

PEGGY G. MILLER

*A Lucky  
Find*

A Sapphic Romance



# PART 1

# *CHAPTER 1*

## Rose

Rose sat at her office desk and hammered across the computer keyboard with her left index finger.

“Oh no, you won’t die on me now,” she shouted at the blank black screen. It had taken her almost three hours to create this database. The Arvine Hill survey from a month ago. Rose hadn’t had the time to sort through the information until today.

She hated computers. Darren, her ex-husband, used to laugh at her. He was an IT expert, born with a laptop in his hand. She pushed her reading glasses up her nose and sighed.

“Problem?”

Rose whirled around in her chair.

Dougie stood in the door-frame, filling it out completely. His bushy ginger beard didn’t manage to disguise his cheeky grin completely. He still wore his high-visibility vest and muddy boots. Dougie was a single-word kind of guy and always straight to the point. One of the many things Rose appreciated about him. He was not just her colleague and a brilliant archaeologist but a very good friend.

“Nope. Maggie will quarter you. You know that, don’t you?” Rose laughed.

Maggie was the head of the domestic department and an institution at the Highland archaeology unit in Faodail. She was in her mid-sixties, half of Rose’s size, and quick as a whip. She had already complained several times about all the dirt and mud in their office and demanded that they take their boots off outside. Maggie was one of the oldest and longest serving council workers; her word was basically law.

Dougie peeled himself out of his shoes and walked towards the desk on red socks that had more holes than substance.

“Where is Claire?”

“Still at the Mill. Recording.”

Cluttery Claire was the second member of Rose’s small archaeology team. At first, Rose had been sceptical about her. Claire’s desk was always the greatest mess. Piles of folders, papers, and letters amongst hundreds of little good luck charms. Anything from trolls to crystals. And she was always running late and in a constant state of disarray. She wore her long brown dreadlocks in a thick bun and had tattoos all over her arms and God knows where else. Claire’s dark-green army jacket was plastered with hundreds of peace and other statement patches, and her private life was a rollercoaster too. Every day Claire rushed into the office with the words, *“You won’t believe what happened to me.”*

Dougie usually just shook his head and laughed, a kind of deep humming sound that reminded Rose of a busy beehive.

Rose hadn’t found it funny at all. Her jaw muscles used to work overtime, and she knew that she had to do something about Cluttery Claire and the chaos that woman carried into Rose’s perfectly well-organised archaeology lab. In the end, she was the head of the council archaeology unit and responsible for maintaining professional standards.

Rose had already prepared a speech and dug out an old policy handbook when Claire’s assessment of the Arvine Hill landed on her desk—meticulously researched and presented. Almost a work of art. Rose had been impressed. No mess and no clutter. Professional through and through. Since then, Rose never again questioned Claire’s competency.

There wasn’t really time for any staff reprimanding anyway. Since Rose’s arrival in Faodail just over six months ago, her workload had quadrupled. It was one desktop assessment after another. Mainly reviews of already-granted planning permits from the last two years.

The council had found a bad apple amongst them—a member of the planning authority had issued several planning permits to developers for large sums of money and bypassed the normally required environmental impact assessments. Two shopping malls and a few parking bays and houses had all been built on unsurveyed grounds which were of potential archaeological significance. In those cases, Rose and her team were too late;

the damage was already done. But there were some other sites still under construction, and interventions were possible. The whole thing was a huge scandal and an embarrassment for the council. So, the pressure was on now, and Rose and her team were working overtime to save the archaeological sites that could be.

“Someone from the Millburn company phoned earlier. I forgot to tell you, sorry. They asked for a meeting with you asap,” Dougie said.

Rose had been waiting for that. Millburn Ltd. was the largest regional development company, and the Highland Council had halted a number of their ongoing constructions to carry out archaeological surveys.

“Don’t worry. I’m sure they will call again,” Rose said. As if on cue, her mobile phone rang—the song “Always Look On The Bright Side Of Life” humming from inside her duffle bag under the desk. She bent down and retrieved it but didn’t recognise the number on the display.

“Hello?” she said, rubbing her neck.

“Mrs Boyd?” said a high-pitched female voice.

“This is Dr Boyd. Who am I speaking to?”

“I beg your pardon, Dr Boyd. I am Tessa McIntyre. The headmistress of Faodail Academy.”

“Did something happen? Is Amber alright?” Rose felt panic rising.

“No need to worry. Your daughter is fine. However, she injured a fellow student during lunch break.”

The words sounded distant, and Rose was not even sure she had heard them correctly.

“What? There must be a mistake!”

“I can assure you, Dr Boyd, there is no mistake. Your daughter attacked the other student viciously and without apparent reason.”

Rose did not like how the woman kept emphasising the words *your daughter*. In fact, she decided that did not like Tessa McIntyre at all. Probably a spinster with no children of her own who had made it her mission to discipline those of other people.

“I need you and your husband to come to school immediately. Your daughter will be kept in my office until your arrival.”

“Amber’s dad and I are divorced, Mrs McIntyre. He lives in London, but I will be there as soon as I can.”

“That is Ms McIntyre, please, and I will be waiting for you. This school has a zero-tolerance for any kind of violence, Dr Boyd, no matter how young or small the perpetrator.”

*Perpetrator.* Amber’s face appeared in front of Rose’s eyes. Long, curly ginger hair, freckles, and deep-brown eyes just like Darren’s. The face of an angel.

“I think *perpetrator* is quite a harsh word, Ms McIntyre. Amber is thirteen years old. How violent can a little girl be?”

“You would be surprised, Dr Boyd.” The words were followed by a squeaky yelp which Rose assumed was a laugh. She definitely didn’t like that woman.

“I trust I will see you soon in my office, Dr Boyd.”

The line went dead.

Rose sighed and put her phone back into her bag.

“Alright?” Dougie asked, watching her closely.

Rose shook her head. “I must go to school and get Amber. Could you finish the Mill report for me?”

“Sure.”

Rose grabbed her jacket and her bag. Just before leaving the office, she turned around. “If Millburn calls back, tell them I will meet them tomorrow at ten o’clock in our conference room.”

Dougie nodded, and Rose rushed out of the door.



Ms Tessa McIntyre turned out to be a tall, slender woman in her late forties. Her mousy hair was neatly trimmed, perfectly framing her face. She pursed her lips slightly and her small black eyes darted back and forth between Rose and Amber. Ms McIntyre flashed a brief smile, exposing a row of straight white front teeth.

“Your daughter’s behaviour has been unacceptable, Dr Boyd, and has jeopardized the safety of students at Faodail Academy,” she paused and looked at the neatly typed report in front of her. “Where did you say your husband was?”

“London. What is my daughter accused of, exactly?” Rose asked and tried to smile.

The headmistress cleared her throat. “Amber pushed one of her fellow students down a small flight of stairs. Luckily, the boy wasn’t injured.”

