

# The Raven and the Crown

## The Song of the Fay – Book Two

*Being the First Part of the Highland Duology*



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*Geek Haus Press*

Minnesota, USA

**The Raven and the Crown** by Elizabeth Amy Hajek

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Books may be purchased in bulk discount at [www.geekhauspress.com](http://www.geekhauspress.com)

Cover Art and Interior Embellishment Design: Shaylynn Rackers

Map Design: Elizabeth Amy Hajek

Interior Design: Geek Haus Press and Rivershore Books

Publisher: Geek Haus Press

Editors: Nathan Hajek and Jansina Grossman

Library of Congress Catalog Number: 2024924185

ISBN: 979-8346245896

First Edition

Printed in the United States of America

# Once Upon a Time . . .

*(or twenty years ago)*

It was a dark and stormy night. Cliché though the description might be, it remained apt. There was no moon, and though the lights of the distant village might be seen on a clear night, tonight the rain fell so heavily that no man could see more than a few feet in front of him.

But Toran was not a man. What he was, exactly, was often disputed, but tonight, for all intents and purposes, he was a cat. And so he had a cat's sharp vision, swift reflexes—and deep dislike of water.

With a repressed yowl and tremendous shake of his fur, the cat—or whatever—hurtled through the tall grass of the glen. Never in his seven lives had he gone out on such a night of his own free will. Always would he choose a warm fire and a book over an *adventure!* But, in truth, this was no adventure. It was a mission, and one he could not fail.

“The child is coming!” the messenger had cried.

And the Queen's face had gone white as chalk. “Three weeks early? How is this possible?”

“I believe humans are unpredictable in these matters, my lady,” Toren had interjected.

“Does He know?” asked the Queen.

“Aye,” said the messenger. “He is coming now.”

“Then we must hurry, if we are to succeed.”

Footsteps echoed in the hall.

“Has He been told?” the Queen inquired.

The messenger shrugged apologetically. “He met me on the way. I could not avoid it . . .”

A curse in an ancient tongue dropped from the Queen’s lips. “And Samhain mere hours away. I must think. Everything hangs in the balance . . .”

Toren had known what he must do. Slink away into the shadows, up through the tunnels, race like mad through the heather, and reach the cottage before—

Before what?

A bargain had been made. The child’s life had been redeemed before it had even been born. The word of the Fay was binding unto death.

Mother and child should be safe. And yet . . .

And yet, of all the Fay, the Faerie Folk were the most crafty, the most clever. Words with them must be precise, and better not risked at all. They could turn even the most casual of promises into something the speaker had never meant.

Toren knew this all too well.

So the child was safe—and yet still in danger.

There, at last, the lights of the cottage came into view. The cat put on an extra sprint, leaping up onto a fence post, into the tree that sheltered—

YEUGH!!!

He dropped to the ground, whimpering and licking at his paws. The wood had *stung* him. That was only possible if—

He sniffed the air. It was masked by the rain, but yes, there was the smell the Fay had learned to fear. A rowan tree.

Curses! In his haste he had forgotten to be cautious! If it had not been raining, he would have been coughing and sneezing a hundred yards out. As it was . . .

The door of the cottage burst open. A man looked out. A man tall (as humans went) with hair already going gray and grizzled stubble doing the same. He held an electric torch in his hand, which he cast over the yard.

Toren froze as he was caught in the beam. No, humans would not hurt a cat. But a grumpy farmer might chase him off.

He must not be chased off.

On the other hand, a man who loved animals might work in his favor. Could not hurt to try.

The cat meowed again, using his catsong to summon his natural powers. For a long moment he could not breathe, as his muscles and bones contracted. Then he wriggled, yelped, and limped forward in the form of a small kitten. He even swallowed his pride and rubbed up against the human legs. His desperation was no pretense.

“Ach, ’tis a wee kitten, Aileen!” the man called into the house. “No need to fret.”

Lightning flashed across the sky, and moments later thunder roared over the mountains.

Inside the house, a woman with faded brown hair watched from around a corner. “Well, bring the poor beast in, Domnall!” she exclaimed. “’Tis no night for any of God’s creatures to be out and about, and certainly not a bairn, cat or no!”

Just then, a scream emitted from behind the woman. It was a blood-curdling shriek that made Toren’s hair stand on end—not because he’d never heard such a cry before, but because he *had* and knew exactly what it meant.

Really, humans had such a rough go of it when bringing offspring into the world. Cats managed five or six times the number without half so much fuss. Of course, humans were also far more likely to die in childbirth than cats were, and—

Toren’s philosophical musings were cut short by Domnall stepping into the house and clicking his tongue. “Come, kitty! Here kitty!” he chirped, the gentle words and tone quite incongruous with his large, weathered form.

Normally Toren would watch such coaxing with disdain, but he reminded himself that this was precisely the result he had schemed for and dutifully followed the human indoors. Thankfully, once inside, the man turned his attention on the drama unfolding in the back room, and Toren had every excuse to follow “curiously.”

And he *was* curious. What would this woman, over whom so much fuss had been made, look like? And the child? Would it, after all this, even survive? If so, Toren would be both put out for his trouble and relieved to go right back to his library.

Domnall stopped outside of the room, no doubt to give the new mother-to-be her modesty. He was clearly in deep distress; perhaps he had allowed the cat in out of gratefulness for the distraction. Now he had nothing to do but pace outside the door, as men had done from time immemorial. His fingers grasped the worn beads of a rosary, prayers muttered under his breath. No, he was not the father, Toren knew this. A grandfather, perhaps?

Uninterested in watching the man pace and pray, Toren followed the woman Aileen into the chamber.

It was a small room. Toren could easily have crossed it in two bounds in his adult form. Most of the space was filled by the huge four poster bed, and the bed itself was occupied by a small woman with a very large belly.

So high was the bed, he required the little stepstool at the side to climb atop it. In his normal form, Toren could have leaped onto the coverlets easily, but in his tiny kitten size, he could only claw his way up the counterpane.

A clap of thunder drew the attention of the humans. None of them noticed the cat's whine. None except the young mother in the bed.

Toren locked eyes with her. Her brown eyes were bloodshot but still striking in their lightness. They were nearly as golden as Toren's own but from natural human genetics, not magic.

Then she blinked and groaned as another contraction rushed over her. Sweat poured down her pale skin and soaked her dark curls. One small hand grasped the coverlet near Toren, digging into the fabric in a very catlike manner.

Toren liked her at once.

He had not expected to like her. After all, she'd caused so much trouble. But she was still here, wasn't she? She could have fled the country long ago, returned across the water to her own birthplace. But she had stayed, perhaps out of some sense of misguided loyalty. Foolish, but brave.

As she groaned again, he found himself pained. Before he quite knew what he was doing, he stretched out his tiny paw and touched the woman's fingers. A small jolt of magic shot from his claws into the woman's skin.

The woman gasped, then the tension in her shoulders eased. She opened her eyes again to stare at the cat.

*Uh oh.* Did she realize what had happened? *He* said she didn't know about the Fay, but really, how could *he* know for sure?

There was a low hiss from the other side of the bed and suddenly Toren found himself swept up in thick arms that smelt of rosemary and salt. "Out!" cried a stern voice. A third woman was present, whom he had not noticed, and she was shouting at him in a strange dialect of his own language.

*She knows what I am. How?*

"Stop!" cried the mother-to-be in the bed. Her American accent jarred the cat, even though it'd been expected. "Please, Dee, bring her back! She helped me."

