

CHAPTER 1



ABERDEEN, SCOTLAND

“*I* swear every year you get more handsome,” exclaimed Grandmother as she looked at her strapping grandson in his evening Highland wear. “Your grandfather is always so proud when he sees you in your kilt.”

Andrew MacNeil had come to Scotland to spend the holidays with his grandparents, and tonight he was going out with friends to celebrate Hogmanay, the Scottish New Year, a holiday more important than Christmas in the Scottish culture. The party would be a large traditional one where most of the men would be in kilts, so Andrew was wearing his MacNeil tartan along with black Bonnie Prince Charlie waistcoat and jacket, both liberally adorned with silver buttons. A long tartan sash was fastened with a silver clan badge at his shoulder and hung down his back, and his black knee socks had MacNeil flashes on them. There was a small

dagger tucked into the top of his right sock, and a dress black sporran hung in front of him from his waist.

"There you are, lad," came the voice of his grandfather, and Andrew turned to see the silver-haired patriarch of the MacNeil family enter the room. The elderly man's eyes reflected great pleasure as they took in his grandson in his MacNeil attire. "You do the family proud," he said with satisfaction as he moved towards his wife.

"What are you and Grandmother going to do to celebrate?" asked Andrew.

"We're going to the MacLeod's for ale and good company, but at our age, we don't require too much in the way of fireworks."

Andrew smiled and nodded. His grandparents were in their late seventies, but both were in excellent health and fully capable of participating in whatever party they wished.

"Are you pairing with the Fraser girl this evening?" continued his grandfather as he watched his grandson carefully. Both he and his wife wished fervently that Andrew would find a good Scottish lass to settle down with, but they had accepted that it might not happen that way. Still, tonight was a good sign.

"Yes, sir," was all his grandson said in reply.

"You know, Elise has had eyes for you for years," put in his grandmother. "I've always thought the reason she hasn't already settled down is because she carries hopes in regards to you."

"Davina!" Grandfather shook his head slightly at his wife, but she ignored him and continued. "It's time to call it what it is. Elise *has* had hopes for years, and you know very well that we'd like nothing better than to see her and Andrew settled together with little bairns. It's time now."

Andrew looked uncomfortable and didn't answer immediately. Elise Fraser was a pleasant-enough lass, and he fully

expected to enjoy this evening, but that was all. He knew, though, that his grandmother was right and that Elise did possibly hope for more, so he probably owed it to her to not lead her on. He wouldn't do anything to ruin the celebration this evening, but before he went back to New Jersey, he'd have a talk with her. He moved towards the door.

"You be safe, lad," his grandfather said. "Don't let the high spirits override your common sense."

"No, Grandfather, everything will be fine." He bid them both good evening and then left, but their eyes followed him out.

"He could have any lass he wanted," commented Grandmother with almost a touch of despair. "I don't know what it's going to take for him to settle down."

"He'll find his way, Davina," replied Grandfather, his serious face looking thoughtful. "He's a good lad and always has been. He'll work it out in the end."

"I so want him to return home, though, and it's a woman who might well be the enticement."

"But we have to accept that it's his life and his choice. He lives in America, so there's a good chance that it's a lass from there who will eventually capture his heart."

Grandmother looked resigned as she said, "I know, but I'd so like it to be otherwise."



ANDREW HAD LIVED in the United States for almost nineteen years now, ever since he was fourteen and his father had accepted a post at the United Nations headquarters as a human rights attorney. Andrew and his younger brother, Ian, had moved with their family to New York City, and as young people do, had both adapted fairly easily to their new life there. At first there'd been many huge differences, but

Andrew had embraced both the changes and the lively atmosphere of New York.

His father was the only child of his grandparents, so there were frequent trips back and forth to keep the ties with Scotland strong. Andrew and his brother also spent every summer with their grandparents, who were concerned that their grandsons not lose their Scottish roots, and the grandparents counted the time until the New York period would be finished and their son and his family would move back to Scotland permanently.

When Andrew graduated from secondary school, he knew he wanted to study architecture, and he seriously considered returning to Scotland to do so, but in the end, he stayed in New York with his family and entered Columbia. He seemed to have it all—a loving family, friends, studies he loved, and a future that looked bright, so like most young people, he wasn't prepared for the day when his life collapsed around him.