Rose looked at her daughter, waiting for some kind of response, but Amber continued to stare out of the window and said nothing.

“Of course, we have informed the boy’s parents too. Needless to say, they are outraged. We do not tolerate any kind of violence at our school, Dr Boyd, and we will have to suspend your daughter if there is any further incident.” Ms McIntyre’s voice had a pitch that caused Rose’s neck hairs to stand up. “Amber, could you wait outside, please? I want to speak alone with your mother.”

Rose almost envied her daughter as she closed the door quietly behind her. Somehow, the headmistress made her feel like a little schoolgirl all over again.

Ms McIntyre sat perfectly straight and motionless in her dark-green leather chair. She sighed dramatically and folded her long, white hands in front of her as if she was going to pray. “Now. I think we may have got off on the wrong foot earlier, Dr Boyd. Amber is certainly a very talented and clever girl.”

Rose slouched even further into her hard wooden chair, waiting for the “but”.

“She is obviously lacking discipline, however. You said Amber’s father is not living with you.” Ms McIntyre paused, looking meaningfully at Rose, her prayer hands now pointing towards her chin like the muzzle of a shotgun.

“Are you saying I am unable to raise my daughter on my own?” Rose asked in a loud voice.

“I don’t believe there is anything wrong with being a single parent, Dr Boyd, but one must be aware of the dangers.”

Rose clenched the chair’s cold armrests.

“I understand that you are the new council archaeologist. An interesting and demanding job, Dr Boyd. It can’t be easy being a single mother and working full time. Of course, your private affairs are none of my business, but perhaps Amber would benefit from some psychological support.” The headmistress paused.

"I'm managing just fine, thank you!" she pressed through her teeth. It never continued to amaze Rose how fast news travelled here.

"I am sure you are, Dr Boyd. But my main concern is the welfare of my students. You do appreciate that, don't you?" The headmistress's voice now had the quality of nails of scratching along a chalkboard.

"Let me assure you, Amber won't cause any further trouble. I'll make sure of that!" Rose stood up in one swift motion, her chair toppling slightly backwards. "If you would excuse me now, I have important work to do. Have a good day, Ms McIntyre." Rose had to restrain every single fibre in her body to not slam the door behind her.

Amber stood outside, leaned against the mint-green wall, hands in her pockets, and grinned.

"I'll see you in the car, madam," Rose growled, not finding anything remotely funny about this.

# CHAPTER 2

## Morag

Amber sat silently in the passenger seat and stared out the window.

"So, why did you do it?" Rose finally looked at her daughter when they stopped at a set of traffic lights. She could hardly contain the anger in her voice.

Amber lazily raised her eyebrows and shrugged her shoulders. Darren used to do that a lot during their marriage, and it had driven Rose mad.

Amber was so much like her dad. The way she smiled or pursed her lips when she wanted something, and her temper at times too. She could go off like a rocket. She also shared Darren's knack for sports and computers. She was a daddy's girl through and through, and their divorce had hit her hard.

Rose and Amber, on the other hand, had hardly anything in common. In fact, if she hadn't seen the umbilical cord between them, Rose would have a hard time believing that Amber was her daughter.

But then again, Rose had been a daddy's girl too and had even become an archaeologist like her father.

The traffic light switched to green, and Rose drove on.

"Well, I'm waiting."

"I didn't do it. He tripped," Amber said finally, sounding almost bored.

"The witness said you did."

"That is so typical! You believe a stranger more than your own daughter," Amber shouted.

Rose's grip on the steering wheel tightened, and she sighed heavily. *Here we go again. Why am I always the baddie, even when Darren isn't there?*

"That is not true, Amber, and you know it." Her daughter knew exactly how to push her buttons. Sometimes Rose really wished that she had a son.

A cute little thirteen-year-old boy who adored his mum and did as he was told.

"It is so! Why couldn't I stay with dad in London? You had to drag me here! To this dump!"

Rose was about to give the girl a piece of her mind when she saw the tears glistening in Amber's eyes. She swallowed hard and said nothing. She knew it was difficult for Amber. New school. No friends. Leaving her ice hockey team behind. Maybe she should have left her with Darren in London. *No, Rose, stop it! It will be rocky for a while, but you will make it work!* Rose glanced at Amber again. There was nothing in the world she loved more than her daughter. Her baby! Rose felt herself welling up with tears too.

"I know it's hard right now, but it'll be fine. I promise," Rose said more gently. *Will it really, though?* Darren would fight to the end to get sole custody.

"What can you offer her, Rose? You are constantly on the go. Here and there and everywhere. I can give my daughter stability," Darren had shouted.

"She's my daughter too!" Rose had shouted back and then turned around and marched away.

"That's right. Just walk away again. That's what you are best at," he had screamed after her.

Rose couldn't really argue with his concerns. She had been away a lot. Across Britain and beyond. It was part and parcel of her job. And she loved it. She loved travelling around and being outdoors.

"I want to stay with Dad," Amber's words ripped Rose out of her thoughts.

She noticed an elderly woman walking in snail's pace over the crossing ahead, slowed down, and stopped the car.

"That's not going to happen," Rose said, clenching her jaws.

"I have rights!" Amber snapped back.

Rose looked at her daughter. Her dark tear-stained eyes were distorted in anger.

"We don't always get what we want in life," Rose said firmly and turned her gaze straight ahead again.

She most certainly didn't. Come to think of it, she had been Amber's age when she was told she'd have to leave London to live with an aunt she

hadn't even know she'd had. Rose had moved up to Scotland a few days after her parents' funeral. It was the darkest time in her life.

Rose's heart started to beat faster at the rush of memories. Flashbacks of the night of the accident, followed by images of two white coffins buried under a sea of flowers. A large crowd of mourners in the small chapel. Friends, neighbours, and colleagues of her mum and dad. Rose had felt utterly alone and lost among them.

When the elderly woman reached the pavement, Rose stepped hard on the accelerator, making the engine howl. She could feel Amber looking at her but chose to ignore it, her mind drifting off again.

"I am very sorry we have to meet under these circumstances, Rose," her aunt had said in her no-nonsense voice—deep and resolute. She had not extended her hand, and Rose remembered being glad that she did not have to touch her.

Because Rose had felt sick to her stomach at the sight of her aunt. Her dad's sister looked so much like him.

Morag was a little older and had more wrinkles, but she had the same winter-grey eyes, the same freckles all over her cheeks and nose, and the same dimples in the corners of her mouth. She had worn her long ginger and grey hair trapped in a ponytail.

Ginger genes ran in the family, and most Boyds had it. Rose glanced at Amber. Her long curls had the colour of autumn leaves too, just like Rose's had been at thirteen. Her daughter had something of hers after all.

Rose looked at the road again as the solemn voice of the social worker replayed in her head.

"I do understand how difficult this situation must be for both of you, but decisions must be made. You've said that your niece could live with you in Scotland, Ms Boyd."

