

The cover features a rich purple background with a subtle, swirling floral pattern. An ornate, gold-colored border with intricate floral and scrollwork designs frames the central text.

WILD
SCOTTISH
KNIGHT

THE ENCHANTED HIGHLANDS SERIES · BOOK 1

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

◆ TRICIA O'MALLEY ◆

WILD SCOTTISH KNIGHT

THE ENCHANTED HIGHLANDS

BOOK ONE

TRICIA O'MALLEY

LOVEWRITE PUBLISHING

WILD SCOTTISH KNIGHT
THE ENCHANTED HIGHLANDS SERIES
Book One

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“She wasn’t looking for a knight, she was looking for a sword.” - Atticus

GLOSSARY OF SCOTTISH WORDS/SLANG

- “Away and shite” – go away
- Bit o’ banter – Scots love to tease each other, banter is highly cherished
- Bladdered – drunk
- Bloody – a word used to add emphasis; expletive
- Bonnie – pretty
- Brekkie – breakfast
- Burn – river, small stream
- Clarty – dirty
- Crabbit – cranky, moody
- Dodgy – shady, questionable
- Drookit – extremely wet; drenched
- Eejit – idiot
- Get the messages – running errands, going to the shops/market
- Give it laldy/laldie – do something with vigor or enthusiasm
- Goes down a treat – tastes good; successful
- Hen – woman, female
- “It’s a dreich day” – cold; damp; miserable
- Mad wi’ it – drunk
- Och – used to express many emotions, typically surprise, regret, or disbelief
- On you go then – be on your way; get on with it
- Scunner – nuisance, pain in the neck
- Shoogly – unsteady; wobbly
- Spitting chips – angry, furious
- Tatties – potatoes
- Tetchy – crabby, cranky, moody
- Tea – in Scotland, having tea is often used to refer to the dinner-

time meal

- Wee – small, little
- Wheesht (haud your wheesht) – be quiet, hush, shut up

CHAPTER ONE



SOPHIE

What was it about death that brought out the worst in people? Most of those in attendance at the celebration of life event today hadn't spoken to my uncle in years, and now I was being showered with rabid curiosity dressed up as forced condolences. Let's be honest. Uncle Arthur had been filthy rich, and everybody was here for the **READING OF THE WILL**. Yes, I heard it like that in all caps whenever someone asked me about the **READING OF THE WILL**. I barely suppressed a hysterical giggle as I envisioned a small man with a heralding trumpet, standing on the balcony and unfurling a long roll of paper, reading off the terms of **THE WILL** like Oprah during her Christmas specials. *And you get a car... and you get a boat...*

I was currently winning the bet on how many times my uncle's ex-wives would try to console me, a fact which simultaneously cheered and annoyed me. There were seven wives in total, having multiplied like Gremlins being exposed to water, before his last, and my favorite, had cured my uncle of his marrying hastily habit.

Bagpipes sounded behind me, and though I wasn't usually a nervous sort, my drink went flying. Turning, I glared at the bagpiper who had the gall to wink at me. Cheeky bastard, I thought, narrowing my eyes as he confidently strode past, parting the crowd like a hot knife through butter. Suitably impressed, because the bagpipe was the type of instrument that demanded attention, my eyes followed the man as he crossed the lawn, kilt billowing in the wind.

“Dammit, Sophie.” Wife Number Two glared at me and dabbed at her tweed jacket in sharp motions. “This is Chanel.” The only thing tighter than the woman’s severe bun was her grasp on my uncle’s alimony. Before I could apologize, Number Two strode off, snapping her finger at a caterer, her lips no doubt pursed in disapproval. Only my uncle would plan and cater his own funeral. I grabbed another glass of champagne from the tray of a passing server.

Arthur MacKnight of Knight’s Protective Services, leader in home and commercial security systems worldwide, did not leave anything to chance. His attention to detail, pragmatic attitude, and strong code of ethics had rocketed his company to the top of the list. On the personal side? Arthur had been a known eccentric, disgustingly wealthy, and one of my favorite people. With a ten-figure company on the line, I guess I couldn’t blame people for wanting to know the contents of THE WILL. But not me. I didn’t care about the money. I just wanted my uncle back.

“Prissy old scarecrow,” Lottie MacKnight whispered in my ear. As the proud owner of the title of Wife Number Seven, Lottie had withstood the test of time and had made Arthur very happy in his later years. She was creative, quirky, and the most down to earth of all the wives, and I had bonded with her instantly over our shared hatred of fancy restaurants. I still remembered giggling over a plate that had been delivered with much finesse but carried little more than a sliver of carrot with a puff of foam. Arthur had looked on, amusement dancing in his eyes, as his new wife and only niece had tried to maintain their composure in front of the stuffy maître d’.