Typical humans. Thinking all cats were female.

But the woman holding him made no mistake. "*She* is a *he*," Dee said firmly. "And the birthing bed is no place for such a creature! Although I still encourage you to try the birthing stool. You would make better progress."

Lightning flared through the room, and thunder roared again, the loudest yet.

"Okay," said the woman. "I'll try."

Surprised, Dee loosened her grip on the kitten. "Truly? Ah, well then—" She set the cat on the floor and moved to assist the mother off the bed.

*Ah.* Perhaps that had not been a waste of his power, after all. Not if it kept him close.

"Here, Stephanie," Aileen, the eldest of the women, said firmly. She took the mother's other arm and helped guide her to a low stool with a U-shaped seat. "Dee is right. The bairn will come now. You can do this, *m'endail*."

By "this" she clearly referred to the next contraction. Stephanie twisted in pain. Aileen supported Stephanie's back, while Dee moved into position to check for the child.

"I feel the head!" Dee cried. "Push now, just once more," she said, in a hum like a song.

*Ah. So that's what she is.* Toren glanced at the midwife in surprise, but the woman was too busy to note him.

Toren crept close to Stephanie's fingers once again. A little more magic could not hurt, surely? This was the woman's first birth, always a difficult task, and she had no husband to hold her.

*And why is that, Toren?*

He shook the thought aside. *Come now, human woman. I give you the strength of my people.*

Stephanie let out her loudest cry yet, but it was not of pain, but of triumph. Aileen clustered close to the young woman, gripping her other hand. Dee braced herself between the outstretched legs.

Outside a blast of thunder roared, followed by a splintering crash. The rowan had been struck.

"Dear God!" Stephanie cried, collapsing backwards into Aileen's arms.

Dee lifted her arms up, carrying something small and red and covered with blood.

A girl, screaming louder than the storm.

"Look!" cried Aileen, hugging Stephanie. "Oh *m'eudail*, you've given us a granddaughter!"

Stephanie reached up to take her child. "My daughter," she whispered. "Oh, Aileen, look! She has his hair . . ."

On the other side of the bed, Dee made the sign of the cross, and she looked at the cat.

Realization hit Toren like lightning. Dee didn't just know that he was a Fay.

*She knows who I serve.*

The cat's eyes met those of the midwife and they made a silent pact together.



# I

## Quoth the Raven

Derek Jeong Moon was not happy. For three glorious months he'd believed that he'd met his future wife and had dared to envision what the next seventy years would hold for them—together. Then, after an epic battle which ought to have ended with them pledging undying devotion to one another, the love of his life had instead announced that she was going to discern a vocation *as a nun*.

What had he done wrong?

He'd wooed her with chivalry and daring. Connected with her on matters both artistic and spiritual. Respected her individuality while protecting her from harm. Done, in short, everything that he'd ever read good Catholic girls wanted.

But in the end, it hadn't been enough.

Oh, he'd lost to the better man. He knew that. You couldn't complain about *Jesus* winning the girl.

*"If you love something, let it go. If it comes back, it's yours. If it doesn't, it never was."*

That was some quote he'd read, once upon a time. Derek kept saying it over and over again, although he knew the truth all too well. Daphne wasn't coming back.

"Earth to Derek!" A tall redhead with freckles across her nose waved a map in front of him. "C'mon, we're going to miss our tour!"

"I'm coming, I'm coming," he muttered.

The girl put her hands on her hips. It was a bright day, and despite not being at all fashionable for central London, Kate Alexander wore a wide-brimmed straw hat on her head. Presumably to prevent the eruption of more freckles. Or sunburn. It *was* nearly June, after all, and unseasonably warm for England.

Derek pushed his gloomy thoughts aside and followed Kate down the cobbled path. He wasn't entirely sure how he'd ended up here. After all, he'd visited the Tower of London before.

It'd been their traveling companions, Abby and Pete, who'd begged to see the Tower. And it'd been Kate who had insisted that the best way to experience the Tower was when escorted by the colorful Wardens. Despite his lifelong globetrotter status, Derek had never actually had a "proper" Tower tour. Thus, his protests had been deemed "daft," and Kate, Abby, and Pete had dragged him across the city and through the big stone walls that had seen so many other traitors pass through to their death.

Well, okay, he wasn't wishing that his friends would get beheaded on the Tower Green. And honestly, not many *real* traitors had actually died within the tower. The factoid purist in Derek had to admit that, despite legends, the Tower (which actually consisted of *many* towers within double walls) had usually functioned as more of a fortress than a prison.

Also, he was beginning to suspect that someone—Maddie, or maybe even Daphne herself—had charged Kate with "cheering him up." Her intentions were certainly well-meaning, and there was no denying that a distraction *was* what he needed. So he decided to *try* to enjoy the tour.

As promised, the guide was not some well-rehearsed college kid. Rather, he was a stout middle-aged man with a booming voice, clad in a navy-blue uniform that looked like something straight out of the Renaissance. He bore the royal monogram in red letters across his chest and a hat that could best be described as an upside-down pumpkin with a brim. The man was probably sweltering in the heat, but didn't let on. Instead, he cheerfully illuminated all of the gory and colorful details of each building that they passed.

"And that's where they say the two little princes were murdered," said the guard, pointing up to a pair of glazed windows.

“Do you really think that’s true?” asked Kate.

Derek felt the heat of embarrassment as everyone’s heads swiveled around to look at their quartet. Really, did Kate never turn her investigative streak off? He glanced over his shoulder, looking to see if Abby would jump in to help tone Kate down—but Abby and Pete were nowhere in sight.

“I mean, there are theories, aren’t there?” Kate continued, ignoring the looks. “That they were abducted and murdered elsewhere? Or that one of them really escaped?”

“Well, some folks always thought the pretender Perkin Warbeck really was one of the young princes,” the warden admitted. “In fact, the King of Scotland was *so* certain, he gave Warbeck one of his own kinswomen as a bride! But Warbeck still ended up back here, didn’t he? Head chopped off and all.”

Kate was incorrigible. “Which might mean the English truly believed his story, right?” she persisted. “I mean, why kill him if he wasn’t really a threat?”

The warden winked at her. “A man come back from the dead? Ah, a bit of doubt is all it takes to make *that* a frightening tale, especially if you’re the King the dead man is trying to dethrone! Oh, it didn’t need to be true for the Tudors to be frightened! ‘Uneasy lies the head that wears the crown’ said old Will Shakespeare, and never was that more apt than in those days. Why, Henry VIII cut off the heads of his cousins, wives, and best friends, all because he was plagued by so many ghosts of the Wars of the Roses, real and imagined . . .”

This segued into a series of ghost tales connected to the Tower. The warden declared (quite straight-faced) that he had seen two of these with his own eyes. He then went on to explain that the wardens and their families actually lived on site in the castle, and many other ghosts had been seen by his wife, his children, and many other tower inhabitants.

Derek shot a glance at Kate, deeply suspicious. If he’d gone on this tour last year, he would have written off such stories as cheap advertising. Given their recent adventures in Paris, Derek now had to wonder if the ghost stories did, in fact, have their basis in reality. Not as spirits of the departed, but as some type of Fay.

Sure enough, Kate stopped questioning the guard and dropped back to whisper in Derek's ear. "Do you think we'll catch any Fay while we're here?"