"My cottage is big enough for the two of us," Morag had said whilst Rose had sat quietly on the blue plastic chair, feeling an iron claw scraping away at her heart.

"That is great, Ms Boyd. It is always better when the child stays with family, and Scotland is such a beautiful place," the social worker had said, and had sounded almost cheerful.

"You move to Scotland, then!" Rose had shouted.

"Mum!"

Amber's scream brought Rose back to the present, and not a second too early as she was in the process of driving through a red light. She hit the brakes.

"I'm definitely safer with Dad," Amber muttered.

"We're not discussing that now!" Rose's words sounded harsher than intended.

The light changed, and Rose speeded up again.

"Dad said you would say that." Amber crossed her arms and turned to face the window.

Of course, her daughter should be living with her. Rose was her mother!

Rose could change, and she would change. It was with Amber's best interest in mind, after all, that she had taken this job as head of the archaeology unit with the Highland Council six months ago. It was a Monday-to-Friday job with fairly steady working hours. They would have a stable life together, and Morag was there to help too.

Her aunt hadn't hesitated when Rose had called her and asked her if she and Amber could stay at her place for a while. There had been no nagging questions. "Of course, Rosie. It's your home," was all Morag had said, and it had brought tears to Rose's eyes.

A couple of days later, they had arrived at Faodail with a few cases and a rucksack each. Morag had greeted them at the train station, and Rose had been shocked at how frail her aunt had become. She was over eighty now, fair enough. Still, she hadn't seen her in quite some time. In fact, Amber had only been five the last time they'd visited, and she didn't remember much of it.

Why had it taken Rose so long to come back? Deep down she knew that having a busy life didn't quite cut it. Not that Morag had ever complained about Rose's absence.

Her aunt's walking was much worse, and Rose could see the pain in her eyes as they made their way slowly along the platform.

"That's nothing, Rosie. Just old age," Morag had said.

Amber had been unusually quiet and had looked shell-shocked as they passed by the tiny, ramshackle ticket office and weathered station sign. They had been the only passengers to get off at that stop. *At least Morag can still drive*, Rose had calmed herself as she spotted the old blue jeep parked right next to the train station.

*Not much's changed in the last eight years.* She stared at a shabby-looking building with boarded-up windows and doors. A sign with a faded picture of a black train swung above the entrance like a tired old flag. *The Auld Steamie.*

"That used to be a pub. Went out of business years ago," she'd explained when she saw Amber looking at it as if she had just landed on an uninhabitable planet.

Morag's cottage hadn't changed much either in the last eight years. The little bench in the front garden had looked slightly more weathered. Inside, everything had stayed the same: the same chairs, blankets, and cushions; the same ornaments and photographs. Rose was sure that even the candles were the same. The only thing that had seemed changed was the magazine cover on the table.



Rose parked the dark-green council jeep in front of Morag's cottage.

"Don't even think about going out today. You are grounded! I have to get back to work, but I want you to give Morag a hand around the house, and we'll talk tonight, missy."

Amber continued to stare out of the car window with tight lips and a clenched jaw.

"And straighten your face!" Rose had just about had it.

Amber climbed wordlessly out of the car and slammed the door shut. Rose had to muster all her strength not to go after her daughter and tell her off. She just didn't have time for that right now.

Rose leaned over to the back seat and ruffled through her handbag. Her phone display showed two missed calls—one from Dougie, the other one from Anne. Her friend never phoned her at work. Only in the evenings. That was strange.

She returned Anne's call. Answering machine. *"Hey, it's me. Everything alright? I'll try again later, bye-bye."*

Rose couldn't get hold of Dougie either and left a message that she was on her way back in to work. She threw her phone on the passenger seat and made sure that Amber had gone inside the house before starting the engine.

Rose drove onto the main road. She had to grin at the memory of their arrival six months ago. Amber pulled a long face at the sight of the small thatched house with the plaque *Morag's Cottage* above the door.

"I'm not staying here!" Her daughter's mood had dropped even further when she'd realised the house had no internet connection.

Rose had let her rant, too exhausted to argue. The previous days had taken their toll on her. She had thrown on her favourite wool jumper—hole-ridden and frayed—and a pair of leggings and had lowered herself onto the sofa in front of the old fireplace. Her aunt had sat in her tattered armchair with her legs stretched out on a footstool and a knitted green blanket wrapped over them.

Rose had hardly been able to keep her eyes open. This had been the first time in a long time that she had felt really relaxed. She'd listened to the soothing crackles of the fire, nursing a cup of steaming hot chocolate.

Amber had refused any food or beverage earlier. She wouldn't eat or drink again until she was back in London, she had announced before she'd continued her inch-by-inch search of the cottage for a Wi-Fi hotspot. Rose had just left her to it.

"Darren and I are getting a divorce," Rose had said quietly, her head resting against the back of the sofa.

Morag simply nodded through half-closed lids. Her aunt's eyes had been darting over Rose's face, sharp as ever, drilling into her soul. Drilling so deep that it had started to hurt. Tears welled up, and so Rose had shifted her gaze quickly back to the flames. What could she say?

But then, Rose opened her mouth, and before she knew it, the words rushed out of her like water from a broken dam. She named feelings and reasons she didn't even realise she'd had: how trapped and suffocated she'd felt, how his temper had flared at times. But in the end, the break-up had been entirely her fault, about her inability to be in a relationship and to be close to him—to anyone, really. Even her own daughter, by the looks of it.

"I'm just not the settling type," Rose whispered.

They sat in silence for a long time after that. The flames swayed restlessly among the charcoaled logs, and the crackles of the fire sounded more like someone shooting an air pistol. It made Rose twitchy, and she sipped her chocolate, lukewarm by then.

"You and Amber can stay here as long as you want," Morag finally said, and then nothing else.

Rose smiled and nodded. She felt disappointed somehow. She'd hoped her aunt would comfort her more. Rose lifted herself off the couch, with aches all over her body.

"I think I'm going to turn in," she said. "Do you want me to get you anything before I go?"

"Could you put more logs onto the fire? I'm going to sit here for another wee while."

Rose took some of the wood out of the rack and fed it into the fire, watching the licking flames. She turned around and headed for the door.

"You are one of the strongest people I know, Rosie. What's meant for you won't pass by you," Morag had said quietly just before Rose left the room.



"Everything alright with Amber? Dougie told me."

Claire sat at her computer as Rose walked into the office. A dark metal box was wired up to it and murky black and white images rolled over the screen.

"Yeah, thanks. Are those the geophysics from Arvine Hill?" Rose leaned over Claire's shoulder and studied the results.

"Yep, and so far, *nada*. No sign of any subterranean structures. By the way, Dougie left a note on your desk. He's taking samples down to the lab."

The archaeology department was allocated a small workshop for post-excavation activities. Cleaning finds, sieving soil, and doing basic analysis. Anything more sophisticated they had to ship somewhere else. Usually, they would liaise with universities.

