

INTO  
THE  
DIM

JANET B. TAYLOR

HOUGHTON MIFFLIN HARCOURT  
BOSTON NEW YORK

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**For Phil: Who always, *always* believed I could . . .**  
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## CHAPTER 1

EVERYONE IN TOWN KNEW THE COFFIN WAS EMPTY.

I think that's what packed the pews—the pure curiosity of the thing. They didn't come for love or admiration. Nope. They came for the show. They came because it was big news. A juicy scandal that jolted our small southern town like spikes of summer lightning.

Hometown boy Matthew Walton was finally laying his wife to rest. By the time my mother's funeral began, it was standing-room only.

Though it was only midafternoon, I was already drained. Sweat bled through the back of my shirt, gluing me to the wooden bench. As the inept fan buzzed overhead, a quick, darting movement caught my eye. A small bird flitted among the rafters. Trapped. I knew exactly how it felt.

As the priest droned a pallid eulogy, venomous whispers began to surge from the hushed crowd behind me. The hateful words oozed up to corrode my skin, exposing muscle and tendon and jittery nerve endings.

*“. . . hate to speak ill of the dead, but we're all thinking it.” “Personally, I couldn't stand the woman.” “That Sarah Walton. Always thought she was so much better than the rest of us.” “Yeah. Snooty bit . . .”*

The voices trailed off as the priest wound down. But the quiet round of chuckles that followed made my teeth shriek, like biting down on tinfoil. My throat ached with the urge to scream. To tell them how they were all vapid, backward simpletons, just like my mom always claimed.

*Of course, I'd yell into their outraged faces. Of course she thought she was better than you. Because she was. She was better than all of you put together.*

My mother was far from “snooty.” She simply couldn't tolerate these small-town divas with their sly prejudice and malicious gossip. She'd rejected them long ago, and they'd never forgiven her for it. But she was brilliant and brave and . . .

*Gone.*

The word slammed around in my brain, keeping time with the bird's desperate circling. I could almost hear its fragile heart, beating so fast it was bound to rupture.

My hands clenched in my lap. My legs strained with the effort of staying in my seat. God, I wanted to see their shocked expressions when I shot to my feet, spun around, and—

I flinched at a sudden thump. The bird, in a bid for freedom, had crashed into the false security of the stained-glass window. It tumbled to the floor in a heap of floating feathers. My heart stuttered, and the rage dissipated on a wave of exhaustion. My fists relaxed. The urge to scream subsided as I stared at the crumpled creature lying so still on the ground. A life snuffed out in an instant, just like that.

The eulogy ended. Jaw set, I followed my dad's stooped form to our place near the altar. As his narrow shoulders hitched, I finally let my gaze drift to my mother's beautiful, empty coffin. I sidled away, gulping. Pain pinged my temples. An iron band tightened around my scalp. Squinting against the pain, I focused on the details. Burlled walnut, mahogany inlay, brass handles, and the casket's manufacturer discreetly embossed in the lower left corner: JOHNSON & SONS.

The words roared out of nowhere, a newspaper article I'd seen years before began to scroll through my mind in neat, orderly rows.

*Johnson & Sons have manufactured fine quality caskets locally since 1921, when Johannes Johnson immigrated from—*

My hands twitched. *Not. Now.*

I struggled to concentrate on something else before the words overwhelmed me. Before they became too big for my skull. I tried to look somewhere else, anywhere else, but my gaze kept drifting back to the flower-draped coffin.

Roses, lilies, and a huge spray of reeking blue carnations that Mom had always called by their Old English term, “gillyflowers.” *The Gillyflower. Queen Elizabeth Tudor’s favorite blossom. She surrounded herself with them at court . . .*

The information swelled, marching across my vision in glowing green columns. The genus and origin of each type of blossom, followed by dates and significant events of Elizabeth’s reign. The words expanded until details of every European monarch since Charlemagne flowed before my eyes a translucent overlay of glowing green columns.

*August 12, 30 B.C., Cleopatra, Queen of Egypt, committed suicide.*

*1775, Russian czarina Catherine the Great defeated the Pugachev Rebellion.*

On and on it went, until the chapel and the mourners—the real world—filtered away. I felt myself swaying, listening only to the symphony of knowledge in my head. Then, cutting through the din, the sound of my mother’s voice, low and incessant.

*A true photographic memory is extremely rare, Hope. It is imperative that we devise a way to keep your mind organized. People with your kind of eidetic abilities must learn to contain all that information, to tamp it down, or it will overwhelm you. Concentrate. Stay firmly grounded. Focus only on what is right before you.*

My training kicked in. I shoved back the mass of useless information, spooling it down into the mental image we’d come up with. A battered gray filing cabinet, like the one in Mom’s office. In my head, I slammed the door for good measure and glanced over at my dad.

He hadn’t noticed. That was no surprise. Pasting on a smile, Dad heaved a quiet sigh as curious mourners began to thread their way toward us for handshakes and awkward hugs.

*Firmly grounded. Focus on what’s right before me.*

*Yeah. ’Cause that’s so much better.*

The endless line passed, leaving behind a sickly odor. Too many flowers mixed with a crap-ton of cheap cologne. My gut began to rebel as Dad turned to me, brown eyes owlsh and distracted behind thick frames. When he couldn’t quite meet my eyes, a last phrase—a straggler—loosed from the billions I’d tucked neatly away. It curled and flapped like a ribbon set loose on the wind.

*A miasma arose. The decaying bouquet of a doomed queen’s garden.*

*Who wrote that?* The answer came to hand like a well-trained dog. *Oh, right. It was—*

“Well, thank God that’s done and we can all get back to our lives,” my grandmother said as she marched toward us. “Though I still say it was a ridiculous waste of money to buy a casket, Matt. You could’ve had a nice little memorial service, but—”

“Hope and I needed closure, Mother,” Dad said. “Leave it alone.”

Beatrice “Mother Bea” Walton gave a nod to the petite, round-faced woman who had moved to stand at my father’s side.

“Stella, honey,” she said, “would you be a dear and go make sure the car’s ready?”

“Of course, Mother Bea. Happy to.” Stella proffered a tremulous smile before rushing off to do my grandmother’s bidding.

My father’s new girlfriend was a nice lady. A librarian. And one of the few people in this town my mother had genuinely liked. I didn’t blame her for jumping at my grandmother’s command. Everyone from the mayor to the bag boys at the grocery hopped to when Beatrice Walton issued an order. I was always mildly surprised when they didn’t bow.

I didn’t really blame Dad for being with Stella either, though it had only been seven months since Mom died. When he’d fallen apart, Stella had been the one to pull him back together. She’d tried to

befriend me, too. But I didn't want a friend. I wanted my mom.

After Stella scurried off, my grandmother directed her words at my father, her son the scientist. Her youngest, her pride and joy until eleven years ago, when he'd gone against her wishes and married my mom, taking on five-year-old me in the process.