"*You* won't," said Derek. "They didn't give *you* the power to see through baseline glamours. I suppose *I* might see something."

He couldn't help the tiny bit of smugness that snuck into his tone. It wasn't a great reaction, but sometimes Kate's self-assurance got a tiny bit grating on the nerves.

"Oh yes they *did*," Kate retorted. "As soon as Ruth got her powers replenished at the nursery, both Maddie and I had her bestow that ability on us. Well, Maddie pleaded and I made the logical case that I have to have every tool in my arsenal when investigating my past in Scotland. Ruth agreed that it was better for me not to be taken unaware."

Derek blinked. "How did I miss this?"

"Well, you were a little preoccupied," said Kate, and immediately looked aghast. "I mean . . ."

"It's okay," Derek said awkwardly. He rumpled his hair and avoided Kate's look of trepidation. He hated to think that the others were walking on eggshells around him. At the same time, he wondered if it had been wise to choose to spend his summer with a group of people who were acutely aware of his break-up. Maybe it would have been better to take the internship with his dad's company.

Not that he needed the hours. He'd been stuffing envelopes at Moon Enterprises since middle school, and last summer had spent three months with his own desk in the New York offices. Derek wasn't even sure what an official internship had to offer other than something prestigious to add to a resume.

Actually, according to his parents, he was technically still signed up for the company program. They were under the impression that he had a flight booked to New York in two weeks. An impression that Derek had not spent any effort correcting.

*Soon, though . . . I have to tell them soon.*

The problem was, he didn't yet know what he meant by "them." Parents or friends? New York or Scotland?

Kate was still staring at him.

“Really,” he insisted, putting enthusiasm into his voice. “So did you spot anything on the trip over?”

“No,” Kate said with a sigh. “I wish we’d taken the ferry instead of the train. Who knows what creatures we might have seen if we’d gone by water instead of by rail?”

Derek shrugged. “Eh. I’ve had enough mermaids to last me one lifetime, thanks.”

A snort laugh erupted from Kate. She hurried to cover her mouth, but not before getting a glare from some of their fellow tourists.

They had traversed the green expanse of the inner courtyard and now stood on a cobbled walk, a little ways from a rough, prehistoric wall of lumpy rock. Set into this ancient wall were gabled roofs and iron bars, enclosing the shadowy forms of great black birds.

“And these are the Ravens of the tower,” said the warden. “Keep your distance, now. These birds are fed on meat and blood and won’t hesitate to peck your eye out if you get too close!”

Derek noted with amusement how the moms on the tour immediately pulled their kids closer. He was pretty sure that the birds wouldn’t be allowed to roam free if they were a safety liability, and from the way they swooped in and out of their enclosure, it was obvious that they were allowed free reign of the tower.

The warden obviously knew his business well, because he bent down and whispered conspiratorially to the children, “The fate of England depends on these birds, you know. Legend has it that if there are ever less than six ravens at the Tower, the crown will fall!”

The kids gasped in awe while the adults chuckled in amusement.

Kate interjected again, this time with a pensive frown. “How long have the ravens been here?”

“Oh, they come and they go,” said the warden. “We usually keep about eight or nine around. Well cared for, they can live a good long while. Munin, our eldest lady, is over twenty! She’s got a bit of a reputation here, we call her our ‘Black Widow’ as she’s already lured two husbands to their death. A mind of her own, but then, she’s our only Scottish lass, so what do you expect?”

Derek wondered if this tidbit had been given specifically for Kate's benefit—she did have a slight Scottish accent at times, and it had been growing ever since they'd arrived in London. Clearly the guard enjoyed tourists who engaged with his stories, as Kate certainly was.

"How do you tell them apart?" a little boy near the front of the group asked.

"Well, the Ravenmaster knows them pretty much by sight, but the rest of us go by the colors of their bands," the warden explained. "See there—" he pointed toward a raven perched on the grass with a bit of red around its leg. "That's Hugine, and she's one of our youngest females."

"Is she the mean Scottish one?" asked the boy.

"No, she's from Somerset, like most of our ravens. Munin is the Scottish one and . . ." the warden squinted into the cages. "She's got a light green band, but I can't see her now. Keep your eyes peeled as we go up toward the tower. She likes to fly as high as she can, that girl."



Kate was puzzled. The warden moved on, leading the group inside one of the large buildings dotting the courtyard. Did he seriously not see the huge raven with the light green leg band staring at them from a nearby lamppost?

Or, rather, staring at *Kate*.

A prickle ran down her spine. She'd never been a fan of birds. Their eyes were so weirdly inscrutable and *beady*. This one looked like she wanted to peck Kate's brains out.

Derek was moving to follow the tour group. Seriously? Did no one see this bird they'd all been eagerly searching for just seconds ago?

*Wait a moment . . . a creature that no one else seems to notice . . .*

"By the pricking of my thumbs, something wicked this way comes," Kate quoted, tugging at Derek's elbow.

“What?” asked Derek, a little annoyed. “Do you *not* want to visit the armory?”

“It’s watching me,” said Kate, nodding toward the raven on the lamppost.

Derek shrugged. “Yeah, Macbeth, that’s what birds do. They’re creepy that way.”

“No, I think she wants to talk to me.”

“Okay, Kate, just because every magical thing that moved in Paris wanted to talk to Daphne, doesn’t mean the same is true for you in London.”

*That* stung. Of course, Kate understood why Derek was grumpy, but she wasn’t going to let him get away with it. Brooding over a heartache only made the pain worse.

*As I know far too well.*

Kate pushed back the whisper from her past and whipped around to glare at Derek. “Hey! I know you’re hurt, but there’s no cause to be *mean*.”

He rolled his eyes. “Because being nice worked out so *well*.”

“Oh,” she said, setting her hands on her hips. “And now you’re only going to be nice when it benefits you?”

Derek winced visibly. That hit home. “Okay, *why* do you think the bird wants to talk to you?”

“Because,” Kate explained slowly, lowering her voice. “There are probably a thousand people on the premises and *that* bird, which happens to be the really old Scottish one no one else was able to see, hasn’t stopped watching *me* in the past five minutes.”

Derek went very, very still (except for his eyes, which zeroed in on the bird). After a long moment he exhaled and gave a little nod. “Okay, sure. That’s worth investigating.”

Kate grinned and warily approached the lamppost. The bird kept watching her.

*It’s not gonna eat me . . . it’s not gonna eat me . . . and if it tries, Derek will use some of his hapkido on it and punch it out. Oh nice, Kate. Because literally punching a national icon on Tower Green is probably the one thing a person could do to actually get thrown into the Tower prison cells these days!*

“But remember,” Derek added, jolting her back to reality, “ravens are extremely intelligent. They can learn to talk, just like

parrots. So just because it might know how to talk, doesn't mean it's magical."

"I know *that*," said Kate. "Trust me, I'm well aware that I am probably about to be subjected to your teasing about seeing magic behind every corner for the next two months."

They were now under the lamppost. The raven didn't flinch at their approach and kept staring beadily at Kate. She felt the skin on the back of her neck prickle. Not necessarily a prickle of magic—more like "hey a meat-eating bird with talons is eyeing me for lunch!" prickle.

"Hi," said Kate, to the raven.

The raven just stared.

Kate felt really silly, but she wasn't going to give up so easily. "So, this is quite daft, probably," she continued to the bird. "But we've just had an adventure in Paris and we've met all manner of talking creatures and I just thought, on the off chance that you were related to one of them, we ought to convey greetings."

