

CHAPTER 5

From rumped black hair to high-top sneakers, Bran Cameron looked perfectly at ease draped in the odd dichotomy of ancient kilt and vintage Lord of the Rings tee. Bran was a person comfortable in his own skin, a reality I couldn't really comprehend. I wondered idly if he'd meant the plaid to match the startling blue and green of his heterochromatic eyes.

“Madainn mhath.”

As he spoke, I realized two things simultaneously.

One . . . that I was staring like a starveling at a pretty piece of cake.

And two . . . that the air, so rich in oxygen only seconds earlier, had gone suddenly and woefully thin.

“W-what?”

“Madainn mhath. It's Gaelic for good morning.” He flicked a hand at his attire. “Seemed appropriate, considering.”

“I know what it means.”

“Well, of course you do,” he said. “You *are* a superhero, after all. Though I must say, I believe I prefer that skirt to a cape and tights.” A slim dark eyebrow cocked as his gaze tracked down my bare legs. “You know,” he mused, “we never gave you a proper superhero name. Personally, I prefer Brain Girl, but we can open the floor for discussion if you—”

“Bran.” His name tasted of mountains and heather and caramelized sugar. “How . . .” I had to stop, swallow. And then I couldn’t stop the questions that had built inside me for weeks.

“What are you doing here? Is it safe? Are you all right? What about Tony? Oh God, I can’t believe you’re really — Does Celia know? I mean, don’t get me wrong, I’m glad you’re here. I’m really, *really* glad you’re here. It’s just . . .”

As I continued to babble incoherently, he took my hand and towed me toward a shady spot behind the ale stand. As I followed, my gaze slipped down past back muscles that moved under a snug T-shirt, slim waist encircled by a wide leather belt, and narrow hips concealed by yards of tartan wool.

He stopped, turned, and caught me staring. He was smiling when I looked up into a face I’d known since I was four years old.

“I did warn you the sight of my bare knees might drive you mad with lust.” His voice sounded scratchy, strained. “Do you remember?”

I did. Of course I did. I was the girl who remembered everything, wasn’t I?



Up close I could see the changes in his features. Jaw sharper than I remembered. Cheeks leaner under rough stubble, making the slightly too-long nose more pronounced. The injury he'd sustained and the corresponding blood infection had taken their toll. But his eyes— one blue, one green—strangely hypnotic and indescribably beautiful, looked the same as they had when we were little more than babies.

“What are you doing here?”

“It’s something of a long story,” he said.

“What happened? Is it Celia? Did she kick you out? Is it your—”

He placed two fingers lightly against my lips, stopping the flow of words. A grin, sweet and slow as maple syrup, curved one side of his mouth as he leaned in and whispered, “Forgive me. But for God’s sake, Hope, just . . . stop talking.”

And then his arms were around me and he was burying his face in my hair. I couldn’t breathe, yet somehow my mouth and nose and lungs filled with the scent and taste of him. Fabric softener and fresh-cut wood and, *always*, the tang of ripe apples that lingered just for me.

I couldn’t get close enough.

His mouth skimmed up the side of my neck, along my jaw, across my cheek. Aching soft, his lips touched my brow and closed lids. When his mouth finally . . . finally pressed against mine, I arched against him. My fists clenched in the

warm fabric of his shirt. My lips opened under his, and I felt the groan rumble through his chest.

His fingers tangled in my hair, roamed down my back. When I nipped at his bottom lip, he gripped my hips to pull me hard against him. A pressure was singing inside me as he lifted me off my feet and we spun, my back slamming against the rear wall of the ale stand.

I thought I heard . . . something . . . but when he swallowed the air that whooshed from my lungs, I didn't care . . . I didn't care . . . I didn't care. Not about anything but being here with him and doing this forever. Short skirt be damned, I wanted to wrap my legs around his waist and kiss him and kiss him until the stars died out. I wanted . . .

“Um, guys?” Someone cleared her throat. “So sorry to interrupt, but you might want to know you have something of an audience.”

Bran stilled. His regretful sigh brushed against my neck, rippling shivers across my skin. His grip loosened and I slid down until my toes once again touched the earth.

Breathing hard, he stared down at me. His blue and green eyes drilled into mine with such raw need, I felt it in the marrow of my bones.

“Damn,” he whispered as he rested his forehead against mine.

My reply came out high and oddly squeaky. “Y-yeah.”

We turned to find Phoebe grinning at us like a Miss America contestant. Behind her, Doug was being all

honorable, trying to shoo away the clutch of giggling tween dancers who'd gathered to watch.

"Told you that outfit was the right call." Phoebe winked sagely. "Just proves one should always listen to ole Auntie Phoebe when snogging's on the menu."

Before I could reply she greeted Bran with a hearty punch to the shoulder. "Good to see *you* again, Romeo. How's your mad bitch of a mum, eh?"

"Phoebe!" Doug cried. "That's an awful thing to say to the lad."

Doug reached out, his huge hand engulfing Bran's fin-er bones. "Damn good to see you again, man. You look a sight better than you did last I saw you, to be sure."

I knew the two had met only briefly, when the Dim had violently disgorged Bran and me from its midst. Fortunately for us, it had chosen to take us back where we marginally belonged.

We'd been whisked off to the hospital. Me with a concussion. Bran only half-conscious from an infection that had entered his bloodstream to ravage his body, courtesy of a knife wound inflicted by his own mother.

"Glad this worked out," Doug said. "I tried everything to open that file you sent last week, but the encryption was too damn good."