"I assume you'll get Hope registered at the high school come the fall," Mother Bea said. "No more of that silly homeschooling, now that your wife's gone."

Mother Bea never called my mom by name. Just "your wife." I shot a look at Dad. He wouldn't look at me. But when he nodded to my grandmother, a cold dread began to spread through my veins.

*High school? Actual high school? This was a joke. Had to be.*

When I was younger, I'd begged to go to "real" school, but Mom wouldn't hear of it. *And waste your talents on that inbred travesty they call an education system? Hardly.*

Now they meant to thrust me into that world of Friday night football games, pep rallies, and "good ole boys" with decapitated Bambis in the back of their mud-spattered pickups?

The very thought filled me with horror.

"And the letter?" Mother Bea was saying. "You've explained about the letter?"

Ignoring her, I turned to Dad, confused. "What letter?"

For an instant, he only glared at his mother. Finally, he forced a sickly barely-there smile and reached for my hand.

"Hope," he said, "a few weeks ago, I received an email from your mother's sister, your Aunt Lucinda. She's invited you to spend the summer with her in Scotland. Isn't that wonderful, honey? You'll get to meet your mother's people. I've told her you would come, of course, and—"

"What?" The word bounced against the walls of the empty chapel like the poor, doomed bird. "What are you talking about?"

"W-we"—my dad stuttered over the word—"that is, Stella and I, feel that it would be good for you to get away, honey. You need to heal. We all do. And . . . well . . . we've planned a little trip ourselves. A—a cruise. So I thought . . ."

He trailed off, helpless in his betrayal. Mother Bea gleamed with triumph as he reached into a pocket and pulled out a crumpled piece of paper. He smoothed it out, and pressed it, limp and damp, into my hand.

*Dear Matthew,*

*As I've already offered my condolences, I shall not do so here. This letter is, instead, in reference to your daughter. I wish to request that Hope come spend the summer with me, here at Christopher Manor. As you are aware, the manor is located in a lovely area of the Scottish Highlands. I feel its pastoral landscape could be soothing to Hope. As there are other young people who live at the manor, she will not lack company of her own age.*

*Attached you will find the pertinent information regarding the first-class ticket I have selected. I look forward to hearing from you.*

*Sincerely,*

*Your sister-in-law, Lady Lucinda Carlyle*

*Postscript: Please inform Hope that I also believe there are insights she might gain at her mother's childhood home which would not be feasible for her to discover in her current circumstances.*

My lungs constricted as I let my eyes rise slowly from the paper to stare at my dad, the man who'd



raised me since I was five years old. The only parent I had left.

My voice came out so small. “You’re sending me away?”

“No!” he exclaimed. “No, it’s not like that, Hope. It’s just that now—”

Before he could say more, the pale-lipped funeral director arrived to usher us out to the waiting limo. I jammed the paper into my own pocket as the two of us slipped inside. Deciding to ignore the fact that my dad wanted to get rid of me, I turned to him on the wide leather seat. I had more urgent issues to deal with.

“Dad.” I tried to infuse calm into my voice as we pulled out behind the flashing police escort on our way to the gravesite. “Please. Please don’t bury that awful . . .” I had to stop. Swallow. “What about the video?”

“Not this again.” He mumbled as he leaned back against the stiff seat, closing his eyes and pinching the bridge of his nose.

With a sharp exhale, he nudged the glasses back into place and turned to face me. “Sweetie,” he said. “I know you think you saw something. And I believe you. I do. But we researched it for weeks. None of the U.S. or foreign networks recognized your description of the news footage.”

“I know what I saw, Dad.”

He scraped a hand across his mouth. I recognized the gesture as poorly-disguised annoyance. I’d seen it before, though not often. Once, when I’d accidentally deleted his paper on ‘Karenia Brevis,’ the organism responsible for red tide in the Gulf of Mexico. And again at eight, when I’d scribbled Socrates’s speech to the Athens jury in permanent marker on his office white board.

“This isn’t easy for me, either, Hope.” His voice was hushed and so, so sad. “But we have to face facts. Your mother was inside that lecture hall when the earthquake struck. No one on the lower floor survived. It’s been over seven months now, honey, and I . . .”

His jaw flexed. A lone tear escaped and rolled down my father’s cheek. “It’s time to let her go.”



After the quake, I’d become obsessed with the news. I didn’t sleep, I barely ate. The extra pounds I’d always carried around had melted away as I pored over each picture, every article, hundreds of hours of news footage. The video had aired only once, on one of the satellite channels in Dad’s office.

Most people wouldn’t have noticed.

I wasn’t most people.

With crystal-clear recall, my mind never stopped replaying the ten-second clip.



The girl’s body lay only a few yards from the collapsed university high rise. She’d obviously tried to run when the building came down, but an immense beam had fallen, crushing her beneath its weight. The footage had panned over her mangled corpse for only an instant, but it was all I’d needed. The neon-pink flyer crumpled in the girl’s limp hand was ripped and bloody and coated with white dust. I could make out only the first few words, written in Hindi, then in English.

*Today’s lecture series with renowned author and historian Dr. Sarah Walton is can—*

That was it. That was all. But I knew, I knew, what that last word really was.

Not *can*. *Canceled*.

For some reason, my mother had canceled her lecture that day. She had not been inside that tower when the earthquake brought it down.

Ecstatic at first, my father had contacted the American embassies in Mumbai and New Delhi. Then

every hospital, shelter, and rescue organization. But as the days and weeks dragged on, he'd slowly lost the hope and faith that we'd find her just slip away. When I refused to let it go, his look had turned from pity to concern.

"Hope." He spoke carefully over the limo's purring engine, as if to a small child. "We've been over this so many times. If Sar—" He paused, took a deep breath through his nose. "If your mother was alive, she'd have contacted us. If she was injured, someone else would have. They've identified all the survivors. I'm so sorry. But, sweetheart, it's time to move on."

I threw up my hands. "Oh, you'd love that. 'Cause if she's dead, you can stop feeling so guilty about hooking up with Stella."

Since the day my mom—the sun around which we both revolved—went supernova, Dad and I had existed in a kind of wobbly orbit. Two orphaned planets. Polite, unfailingly cordial, but never quite synchronized.

"Bet you wouldn't just throw me out like this if I was your *real* daughter," I muttered, staring out the glass at the trees whipping past.

My dad flinched, hand pressed to his heart as if to keep it from stopping.

I hadn't cried when he made me go with him to pick out the coffin. I'd remained stubbornly mute while Dad and the funeral director made all the arrangements. During visitation the night before, I heard my grandmother whisper how I was an unnatural, cold child.

None of it had touched me. It wasn't real.

It took the horrified, wounded look on my father's face for it to finally break through. I heard it happen, a quiet snap deep inside.