Rose looked at the piece of paper with Dougie's loopy handwriting on it. *Millburn called. Meeting tomorrow at 10.30 am. —D.*

Rose's heart did a flip. *Did he mean Blair Millburn?* Most likely it was one of the company lawyers calling for her.

The Highland Council was embroiled in a legal battle with the Millburn family, the biggest developer and employer in the area. They had cut corners and neglected to carry out detailed environmental impact assessments in a number of their projects. Their behaviour had been ongoing for years, and it was anybody's guess how many archaeological sites had been lost

without record. The police had been involved, and planning permits for a shopping centre and a spa had been put on hold. There had only been one public statement by the Millburn family since the discovery of the scandal, and the family had denied any wrongdoing.

Rose remembered watching the news clip on the telly at the time, searching for Blair in the background, but she hadn't been there. She'd been sure she'd recognise Blair, even after more than twenty years, though Blair would certainly not be sporting her blue Mohican anymore, would she? The thought had made her smile.

She still remembered Blair in that tight red dress and a black-tassel leather jacket: the school leavers' ball, the last time Rose had seen her. She'd felt a faint stir in the pit of her stomach and quickly shook it off.

Blair worked for her family's company, but it had been annoyingly difficult to find information about her. Why did it matter anyway? After all this time? Rose swallowed hard. It simply did.

After the recent death of Blair's father, Fraser Millburn, there had been changes in the company's administration. Rose had known the man, but only by sight: an imposing figure, tall and commanding, towering over any crowd he was in with the aura of a Roman emperor. Fraser Millburn had managed to build a sizeable empire.

Despite the teenaged punk attire, the family resemblance between Blair and her father had always been uncanny: the same fierceness and the same piercing pale-green eyes. But Fraser Millburn had been ruthless too, and if recent discoveries were correct, he had bullied and bribed a lot of people into getting what he wanted. Rose knew for sure that her predecessor had been on the company's payroll.

The council planning committee was due to meet again next week. The Millburns had appealed against the work disruptions at the future spa and shopping centre sites. Perhaps tomorrow's meeting was an attempt to bribe Rose. To persuade her to hurry up her archaeological investigations and limit the suspension time; she wouldn't be surprised. The company was currently losing a lot of money.

"Dougie said the new Millburn company president knows you?" Claire looked at Rose and wiggled her brows suggestively. "Alistair."

*Shit!* Rose crumpled Dougie's note into a ball and threw it into the paper basket.

"You alright, Boss?"

Rose nodded. "Just a blast from the past, that's all." *And not a very nice one.* The last time she had seen Alistair Millburn had also been the night of the leavers' ball. He had come on to her, and if Blair hadn't stepped in... Rose shook her head. She didn't want to go there.

Claire eyed her suspiciously. "Well, it must be a mighty big blast. You look as if you just swallowed a frog."

"That was a long time ago. It really doesn't matter anymore now." At least she hoped it didn't.

"You are not planning on going on your own into that meeting, are you?"

"No, of course not," Rose lied.

"I can come with you, if you want, and take the minutes," Claire said.

"No. You must go back to Arvine Hill tomorrow and do more geophysics. Some of the results weren't conclusive." There was no way she would have Claire sitting in. That woman was far too perceptive. Not that Rose expected anything to happen between her and Alistair. Surely, they were all grown-ups now. She had heard that he had a family—a wife and two kids. Still, she felt an unpleasant twitch in the pit of her stomach at the thought of seeing him again.

She knew that Millburn Ltd wanted her to cut short the archaeological surveys and desktop assessments. But she wouldn't give them an inch. They had destroyed enough of the local past already, and there were no records of it either. Gone forever.

Claire was right, though. She should take someone into the meeting with her. It wouldn't be pretty.



Rose had asked Erin to meet her for a quick coffee after work at their usual place, McCab's. The cappuccino here was astonishingly good for a pub.

Her friend had hardly changed in the last twenty years. She still wore her hair blond and spiky, with earrings and bangles all over. She even used the same cherry-red lipstick. But Erin looked tired today. Rose didn't know if it was the lighting in here or maybe her make-up, but she seemed to have more wrinkles too.

"Are you alright?"

Erin shook her head. "No, Dad isn't great. They want to transfer him to the dementia unit."

Mr McPhee had been diagnosed with Alzheimer's a couple of years ago, and recently, the disease had progressed dramatically.

"I'm so sorry, Erin." Rose touched her friend's arm gently.

"Well, we knew it was coming." Erin forced a smile. "How are you? Is Amber doing alright?"

"Don't even go there," Rose said, sighing heavily. "According to the school headmistress, my daughter is a perpetrator. She pushed another student."

"Oh." Erin furrowed her brows.

"Yep, and that woman is quite serious about it. I'm at my wit's end. I don't know what to do if she decides to expel Amber. Maybe she should live with Darren for a while?"

"Rubbish!" Erin looked at Rose angrily, her blue eyes a stormy ocean. "That is not a solution. Since when does Rose Boyd throw in the towel?"

"Never," Rose said and grinned. "And that is Dr Rose Boyd, if you please!"

Somehow, Erin always managed to cheer her up. "When will you know what's going to happen with your dad?"

"There is a case meeting at the hospital next week, but he definitely can't go back home. We've involved social work. Once the decision is being made, I'm to put his house up for sale to fund the placement." Erin's voice faltered.

"I'm so sorry. If there is anything I can do..."

"He loves that house, but I don't have a choice." Her friend swallowed hard, and a heavy silence descended between them.

Erin lifted her chin and smiled. "Enough already of that doom and gloom. You said on the phone that you wanted to ask me something."

"Yes, what do you know about the Millburn family?"

"Not a lot. Why?"

"It's nothing really. Just curious. I have a meeting with one of them tomorrow. Work related." Rose tried to sound as nonchalant as possible and not to move a muscle in her face. Erin could read her like a book.

Rose had already questioned Morag about the Millburns the previous night, but her aunt was so untalented at gossiping. She had to drag every little detail out of her and then had finally just given up.

"Well, all I know is that Mr Millburn died recently," Erin said. The mother is still alive but apparently wheelchair-bound after a stroke. So the children have taken over the family business now. They're even more ruthless than their father was, I've heard."

"I'm meeting Alistair Millburn tomorrow. What about his sister, Blanche—or Blair?" She was surprised to feel a little pinch in her chest just speaking Blair's name.

"I know that she's married. No kids, though. She used to travel a lot, but now I suppose she is going to be more involved here with the company," Erin said.

Rose swallowed. Her mind went blank for second. Blair was married. Somehow, she couldn't picture her as a bride. With a husband. She stirred her second cappuccino.

"Didn't you have a run-in with her? Correct me if I am wrong, but wasn't it during our leavers' ball?"

Rose stared at Erin. She felt the heat rising in her cheeks.