"Convey greetings?" said Derek, half under his breath. He glanced around, as though expecting a nervous bird custodian to come running up and warn them to get away from the eye-ball-pecking beak.

The bird said nothing.

"Yes, well, that's all," Kate finished. "Have a good day, Munin."

"Well, really, you don't even bother to ask what name *I* prefer?" the raven croaked.

Kate jumped slightly. Derek, of course, kept as cool as the proverbial cucumber.

*Show-off.*

The raven continued, in tones that sounded like Julie Andrews with a bad cold. "You just accept what the humans call me and don't bother to determine the truth? I should have thought anyone with the Sight would be better informed."

"Well, we're very new to this," Kate protested, striving hard to keep calm. "What would you prefer to be titled?"

Inside she squealed, *A bird is talking to me! I identified a magical creature! Take that, Derek Moon!*



“Oh, Lady Munin is quite adequate,” said the bird. “It was the presumption I took issue with.”

“Fair enough,” Kate agreed. “Speaking of presumption, am I correct in assuming that you’re shielding yourself from other humans right now? So it just looks like I’m talking to a lamppost?”

“That presumption is correct. You’d appear far less ridiculous if you directed your face to your companion, rather than toward me.”

“Right, how silly of me,” said Kate, immediately turning toward Derek.

“Silly indeed,” Derek interjected dryly. He took the chance to ask a question of his own. “Um, would you be offended if I asked if you are indeed one of the Fay, and not just a bird gifted with intellect?”

“It is presumptions I object to, not questions,” said Munin. *Lady* Munin, that was.

Kate perked up. “Oh good. I have so many!”

“I did not say I would *answer* them, human.”

“Oh. Well, will you at least tell us why you were so interested in us?”

“I am always curious when one with the Sight walks through my domain,” Munin replied. “Particularly one marked by the Faerie Court.”

Kate and Derek exchanged frowns.

“You mean Melusina?” asked Derek.

Munin cocked her head slightly. “No. Why would I be interested in a French river woman?”

Derek threw up his hands. “Sorry, that’s the only fairy ruler we’ve met. Although I guess a court implies royalty and I never heard her titled as a queen.”

The raven made a low croaking sound that was possibly her version of a laugh. “Melusina? A queen? Of fishes! No, no, no, *this* queen is not to trifle with.”

“Melusina was no trifling matter,” Kate replied with a frown. “There was blood sacrifice and—”

Munin crowed. “This fire will require a greater tide!”

“Look here,” said Derek. “Are you just going to talk in riddles, or give us some useful information?”

The raven stared at him coolly. She abruptly dug her beak into her own feathers and pulled out a quill and dropped it on the cobblestones in front of Kate. She opened her beak, as though to speak further, then something startled her and she took to the sky.

The two humans stared blankly at her retreating figure.

“Well that’s torn it,” Kate muttered. She bent down and swept up the feather.

“No kidding,” Derek agreed. “So who’s this Faerie Queen she’s talking about? A godmother you forgot to tell us about?”

Kate laughed wryly. “My godmother may be obsessed with spinning wheels, but she’s no fairy, trust me.”

“Spinning wheels?” asked Derek, a blank expression on his face.

“You know, for spinning yarn the old-fashioned way?”

“Oh,” said Derek, although he still looked slightly confused. He cleared his throat and shrugged. “So, are you really going to keep that feather?”

Kate shrugged. “Evidence, you know.”

Before she could elaborate further, footsteps pounded on the cobbles behind them. “Kate!” a high female voice called. “There you are!”

They turned to see Abby and Pete jogging toward them. The two made an odd pair as Abby was tiny, with chin length, jet black hair, and Pete was tall and lanky with brown hair that curled around his ears. Abby dressed neatly and classically in neutral colors, while Pete wore a bright red T-shirt with a gold lightning bolt on it that he claimed was a superhero emblem. And, finally, Abby carried a serious-looking black camera, while Pete snapped photos with his battered smartphone.

In fact, their friend Maddie had once said that Abby and Pete were so opposite, that they’d be a perfect romantic set-up. She’d been very annoyed when Kate had refused to engineer a “Much Ado About Nothing” matchmaking scheme on the trip.

“Where’d you go?” asked Pete. “We got to the weapons and armor display, and you weren’t there!”

The one thing Abby and Pete *did* have in common was their lack of knowledge regarding the existence of the Fay. Derek and Kate had no plans to enlighten them unless it became necessary.

One ominous raven did not qualify as *necessary*.

Derek shrugged. "We were birdwatching."

Kate grinned to herself. It was nice to see Derek's sense of humor hadn't been completely demolished by his broken heart. In her opinion, his dry wit was one of his best features.

"You're weird," said Pete.

"Well, if you're done with the birds, I'm almost out of battery, so let's go get in line for the crown jewels," Abby suggested. "I don't think they allow photography in there."

"Not me," said Pete. "I want to find where they kept William Wallace."

Derek's eyebrows shot up. "Braveheart was imprisoned here?"

"Yeah," Pete said. "They didn't execute him here, though, being a commoner and all. They stripped him naked, drug him through the streets, *then* . . . well, grab a puke bucket, cuz the rest is—"

Abby wrinkled her nose and tugged Kate away before they could hear all the details of the Scottish freedom fighter's gory end. "Why were historic people so barbaric?" she asked. "We went by the chapel where Anne Boleyn is buried and the warden said she got beheaded by a special swordsman with a super sharp sword, and *that* was considered merciful! Because if you got executed by an axeman you might be *backed to pieces*. But even that is better than what Pete was describing!"

"I don't know," said Kate. "You're right. These days many of us aren't comfortable with the idea of the death penalty, even in the most extreme cases."

The girls stepped into a moderately sized line leading to the Crown Jewels vault. It was nearly lunchtime, so most of the tourists were heading away from the exhibits, rather than toward them.

"And then there were the burnings," said Abby, lowering her voice. "Our guide got kinda anti-Catholic there. I had to hold Pete back. Burnings happened on both sides, you know, not just under Queen Mary I."

"There's a very violent history there," Kate agreed. "It leaves scars on a country."

Abby sighed. "No kidding. I just can't imagine. Turning your own friends and relatives in to be burned? Can you imagine actually

being responsible for burning a person alive? And then going to *watch* it? How did people do that?"

"They didn't want to draw suspicion," said Kate. "They had to show up or end up tied to the stake themselves."

Yet even as her logical brain tossed out facts at Abby, a prickle ran down Kate's spine. There was something so visceral about being burned alive. She didn't know why, but the concept always seemed particularly raw to Kate. Even now, she could almost smell the smoke. And that in itself was odd, because Kate was not inclined to vivid imaginings.

What had Munin said? *This fire will require a greater tide*. What did that mean? And who *was* Munin anyhow? Was she just a raven, or a shapeshifter, like the guardian at the Cluny Museum in Paris?

"Oh my gosh," Abby cried suddenly. "Is this it?" She pointed toward the insanely thick door through which they were about to proceed. "I didn't think it was an actual *vault*."

"Come on," said Kate, chuckling. "You don't store the biggest diamond in the world behind ordinary security."

Abby's eyes popped as they stepped into the Jewel House. Even Kate—who had seen it several times before—caught her breath. The entire display was crafted to focus completely on the jewels. Everything in the room was black, apart from the jewels themselves, which were expertly lit to show off their facets and shine.