"Dad?" I choked. "Daddy? I'm sorry. I didn't mean it. I didn't. It's just that I—I can't . . ."

"I know, sweetie." He pulled me across the seat to wrap me in his arms. "I know."

The tears came then. Because he was right. They were all right. My mother was dead, and I had been so stupid.

---

## CHAPTER 2

I'D LISTENED IN ON THE KITCHEN EXTENSION WHEN MY dad took the call all those months ago. The man from the Red Cross sounded so apologetic. His proper speech and Hindi accent made the words almost soothing. The search for survivors was called off, he'd explained. Explosives had been set to bring down the rest of the dangerous, mangled mess that had once housed the university lecture halls. Anyone still missing was now presumed dead.

I think Dad even thanked him before hanging up.

*Now presumed dead.*

The phone had tumbled from my hand as the files in my mind blew open and began to flood with images of death by crushing. Death by suffocation. The walls closed in around me as pain blasted through my brain. Unbearable, unspeakable pain. When my father rushed into the kitchen seconds later, I was curled on the floor, screaming in agony.

I'd had them before. Cluster migraines, the doctors called them. Brought on by my unusual mental "gift," and exacerbated by severe claustrophobia. They weren't dangerous, but when my brain—with its photographic capability—took in too much stimuli, it simply couldn't cope.

Though the shrinks could diagnose the headaches all day long, they'd never been able to pinpoint the exact source of the horrific, breath-robbing nightmare I'd suffered my entire life.

After Mom died, the dream had gotten so much worse.

In it, I'm trapped inside the belly of a great tree. A dank, cold place in which the living wood tries to consume me. Where fat, leggy creatures drop down from the blackness above to roam through my hair and skitter across my face.

For months after Mom died, I woke up every night, biting back screams, my sheets sweaty and tangled around me. They'd recently subsided to only once or twice a week. Though now when the nightmare came, I stayed awake the rest of the night, too afraid to fall asleep again. Without the comfort of her voice or her cool hand to smooth the hair off my clammy face, the monsters always returned.

In the end, I did nothing as they lowered the shiny, tenant-less casket into the ground. Back in our own car, Dad pulled up in front of the house, but didn't get out. His hands tightened on the steering wheel. "I won't force you to go," he said. "But Stella and I will be gone for a few weeks. We're taking a long drive west, then up to Seattle, and the Alaskan cruise is for two weeks. It's something she's always wanted to do."

I managed not to roll my eyes, but it was a close thing.

"You can, of course, stay with your grandmother."

I blinked at him. He knew I'd rather live in a cardboard box and take showers with the hose than stay with *her*. A woman who'd never, in all the years I'd known her, shown me one ounce of kindness.

"No, thanks," I said, though it left me with decidedly few options. It wasn't like I had a friend I could stay with.

Or a friend.

"Yes, well . . ." He sighed. "I'm sorry, honey, but those are your choices. It's your call, though I think the trip would be good for you. We can get you a mild sedative from Dr. Miller for the plane ride." He squeezed my knee and smiled, as if that was the answer.

*A mild sedative.* Just the ticket. That would take care of the massive panic attacks that would surely come when I was alone forty-thousand feet above the Atlantic Ocean.

“I’ve forwarded you the email from Lucinda,” he said as he got out of the car. “I never met her, but she and your mother were very close, you know. Promise me you’ll at least think about it.”

I snorted. *Sure. No problem. I’ll just hop on a plane. Easy-peasey.*

Unlike a normal person, I wasn’t worried about crashing. I’d researched the chances of that, and they were infinitesimal. No. It wasn’t splatting into the ocean and cracking into a million pieces that made my teeth itch. It was being trapped inside that suffocating metal tube.

As I walked across the porch, the memory zipped into place.

My mom was a prominent historian and author of a dozen popular biographies. Universities all over the world paid her very well for her lectures and book-signings. She’d tried for years to take me along on her circuit. She’d begged, cajoled, promised me a great time. A little over a year ago, I’d finally agreed. We planned it for months. We’d fly into London and rent a car, and I’d actually get to see some of the historical places I’d spent most of my life studying. I wanted to go so badly, I could taste it. Then, three days after my fifteenth birthday, we went to the airport.

It was an unmitigated disaster.

I tried. I tried so hard to make myself get on that plane. In the end, my mother had boarded alone, while I vomited quietly in my dad’s back seat, the claustrophobia-induced migraine splitting my skull in two. After that, no matter how much she begged, I wouldn’t even discuss it.

Alone in my bedroom, I slumped in my battered desk chair, staring down at the smears of red graveyard mud that tracked across the frayed carpet. The muted clink of dishes rose up through the floor. Below, I could hear the muffled voices of people who’d followed us home. Done with the whole mourning thing, they were busy stuffing their faces with casseroles and neighbor-baked pies.

*She’s gone. She’s really gone. And now Dad is leaving me too.*

But ten hours on an airplane? Impossible.

*The area inside a typical Boeing 747 is 1,375 square feet. The average size of a small house. Not so bad, right? A house. Plenty of room. No big deal.*

*But if you’re in a house, you can go outside. You can step out and breathe the air. If you want—if you need—to.*

Panting, I lowered my head to my knees as tiny jets of agony began to pulse across my scalp. An invisible band slowly tightened across my chest as sweat gathered at my hairline and across the back of my neck.

When black spots appeared at the edge of my vision, I knew I was seconds from hyperventilating. Grinding my teeth, I forced myself to perform the breathing technique Mom and I had practiced over and over, when everything became too much. When the vast quantities of information that never, ever left my brain just kept expanding.

*In . . . two three. Out . . . two three. That’s right, Hope. There you go. Slow and easy. Just keep counting.*

When my breath had normalized, I sat up and turned back to the computer. The subject line in the forwarded email read, “Invitation from your aunt.”

*Aunt.* I scowled at the four black letters. *Yeah, right. Might as well say “Invitation from a total stranger.”* My mom and her only sister *had been* close, that was true enough. They’d talked on the phone every week. Sometimes for hours. But Mom always claimed her sister was something of a recluse. She never visited. And in all those years, she’d never asked to speak to me. Not once.

I tapped ragged fingernails on the wooden desk. I didn’t need to read the letter. I’d committed it to memory in that one, quick glance. *As I’ve already offered my condolences, I shall not do so here.*

I grunted. *Wow. What a sweetheart.*

My gaze snagged on the postscript.

*I also believe there are insights she might gain at her mother’s childhood home which would not be*

*feasible for her to discover in her current circumstances.*

“Insights?” I muttered. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

I stood and paced to the window. Even here, in my own space, I felt suffocated. I shoved the sash open, but the muggy June air only made it worse.

Frustrated, I slammed it back down. Wrapping a fist in the nubby curtains, I started to jerk them closed, when a blaze of blue caught my eye. Our neighbor’s massive hydrangea bush.