"Now, since you mention it," Rose quickly said, lowering her gaze and mixing her coffee more rigorously. Images of Blair's red full lips and her curvaceous body wrapped in red dress pressing against her flooded Rose's mind, causing a shiver. She could feel her friend watching her and quickly took a sip of her cappuccino.

"Are you alright, sweetie?" Erin said as Rose started coughing.

She managed to nod.

"Well, Dad hates that family. The Millburns robbed him of his business, putting the rent for his shop up so high that he couldn't afford it. And don't you remember how Blair and her brother used to taunt everybody? I don't think they have changed that much."

Erin spoke with a venom in her voice that made Rose look at her. She almost had forgotten that the Millburns were responsible for the closure of Mr McPhee's small local hardware shop. Erin's dad never got over it.

Suddenly, her friend's face lit up, and she waved. Rose turned around. Andrew was walking into the pub.

"Hey, sweetheart." He planted a kiss on his wife's lips and one on Rose's cheeks. His beard scratched briefly over Rose's skin.

*They really are a sweet couple*, Rose thought, watching them squabbling over domestic affairs. Andrew was already grey, or, actually, almost white. He had grown quite a pouch around his waist too and had chubby rosy cheeks. The perfect Santa Claus.

Rose had never felt as relaxed around Darren as Erin seemed to feel around Andrew. They just didn't have that natural banter. Didn't have a natural anything, really. She finished her cappuccino and got ready to go.

"Sorry, but I have an appointment with my lovely daughter at home," she said, winking at Erin, who gave her a thumbs up.

"Let's meet for dinner soon. Our place," Andrew said. He was an excellent cook.

Rose nodded.

"Good luck with your meeting tomorrow," Erin shouted after her. "Maybe Blanche will be there too."

Rose spun around and stared at her friend. Erin flashed her a smile and winked. That woman missed absolutely nothing.

# CHAPTER 3

## The Proposal

Rose steered her jeep through rush hour. Her head was thumping. She had hardly slept last night. At first, there had been the lengthy discussion with Amber, which had ended in shouting, tears, and door slamming. Her daughter had accused Rose of stealing her happiness and dooming her to a life of misery.

Then she had called Anne to cheer her up, but her friend had had bad news.

“Harry said Darren went to Mullford and Son. The best family lawyers in town, Rosie. Megasharks.”

Harry was Anne’s soon-to-be husband number four and Darren’s golfing buddy.

Rose didn’t know why the news upset her so much. She did expect that Darren wouldn’t give up that easily. It was probably just all catching up with her now.

She had sat at the fireplace for hours last night, long after Morag had gone to bed, with a sketch-pad on her lap. Doodling and drawing usually relaxed her, but it didn’t work that evening. She couldn’t even find the strength to lift the pencil.

*The best lawyers in town. Megasharks.* The words bounced around in her head like ping pong balls, louder and faster with each passing minute. Her head was spinning.

What if she lost custody of her daughter? The thought enclosed her like an iron maiden, leaving her suffocating in the dark. *Amber said that she hated her.*

Rose had jumped out of bed at that point and walked up and down in front of the window, hugging herself. Every child hates their parents

sometimes. She most certainly did. The face of her mother, pale and ghost-like, had floated around in her mind, and she had broken down on top of the bed and started to cry.

Rose hit the brakes and stopped abruptly. The red traffic light was swimming in front of her eyes, and she wiped her tears away with the sleeve of her jacket. Rose pinched the bridge of her nose hard. She only had to get through today.

It wasn't going to be easy, though. She really wished she hadn't agreed to the meeting with Millburn. She already knew it would be a waste of time anyway. *Why did she do it, then?* Before Rose could contemplate an answer, the light turned green.

She finally arrived at the council building, a gigantic grey cement block with three rows of windows and the charm of a shipping container. It looked covered with dark mould after the rain last night.

Rose sighed before entering. She was almost an hour late; a car accident had slowed down traffic. She didn't even have the time to fetch a drive-through coffee. *How am I going to survive this morning without caffeine?* Just the thought made her yawn.

Dougie looked up from his computer screen as Rose strode into the office.

"Alright?"

"Did Claire go to Arvine Hill this morning?" Rose asked, ignoring his question. She was in no mood for idle chit-chat today.

Dougie nodded.

Arvine Hill was their only ongoing project that had no connection to the Millburn family. It was a prehistoric hill fort. They had found the leftovers of two ramparts, sherds of pottery, and fragments of cremated bone. Most importantly, Dougie's geophysical survey on top of the hill had revealed a number of postholes and the outlines of three buried circular structures which Rose suspected to be the foundations of Bronze Age dwelling. If this assumption was correct, then the hill fort site would have been occupied by humans earlier than they had originally thought.

Rose was still waiting to hear from Glasgow University about the pottery type analysis and radiocarbon dates. Even more exciting were the results of Claire's search through aerial photographs of the area taken during World War II.

She had identified the remnants of an earthwork—two parallel banks and a ditch which seemed to lead away from the western side of the hill and towards Loch Faodail. Rose and her team believed that this could be some sort of ancient track or avenue. In prehistoric times, people probably used the avenues to travel between monuments, landscapes, and symbolically, between the world of the living and the dead.

Rose reckoned that the presence of an avenue in such close proximity to the hill fort suggested that it was used for a ritualistic purpose rather than a defensive one, but she needed more conclusive evidence.

She plunged into her office chair and stared at a large paper cup that sat on top of her desk.

“Cappuccino,” Dougie muttered.

“Thanks,” Rose looked at him and tried to smile, but she was too tired. She took a sip from the cup. It was freezing. Still, it was caffeine, and she needed all she could get today. Rose gulped it down, and shortly after, she didn’t just feel tired but nauseous too.

The phone rang. Dougie grabbed the receiver without taking his eyes off the computer screen.

“Hello?” He paused. “OK,” he said, hung up, and whirled around in his chair.

“Millburn is here,” he said.

Almost half an hour early. *Great!* Rose had hoped to be able jot down some pointers beforehand.

“You want me to come with?” Dougie asked.

Rose shook her head. “No, it’s fine.” She skimmed through the stack of papers on her desk, removed a blue folder with the heading *Millburn Ltd. Projects*, and sighed heavily. *Let the show begin.*

Just before leaving the office, Rose turned back to her desk. She grabbed her handbag and rummaged through it. What a mess. She really needed to clear it out. Pencils, plasters, painkillers, chocolate bar, small paint brushes, tweezers, small dental hooks, even a measuring tape. More like an archaeology kit, really. Eventually, she found her pair of red plastic reading glasses. She had a couple of those, in all sorts of colours, from a buy-five-for-the-price-of-three kind of deal.

Rose pushed them onto her forehead and marched towards the door. Whatever happened, she was ready.

Dougie had a big grin plastered all over his face. He looked ready to say something.

She glared at him. "Don't!"