"*Man*," Abby breathed, leaning as close as she could get to the thick glass protecting the display. "These are real? They're not replicas for us commoners to gawk over?"

"They're real," Kate confirmed.

Her heartrate had gone up suddenly. It always happened when she looked at jewels, and it always embarrassed her. It just seemed so ridiculous to have an emotional response to a bit of shiny color. (Or non-color, in the case of diamonds. Unless—were diamonds colorless or *all* the colors, like light?)

"Which is your favorite?" Abby whispered.

"What makes you think I have a favorite?"

"I know you, Kate. You have a favorite. I mean, you literally have nicknames for the gems at the Field Museum in Chicago—"

Kate sighed. Her friend was correct. Kate loved jewels. *Adored* them. Could spend hours at any exhibit, just staring into the heart of each gem. Which was the closest she was ever going to get to them, because she didn't have a hope of being rich enough to own one herself.

And didn't know if she could ever justify such a possession, when there were so many starving children in the world.

Still . . .

"The Stuart Sapphire," she murmured, gesturing toward the huge blue stone set at the posterior base of the Imperial State Crown.

"Oh, I thought you'd pick the ruby," said Abby. "But Stuart—that must be Scottish?"

Kate nodded. "Yes, but that's not why I like it. I just . . . sapphires speak to me."

"Blue is your color," agreed Abby. "I think the emeralds are my favorites. My mom got the most amazing emerald necklace from my dad's parents at their wedding. Normally jade is more common, but my dad's family really liked emeralds. Mom and Dad say they'll pass that one on to me when I get married. Mom prefers her pearls and gold. But Dad . . ." she smiled. "Ever since I was a little girl, every time Mom would wear the necklace, Dad would always say he couldn't wait for it to be my turn, when he walked me down the aisle for my wedding. And then he'd cry, of course."

"You'd better hurry up and get married then, so I can see those jewels," said Kate. She put on a teasing smile for her friend's sake, and ignored the sudden ache in her heart.

Abby touched Kate's arm as they moved along through the exhibit. "I'm sorry. That was tactless of me."

"You didn't say anything wrong," said Kate. "We're straight with each other, remember? I want to hear about your traditions. I don't want you to pretend your dad doesn't exist."

"But I should have thought—"

"No," Kate said sharply. "No, you shouldn't. The world doesn't cease to be populated with fathers, just because mine is gone. I need to hear the good stories. Need to know what a good dad looks like."

“Oh?” Abby frowned. “Because—” She stopped, then laughed. “I thought you were talking about husband material research for a minute. But you don’t mean that at all, do you? It’s God, right? Understanding Him as a Heavenly Father?”

Kate glanced sideways at her friend, trying to hide her surprise. But that was Abby for you. Still waters that ran deep. It was why she felt so comfortable with the other girl, why they were friends. So many people found Kate unfathomable, or abrasive, or too stubborn. But Abby really *understood* what was under the surface.

“Yes,” she said quietly. “My grandfather is amazing, and he’s given me so much . . . but I always wonder . . .”

Her voice drifted off. She couldn’t finish the thought. It wasn’t fair to her grandfather—and it was more than she wanted to vocalize, even to Abby.

Abby understood. She linked her arm in Kate’s. “Let’s go find the boys,” she said. “They have to be done with the gruesome execution retellings by now.”

**FROM: KAlexander@KCUJ.EDU**  
**TO: MTHIBOUDEAU@KCUJ.EDU**  
**SUBJECT: Confessions of Benvolio**

Hi Mads,

We've been in London for three days, and tomorrow morning we'll catch a train to Oxford, then on to Edinburgh. We're spending one last night at my cousin's flat, which is good because FREE WIFI!!!

Pete is currently updating his blog with the London installment on his "Real Life Braveheart" series . . . hopefully won't be too gory for you to enjoy. At least he's interested in the historical accuracy bit now.

On second thought, maybe you'd be better off just enjoying Abby's photos. I think she's posting them online now.

As for Romeo...he's doing okay, but he still misses Rosaline. He's grumpy, but I think I'm on the road to getting him engrossed in my investigations. Have you heard anything from her?

Speaking of which, we ran into ONE OF THEM today! At the Tower of London, of all places. Not a profitable interrogation, alas. Difficult in such a public place, you know? Have you run into anything? Any helpful fairy stewardesses on the airplane, or gremlins running around your parents' backyard?

Miss you. Wish you were here.

Kate

**FROM: MTHIBOUDEAU@KCUJ.EDU**  
**TO: KAlexander@KCUJ.EDU**  
**SUBJECT: Re: Confessions of Benvolio**

Kate,

RUB IT IN, WHY DON'T YOU?

Here I am, stuck in the sweltering Southern heat and swatting flies like crazy, while you waltz around misty green Britain having more magical adventures. How dare you.

Send more details. Immediately.

My flight home was completely boring, with nothing more exciting than filling out custom forms. How am I supposed to remember how much all my souvenirs cost? I bought most of them months ago!

But I can't tell you how glad I was to have real grits and proper Old Bay seasoning and authentic Tex Mex. Even if it comes alongside overdone eyeshadow and a mama, a nana and a meemaw wondering why I didn't manage to come home with a ring on my finger. THEY were all engaged by the time they were eighteen, they'll have you know.

Eighteen! Kate, it's crazy. I grew up thinking that was a perfectly normal age to get married at. And now I'm about to turn twenty-one and I don't even have a boyfriend! How did none of us come home from the City of Love with a relationship?

Well, not a romantic relationship. I've got a penpal, you know. A real old-fashioned one, who sends ivory envelopes with beautiful calligraphy



addresses. I have to pretend he's a girl, otherwise gossip will have me engaged to a Frenchman in the blink of an eye. But I can't tell them I'm writing to a two-hundred-year-old ghost, now, can I? And two-hundred-year-old ghosts are not boyfriend material.

You know, writing it down, I guess I made out okay. I can find a fiancé in Mississippi if I need to. I don't think I can find a magical Victorian-era penpal. Although if there were ever going to be Fay on this side of the ocean, they'd definitely have to haunt this area. You can almost feel the mysticism even when you don't know about the Fay. Maybe I should go hunting. How do you go Fay hunting?

Regarding Daphne—Uh, I mean Rosaline (Why are we talking in code? Who's spying on us?)—she's back in Illinois taking care of her fifty-million siblings over the summer. Her parents are over the moon about her decision and are helping her find a good vocation-discernment retreat. I'm a little surprised, as I thought they'd want her free babysitting services forever, but I guess she's got another sister ready to take over. (Yeah, I know, I'm preaching to the choir here. We're on the same page regarding parentification.)

Uh oh. Mama's talking to Miss Lila on the phone and making EXTREMELY LOUD comments about a lawyer nephew. Pray for me. And don't tell me anything about the dashing highlander you're definitely going to fall in love with this summer.

—Maddie

P.S. You're not Benvolio. Cuz if you're Benvolio, then that makes me Mercutio, and both Derek and

I end up dead, which I don't approve of. Let's be heroines of our own stories, or at least a Shakespearean Comedy, where all the deaths turn out to just be horrible mistakes.

## 2

### Hollygrow Cottage

Derek craned his head against the window, his eyes traveling up a steep crag, searching for the top. The angle was too sharp; he couldn't quite see it. He bent his head closer to the window and—

*Thump.*

The car dipped into a pothole and Derek's head crashed against the glass.