I flinched away from the window as the memory sliced me apart.

The annual Walton Fourth of July picnic was mandatory. Only imminent death excused attendance. That year, Mother Bea had hired a professional photographer, who’d spent the day snapping candid. Twelve, chubby and awkward, I’d spent my day ducking out of them.

As the sun waned, my grandmother had perched in her favorite wicker chair before a great wall of blue hydrangeas to begin formal portraits. When the photographer called for the grandkids, Dad towed me toward the plethora of cousins. Stifling a sigh, I’d arranged myself near the back. Mother Bea’s perfectly permed gray head swiveled, scanning her progeny. When the photographer raised his huge camera, she gestured for him to wait.

Without bothering to turn, my grandmother made the announcement. “I’d like for these to be blood kin only,” she called. “Hope, you understand, don’t you, dear?”

Stung—stunned—it took me a second to get it. After I slunk away, my grandmother ordered the obviously disconcerted photographer to proceed. Several of my cousins snickered as waves of hot embarrassment baked my face. Of course it wasn’t a secret that no Walton blood flowed in my veins. But never before had I been singled out that way.

*Left out that way.*

In the tangerine glow of a perfect sunset, I’d watched the mob of tanned, golden-haired kids cluster around their matriarch. Uniformly big teeth gleamed as they grinned on cue. I stood alone, a pale, dark-haired stain against a gleaming white column.

My mother’s reaction was predictably fierce, and the next day, after my lesson in Empirical Russian, she’d informed my father that she and I would attend no more family functions.

My mom despised her mother-in-law and everything she stood for. She would never have wanted me to stay.

I sank down in the desk chair. Tears blurred the screen as, hands shaking, I typed in the two-word reply.

“I’ll come.”

---

## CHAPTER 3

I WOKE JUST AS THE PLANE TAXIED INTO EDINBURGH AIRPORT. Dad had been right about the sedative, though I was fairly sure Dr. Miller, a kindly, old-school pediatrician who'd treated my myriad ailments since I was six, might've upped the recommended dosage just a smidge.

The first, lighter round of meds had kicked in just as I boarded and strapped in. Somehow, I had stumbled to the right gate in Atlanta. Then I'd spent the next ten hours passed out, drooling, and—based on the mutters of the disgruntled passengers around me—snoring like a bear with a sinus infection.

Before I left, I'd tried to research my aunt's home, Christopher Manor. There was little to find. Only a few faraway photos posted by hikers traveling through the famous Scottish Highlands. And a stern warning that—unlike a lot of other grand Highland estates—it was not open to the public.

"Your aunt's right sorry she couldn't be here to welcome you herself, lass." Mac, Lucinda's lanky, balding caretaker, had explained when he met me at baggage claim with a little, handwritten sign. "Urgent business, you understand."

*All this way. And she wasn't even here?*

Still drowsy and more than a little grumpy, I hadn't said much on the long, dark drive from Edinburgh. But when we pulled up the gravel drive and parked in front of the massive, imposing mansion, I couldn't help but gape.

Floodlights illuminated five or six stories of golden stone that glowed against the night sky. Square Norman towers stood sentinel at each corner, giving the manor a boxy look. There were no storybook turrets that I could see, but the crenelated tops of the walls and towers made it easy to imagine long-ago kilted archers defending the house against rival clans.

"The house nestles right up against the mountain," Mac said as he saw the direction of my gaze. "She's a right good old girl."

I nodded, still mute with awe. I couldn't tell how far the mansion stretched out behind. But judging by the distance to the hump of the mountain in the near distance, it had to be enormous.

Inside, the house was dark and silent. Only the soft glow of wall sconces set between grim-faced ancestors lit our way as we trudged up two flights of wide, carpeted steps. The scents of stone, lemon polish, and musty drapes cascaded over us as I followed Mac's knobby shoulders down a narrow hallway.

Only a small bedside lamp lit the room where Mac deposited me and my bags. With a groan, he laid my suitcase on a nearby table before pointing out a thermos and covered plate. "My Moira wanted to wait up for ye," he said. "But I told her we'd be sore late getting in. Still I swear she'll take a broom to these old bones if ye don't eat at least two of her famous jam sandwiches."

At my very-polite thanks, his grin widened, making his small blue eyes disappear into a fan of wrinkles. "Aw, Lass," he said, "You've had a hard row to hoe. But it's right pleased we are to have you here. Now, you get yourself some sleep. The others will be rarin' to meet ye come the morn."

Still druggy and exhausted, I climbed up the three wooden steps to the bed and, fully clothed, passed clean out.



The clack of footsteps woke me the next morning. I cracked one crusty eyelid to see that pearly dawn.

light now puddled on the floor of my new bedroom, brightening as I watched. Groaning, I glanced at the ornate bronze clock on my bedside table.

*Not even seven, yet. Who the hell is wandering around at this ungodly hour? And in heels, no less.*

I pulled the quilt up to my chin and burrowed deeper into the feather mattress.

Without warning, the bedroom door flew open with such force, it smacked against the paneled wall. I shot up, heart hammering. Before I could blink, a dainty, elf-faced girl with an upturned nose and short spiky hair the startling shade of a blue Slurpee bounded into the room. In a short skirt and peasant blouse—and sporting the highest platform heels I'd ever seen—the girl scampered up the steps to the bed and settled herself beside me, wriggling like an excited puppy.

“Cheese an’ rice.” A toothy grin lit her entire, freckled face. It was infectious, and I had to force my own lips not to respond. “I thought you were going to sleep away the morn.”

My mouth felt lined with cat fur, my brain pickled from sleep. I shoved my hair out of my face and scooted back until I was pressed against the puckered velvet headboard.

She followed my gaze to the half-open door. “Shh. I’m supposed to let you sleep, but you look fine to me. I’m Phoebe, by the by,” she said. “Mac’s my grandda. You met him last night, I hear. He and Gran help Lu run the estate.”

“I’m—”

“You’re Hope,” she said, giving me a blinding grin that went all the way to her hairline. “I know. Everyone knows. We’re so excited you’re finally here.”

“That’s, um . . . good?” I managed before she hopped to the floor.

“I’ll put your things away while you get ready.”

I winced as the bubbly girl began yanking clothes from my suitcase and jamming them into a massive ancient dresser. When a pair of too-large sweats emerged from the jumble, she cocked an eyebrow at me.

“They’re my mom’s,” I said as I slid from beneath the covers. “I just—”

“You don’t have to explain to me. I sleep in one of my da’s old shirts. I know it’s nutters, but sometimes I can still smell him. We lost him when I was but a babe. Still . . .”

Her smile wobbled as she swiped a hand beneath her nose. “It’s pure natty, but I don’t care. Gran and I had a huge row when she threw it in the bin and I fished it right back out.”