He shrugged his shoulders. "OK."



Rose entered the reception area. A tall man leaned against the receptionist's desk and was talking to the young student behind it. Andrea laughed out loud at something he said. They didn't hear Rose coming. She felt a sting of disappointment. Somehow, she had hoped that it might be Blair.

Rose couldn't see the man's face, but she knew in an instant that it was Alistair Millburn, his hair still thick and dark with faint silver at the temples. He wore a golfing outfit. Pressed grey trousers. A white short-sleeved shirt and a checked pink-grey vest. Rose cleared her throat noisily.

Alistair spun around, and a look of surprise crossed his face. He quickly recovered and flashed her a smile. The row of crisp white teeth reminded Rose of a toothpaste advert. She felt an unpleasant contraction in her stomach. *Get a grip, Boyd!* She had forgotten how much like Blair he looked—the same dimples, slightly hooked nose, and bright eyes. His lips weren't as beautifully shaped and full as Blair's, but the physical resemblance between them was remarkable.

Alistair walked towards her with open arms. He looked trim and fit. "Rose Boyd! How very nice to see you. How long has it been?" The smile didn't reach his eyes. He scanned her—looking her up and down shamelessly, his gaze lingered briefly on her cleavage. "You look great," he beamed. His voice was perfectly manicured, just like his hands.

Rose said nothing. Her mouth felt suddenly dry. She couldn't move. Couldn't extend her arms. She'd never forget the leavers' ball. His drunken assault. It all came rushing back to her in this moment. As if somebody had just kicked down a locked door in her mind. One she didn't know existed. Rose thought for a second that she could smell his alcohol-drenched breath again. The stench was strong and sickening. She saw the image of his drooling, distorted face in front of her. "*Just wait until I am finished with you,*" he had slurred.

"Are you alright, Rose?" Alistair stretched out his hand to touch her, and she stumbled backwards.

"I don't think it was a good idea to meet," she managed to press through her grinding teeth. Her nails were digging into the work folder in her hand.

"Is it still the ball thing? I am truly sorry, Rose. I was so drunk and stupid. I wanted to apologise, but you had moved away." Alistair walked again slowly towards her. He spoke in a soothing lullaby voice, like a psychiatrist might speak to her unstable patient. Rose wished she had asked Dougie to come along with her.

"I am really sorry, Rose. You must believe me." Alistair stood now in front of her. Only a few inches away.

She had to get her act together. Be professional. She was the head of the archaeology unit after all, and this was business. Through her peripheral vision, Rose caught sight of Andrea, who sat there with crossed arms, watching.

"I've got five minutes," Rose said, trying to sound sharp. She had originally planned to go up to the conference room, but that was not going to happen. There was no way she would ride an elevator with him.

Rose walked over to the small waiting area in the reception hall, and Alistair followed closely. The table was littered with old magazines and framed by a couple of white plastic chairs. In one corner was a play area for children with tattered toys and books. There was a coffee automat with white plastic cups too. They sat down, the legs of their chairs screeching over the floor tiles.

"I am here to make you an offer, Rose."

She wished Alistair would stop saying her name.

"It's Dr Boyd, please. I really don't see what you could offer me, Mr Millburn. I'm not someone you and your family can buy."

Alistair looked at her with narrowed eyes. As if shielding them from bright sunlight.

Rose couldn't tell what he was thinking or feeling right now.

"I don't want to talk about developments with you. I'm here on an unrelated matter. We share a common interest," he said dryly.

"What could you and I possibly have in common?" The harsh words slipped out of Rose's mouth before she could think them through.

The smile had now completely vanished from his face. His eyes were devoid of anything, and he just watched her without blinking, like some animal.

“Let’s just say we are both trying to make the most of the past,” Alistair said slowly, stressing the last word. He leaned slightly forward and stared at her for a moment with the hypnotising gaze of a viper. “I want you to carry out an archaeological survey on Wee Grannie. I am granting you full access in the name of the Millburn family.”

Rose was stunned. She hadn’t seen that coming. For a moment, they sat in silence as Rose tried to make sense of his words. The offer was stunning. *But what did he really want?* No outsider had ever been allowed onto the island, as far as she knew. Since the discovery of the avenue, Rose had played with the idea of approaching the Millburns again for permission to survey the island in the middle of Loch Faodail.

“Why?” she asked, looking straight into his eyes.

“Curiosity,” he answered without hesitation.

Still, Rose didn’t believe him.

“You don’t need to decide today. Think about it,” Alistair rose from a chair and the screech of the legs scraping against the floor echoed through the reception hall.

“There are two tiny conditions,” he said, flashing a sticky, honey-sweet smile at her. Rose almost expected some sort of one-night-stand proposal. “The survey can only be done by you. Nobody else is allowed on our island, and you must do it by next weekend.”

Rose stared at him, speechless. “What?” she finally managed.

Alistair just winked at her. “I’ll probably see you at the council meeting. Have a good day, Dr Boyd,” he said before he turned around and walked away.

Rose remained seated and watched him stroll confidently through the reception hall with his hand in his pocket like he owned the world. On his way out, he leaned briefly over the desk and said something to Andrea. The receptionist flushed.

Rose turned her gaze away. *What just happened here?*

She slowly stood up, went over to the coffee automat, got herself a black coffee, and sat down again, staring out of the window. It had started to rain, and water was lashing against the glass.

Wee Grannie. She had heard so many legends about the island over the years. The tomb of the ancient Amber queen was rumoured to be there. It was said to be protected by guards with the heads of ravens with red eyes and long and sharp claws, and that were clad in black feathers. That latter bit was scaremongering at its finest, of course, and probably put in circulation by the Millburn family to keep intruders away.

Only one archaeologist had ever been allowed to investigate the island: Professor Ewing from the University of Edinburgh in the seventies. He left hardly any records of his findings.

Rose sipped the coffee slowly. It tasted like dishwater. She didn't care. She felt excitement rushing through her veins. *Such an opportunity! Why me? What is the price? What is Alistair really after?*

That he wanted something from her was beyond any doubt. She knew he hadn't changed, despite his apology and perfect smile. For sure, he was still ruthless and was attacking his victims when they were at their weakest. But could she really refuse such an offer? She was a scientist after all, and this was a rare chance. Rose's mobile phone started ringing and vibrating. She fished it out of her trouser pocket. It was Claire.

"Is everything alright?" she asked Rose. "Where are you?"

"Hi, Boss. I am still at Arvine Hill. You've got to see this! Can you come up here?" Claire shouted in a high-pitched voice.

"Not really. My diary is packed. What is it?"

"I've done more geophysics at the middle of the hill plateau, and the output shows the outlines of a structure."

Rose just wanted to tell her to use the ground-penetrating radar to investigate in more detail, but before she could even open her mouth, Claire's voice bubbled through the receiver.