When I was twelve, I had come home one day to the contents of my bedroom being placed in boxes by our very apologetic housekeeper. Much to my horror, my parents had informed me—via a note on the kitchen counter, mind you—that I was leaving for boarding school that same evening. Somehow, Lottie had caught wind of it and rescued me, bringing me back home to live with her and Arthur. I’d happily settled into a life of contradictions—business lessons at breakfast, fencing lessons at lunch, and magick studies after dinner. Well, not magick per se, but Arthur had nourished an insatiable love for myths, legends, and the unexplainable.

Once a year, I dutifully endured a phone call with my parents from whatever far-flung destination they were visiting. As an afterthought, I would occasionally receive inappropriate birthday gifts that would leave me blinking in confusion. A few we kept for the sheer madness of it all, like the gold-plated two-foot penguin statue. Lottie had promptly named it Mooshy, set him in the front hall, and put little hats or bows on him,

depending on the occasion. Because of them, my tender teenage years had gone from stilted and awkward to vibrant and fulfilled, and I would forever be grateful.

Arthur's loss numbed me, like someone had cut out the part of me where my feelings were supposed to reside, and now I was just shambling about making awkward small talk with people who were suddenly very interested in speaking with me. Even the Old Wives Club, as Lottie and I referred to the other six wives, had made weak attempts at mothering me. Hence the bet I'd made with Lottie. Upon arrival at the funeral, the wives had besieged me, like a murder of crows dressed in couture, angry in the way of perpetually hungry people. Lottie, being Lottie, had swooped forward in her colorful caftan and flower fascinator, rescuing me from the wives by cheerfully suggesting they look for the attorney who carried THE WILL. The Old Wives Club had pivoted as one, like a squadron of fighter planes, and narrowed in on the beleaguered attorney with ruthless efficiency.

The funeral was being held on the back lawn of Arthur's estate in California, his castle towering over the proceedings. Yes, *castle*. Arthur had built his house to remind him of the castles in Scotland, much to the chagrin of the neighborhood. His neighbors, their houses all sleek lines and modern angles, had hated Arthur's castle. I *loved* it. What was the point of earning all that money if you couldn't have fun with it? Arthur had nourished a deep affection for his Scottish roots, often traveling there several times a year, and had spent many a night trying to convince me to enjoy what he claimed were the finest of Scottish whiskies. As far as I was concerned, if that was the best Scotland could do, then I was not impressed.

It was one of those perpetually cheerful California days, and the sun threatened to burn my fair skin. Arthur had always joked that he could get a sunburn walking to the mailbox and back. He wasn't far off. I'd already wished I had brought a hat with me. Instead, I slid my bargain-bin sunglasses on my nose to dull the light. Designer sunglasses were a no-go for me. At the rate I sat on my sunglasses and broke them, it was far more economical for me to grab some from the rack on the way out of the gas station.

"Nice glasses. Dior?" Wife Number Three drifted up, her knuckles tight on the martini glass she held.

"No, um, BP." I nodded. I pronounced it as Bay-Pay, skewing the name of the gas station.

"Hmm, I haven't heard of them. I'll be sure to look for their show this

spring in Paris. Darlings!” Number Three fluttered her fingers at a fancy couple and left to air-kiss her way into an invitation to a yacht party.

“Break another pair of sunglasses?” Lottie asked, biting into a cube of cheese. There was cheese? I looked around for the server who carried that coveted tray and grinned.

“Third this week.”

“That’s a lot for you.” Lottie turned to me, her eyes searching my face. “You okay, sweetie? This is a tough time for us. I loved Arthur, and I’ll miss him like crazy, but it’s different for you. He was like...”

“My father,” I whispered, spying my own parents across the lawn, who had arrived over an hour ago and still hadn’t bothered to greet their only daughter. Their indifference to my existence still shouldn’t sting...yet. Here we were. I tried to frame it in my head like they were just people who I used to room with back in the day.

“And as your mother”—Lottie waved a jewel-encrusted hand at my parents—“I don’t care that those two idiots are here. *I’m* claiming Mama rights. So as your stand-in mother, I want to make sure you’ll be able to grieve properly. I’m here for you, you know.”

“I know, I know.” I pressed a kiss to Lottie’s cheek, catching the faint scent of soap and turpentine. Lottie must have been painting her moods again. She was a world-renowned painter in her own right and worked through her emotions on her canvasses. All of Arthur’s and my spreadsheets and business talk had made her eyes glaze over with boredom. “I don’t really know yet how to think or feel. I’m numb, if I’m being honest.”