It was so weird to watch someone else handling my things. I’d never had a friend back home. No one to wear my clothes without asking or ruin my favorite sweater or share stories about boys. When I was younger, I dreamed of having a friend like that, but Mom always claimed being around “empty-headed” girls my own age would only distract me from my studies.

Stifling a groan, I eased out from under the covers and stumbled to the center of the room, taking a first real look at my new surroundings.

*Holy cow, I’m living in freaking Hogwarts.*

Turning in an idiot circle, I gawped at the shabby opulence. Dusty ostrich feathers topped yards of midnight-blue velvet that draped the immense canopy bed. A high, scalloped ceiling was complete with plaster cherubs. Stuffed bookshelves lined each side of an honest-to-God marble fireplace. I inhaled, tasting book glue and the ghosts of long-ago fires.

Phoebe cheerfully slammed the last of my things into a drawer. “Pure awesome room, aye? It was your mum’s, you know. Sarah’s.”

I could see it. My mother as a young girl, curled on the tartan loveseat, strawberry hair tucked behind her ears as she frowned down at a leather-bound book.

Phoebe tactfully ignored me, humming under her breath as she heaved my empty suitcase over to a closet. I noticed her eyes were an exact replica of her grandfather’s. Small. Blue. Smiling.

Before setting the frame on a bedside table, she studied the only photo I’d brought. Me and Mom,

lying on a bed of autumn leaves, brown and gold bits tangled in our hair as we grinned up at my dad.

“Gads,” she said. “~~You don’t look anything like her. Sarah, I mean. You’re exotic, like some gypsy girl, with that dark hair and those great gray eyes of yours.~~” She tilted her head, studying me. “But then, you’re adopted, aye? Lucky, that. They say I look just like my mum. And you couldn’t know, but that’s pure unfortunate.”

I couldn’t help but grin at her comically tragic expression. A stud pierced one straight, rust-colored eyebrow, which I assumed meant that beneath the dye, she was likely a redhead. The silver stud winked in the light as she babbled on in an accent so thick, I had to concentrate to understand.

“I met her—Sarah—when she was here in the fall. She came before . . . Well, she was in an awful hurry then, wasn’t she?”

“You saw my mom?” The words tangled in my mouth until I almost couldn’t get them out. “But . . . she never . . . I mean, I thought she went straight to India. Are you sure it was *last* fall? When, exactly?”

The girl’s mouth snapped shut, eyes widening at the obvious mistake.

My mind whirled, trying to take it in.

Mom had left home only once last year. The final time, nearly eight months earlier. *Why hadn’t she mentioned going to Scotland?*

“So, uh . . . you haven’t met Collum yet,” she bumbled on. “Just so you know, my brother can be a bit of a wank, sometimes. Though if he acts like that to you, I’ll give him—”

Phoebe winced as a distant voice called up the stairs.

“Bollocks!” she groaned. “If Gran catches me, I’m done for. Don’t mention you saw me, aye?”

“But,” I called after Phoebe as she fled the room. Feeling as though I’d been buffeted about by a tiny, blue tornado, I whispered to the now-empty room.

“But why would she lie to us?”



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## CHAPTER 4

AFTER A QUICK SHOWER IN A CLAW-FOOT TUB WHOSE HAND-HELD sprayer spat rusty, lukewarm water, I wound my way down the curved stairs and through a series of rooms. High ceilings soared over scarred wooden floors lined with tatty vintage rugs. Scruffy antique furniture was clustered in comfy arrangements before fireplaces mounted with crossed swords or family crests.

I followed the sound of clinking dishes until the heavenly scents of baking bread and frying eggs overcame the odors of stone and age. My stomach rumbled as I paused in the long dining room to watch a spider swing between the prongs of a huge deer-antler chandelier. Judging by the spotless gleam on the massive table beneath, I didn't think the impressive web would be there long.

Two voices penetrated the nearby door, the source of the delicious smells. When I heard my name, shamelessly pressed against it to listen.

"What did ye think of her?" a woman's voice spoke. "Will the lass be able to handle such a thing?"

I recognized Mac's gravelly rumble. "The child barely spoke, my love. She was exhausted, and most Yanks get a bit fankled when they first see the manor, even in the dead o' night. All I know is that Lu believes her capable."

"Lu believes in her because she's Sarah's daughter." The woman sounded unsure. "She's had no real training, and 'tis a hard task for one not raised to it."

I couldn't make out Mac's reply, though I heard the woman's response well enough.

"I hope that's so. I worry about the poor lamb. We've so little time to get her prepared."

I frowned. *Get me prepared? For what?*

I didn't like the sound of that at all. But I probably wouldn't learn much lurking in the shadows. Exhaling, I pushed into a bright, homey kitchen. Next to a flour-dusted island, Mac and the woman stood in a loose embrace. A thick, graying braid swayed across her back as he rocked her gently, her head tucked under his chin. My throat swelled, watching them. When I was little, I'd once come upon Mom and Dad in the same pose, swaying to music only they could hear.

Mac's blue eyes opened, and I realized I'd been right about Phoebe. The eyes were identical.

"Why, look who's come to join us, darlin'." He released the woman, grinning at me, and I realized he'd passed his blazing smile along to his granddaughter too. "Welcome to Christopher Manor, lass."

Within a few seconds, I learned the round-faced woman was Moira, of the jam sandwiches. That she was Mac's wife and Lucinda's best friend and business partner for more than thirty years. That she and *only* she ran this house, and that I was too thin and needed fattening up. Despite her bulk, Moira bustled around the kitchen with the grace of a ballerina.

She hustled me toward one of the benches that lined the long, scuffed but scoured kitchen table. Soon she was smiling down at me as I scarfed up steaming eggs and two pieces of warm bread slathered with fresh butter and strawberry jam.

When Moira offered a large ladle of baked beans, Mac chuckled at my horrified expression. "Aye, understand you Yanks don't appreciate the bean for breakfast?"

"Well, they're mostly a supper thing for us. Thanks, though."

"Pity that." Mac smothered his own breakfast with a hearty portion. "Ye don't know what you're missing."

I scanned the room, wondering where the girl had gone.

"If you're looking for Phoebe"—Moira settled onto the bench next to me with a groan—"I've sent the little minx to the village. She knew she wasn't to speak to ye till Lu's return."

“Our granddaughter’s a bit on the curious side,” Mac explained through a mouthful of food.

Moira snorted. “Curious—that’s an understatement if ever I’ve heard one, John MacPherson.”

“Hope”—Mac wiped his mouth with a yellowed linen napkin—“Phoebe’s a good girl, and I hope ye’ll take to her. She’s high-spirited, but she has the biggest heart in the Highlands, she does.”

“With the biggest mouth to go along,” Moira muttered, though a fond smile softened her words.

“Our grandson, Collum, has gone with Lu. Ye’ll meet him when they return in the morning. Collum’s a . . . serious lad. As different from his sister as night is from day.”