"Last week?" I mouthed the words mostly to myself, certain I'd heard wrong.

I shot a look at Phoebe. She was watching me. But at the look on my face, she quickly ducked her violet head,

and began tugging at her thigh-high socks. “Damn things always creeping down.”

I turned to Doug—who was basically incapable of lying. “Doug?”

“W-well, you see, Hope.” Whisking off gold-framed specs, Doug pinched sweat from between his eyes. “It’s only that—”

“It was me.” Bran jumped to the traitorous pair’s defense. “I swore them to secrecy. But only because I wanted to surprise you.”

“Yeah, well. Mission accomplished, I guess.”

Bran’s grin faded. “We’ve only been conversing a few weeks, you see, and—”

“Wait.” Voice deathly quiet, I held up a hand to stave off the rest of his words. “Did you say *weeks*?”

Phoebe cast a scathing look upon both boys, moving to my side in a show of girl unity.

“Doug didn’t tell me until last night, Hope. They’ve been keeping their little bromance to themselves, it seems. No one else knew of it.” Hands on hips, she glared at Doug. “And I told you she wouldn’t like it. Hope hates secrets.”

Bran’s brow creased. “You’re angry?”

“Oh, no,” I said. “Not at all. I lo-o-o-ve being left out in the dark. My mom did it to me my whole life. Why should you be any different?”

Maybe I was being petty. Having him here was a wonderful—no, a stupendously wonderful—surprise. But I had

a feeling our impromptu little reunion was only part of the story.

“If this was all about *surprising* me, then what’s all this about a file?”

Doug’s face filled with regret. “I’m sorry, Hope. I should’ve told you. I—I know what it feels like to be excluded, aye?”

We locked eyes, and I realized that of everyone in my new family, Doug was the only person who truly understood what it feels like to be left out in the cold.



Doug’s dad had been one of Mom and Aunt Lucinda’s closest relatives. Which— leaving aside my bizarre bloodlines — made him my cousin. When his parents died in a car accident, the seven-year-old had come to live with Lucinda as her ward. Though he survived the tragedy that killed his folks, the head injury he’d sustained carried long-term effects. Doug now suffered from a dangerous case of epilepsy. A few weeks earlier I’d witnessed one of the violent seizures that came upon him suddenly, this time at the dinner table. It had been one of the most terrifying things I’d ever seen. Because of the instability of Doug’s condition, Lucinda had long ago decreed that he’d never be able to travel with the rest of the Viators. Though the brilliant boy accepted his supporting role with an astonishing amount of grace, it had to hurt.

Douglas Carlyle, the smartest person I’d ever known, was the only one of us permanently bound to this time.

It wasn’t fair.

I reached up to pat his broad shoulder. “It’s okay.”

He dipped his head in a nod and I turned back to Bran. “But you,” I said. “Get talking.”

“You’ve no idea how much I’ve yearned to hear you snap at me,” he said, trying—and failing—to look contrite. “You see,” he said, “there were some things I needed to work out first. Things I knew Doug was uniquely qualified to help with. Then, once I learned you lot would be coming here, I fabricated a false lead on the Nonius in Inverness. Naturally, Celia didn’t want to send me, but I withheld the pertinent information until she had no choice. After that, it was simply a matter of drugging Flint’s lager— so that I could slip the leash, so to speak. Then, I, um . . . borrowed a set of keys from the valet station, located a car in the hotel’s long-term parking, and drove like a demon so I could see you.” Slender, elegant hands danced through the air, punctuating the story as he finished. “There’s more, of course. But that is it in a nutshell.”

As he looked down at me, I saw an oddly shy expression peek out from behind the cocksure curve of his mouth. A warmth spread through my chest as I thought to myself, *He’s gone to so much trouble. Taken so many risks. He drugged a guy for God’s sake.*

Just to see me.

His eyes closed as I rested my palm against his stubbly cheek. “I guess I forgive you,” I told him. “Just this once.”

“Well,” he scoffed as he brushed windblown curls back from my face. “I must say that is a huge relief.”

Bran and I shared a smile. A blaze of heat and tenderness and something else I couldn't yet name began to flood through me. The rest of the world faded away into a distant thrum. What existed between us had survived through time and space. I thought . . . maybe . . . we could become something extraordinary. Something legendary.

But the thing about legends is that they rarely have a happy ending. Romeo and Juliet? Antony and Cleopatra? The prince of Troy and his Helen? Every one of those fateful couples was doomed, what drew them together burning too hot and too bright to last for very long.

I let my hand drop.

Bran looked at me quizzically. "What?"

"Nothing." I stepped back, deliberately puncturing the bubble that had pushed the rest of the world away. "You, uh . . . You said there was more you needed to tell us?"

Bran's gaze searched my face before he nodded, and turned to include Doug and Phoebe.

"Yes," he said. "Well, back to Phoebe's initial query about my mother. I'm afraid she's quite correct. Celia is worse than ever these days. I fear the woman has gone completely off her nut."

"Why does that scare me more than anything I've ever heard?" I muttered.

Bran chuckled, a pallid sound that dissipated as he gestured for the others to come closer.

"Which brings me to the other reason I came," he said, taking care that his voice wouldn't carry beyond our small

huddle. “Which is to inform you of the newest scheme my dear, demented mater has hatched.”

“Jesus, Mary, and St. Bride,” Phoebe groaned. “What kind of heinous plan does the Mistress of Bloody Darkness have on tap for us today?”

“That,” a gruff voice spoke up, “is something I’d be sore interested in hearing.”