“Numb is just fine. As Pink Floyd would attest to...it’s a comfortable place to be. Just live in that space for a little bit, and we’ll handle what comes. What about Chad? Or is it Chet?” Lottie affected a confused expression, though I knew very well she knew my boyfriend’s name.

My boyfriend, Chad, was good-looking in a polished private school kind of way, and at first, I’d just been drawn to someone who’d paid careful attention to me. Now, as I watched him schmooze my parents—*not that he knew they were my parents*—I felt an odd sort of detachment from him. Perhaps that was grief numbing my feelings. Or maybe I liked the idea of a Chad more than an actual Chad himself.

“He’s been very supportive,” I told Lottie. Which was true. Chad had doted on me constantly since Arthur had died, but so had all my new besties who had crawled out of the woodwork upon the news of Arthur’s death. Lottie patted my arm and turned as the celebrant began speaking.

The words flowed over me, intertwining and blurring together, as my

own memories of Arthur flashed through my mind. Our heated fencing battles—a sport Arthur had insisted I learn—his quirky obsession with all things Scottish, his willingness to always listen to any new ideas I had for the company, and the way he'd always called me his wee lassie. No, I wasn't ready to say goodbye.

“Oh, shit.” Lottie gripped my arm, her fingers digging into the soft flesh, and I pulled myself from my thoughts to see what had distracted Lottie.

The bagpiper had returned to the back of the crowd, having circled the lawn, and now stood waiting for the celebrant's signal. Behind him, Arthur's five Scottish Terriers tumbled about.

“Did you let the dogs out?” I whispered, horror filling me. Arthur's Scotty dogs, while decidedly adorable, were quite simply put—terrors.

“No, I didn't. But the lawyer had asked where they were...” Understanding dawned, and we turned to each other.

“Arthur,” I said, shaking my head.

“That *crazy* man. God, I loved him.” Lottie brushed at a tear as the wail of bagpipes began again, and the kilted man once more strode forward.

“*Amazing Grace.*” For one haunting moment, the music transported me to another time where I could just imagine a Scottish warrior crossing the land in search of his love. Romantic thoughts which had no place here, I reminded myself, fixated on the bagpiper. The dogs bounced after the man like he was a Scottish Pied Piper, and only then did I see that one of them carried a large stuffed Highland cow. *Coo*, I automatically corrected myself. A heiland coo had been one of Arthur's favorite things to photograph on his travels to Scotland, and he'd even talked of developing a Coo-finder app so that the tourists could more easily get their own photographs.

“You don't think...” A thought occurred to me, but it was so ridiculous I couldn't bring myself to say it.

“Nothing that man did surprised me.” Lottie chuckled. We watched with horrified fascination as the dogs reached the front of the funeral gathering. The Old Wives Club shifted in unison, likely due to the possibility of getting dog hair on their Chanel, and I couldn't look away from the impending doom. It was like watching a couple fight in public—I knew it was bad to eavesdrop, but I always wanted to listen and pick whose side I was on. Spoiler alert. I usually sided with the woman.

“Tavish and Bruce always fight over toys,” I hissed as two of the dogs separated themselves from the pack, their ears flattening.

“Arthur knows...*knew* that,” Lottie said, her hand still gripping my arm. I winced as it tightened. A gasp escaped me when the dogs leapt at each other. Houston, we have a problem.

A flurry of barking exploded as the last notes of “*Amazing Grace*” faded into the sun, and the bagpiper strolled away seemingly unconcerned with the chaos he left in his wake. Maybe he was used to it, for the Scots *could* be unruly at times, and this was just another day’s work for him. I grimaced as Tavish and Bruce got ahold of the coo, each gripping a leg, and pulled with all their might. The celebrant, uncertain what to do, walked forward and made shooing gestures with his hands.

The dogs ignored him, turning in a manic circle, whipping their heads back and forth as they enjoyed a fabulous game of tug. Growls and playful barks carried over the stunned silence of the gathering, with everyone at a loss of how to proceed.

With one giant rip, Bruce won the toy from Tavish and streaked through the horrified crowd. A fine white powder exploded from the coo, coating the Old Wives Club and spraying the front line.

“His ashes,” I breathed. My heart skipped a beat.

“Indeed,” Lottie murmured.

Bruce broke from the crowd and tore across the lawn toward the cliffs, the rest of the dogs in hot pursuit, a doggy version of Braveheart. Tavish threw his head back and howled, and I was certain I could just make out the cry for “freeeedom” on the wind.