"You all right, lad?" asked a thick Scottish accent from the front seat. Camden MacCrimmon, a thirty-something with a family connection (and resemblance) to Kate, was the owner of the car who had offered to pick them all up at the nearest train station.

"Yeah, fine," said Derek, rubbing his head. He gave the crag an annoyed look. The first part of their journey had been via train, all across the gentle, rolling countryside of England with unobstructed views and smooth, predictable tracks. They'd spent several days exploring the city of Edinburgh before boarding the train again.

This journey had taken them into the Highlands of Scotland, a rougher, sharper landscape, with rocky hillsides leading up to actual mountains.

There was an eerie familiarity to the vista. At times, Derek almost forgot that he was in Scotland and not South Korea. Then they'd pass a white-washed historic cottage, and the distinct Europeaness of the style would jolt him back to awareness.

At last, the great crag fell away. A gentle valley appeared in the midst of the rocky hills, filled with vibrant grass and a flock of sheep. A narrow creek followed the road, both of which ran right up to a two-story cottage of rough-hewn stone.

Kate leaned over with a big smile on her face. "That's it," she said. "Hollyrow Cottage."

"Whoa," said Pete, who, as the tallest of the group, had been given the front seat. "Is that your grandparents' house? It's so cool! It looks like something from the Middle Ages!"

Kate grinned. "It was built in the 1700s, so you're only a couple hundred years off."

"*Sweet.*"

On the far side of Kate, Abby started wiggling. "Oh! I need my camera!"

"I think you'll have plenty of time to get photos once we've unpacked a bit," Derek reminded her.

Abby started listing all of the reasons why this wasn't satisfactory, but Derek tuned her out. The front door of the cottage had opened, and two figures emerged.

*Those must be Kate's grandparents,* he thought. He was aware of the fact that Kate, stuck in the middle of the backseat, was practically vibrating with repressed excitement.

Even as the words raced through Derek's head, he grasped the handle of his car door and wrenched it open. Kate barely waited for him to exit before barreling past in a blur of red hair.

"Gran!" Kate shrieked. However, before she could reach her grandmother, a ball of gray fur bounded up, meowing loudly. Kate stopped and bent down to scratch the cat with a laugh. "Hey, Toren," she said, bending her nose down to touch that of the animal's. "Did you miss me?"

The cat meowed at her and rubbed his head against her cheek.

"Wow," Abby murmured as she climbed out of the car behind Derek. "That is one excited cat."

Derek chuckled.

The cat continued to weave in and out of Kate's legs, but she seemed used to this and navigated agilely over to the door, where she embraced her grandmother.

Mrs. MacCrimmon was a short, round, blue-eyed woman, with wavy gray hair pulled back in a bun. “There, lass,” she said as she returned Kate’s embrace. “You’re home now.”

“Kate!” boomed a deep voice from the doorway.

Derek looked over to see Kate’s grandfather beaming at them. Where his wife was short and pleasantly round, Mr. MacCrimmon was over six feet of hard sinew and muscle. Years of work outdoors had weathered his face, so that he looked older than he likely was. Yet although his cheeks were wrinkled and scarred and his hair pure white, his green eyes twinkled with merry youthfulness.

“Here’s my bonnie Kate,” said Mr. MacCrimmon, wrapping her in a tight hug. “Have you gone and grown another inch, then?”

“Pretty sure that’s not possible unless I have some previously undiscovered medical condition,” Kate replied.

Her grandfather released her and stepped back to eye her height in relation to the doorpost. “Are you certain, lass? It seems to me that you’re a bit taller than the last mark we left here.” He tapped the groove in question, which did rest an inch or so lower than Kate’s head.

“Granddad!” Kate protested with a roll of her eyes. “We haven’t marked my height since I was fourteen. Of course I’ve probably grown since *then*.”

“Ah, well, then we should update it, aye?”

“Mind our guests, Domnall,” added Mrs. MacCrimmon, with a nod toward Derek and the others.

“Aye.” Mr. MacCrimmon strode forward, with Kate and Aileen following close at his heels. “I’m Domnall, Kate’s granddad,” he said, holding out his hand to Abby. “Feel free to call me Domnall, or Dom, or Granddad, as Kate does.”

Abby’s tiny hands were completely swallowed in the old man’s large grip, and she had to crane her neck to meet his gaze, but she smiled pleasantly. She was quite used to being the shortest one in any group. “It’s very nice to meet you, sir. Thanks for having us. I’m Abby.”

“And I’m Peter—usually called Pete,” added Pete, extending his own hand to Kate’s grandmother. “You must be Mrs. MacCrimmon. We’re really excited to be here.”

“Och, call me Gran, please,” said Mrs. MacCrimmon. “Mrs. MacCrimmon is too much to be shouting all over the glen.” She turned a big smile on Derek. “And you must be Abby’s brother. Are you twins?”

Derek noted that Kate’s face went beet red. He gave her a reassuring grin. He was well used to the inability of most Westerners to discern the differences between Chinese and Koreans, and he had anticipated some level of confusion from the residents of this remote corner of the Highlands.

“Um, no, they’re not related,” Kate said quickly. “Abby’s my roommate, remember? I wrote you about her. And Derek is just another friend.”

Mrs. MacCrimmon nodded empathetically. “How daft of me. Derek, is it?”

Derek nodded and took her offered hand. “Pleased to meet you, ma’am.”

“Gran,” she corrected sternly.

He chuckled. “Gran, then. Thank you for having us.”

The young people paused just long enough to gather up their bags, while Mr. MacCrimmon—Domnall—thanked Camden for making the drive. Derek gathered that the MacCrimmons’ vehicle was under repairs, which is why they hadn’t made the trip into the station themselves.

The interior of the cottage was quite dim after the brightness of the late afternoon sun, and Derek had to blink several times before he could make out his surroundings. This effect was accentuated by the fact that they had walked into a long, narrow corridor. On each side of the hallway were two doorways, and at the far end a row of steps led up to the second story. An aroma of fried onions and fresh bread drifted through the house.

“We’ve turned the sewing room into a bedroom for the boys,” Mrs. MacCrimmon—Gran—told Kate. “The study is bigger, but I’ve long since given up hope of achieving any sort of order in that room.”

“I ken where everything is,” Domnall called from behind them. “That’s order, no?”

Kate turned at the top of the stairs and Derek caught a grin and a roll of her eyes. “Sure, Granddad,” she called back. Then, passing a room with a small clawfoot tub and a tiny toilet, she explained, “That’s the only tub, I’m afraid. And the pipes are horrendously loud, so don’t use it when anyone is asleep. But there is another toilet down off the kitchen, under the stairs. And Gran still likes to wash her hair with rainwater she collects in a basin, so unless any of you take *really* long showers, we’ll be okay.”

Pete grinned mischievously. “Okay, but you’re a girl, so by really long, you actually mean like an hour or something, right? Because Derek and I totally take military-style showers. Rinse, soap, rinse, out.”

“In non-heated water, no less,” Derek added dryly.

“I know you’re joking,” said Abby. “You *are* joking, right?”

“Yeah,” said Pete. “I actually *require* long showers. Kate, what are you doing to us?”

Derek nudged him. “Hey, we still have it better than Braveheart. You know, go wash off in the creek once a month.”

“*Emm*,” said Abby.

“It wasn’t as bad as it sounds,” Kate told her. “Apparently changing their smallclothes often and using sponge baths actually kept people smelling fairly okay. Re-enactors have done experiments and such.”