I laid my fork down, careful not to look up from my plate. “Speaking of Phoebe,” I said, “she mentioned something about my mother being here in the fall. But how could that be, when—”

Mac stood abruptly and hurried to open a door that led out onto a mud porch. “Och, look a’ the time. I must away to the west barn. One of the ewes is near her time.”

He thrust long arms into a faded vest and plucked a houndstooth cap from a peg on the wall. “Moira will show ye the house. If this rain lets up, I’ll take ye out on the horses later. I hear ye’re a fine rider.”

Moira snatched up my empty plate as he left. I stood and offered to help. At the sink, I turned toward her. “Moira, about my—”

She shooed me from the kitchen before I could finish the sentence, telling me she’d come for me once she’d finished up in the kitchen, and we’d take a tour of the house. I paused in the doorway and turned to face her. My utter confusion must’ve shown, because her apple cheeks rose as she gave a soft sigh.

“Child,” she said, “let me offer ye some advice my old mum used to give me.” When she smiled, her eyes nearly disappeared behind the full cheeks. “A drop of patience can yield an ocean of reward. Now, I admit, I often have a hard time following it myself. But I’m offering it to ye anyway.” She cocked her chin toward the door. “Now scoot.”



The rear of the house, which apparently contained more parlors, a billiards room, and a grand ballroom, was sealed off. Locked up due to heating costs, Moira told me during the tour. After viewing innumerable bedrooms, most shrouded in ghostly dust covers, I was relieved when Moira pushed open a set of wide double doors saying, “And finally, there’s the library, o’ course.”

Moira reminded me of my dad’s grandmother, the only member of his family who never treated me like some kind of fungus that had invaded their family tree. Memaw died when I was ten. Like her, Moira was all round curves and sweetness, a person who solved life’s problems with hugs and a tin of sugar cookies.

I liked Moira, except that all during the tour, whenever I opened my mouth to ask about my mom, she diverted the conversation with a quirky comment on this ancestor or that piece of furniture.

I swallowed down my latest attempt as we stepped inside the cozy room, the sights and smells a balm to my jangled nerves. Tall mullioned windows. Muted yellow light. Aged leather and old paper. The library smelled like Shakespeare. It smelled like my mom.

I breathed it in, walking over to pull a book from one of the floor to ceiling shelves. *The Royal Forests of Medieval England*, by Charles R. Young.

I’d read it, of course. The words were installed in my memory files along with billions of others. If I needed them, I could bring them up by chapter or page number.

“Ye’ll find most of the best history books ever written on these shelves, my lamb,” Moira said. “And you’re welcome to any you care to read.” She paused, head tilted as she studied me. “I understand ye’ve the gift of memory?”

*Some gift*, I thought as I slid the book back.

~~“Yes, ma’am,” I said. “When I see or read something, it . . . well, it just kind of sticks.”~~

“What a blessing that must be,” Moira said as she cupped my cheek. “Your mother told us you were a very special girl. It’s happy we are to finally have you here, and to welcome you into our family.”

*Family.*

I nodded, my throat too tight to speak.

“Now”—Moira linked arms with me and towed me toward the marble fireplace, above which hung a huge painting—“may I introduce Lord and Lady Hubert Carlyle. Your many-times great-grandparents. And with them is their son, Jonathan.”

Hubert was a stern-looking guy with a walrus mustache and heavy jowls. His wife looked as if she been sucking on lemons. But the young Jonathan’s hazel eyes danced with mischief. I liked him immediately.

In the portrait to their right, Jonathan was older. He was situated behind a beautiful, seated woman whose shiny dark hair was replicated in the two little girls kneeling before her. One hand on his mother’s shoulder, a gangly, adolescent boy stared out with his father’s sparkling eyes.

“Jonathan’s wife, Julia,” Moira said. “And their children.”

“Oh . . . the little girls are so cute,” I grinned at the youngest girl’s chubby cheeks.

Moira stared up for a long moment. “Aye.” The word came out as a croak and she had to clear her throat before continuing. “Aye. They certainly were.”

The far side of the fireplace held a smaller portrait of a round-faced couple. The woman had Moira’s merry eyes and round chin. “These are my own ancestors on my mum’s side, James MacPherson and his wife, Edwina. James was Hubert’s estate manager. Mac is also distantly related to the two, this part of Scotland being riddled with MacPhersons, ye know.”

I wandered around the welcoming room, touching this and that, until I noticed a heavy silver frame on a small table tucked into a far corner. My eyes widened. I couldn’t believe it.

“Hey, Moira,” I called, picking up the photo. “Is this my mom? Wearing a toga?”

Moira slid a pair of reading glasses off her graying hair. She squinted in the low light, then muttered, “I thought I’d put this one away.”

She reached to take the picture from me, but I pretended not to notice. Her mouth tightened, but she said nothing as I tilted it for a better look.

She sighed. “Yes, that’s Sarah. And Lucinda beside her.”

Aunt Lucinda looked a lot like my mom. Smooth hair, in a shade of ripe apricots. Broad at hip and shoulder. Same long nose and close-set eyes the color of faded denim. But even though Lucinda was smiling in the picture—and dressed for a frat party besides—her erect posture seemed too stern, like she was preparing to rally the troops.

Mom was squashed between her sister and a guy with freckles and a blaze of red hair. The boy had his arm around Mom, squeezing her to him. While Lucinda looked to be in her twenties, the other two couldn’t have been much older than I was now. Hair wrapped around her head in elaborate braids, her shockingly slim body draped in folds of white linen, and gold sandals laced up bare calves, my mom grinned madly into the camera. So young. So happy. I’d never seen her look like that.



Moira peeked around my arm. “That’s Collum and Phoebe’s da, our son Michael, there with your mum. I’d always hoped . . .” She paused, frowned. “Well, but he was young and stupid. Ended up marrying a local girl, didn’t he? Fiona, the children’s mum, wasn’t worth a hill of beans. Took off with another man soon after Phoebe’s birth. I ask you, what kind of woman leaves a young lad and

newborn behind for a father to raise? If things had been different, he and Sar—" Her voice cracked as she traced a finger over the happy-looking young man. "Oh, but Michael did love those babes." She gave a small sigh. "He's been gone nigh on twelve years now."

"I'm so sorry, Moira," I said, feeling a rush of sympathy for the funny girl, Phoebe. At least I still had my dad.

She waved me off, and I stared down at the photo, still incredulous. "So *my* mom actually went to a toga party."

"Not exactly," Moira said.

*Suuure.*

At the edge of the frame, a pretty, olive-skinned girl with high cheekbones and jutting chin stood slightly apart from the others. Dark braids twined to her waist, like slender snakes. She was the only one not looking at the camera. Instead, her black eyes were narrowed on Michael MacPherson and my mom snuggled up together. While the rest practically danced off the photo, the brunette glowered. Though she was dressed like the others, there was something different about her. The longer I stared, the more I could almost feel the rage and jealousy flow off the picture.