The wind that now carried a cloud of ashes back to the funeral gathering.

Pandemonium broke out as the crowd raced for the castle, trying to beat the ash cloud, while Lottie and I stood upwind to observe the chaos from afar. A muffled snort had me turning my head.

“You can’t possibly be...” I trailed off as Lottie pressed her lips together in vain, another snort escaping. To my deep surprise, the numb space inside me unlocked long enough for amusement to trickle in. In moments, we were bent at the waist, howling with laughter, while the Old Wives Club shot us death glares from across the lawn.

“Oh.” Lottie straightened and wiped tears from her eyes. “Arthur would’ve loved that.”

I wrapped an arm around Lottie and watched Wife Number Three vomit into a bush.

“It’s almost like he planned it.” As soon as I said the words, I *knew* he had. Raising my champagne glass to the sky in acknowledgment, I felt the first bands of grief unknot inside me. He’d wanted us to laugh, as his last

parting gift, to remember that in the face of it all...the ridiculous was worth celebrating.

CHAPTER TWO



LACHLAN

“O ch, now, it’s a dreich day,” I grumbled, shaking my coat off as I came in through the side entrance of our castle. Well, I used the term “our” loosely. Technically, ownership of the castle had recently changed hands from the collective trust of the Village of Loren Brae and had passed over to private ownership. Which meant I now had a new boss that I’d yet to meet. The thought rankled, and I’d spent many a night cursing the stupid American who’d purchased the property months ago and hadn’t bothered to once step foot in it. For years now, our people had looked at me as the unofficial laird of Loren Brae, and now our village suffered.

MacAlpine Castle, situated on the bonnie banks of Loch Mirren, reminded me of a dowager countess, stately and majestic, yet showing her years if you looked closely. With four wings, an abundance of historical features, and an area open to the public for tours, MacAlpine Castle was one of the main tourist attractions for Loren Brae. It was also my home, which was why I’d somehow stepped into the role of village patriarch. On weekends, I’d don my kilt and greet tourists, posing for photos and answering questions, while Hilda and Archie, the castle keepers, managed everything else.

The three of us lived in two wings of the castle that had been converted to residential apartments several decades back, and it suited us just fine. Even if the tours had virtually dried up these days. Just the bad weather, I assured myself, running a hand over my hair to shake off any water droplets. Summer would bring more visitors—it always did. An excited

yip greeted me, the only response to my grumbling, and I bent over to greet Sir Buster Campbell, one very skittish, loving, and cantankerous chihuahua.

Was it odd that I had a dog that was no longer than the span of both my palms fitted together? Yes. Did Hilda insist on putting him in a tweed vest and kilt and parade him about for the visitors? Also yes. Had he grown his own following on social media through the years, and did I sometimes wonder if people were more excited to visit the castle or meet Buster? Yes, and yes.

I bent to pet Buster, and he bared his teeth at me, emitting a low growl that had me shaking my head.

“All right, you crabbit beast. On you go then. I’ll feed you and then maybe you’ll be taking the time of day to have a wee cuddle with me.” I couldn’t blame Sir Buster. Much like myself, I often was cranky when I was hungry. I noted the time on the grandfather clock in the expansive hallway. It seemed I was fifteen minutes late for Sir Buster’s dinner, and he expressed his displeasure as he trotted through the hallway toward our shared kitchen and lounge. My own private apartment consisted of a bedroom, en suite, my study, and a small kitchenette if I wasn’t feeling like socializing with my meals. Most nights, I took my dinner downstairs and relaxed by the fire in the main lounge.

“You’re late for tea,” Hilda said, Sir Buster’s annoyed grumblings alerting her to my arrival. A round woman with lively bright blue eyes and hair just edging to silver, Hilda acted as my *de facto* mum. Having lost my own mother at the tender age of eleven, and my father disappearing into his work shortly thereafter, Hilda had assumed care of me as part of her duties as castle keeper. Since I resided in said castle, I’d fallen under Hilda’s domain, and it was only natural that she’d taken to mothering me. While I may be the unofficial laird of the town, Hilda was the queen of the castle and nobody, including Sir Buster, forgot it. He cut off his growls upon seeing her, and I swear that dog softened his eyes and gave Hilda a smile, flirting with her.

“Oh, sure. You were spitting chips moments ago and now you’re having a flirt, are you then?” I whispered to Sir Buster, who whipped his head around and bared his teeth at me. No growl, *of course*, as he knew Hilda would chastise him. Smart dog, that one.