He was in a two-hour afternoon lecture class when he was called out and found two members of the Scottish U.N. delegation waiting for him. They took him to an unused room and told him as gently as possible that the small plane his parents had been on that morning had crashed, and that there were no survivors. The parents he'd loved so much were both gone, and he and his brother were now orphans.

His first thoughts had been for Ian, only sixteen, and he convinced the delegates to allow him to be the one to tell his brother. It was a terrible day that was forever etched in his memory—shock, disbelief, confusion, pain, even tears. How does a young person process the abrupt end of life as he'd always known it? The days that followed were a blur. The funeral was in Scotland, so Andrew and Ian returned there temporarily, to the security of their grandparents, heart-broken but putting up a brave front for their two grandsons.

Afterwards there were decisions to be made, and for the sake of continuity, it was decided that the school year would be finished in New York, so the boys returned and Andrew moved out of his student apartment and back into the family home. He did his best to be there for Ian, but in the end, Ian needed more support than a nineteen-year-old knew how to give, and Andrew sent his brother back to live with his grandparents. He himself found solace in New York, where the constant bustle was a distraction from the awful enormity that sometimes threatened to weigh him down.

He thought about returning to Scotland, too, but he would have lost so many of his academic credits already earned that it would have been almost like starting over, so he stayed at Columbia and threw himself into his studies with a new seriousness. Then came graduation, an internship, and finally licensing, followed closely by an excellent job offer, so he stayed a while more, and all the time his roots in America were getting deeper and deeper. He knew his grandparents wanted him to return to his real roots, but he was young and there was plenty of time.



“Do you want to sit down a while?” asked Andrew, looking at Elise. They’d been on the dance floor for the better part of an hour, and Andrew thought maybe she could use a cold drink.

“Whatever you want,” she answered, smiling agreeably, so Andrew steered her off the floor and towards a large table where several of their friends were sitting. He brought a cold ginger ale for each of them and then laughed as he watched her remove several of the ice cubes from her glass. After so many years in the States, he’d acquired the American habit of

lots of ice, and he'd forgotten and filled *her* glass with American-style ice, too.

"Sorry about that. I forget that every time, don't I?" He took the offending cubes and disposed of them for her.

"Why do people in America use so much ice?" asked Elise, a small frown on her face.

"They wonder why people here use so little. I guess it's just what you're used to."

Elise saw an opening and took it. "So are you ever going to come home again?"

Andrew didn't answer right away, but finally he said, "I don't know what I'm going to do. I've lived there for more than half my life now, so it's like a home to me, too."

"Yes, but your family is all here."

"I know," he answered seriously. "To tell you the truth, I think about it a lot. It's a hard decision to make, because if I come back here, I'll have to step back professionally. I'll have to do more training and get licensed all over again, because I'm trained as an American architect, not a Scottish one."

"Is it that different?"

Andrew laughed. "I build spaces in square feet, not square meters, and our building codes are very different."

Elise looked like there was much more she'd like to say, but just then a lively group dance started on the floor, and they went to join in, staying there until close to midnight, when couples started finding each other to wait for the bell ringing.

After many cries of "Happy New Year!" there was the obligatory kiss, and Andrew too kissed the woman he was with—gently, so as not to leave the wrong impression. Then he put his arms around her while they sang *Auld Lang Syne*.

She's a good sort, he thought to himself as they sang, and I even care for her, but just not the way I want to care about the person I marry.

A few days later Andrew took Elise to a quiet place and talked to her honestly. He explained that he cared about her but that his life was in America right now, and that she needed to move forward with her own life. He tried to be gentle, but he knew what he was saying was hurtful to her, and he was sorry. He was a stand-up kind of guy and tried not to hurt others, but he believed that letting her know the truth was kinder in the long run than stringing her along. She shed some tears, but they parted on relatively good terms, and Andrew assured her he'd always be in her corner if she needed help.



“GOOD BYE, GRANDMOTHER,” said Andrew two days later as he hugged her and kissed her cheek. “Take care of yourself. I’ll call in a few days.”

There were tears in her eyes as she hugged him back. He was the image of his father, and she missed him so when he wasn’t there. “Be careful, lad,” she said now holding onto his hand.

“Don’t worry, Grandmother.”

“Keep Scotland in your heart,” added his grandfather as they hugged.

“Always.”

And then he was gone, off to spend a couple of days with his best friend in Edinburgh before returning to New Jersey, where his other life awaited him.

He knew he had a lot of thinking to do.