“History is so gross . . . and so cool,” said Pete.

“I think Kate’s point is that it *wasn’t* so gross,” Derek reminded him.

“Anyhow,” said Kate, pushing open the door next to the bathroom. “Here’s the sewing room.”

The boys stepped past Kate into a small room. Bins of fabric, yarn, and tools Derek could only guess the use of were stacked up neatly to create just enough room for two camp beds. It might have felt claustrophobic, except for the fact that a big glass window took up the larger portion of the far wall.

Derek stepped toward the window. The glass panes were modern and large, allowing for a gorgeous view of the crag they had passed earlier, which now glowed in the setting sun.

“Wow,” he said softly.

“Pretty amazing, isn’t it?” Kate added, back from the doorway. “The night I was born, the wind was so strong that we lost a couple of trees around the house, and one of them fell right into the original windows. Gran asked if they could turn this into a large picture window, so that she’d have good light for her crafts. If you think it’s gorgeous now, wait until you see the sunrise!”



Kate opened the door to her childhood bedroom with strong sense of nostalgia. Even though she had spent most of her life moving around, and was now technically residing in Chicago, this would always be the place that she considered home. Her earliest memories were bedtimes here, snuggling up with her mother in the big four poster bed. And the bed itself could not be more full of warmth and safety, as her grandfather had built the frame from the rowan tree that had fallen on the day of her birth, and her grandmother had sewn the quilt for Kate’s father when he was a boy.

“Kate?” Abby said softly.

Kate realized that she was still standing in the doorway. “Sorry,” she said, quickly moving on into the room.

Abby followed her and took in the décor. It was a compilation of antique furnishings that had been in the family for generations, and various knickknacks and pieces Kate and her mother had collected all over the world. The African Batik curtains and lamp made of coconuts might clash with the solid Scottish carpentry and jewel-tone patchwork bedspread, but it was a hodgepodge that Kate had always felt expressed *her*. Abby, however, was the sort who shopped at Target and Ikea and coordinated her bedspread to her wallpaper in perfect pastels, and . . .

. . . and she also knew Kate very, *very* well.

“Looks just like you,” Abby said with a grin. She set her suitcase down on the trunk at the foot of the bed. “Any place in particular that you want my stuff?”



Kate glanced around and noted that her wardrobe doors were open. She'd cleaned most of her clothes out before heading to college. Gran had probably moved the rest of the stuff into the chest of drawers.

"Go ahead and put your stuff in the wardrobe," said Kate. "You have more dresses than I do." She walked over to the chest of drawers and checked it. "There you are!" she exclaimed, grabbing a pair of handknit socks and pulling them on her feet.

As she slipped the socks over her heels, she noted her cat slinking away.

Kate raised an eyebrow at him.

He casually avoided her gaze, but he couldn't hide his look of guilt.

"Toren," Kate said sternly. "Did you hide my socks so that I wouldn't leave last time?"

The cat started licking his paws.

"Uh huh," said Kate. "Thought so."

Abby chuckled. "Smart cat?"

Kate shrugged her shoulders and went back to unpacking. "He usually freaks out when Mum and I leave. Mum actually found him in her suitcase the first few times she took me with her. Then he used to steal my glasses—back before I got contacts—but only the night before we were about to leave. Took us a while to figure *that* out. Now I hide my glasses—and my contacts case—and my wallet. I guess he's moved on to my knitting projects."

"Wow," said Abby, her eyes widening. "That's impressive. *My* cat doesn't even notice when I leave. She just goes and gets snuggled by my sister instead."

"Well, Toren has always been protective of me. He arrived the night I was born, just a baby himself, and Mum says that he thinks he is my big brother."

Abby bent over and offered her hand for Toren to sniff. He did so cautiously at first but seemed to approve of her because he rubbed his head against her fingers.

"Yeah, we approve of Abby," said Kate. She put the last of her jeans away in the dresser and slid the drawer shut. "Okay, I'm good to go. You ready for supper?"

“Almost,” Abby said with a nod. She pulled the last few garments out of her suitcase, shook them to release the wrinkles, and hung them in the wardrobe. As she slid the clothes in, one of the sweaters caught on the side of the compartment. Abby carefully unsnagged the fabric, unintentionally causing the protrusion to jut out farther.

“What on earth?” muttered Abby. She gave it a tug and a small square of paper slid free.

Curious, Kate picked it up.

“Yours?” asked Abby.

Kate shook her head. “I don’t even recognize the handwriting. It must have been something of my dad’s.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. This was his room.”

Abby was silent for a moment, then held up the paper. “It looks like an address,” she said.

“Really?” Kate took the message and squinted. “I can’t read it at all.”

Abby laughed. “My mom is a doctor, remember? I grew up reading this kind of handwriting.”

“Funny you should say that,” Kate said slowly. “My dad was studying to become a doctor. I wonder if it *is* something he wrote. All the letters my grandparents and Mum have are typewritten. Gran always said his handwriting was atrocious even *before* he became a med student.”

“That’d make sense, especially if it was just a note to remember an appointment,” said Abby. She peered closer at the letters. “Yeah, it’s definitely an address in—Inverness? I think that’s the word. That’d make sense, right? We’re not too far from there.”

“Not by American terms,” Kate agreed. “An appointment?”

“Yeah, see?” Abby pointed at the bottom line of the note. “3pm, 20 September.”

Kate felt a chill prickle over her skin. “September *twentieth*? Is there a year?”

“No,” said Abby with a shake of her head. “That’s why I think it’s an appointment. We don’t usually put the year down when recording appointments to keep, right? What’s the matter, Kate? You’ve gone completely white.”

“That’s the day my dad disappeared,” Kate said softly. “September 20th, five weeks before I was born.”

On the floor, Toren let out a long *meow*. He crossed over in front of Kate and stretched up to claw at her jeans. “I’m fine, Toren,” she said, reaching down to scratch the cat behind his ears. “Just surprised, that’s all.”

She stuck the note into her pocket, resolving to ask her grandparents about it later.



*This is not good, not good at all*, thought the cat. He nosed along the edge of the drawer, trying to edge it open. He’d only caught a whiff, but he was certain he’d smelled—

Ah, there, an edge where he could slip his paw in. He caught his claws in the wood and tugged. It didn’t move.

*Oh, very well.* He grumbled and sent a little surge of strength power along his limbs. The drawer protested but gave way.

Scents he hadn’t encountered in ages drifted up into his nose.

Fox. Well, that was all right. She’d gone to the Cluny museum, no doubt. Bumped up against a certain guard.

Mermaid. Nothing new there. Mermaids were always shmoozing around, rubbing their scent against their targets. Stephanie had come back smelling of them more than once. It was just an occupational hazard of being in the dating game. No need to worry unless Kate started looking lovelorn, which she wasn’t.

Unicorn? *No, that can’t be right.* No one ever ran into a unicorn by accident.

Toren’s hair stood on end. If Kate had run into a unicorn . . . if she’d *seen* it . . . then that meant . . .

*No. No, no, no!*

And then—one more scent—stronger than the others—

Digging in his claws, Toren pulled the clothes out of the way to reveal a single black feather at the bottom of the drawer.

*Impossible.* If Kate had *that*—if she could *see*—  
He had to know. Had to stick by her until she somehow  
hummed or sang and confirmed it, one way or the other.  
The cat darted out of the room.