"Is the black-haired girl Fiona?" I asked. "'Cause she doesn't look too happy in this picture."

Moira stiffened and plucked the picture firmly from my grip. Mouth tight, she glared down at the dark-haired girl, and I got the impression she wasn't Moira's favorite person. "No," was all she said.

Moira thumped the frame onto the table, picture side down.

"And this is the end of the tour, I'm thinking."

With a decisive step, she moved off toward the door. I didn't follow at first, only watched as she flitted around the room, clicking off the small, mismatched lamps and casting the library into shadow.

"Hey, Moira? I—"

"Och, but this place needs a good dustin'," she cut me off, reaching on tiptoe to swipe a finger across the edge of an upper shelf.

When Moira glanced back to see me standing still and alone in the center of the room, her pursed mouth softened. "Come along then, my lamb," she said, "'tis time for tea."

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## CHAPTER 5

WHEN MAC WOKE ME FROM A NAP A COUPLE OF HOURS LATER, I felt drained—a wrung sponge left to dry on the sink. My limbs dragged as I moved the book that lay open on the bed beside me, a biography of Eleanor of Aquitaine someone had left on my bedside table, and followed him to the stables.

Outside, the lowering sun shot streams of gold through heavy clouds as I trotted through the stable yard astride a sturdy gray mare named Ethel. A fragrant breeze blew past, ruffling my clothes as I stared, astounded by the brutal beauty of the land around me. Beyond the yard, the valley spread out like a rumpled green and purple quilt, with the vast moor just beyond.

Behind us, the fortress-like Christopher Manor guarded the sheep and cattle that roamed between it and the charcoal roofs of a small village. The town lay at the foot of the valley, on the opposite side, nestled between craggy, twin mountains rubbed bald by millennia of wind and rain. A river bisected the gorge and disappeared into the heather and gorse of the moors.

“The uplands look flat,” Mac warned from his perch on a wide gelding. “But ’tis full of dips and hidden burns—those are streams, mind—that cut through the heather before joining the river. Ye’ll come on them sudden-like, especially once ye get closer to the big mountain, so keep our girl here to a nice, easy trot.” The lines in his weathered cheeks deepened as he smiled. “Ethel likes to run, so ye’ll have to hold her back.”

I pivoted in the saddle. “I can go alone?”

The horse danced under me, eager to get moving. When I stilled her with heels and reins, Mac nodded in approval.

“Seems ye handle yourself well enough.”

*Every girl of good family should sit a horse well.* My mom’s approving voice spoke in my memory.

I’d adored my weekly riding lessons, the only nonacademic hobby my mother had ever allowed. At eleven, I’d never been near a horse before. Yet that very first day, my instructor, Mr. Waterman, told Mom he’d never seen a child take to riding like I did.

*Look at her go. It’s like she was born to it, Miz Walton.*

Watching me, Mom frowned, though I’d blushed to the roots at the old man’s praise. Used to feeling awkward and klutzy, from the moment I climbed in the saddle it was like my hands and feet took on a mind of their own. On the horse, I’d felt graceful for the first time in my life. The smells and the movement of the horse and leather beneath me was familiar, like returning to an old friend. It felt wonderful. It felt right.

After Mom died, Dad never mentioned the lessons. I could’ve said something, I suppose. But it hadn’t seemed right without her. So I’d kept quiet, and the one activity I had loved slid to the wayside.

“I’m away to the south pasture to check the flock.” Mac walked his horse over to the gate and leaned down to open it. “Ye’ll have but a few hours of peace, lass. I’d enjoy them if I were you. When Lu returns tomorrow, things may become . . . different.”

He frowned, as if he wanted to say more.

“Mac?” I nipped at a cuticle on my free hand. Moira’s warning echoed in my head, but I had to try one last time. “When was my mother here last?” I trailed off as his eyes cut away.

He clucked to his gelding, who ambled over until our knees almost touched.

“Lass,” the word came on a sigh. “I don’t pretend to understand what you’ve suffered. You’ve been through the wringer, and that’s the truth of it. But I’m knowing one thing for certain.” He placed a rough, careworn hand over mine where they gripped the reins. “Our darlin’ Sarah loved ye more than

life itself. And she did her best by ye. And so too will all of us here. Ye can take to the bank, aye?"

My throat closed. "Yeah," I whispered.

"Away with ye now," he sniffed, and wheeled his horse. "But be careful, aye? And dinna be too long. Moira'll have my hide if ye miss supper."

"Thank you, Mac."

With a backwards wave, he moved off toward the opposite fence.



The horse responded to the barest pressure of my knees as she trotted down the long valley and out onto the magnificence of the Highland moor.

Ethel splashed through the narrow burn, which twisted and turned upon itself, growing deeper and faster the closer we got to the huge mountain range that bordered the uplands to the north. These were higher, misty and still snowcapped, even in June. Weaving through clumps of gorse and thistle with ease, the mare wended her way around the waist-high boulders that sprouted up like mushrooms.

When I loosened the reins, Ethel's powerful muscles bunched and elongated under me. Strands of hair lashed my face as the wind whipped past. The roar of the river ahead pounded and my body began to relax, to move in rhythm with the horse's gait.

A pitted boulder appeared before us. I jerked on the reins, but Ethel apparently had a different idea. She raced straight toward the rock. My mouth opened in a scream that turned to a shout of pure joy as we soared over it.

With the horse pounding beneath me, I felt alive. I felt free.

A glint of reflected sunlight caught my eye. I reined up, squinting across the brush at a figure on horseback that had emerged from behind a large clump of rock. He—pretty sure it was a he—held something to his face that winked in the weakening sun.

*Binoculars? Is someone watching me?*

When I clucked at Ethel and headed toward him, the man veered his horse and raced off in the opposite direction. Curious now, I nudged the mare into an easy canter. Ahead of us, the stranger galloped away. Every once in a while he glanced back, as if gauging the distance. He was looking behind him when they crested a steep hill. His horse—apparently not in the mood for a jump—planted its hoofs. The rider went flying over the animal's head, disappearing from view as the now-riderless horse shied and galloped away.

"Oh. Crap," I said, and kicked my heels hard into Ethel's flanks.



I dismounted beside a steep riverbank. Below, the clear brown water dashed against the boulders, drowning out any other noise.

"Hey!" I yelled, but the guy had disappeared.

When I edged closer, the damp earth of an overhang crumbled beneath me. Arms pinwheeling, down the slope I went, crashing through mud and brush, before I fetched up—panting—at the pebble edge of the surging river.

I saw him then, tangled in a patch of undergrowth at the water's edge, like a piece of driftwood. He was sprawled face-up across a flat rock, clothes splattered with mud, laces of his brown hiking boots floating in the swift current. He wasn't moving.

