this was the moment he lifted a locket into the air. A second later, her flashlight's beam glinted off of a silver chain. She followed it down to a pendant dangling from it. "It looks promising. Let's see if it opens."

“I hope it’s a locket,” Roger answered, his voice shaky as he handed it over to Cate. “I’ll let you do the honors.”

She carefully laid the pendant in her hands and used her thumbnail to press against the delicate clasp. A second later, it popped open. She grinned up at Roger. “It is a locket. The inside is engraved with Elsa’s name. This is the lost locket needed to break the curse. Roger, you did it!”

He beamed at her again. “I’m so glad I could help. Now, what do we need to do to lift this curse?”

“We need to take this to her grave. She was buried in the family cemetery by one of my ancestors when she died on the property. Come on, let’s go finish this and save the wedding.”

Roger bobbed his head, and together they left the secret room behind, returning to the portrait gallery. With the locket in hand, they retrieved Jack and Molly from her bedroom.

“We found it!” Cate exclaimed. “Well, your Uncle Roger did. Now, Jack will need to place it on Elsa’s grave to release the curse.”

“Thank heavens she’s buried close,” Jack answered as they made their way through the halls and out into the sunny day.

Cate led them across the manicured lawn to the family cemetery. They threaded through the tombstones and monuments, searching for Elsa’s grave.

They found a simple tombstone in the corner of the cemetery marked with her name. Jack raised the locket in the air. “Well, I suppose I should say a few words. Maybe something like I’m sorry. I know Jonathan Reid didn’t do right by you, but...”

He snaked an arm around Molly. “I plan to do right by Molly, so... please lift this curse so that we can move forward with our lives together.”

With a lick of his lips, Jack set the locket carefully on the corner of the gravestone.

As he did, mist rose from the ground. The image of a woman formed, her features blurry.

Cate sucked in a sharp breath, wondering if they’d be dealing with an angry ghost.

The image solidified a little more before the ghost reached for the locket. Her wispy, ethereal fingers brushed it, a slight smile forming on her features. “The lost locket.” Her voice, a whisper, made the hairs on the back of Cate’s neck stand up.

The ghost twisted, eyeing Jack and Molly. “Thank you. You are free. The curse is lifted.”

With the locket clutched in her ghostly fingers, she shot skyward, disappearing from their sights.

Cate breathed a sigh of relief, wrapping her arm around Molly’s shoulders. “It’s over.”

Molly wiped a tear from her eye. “And now we can get married in peace.”

CHAPTER 10



Cate stared at her own sparkling blue eyes, made even more prominent by the matching dress color until Molly emerged from behind the screen. In her puffy princess-style wedding dress, she looked like a cake-topper, and very ready to be married at a castle.

“Oh, Molly! You look beautiful!” Cate exclaimed.

“Aww, thank you,” Molly answered with a warm smile as she checked her reflection in the mirror. “And thank you for letting me get married at your castle, and for being my matron of honor.”

“You’re welcome,” Cate answered as Andrea tucked one strand of wayward hair into Molly’s veil. “Are you ready?”

“I think so,” Molly said with a broad smile.

Cate retrieved the bouquets, giving Molly hers before they left the bedroom behind. With Andrea’s help, they led Molly down to the waiting horse-drawn carriage.

After climbing inside, they were whisked away to the chapel across the property.

Music floated on the air from within as they arrived. Cate climbed from the carriage with the help of the attendants.

With Andrea left behind to put the finishing touches on Molly’s ensemble, Cate readied herself to walk down the aisle.

As the doors opened and camera flashes blinded her, she plastered on a nervous smile and walked down the aisle toward Jack and Stanley who waited at the front.

Jack grinned at her as she took her spot to wait for Molly. She offered him a warm smile before her gaze flicked to Marcus. They hadn't had a wedding quite like this, but it didn't matter to her.

She'd found an unexpected happiness after the unbelievable course of events that had brought them together.

The music changed, calling her attention to the doors in the back. Molly appeared in her white dress with Roger leading her down the aisle.

After a short ceremony, the Reids shared their first kiss as a married couple before they proceeded out of the chapel and into the bright sunshine beyond for pictures while the others made their way back to the castle for the reception.

Cate posed for several pictures with the couple before they returned to the castle.

The meal gave way to dancing. Marcus led Cate to the dance floor, pulling her closer to him.

"I would have been just fine sitting," Cate answered.

"I wanted to be otherwise engaged before Mrs. Campbell troubled us about a second wedding," he answered.

She grinned at him. "Good idea."