"I just ran the GPR over the section, and there is some sort of elongated structure buried inside the hill. It could be a burial."

Rose jumped out of the chair, crushed the empty coffee cup into the bin, and rushed to the elevator, phone still pressed to her ear.

"How deep?" Rose felt her heart accelerate.

"Maybe twelve or thirteen feet."

"Four metres! I'm coming up!"

# CHAPTER 4

## Arvine Hill

“Hi, Aunt Morag, it’s me. Could you collect Amber from school today? I’m stuck at Arvine Hill,” Rose said into the phone.

“Of course. What time?”

“She finishes at three.”

“Are you alright, Rosie? You sound tired.” Morag’s voice was full of concern.

“I’m fine. It’s just really maddening up here today. I’ll tell you all about it tonight.”

“I’m going to make your favourite tonight. Stew,” Morag said.

“Thanks.” Rose smiled. A slice of toast with butter was all she had eaten today. Morag knew her too well. She tended to forget everything when she was engrossed in her work. All her senses focused on the one thing at hand. Nothing else mattered. She didn’t eat, drink, or sleep.

More than once, she even almost forgot to collect her daughter from school. Something Darren’s lawyers would surely bring up in court. Rose felt the pressure building in the pit of her stomach. It was going to be a tough battle.

*Don’t dwell on it. Focus,* she chanted to herself and tried to concentrate on bagging and labelling a small piece of worked flint they had uncovered. Rose was sure that it was an arrowhead, and going by the leaf-like shape, it was highly probable that it dated back to the Early Neolithic period—another piece of evidence to support her theory that Arvine Hill had been occupied well before the Bronze Age.

Shortly after Rose had arrived at Arvine Hill, she and Claire had repeated the geophysical survey twice. The results were clear: Something was buried down there.

She had briefed Ian Bramley, head of the council planning committee and then had called Dougie and asked him to oversee their other projects. Thankfully, they had a fairly large workforce, volunteers, who were prepared to do the physical labour for nothing but free meals, drinks, and a good time. They were mainly locals and archaeology students looking for work experience and needing fieldwork credits. There shouldn't be major disruptions anywhere. Dougie and two of the PhD students would supervise the different sites.

Meanwhile, Claire and Rose had decided where to open up the trenches on the hill plateau, and how many. They were going to excavate three trenches, which would be three by four metres each. Possibly even four, depending on their findings.

"We'll start removing turf first thing in the morning," Rose said. The rain had been drizzling down on them all afternoon, and their trousers, jackets, and hair were getting soaked—slowly but surely. "If we do it tonight, we'll have a mudhole here in the morning. I checked the forecast, and it's supposed to rain all night."

Claire nodded. She looked as exhausted as Rose felt. It was time to pack up and call it a day.

"Don't you have that Millburn meeting tomorrow morning?"

Rose cursed. She had almost forgotten. The council would sit down with the head of the company, and Bramley had insisted that Rose be present too.

"Just start without me, then. I'll join you as soon as I can."

"No problem," Claire said and tightened the hoodie over her bundle of dreadlocks. She turned around, and Rose grinned. The elongated back of her head made her look like an alien.

"What do we do about the bank? It's definitely leading towards Loch Faodail," Claire said, pointing ahead.

Rose nodded. There was only little vegetation on the plateau, and they had a clear view from here. The water of the loch looked dark and cold under the heavy grey clouds. The trees at the shoreline exploded in all shades of red, green, and yellow. Rose closed her eyes briefly and took a deep breath. She liked autumn. The musty smells and the deep colours. She could feel the rain on her face. It was picking up.

Rose opened her eyes again and scanned the surface of the Loch Faodail, stopping at the small island. It floated on top of the murky water like the dark pupil of a watchful eye.

"I've been given permission to survey the Wee Grannie," Rose said quietly.

"What? From Millburn-Horton?" Claire looked flabbergasted.

Rose froze. "What do you mean? Why from her?"

"Well, Blair Millburn-Horton is the new CEO, and I've heard that she basically owns the island."

Rose stared at her, heat rushing into her cheeks. *Blair's Island!* Claire's face zoomed out of focus as Rose's mind drifted away to the shores of Loch Faodail, twenty years ago.

"Hey, you're on my property, and you are destroying it, Gingerhead," Blair shouted and gestured with her hand at the large hole that Rose had dug up with Morag's small spade on the grounds of the old mill. She wore her trademark black leather jacket with tassels and a pair of tight stonewashed jeans. The laces of a red bra were visible under her low-cut top. She had crossed her arms in front of her chest, pushing up her breasts.

"This is a public place," Rose said, trying to sound unfazed.

"This is my family's land. My land," Blair said, uncrossing her arms and strolling slowly towards her.

Rose struggled to her feet under Blair's watchful eyes, her cheeks burning.

"Are you digging an escape tunnel or something?" Blair mocked, stopping a couple of feet away.

Rose had to admit her trench was a tad big now. "It's a project for school," she lied.

"Oh, really!" Blair raised her eyebrows.

"Is that part of your project too?" She pointed at Rose's sketchbook which lay open in the grass.

"No. That's nothing," Rose mumbled, starting to feel light-headed.

"Let me see." Blair leaped forward and picked up the pad before Rose could stop her.

They were only inches apart now, and Rose smelt the scent of a flowery perfume. Her heart was pounding so loud that she thought Blair could hear it. But Blair didn't seem to notice her reaction and leafed through the sketchbook.

"You did all that?" Her voice sounded distant.

Rose managed to nod.

Blair looked at Rose with eyes the colour of a summer meadow after heavy rainfall. If she took one more step now, their arms would touch.

Rose felt the heavy heat coming from Blair's body—or was it her own? Like a moth to the flame, her eyes wandered to Blair's lips. As soft as blossom petals.

"You drew that?" Blair asked.

Rose stared at the page the girl was looking at. It was a sketch of Blair walking across the schoolyard. She nodded again.

"That is...nice," Blair said quietly and looked up, her green eyes sparkling.

Rose felt dizzy. This is not happening.

"Can I have my sketchbook?" Rose managed to croak, already moving her hand towards the book.

But Blair pulled back.

"Technically, it's mine." The cockiness was back in her voice.

"What?"

"Well, I've found it on my land." She looked at Rose with challenging eyes. Amused.

"What? I don't think so!" Rose grabbed the book and yanked it out of Blair's hand.

Blair dived after it. She got hold of Rose's arm. Rose could feel her breath on her cheek. Suddenly, Blair took another step forward, and Rose felt a leg behind hers. She stumbled and fell backwards on the ground, with Blair on top of her. Something pressed painfully into Rose's back, and she tried to move away, but Blair had already found her bearings and was kneeling over her. They looked at each other, panting. Only now did Rose realise that her T-shirt had

slid up, leaving her stomach bare. She blushed, but Blair did not seem to notice. She leaned forward and pressed Rose's wrists to the ground. Blair's shirt now stretched tightly over her breasts. Rose could see the lace of her bra and her nipples were only inches away from Rose's face. She could touch them with her lips if she leaned forward. A flush of heat jolted through Rose, and a moan escaped her lips. She closed her eyes and swallowed hard, the warm pulse between her legs intensifying.