When Derek and Pete descended to the kitchen, they found Gran making, of all things, onion rings.

“Wow!” said Pete. “I’ve missed onion rings so much! I didn’t know they were Scottish!”

“Well, fried fish is a big staple in the UK,” Derek reminded him.

Gran laughed. “No, lad. We do have them in the pubs here, but I’m making them because they are Kate’s favorite food, but the poor lass can’t eat them anymore, not since they diagnosed her with gluten intolerance.”

Pete looked confused.

“That means Kate’s allergic to things with gluten,” said Derek. “Like wheat and barley and stuff.”

“Ohhhh,” said Pete. “Right, I know that. I thought she just was watching carbs, like girls do.”

“I didn’t understand it either, at first,” Domnall interjected from the other side of the room. He’d come in from a second doorway that led out the back. Crisp evening air blew in behind him and he quickly stepped over the threshold and shut the door. “But Aileen”—here he nodded his head toward his wife—“took it all seriously and learned to cook everything our Kate desired. Even made me stop brewing my own ale and take up cider-making instead.” He shook his head with a rueful smile. “But it wasn’t so bad in the end. There are so many celiac and gluten-intolerant people in the UK now, so we’ve other friends that enjoy being able to safely partake of the fruits of my labors.”

“Really?” said Derek in surprise. “It’s that common here?”

Aileen nodded. “By population percentage, there’s more celiac sufferers in the UK than in the US.”

"That's fascinating," said Derek. He crossed over to the stove and surveyed the flour mixture that Gran was dipping the onions in. Derek considered himself a fairly proficient chef of Korean cuisine and American favorites, but he'd never had a reason to accommodate any food intolerances. "Is that rice flour?" he asked Gran.

"Ah, I am using a mix!" she replied. "They carry it in stores now! Much, much easier than before when I had to weigh four different flours out precisely. Here, try one." She plucked a crispy golden ring from out of the frying pan and dropped it onto a paper towel. After allowing it to sit for a moment, she picked it up and handed it to Derek.

"Wow, that's amazing," said Derek. "This is gluten-free? And do I taste paprika in it?"

Gran raised her eyes in surprise. "Aye, it is. Are you a cook yourself, then?"

"I try," said Derek. He savored the rest of the onion ring. Normally he didn't go in for fried foods (he had been raised too much on a Korean diet to tolerate the high fats of American restaurants), but there was a heartiness and freshness to this onion ring that made it enjoyable despite the greasiness. "I think this is the best onion ring I've ever tasted," he told Gran.

"Och, away with you!" said Gran, but her face was beaming.

Derek was suddenly inspired. "I haven't gotten to cook for the past semester. Would you allow me to prepare a few traditional Korean meals for you while I'm here?"

The older woman looked a little surprised by the suggestion. Derek guessed that in her experience, she probably had not observed many young men *asking* for a chance to cook. "And how could I say no to such an offer?" Aileen finally answered with a chuckle. "Kate'll take you to market and help you find what you need. And if our little town doesn't have everything, well, you can always take the truck to Inverness. Whenever it gets back from the shop, that is."

"Can we help you with anything now?" asked Pete.

Aileen studied them for a moment. "Well, do you know enough about food to run and pick some lettuce from the garden? It is the season for salad."

"I'll show them," said Domnall. "Best they know, if they want to help around here."

"That'd be great," Derek replied.

Derek and Pete followed Domnall out of the house and around the corner. Chickens were pecking at the ground near the back door, and they popped up to look curiously at Domnall as he approached. A few of them even started stepping toward him, with curious squawks.

"I've already fed ye," Domnall told the birds, with the gruff tone of a man who was trying to hide his true affection for the creatures. "Watch out for that one," he instructed, pointing toward a multicolored rooster who was ruffling his feathers as they approached. "He doesn't take well to intruders. Between him and the cat, we've no need for a guard dog. No, away wi' ye, Alistair!" He gave a shout and waved his arm at the bird, who let out a crow and backed away, flapping his wings.

Pete's eyes were wide. "Is it dangerous?" he asked.

"Nay," said Domnall. "Just give him a kick if he comes after you."

"We'll be fine," Derek assured Domnall. He felt sure that after fighting a band of crazy mermaids he could handle one tiny rooster.

"Aye, well, if he goes after little Abby, we'll throw him in the stewpot," said Domnall with a chuckle. "But I don't think he will. If Kate likes a person, Alistair usually does too."

Derek gave the rooster a long, studied glance. They'd already met one Fay in bird form. Was this rooster another? He felt tempted to try talking to the bird, but with Pete staring at him curiously, now was not the time.

Although the sky was still bright blue overhead, the sun had dipped behind the western peaks, leaving the valley in shadow. Yet, though the dim, there was still enough light to follow Domnall through a creaking gate and into a garden.

For a moment, Derek thought he had stepped into a fairy world.

Unlike the tidy rows of crops he was used to seeing in the American Midwest, this garden was a wild tumble of plants. Peas

and beans grew up poles in the center of the garden, surrounded by low-growing root vegetables, herbs, or fruit that had not yet flowered. Great orange blooms might have been squash, and tiny yellow flowers could be tomatoes, but they were laid out in no discernable rows, and Derek wasn't sure what was weed and what was edible. The entire jungle was enclosed in a wooden fence that seemed to have been woven out of sticks, rather like a basket.

Furthermore, the place was teeming with life. Dragonflies, butterflies, bees, and beetles zoomed and landed throughout the leaves. A bird burst out of a clump of purple flowers, and, as they entered in, Pete had the misfortune to nearly step on a toad.

"Whoa!" Pete squeaked.

The toad gave him a reproachful look, then hopped off.

"Shut it behind ye, lads," Domnall warned them with a nod toward the gate. "We don't want the rabbits getting in, ken. And watch out for the hedgehogs. Usually, they'll stay well away from us, but it's hard to be sure in the dark."

Pete and Derek exchanged astonished looks, then quickly made sure the gate was latched and their feet well away from anything that looked prickly.

In the sky above, a dark form swooped. A big dark bird, but not an eagle or a hawk. There was something familiar about it . . .

"What's that?" asked Derek, pointing.

Domnall leaned and squinted. "Ah, that's our lucky raven."

*Raven?*

Keeping his voice even, Derek asked, "What makes it lucky?"

"Keeps the raptors away," said Domnall. "Even the falcons, which is unusual. We have some peregrines in the area, but none of them will bother this fellow."

"I thought ravens were generally unlucky," Pete interjected. "Or ominous."

*Or deliverers of ominous messages,* thought Derek.

"Oh, to be sure," Domnall agreed. "But ours never bothers the livestock, and there's been no unfortunate happenings since he appeared."

Pete let out a low whistle. "Your own guardian raven. That is so cool! Definitely the same one?"

“Aye. He never lands in our barnyard, just circles.”

Yeah, that wasn’t at all suspicious. Derek frowned and watched as the bird circled out of sight. “How long has it been around?”

“Ah, let’s see now,” Domnall muttered as he bent over a row of greens. “I first noticed him the day of Kate’s christening. He circled our car all the way from the church to the cottage. Aileen made a comment about angels coming in strange disguises. Here now, lads, this’ll be the lettuce she wants. Fill up the basket, but pick off any grubs.”

Pete wrinkled his nose but got right to work. Distracted by his thoughts, Derek followed at a slightly slower pace.

A raven who showed up following Kate on her christening day? That couldn’t be a coincidence, now, could it?