My jeans wicked up the frigid water as I splashed through the shallows toward him. His head lay cocked at an angle that hid his face. I couldn't tell if he was even alive.

“Oh God oh God oh God.” A crimson ribbon of blood trickled from his dark hair to stain the mossy rock.

“Hey,” I called. “Hey, can you hear me? Are you okay?”

The stranger’s ripped shirt lay open beneath a crumpled camp jacket, revealing a terrible scrape across a tanned chest. His visible hand hung bruised and still, the long tapered fingers dangling in the water.

*What if he’s dead? What do I do?*

Dread dug sharp claws into my spine as I splashed to his side. His chest moved up and down.

*Thank God.*

I carefully shook his shoulder. “Hey! You all right? Wake up. Can you hear me?”

Nothing.

My mind raced as I tried to decide what to do. *Stay with him so he doesn’t roll off and drown? Ride back to the house and call 911? Do they even have 911 here? Dammit, why didn’t I bring my phone?*

An expensive-looking camera hung around his neck. The source of the glint I’d seen. The display screen had brightened to life when I shook him. When I saw the image it displayed, my mouth dropped open.

“What the hell?”

“Not bad, eh?” I nearly toppled over as he muttered in a voice creaky with pain. “Of course, it like won’t win any prizes. But you have to admit, the composition’s quite lovely.”

I didn’t respond as I jerked the camera toward me and scrolled through the images. He was right. The light, the setup, the arrangement of each image highlighted the stark, breathless beauty of the Scottish Highlands. It wasn’t the background that freaked me out, though. It was the subject.

Every photo—more than a dozen—was a close-up of me.

My eye twitched. “Who are you? Why were you taking pictures of me?”

Dark, damp hair was plastered over his forehead, though with blood or water, I wasn’t sure. I couldn’t see now that he was around my age. Sixteen. Seventeen, maybe. He gave a little groan as he scraped the hair back and turned his face toward me.

Then, he opened his eyes.

Behind a fringe of black lashes, his left eye was a soft green, like sunlight on moss. The right, the brilliant blue of an October sky. As I stared down at him, the world warped around me.

The rush of water grew muted and distant. *My nose and chest filled with the stench of . . . smoke? Yes. Wood smoke, tinged with a sickly sweetness of charred meat. Somewhere, a fire crackled and popped like bacon in a pan. Screams. The thump of hooves. A winy scent of overripe apples.*

“Hello?” a voice called from far away. I clung to it like a lifeline.

The river’s gurgle returned, and I suddenly realized I was standing in the middle of a swift current gaping down at a complete stranger.

“I know what you’re thinking, love.” The words came out husky, his accent more blue-blood than Highlander. “You’re wondering how someone so strong, so handsome, and so obviously endowed with athletic ability could’ve gotten himself thrown from a bloody horse.” He winced as he sat up and swung long jean-clad legs over the side of the rock. “The answer is quite simple, really.”

His camera still in my hand, I yanked on the strap. He groaned when it jerked his head forward. I tilted it to read the brass plate bolted to the side. PROPERTY OF BRAN CAMERON. IF FOUND, PLEASE RING . . . When I let go, the heavy camera struck against his chest with a satisfying thwack.

Edging a few steps back, I asked through stiff lips, “Why were you taking pictures of me, *Bran Cameron?*”

At first I thought he was ignoring me as he examined the blood smeared on his fingers. “Forgive me, won’t you? I’m, uh . . . feeling a bit off.”

With a moan, his head dropped into his hands.

“Crap,” I grumbled, torn between irritation and pity. “Are you okay?”

*And what the hell do you do if he’s not, Walton?*

Bran raised his head and gave me a wobbly grin. One of his canines was crooked. Oddly, it made me feel better, because the rest of him looked as if he’d been drafted by an architect. All clean lines and straight edges. He wasn’t beautiful, the nose a bit too long, the lips sculpted instead of full. Though his jawline was sharp enough to cut glass, it was his eyes I couldn’t look away from. Those peculiar, mismatched eyes.

“I know you.” The words tumbled out before I could stop them.

“I don’t think so, love.” He peered at me. “I can assure you if we’d ever met, I’d remember. I have an uncanny ability to remember pretty girls.”

*Pretty? Me? Yeah. Sure.*

His trim eyebrows waggled. “Unless of course you attend St. Sebastian Academy down in Kent? I admit, I’ve snuck past their fences a time or two. And I may have had a pint or three beforehand. So if we did, as you Americans like to say, ‘hook up,’ I wish to offer my sincerest apology for my poor memory.”

Blood boiled into my face. In my sixteen years on this earth, no guy had ever, *ever* flirted with me. The redneck boys where I was from preferred girls like my cheerleader cousins. Size two. Blond. Busty. Brainless.

“As you so astutely observed”—from his seated position, he gave a comical bow—“I am Bran Cameron. And, yes. I was photographing you. Though in truth, I was out stalking.”

At my look, he chuckled. “Not in any depraved way, I assure you. I was merely hunting for the Highland stag. Some use guns to stalk. I prefer electronics.” He gave an exaggerated shudder that almost made me smile. “Less blood and entrails, that way. Then I saw a lovely vision on a horse and, well . . . I couldn’t resist.” He shivered. “And now that we are properly acquainted, would you mind terribly helping me off this rock and out of this bloody cold water?”

I realized I was just standing there, gaping at him like a moron, while his lips turned blue with cold.

“Oh.” I held out a hand. “Yeah, okay.”

He took it, pulling himself to his feet. Strong fingers squeezed mine as he bobbed, then steadied. My eyes were level with his chin. I focused on that, instead of his eyes.

Back on dry land, I noticed blood pulsing in a steady stream down his neck, staining the collar of his jacket. I hurried over to Ethel and retrieved a scarf I’d tied to her saddle.

“Here. You’re bleeding.”

Looking up into his odd eyes, once again the disturbing sensation of familiarity rolled over me. When I stumbled, Bran steadied me before I could tumble headlong into the river.

I was blinking too fast, trying to rid myself of the bizarre feeling, when he said, “I’m sorry, but did you tell me your name?”

“Hope,” I managed. “My . . . I mean, I’m Hope Walton. And I’ve got to go.” I eased out of his grip and quickly moved to untie Ethel’s reins from the brush.

“I don’t mean to be a bother,” he called, “but earlier you said you knew me from somewhere.” When I turned, he was close. Right beside me. “Do you?”

“Do I what?” I edged away, nervous at the intense look on his face.

“Know me.”

“No.” The word tasted like a lie, though I couldn’t explain why. “But then again, I’m not one of those slutty St. Sebastian girls.”

He laughed out loud at that. Then groaned as he pressed the scarf against his head.

“Actually,” I said, “I just got here last night, so we couldn’t have met. I-I’ve barely been out of my



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