He glanced around the room. "Do you wish we would have had a real wedding?"

"We did," she said as she swayed with him. "It was in 1810, but we did. Remember?"

He chuckled, his thumb rubbing the back of her hand. "But no one you knew was there."

"And that's perfectly fine. It certainly didn't affect our happiness, did it?"

"It has not affected mine, but if you prefer a lavish soiree...that can be arranged."

"I prefer a quiet life, although, after visiting the future...I don't think we'll have a quiet anything."

He offered her a soft smile. "Does it bother you?"

Cate heaved a sigh, her gaze scanning the crowd. "No. No, it doesn't. We have special abilities to help others. And we should do that."

"Hmm," Marcus murmured. "I wouldn't go that far, but if it makes you happy, dear."

She focused on him, a smile playing on her lips. “Oh, stop. You just like to pretend you’re this mean. You’re really not.”

“Not to you, no. Celine may disagree with you.”

“You are Celine’s ally, and she knows that.”

“Let’s not let those details slip too widely.”

She pressed her lips together, hiding her smile. “Okay. I’ll let everyone think you’re as mean as you like to pretend you are.”

“Very good, dear,” he said with a kiss on her cheek as Jack approached them.

“Hate to interrupt, but I’d love to steal your wife for a dance.”

“Well,” Marcus said as he passed Cate’s hand to Jack, “I suppose I will find yours for one.”

Cate settled into a rhythm with Jack. “Happy?”

“Very. And thanks to you, not cursed.”

She grinned at him. “I’m a full-service employer.”

“And a very interesting one.” He scanned the others in the ballroom. “Did you ever think this is how our lives would have turned out when you came here?”

“I did not,” Cate answered. “I never imagined when I got on that plane with Riley and left my life behind in the US that I’d end up a time-traveling duchess who is married to a warlock.”

Jack screwed up his face. “Really? I would have thought you’d guess that right away.”

Cate playfully smacked his arm with a shake of her head. “Funny.”

“But seriously, you’re happy, right?”

She offered him a warm smile and a nod, her eyes finding Marcus as he danced with Molly. “Very.”

“Good. Because I don’t think our lives are going to ever be normal, Cate.”

Cate clicked her tongue. “Me either. In fact, I’m pretty certain this is as normal as they’re going to get. According to Future Jack...he and I solved a lot of mysteries.”

Jack bobbed his head. “Well, I suppose we’d better settle in for it then. Between the time-traveling and your psychic visions, we have our work cut out for us.”

“I think so,” Cate answered. “And I’m kind of looking forward to it. Bring on the mysteries. I’m ready to solve them.”

"You know," Jack said, "this feels more like a beginning than an end."

"It does," Cate agreed, her mind buzzing with the possibilities of every tomorrow yet to come. "There are so many mysteries left unsolved, so many times we haven't visited."

"And so many wrongs we may right," Jack added, his eyes alight with the thrill of their shared secret.

"Yes, and maybe next time, we won't have to worry about curses," she laughed, but her eyes were serious. "Are you ready for whatever comes next?"

"Always," Jack said, clinking his glass against hers. "Especially if it means more adventures with you, Cate Kensie, time-traveling duchess."

The reception continued until the sun hung low on the horizon. As the newlyweds stepped out into the sunshine, Cate lingered behind, her gaze sweeping over the ancient stones of the castle that had become her home. Each corner held a memory, each shadow a ghost of the past adventures—both thrilling and terrifying. She thought about the first time she'd walked these grounds, naive and unaware of the magic that seeped through its walls. How far she'd come, not just in miles from her old life in the US but in every beat of her heart that had learned to find home in the impossible. "Here's to the future," she whispered to herself, a promise that no matter how unconventional, this castle was where she belonged.

* * *

Look for more Cate Kensie Mysteries coming in 2026! Until then, try another cozy mystery series! Start with *Ghosts, Lore & a House by the Shore.*

* * *

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Award-winning author Nellie H. Steele writes in as many genres as she reads, ranging from mystery to fantasy and allowing readers to escape reality and enter enchanting worlds filled with unique, lovable characters.

Addicted to books since she could read, Nellie escaped to fictional worlds like the ones created by Carolyn Keene or Victoria Holt long before she decided to put pen to paper and create her own realities.

When she's not spinning a cozy mystery tale, building a new realm in a contemporary fantasy, or writing another action-adventure car chase, you can find her shuffling through her Noah's Ark of rescue animals or enjoying a hot cuppa (that's tea for most Americans.)

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