“Don’t antagonize Sir Buster. He’s having a bad day.” Hilda pressed a kiss to my cheek before bustling back to the kitchen. Could dogs even have bad days? What could possibly have happened that would put a dog in a mood?

“Is that right? Do tell,” I said, my curiosity piqued. I crossed to the cabinet by the crackling fire, nodding to Archie, who snapped his newspaper pages in response, and poured myself a wee dram of Edradour.

“Well, now, I can’t be embarrassing the wee one, can I now?” Hilda shot me a chiding look, and I glanced back at where Sir Buster stared at her in adoration.

“This is a dog that has no shame,” I said, crossing to the table where Hilda had placed bowls of creamy potato leek soup and crusty bread. “Can I help with anything?”

“Och, no, it’s a bit of soup to warm your bones on a blustery night. And chicken for you, Sir Buster. Yes, sir, nothing but the best for my baby,” Hilda cooed, bustling through the door into the kitchen and returning promptly with a small dish for the dog. So the dog ate chicken and I got tatties? Roundly put in my place, I pulled out my chair and sat. Archie folded his paper and rose. A limber man with a shock of silver hair, glinting brown eyes, and a terse way with words, Archie preferred to spend his time among the gardens where social skills were not required. Nevertheless, when he did speak, he often made a fair point.

“He had a disagreement with a hedgehog this morning before the rain came on. Seemed the hedgie had the right of it, and Sir Buster wasn’t pleased,” Archie said as he joined the table.

“Took on more than you can handle, did ya, wee man?” I laughed when Sir Buster paused from his dinner to glare at me.

“That’s enough out of the two of you,” Hilda said, sitting down with her glass of wine. “We’ve got bigger things to worry about than Sir Buster’s battles.”

“What now?” I took another sip of my whisky, the liquid trailing heat to my stomach, and braced myself for more bad news. We’d had a string of it of late, with more businesses closing, tourism drying up, and the people of the village talking of ancient curses. I’d tried my best to assure the town that it was just an economic slump, but even I was beginning to have a hard time explaining a few odd occurrences lately.

“The last of the Order has died,” Archie said, and I brought my glass to the table with a resounding thump.

“We’ve been over this...” I began, frustration rankling in my gut.

“Aye, we have, yet you refuse to listen. What’s it going to take, boyo? A Kelpie hurting one of your own before you believe?” Archie slapped his hand on the table. This, from Archie, was akin to him skewering me with one of the ancient swords that hung in our weapons room.

“Lachlan,” Hilda said, her tone serious. “The Order of Caledonia is

real. You can bury your head in the sand all you want, but it won't make it go away. The last of the Order has died, and the Clach na Fìrinn lies unprotected. The last line of defense has been triggered. The village is no longer safe unless we restore the Order."

"The Stone of Truth..." I shook my head and cursed, softly though so Hilda couldn't quite make out the words, and crossed my arms over my chest. "Och, that's nothing but a myth, Hilda."

"It's not," Archie said, sweeping his spoon into his bowl of soup. It was the angriest I'd seen him in ages. "And your stubbornness will have good people getting hurt."

At that, I paused. Archie was rarely adamant about something that didn't truly matter unless it was fly fishing, and his words stung.

"I understand this is sensitive for you, what with the way you lost your mum, but..." Hilda winced as I burst out of my seat and strode to the bar to pour another dram of whisky. There, I stood, memories of my mum's death swirling around me as I stared at the dancing flames.

She drowned, Lachlan.

It wasn't an accident.

The Kelpies, Lachlan.

She was too close to the island.

As a child, I hadn't wanted to hear about the myths and legends that had supposedly stolen my mum from me. No, I had wanted a solid answer that I could make sense of. She'd been swimming, as she did most days of the year in a wetsuit to keep her warm, when she'd developed a cramp and drowned. It was a human, and normal, way to die. That was it. That was all it had to be. It was the truth I'd clung to for all these years and had refused to let anyone tell me differently. If it wasn't the truth, then I'd have to avenge her death against mythological water horses and, well, the thought of that was just crazy enough to make me take another long sip of my whisky.

"I'll listen," I finally said, as much to my surprise as theirs. My hand tightened on my glass, and I stayed where I was, staring into the fire. How many times through the years had another man stared into this same fireplace while contemplating difficult decisions?

"We need to restore the Order if we want to keep the stone protected. Per legend, it starts with the knight. I finally found the last Knight of the Order. Arthur MacKnight is his name. He, well, he was receptive at the time. Enthused, even. I'd hoped he could be the start of a new Order of Caledonia, but he's just passed this week," Hilda explained.

"MacKnight?" I stared at her. MacKnight was the surname of the new