Blair lowered herself onto her, the seam of her jeans rubbing against Rose's skin. Her eyes snapped open and met Blair's—they were darker now, somehow, and her lips were parted. Blair bent slowly down, as if she wanted to kiss her, and Rose didn't turn away.

But before their lips touched, Blair suddenly stopped, a look of shock on her face. Seconds that felt like hours ticked by. She let go of Rose's wrists, jumped up, and started to laugh. A deep, shaky laugh at first, but it grew louder and stronger. She walked away, still laughing, and then Rose heard her cracking open a beer can.

Rose stared into the blue sky. Blair's laugh washed over her like a bucket of ice water.

Blair's face appeared in her view again. She took a swing of her beer, bent down, and lifted something up from the ground.

"Keep it! A present from me," she said and threw the sketchbook into the grass.

"Are you alright?" Claire's voice filtered through.

Rose was startled for a moment—the image of Blair's face evaporated like smoke. An unpleasant feeling lingered in the pit of her stomach. *Am I alright?* Rose wasn't really but nodded.

"Actually, it was Alistair Millburn."

"Really? Why?"

"He claimed it's only for curiosity's sake," Rose said with raised eyebrows.

"No way! He is a snake on two legs!"

The venom in Claire's voice surprised Rose. "Did I miss something?"

Claire hesitated for a moment and then just shook her head. They stood in silence. Rose debated if she should dig deeper but decided to let it go. The rain was getting worse every minute, and she could feel the moisture even seeping through her shoes.

"Whatever Alistair is after, I'm sure it's something big, but does it really matter? We are getting a chance to prove our hypothesis that there is a connection between Arvine Hill and the island," Rose said.

Claire wiped her wet face with her dirty sleeve, leaving a trail of mud on her cheek. "Alright, then. When do we start?"

"That's the other thing. It's already set for next week, and it's only going to be me. Those were his conditions." Rose muttered.

Claire dropped her trowel and put a hand on her hip. "Don't tell me you are going to do this!"

Rose shrugged with her shoulders. "Why not?"

"It's creepy. That's why!"

"C'mon, don't worry. I can handle Alistair Millburn. It's a unique opportunity, and I'm planning to take it," Rose said, shifting her gaze quickly away from Claire. *I had to handle him once before.* The memories of her leavers' ball flooded back as if it had all just happened yesterday, and not more than twenty years ago.

Rose unlocked the toilet booth and stumbled into him outside.

"Hey, pretty. No need to rush," Alistair slurred. His breath reeked of alcohol and cigarettes. He pressed his hands onto her hips and tried to push her against the wall behind her. Rose kned him hard in the groin.

He stumbled and bent over backwards in pain.

"Don't you dare try that again," Rose hissed.

His face turned crimson. "Just wait until I'm finished with you, dyke!" He spat the words into her face, drooling all over his chin.

The curtain separating the toilets from the main pub swished opened suddenly, and Blair appeared. Her eyes darted between Rose and her brother.

"Problem?"

Neither of them answered.

Alistair's jaw muscles were set tight, and his eyes shot daggers at Rose. "I will find you!" He spat at her, and a droplet of his saliva hit her cheek.

Then he turned around and staggered away, stumbling as he tried to push his sister out of his way.

Rose shook her head, trying to throw off the images. Yes, she could handle Alistair Millburn.

"I think we'd better leave before the rain turns the slopes into mudslides," Rose said out loud and started to gather their equipment together.

Claire didn't move. "You know what haunts that island, don't you? The ghost of the mighty banrigh," she said.

Rose met Claire's eyes. Her colleague looked dead serious.

"The Amber Queen. Really, Claire! That's a legend and a fairy tale and was probably created by the Millburn family themselves to keep locals from going to the island," Rose said.

Claire didn't flinch.

"Queens usually find me quite charming, you know," Rose added, wiggling her eyebrows.

Claire's face relaxed, and she burst out laughing. "Oh, really! You are hiding your charm well."

They continued to pack up in silence. Just before making their way down the hill, Claire grabbed Rose gently by her arm.

"I really mean it, Rose. Be careful! I think Alistair is dangerous."



Rose stood in front of the bathroom mirror, ready to submerge herself in a hot bubble bath. Amber had scurried off to her room and barricaded her door, apparently doing homework at her computer. Morag was in the kitchen, preparing the beef stew.

Rose looked at her face. Streaks of mud were plastered all over her cheeks and forehead. Her eyes seemed tired. She rubbed her fingers over the skin beneath them, trying to smooth it like creases in a piece of cloth. It was futile. She flipped a long ginger curl out of her forehead and focused. There was no mistake. More grey hairs. They were spreading like weeds.

She had to rethink her strategy of pulling them out, or she would be bald soon.

Rose sighed and lowered herself into the bath, her bones creaking with exhaustion. She leaned back and closed her eyes, trying to ignore the aches and pains in her back and knees, but they were getting sorer every day. Maybe she really was getting too old for this job.

She inhaled deeply. That was heaven. The truth was, Rose couldn't wait to get back to Arvine Hill tomorrow. There was something up there. She could feel it in her guts.

Would she really be able she to survey Wee Grannie on her own next week?

She sighed, feeling the heat of the water relaxing her muscles and her mind. The island wasn't that big, fair enough. One and a half miles in diameter, maybe. Still, Claire's words echoed through her head. Blair's Island. Did Blair know about her brother's offer? She could ask her tomorrow at the council meeting. As an icebreaker, so to speak.

"Hi, nice to see you, and by the way, I'm digging up your island next week." Rose had to smile. That would go down well.

She was sure Blair, as Millburn Ltd.'s CEO, would be at the meeting tomorrow. She didn't really know how she felt about it. In fact, Rose had avoided thinking about her, about Blair. Whatever had happened between them, it was a lifetime ago. Surely, it didn't matter anymore. Maybe they would even laugh about it together. *"Do you remember the ball? Our wee kiss? How silly, eh!"*

Maybe Blair didn't even remember her. That would hurt. *Why, for crying out loud?* She tried to picture Blair twenty years older, but all Rose's mind could conjure was a miracle: Blair not having aged a bit.

Rose took a deep breath and dipped her head under the water. She floated with her eyes wide open and watched the bathroom light breaking through the water surface. Peace.

There was a faint knock and then a muffled voice. Rose emerged at once.

"Mum, I need the toilet. Now!"

Rose sighed. "I'm coming. Give me a minute," she shouted, wiping the foam out of her eyes.

Everything was going to be alright tomorrow. She would manage Blair, no problem. At the end of the day, she was there to do a job, and if nothing else, she was professional.

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