



WILD
SCOTTISH
LOVE

THE ENCHANTED HIGHLANDS SERIES · BOOK 2

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

♦ TRICIA O'MALLEY ♦

WILD SCOTTISH LOVE
THE ENCHANTED HIGHLANDS
BOOK TWO

TRICIA O'MALLEY

LOVEWRITE PUBLISHING

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“The right ingredients can create a legend.”

– Coco Chanel

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

CHAPTER ONE



L_{IA}

“Grasshoppers?”

An alarm sounded in my head as Damien, the new owner of Suzette’s, a fine-dining restaurant tucked away in Boston’s cozy North End, dropped a box on my spotless prep table. As head chef, *I* should have been the one ordering the ingredients for the menu, not Damien.

At least that was the way things had been when Suzette had been alive. Now I was shouldered with dealing with her sleaze of a son who couldn’t leave well enough alone. Suzette’s was one of the hottest restaurants in Boston, thanks to my inventive, themed surprise menus, and Damien had taken his new role as an opportunity to strut his authority around the restaurant. Every night, like cock of the walk, he’d stroll through the dining room and publicly find fault with something, often reducing one of the servers to tears. We’d all been on edge for months now, and I knew that several of the staff were actively looking for other jobs.

It was hard enough to grieve the loss of Suzette, a kind woman who had shared my dream of building a restaurant that was both cozy and innovative, without having to also navigate a new boss who never bothered to learn anything about the service industry. Even worse? I woke up each night, drenched in sweat, panic gripping me that the one goal I’d devoted my entire life to was slipping from my grasp.

“Yeah, it’s all the rage,” Damien said, picking up my custom chef’s knife. The knife had been a gift from Suzette when Boston Magazine had run a feature article labeling me as the hot up-and-coming chef in Boston’s elite culinary scene, and it had been designed to perfectly balance in my palm. I cared for that knife like it was my baby, and seeing Damien’s

greasy fingers on it made my lip curl in disgust. The bright side? He likely had no clue how sharp it was, so there was hope he'd maim himself shortly and I'd be left to get on with my menu for the night.

"Damien...be careful..." I trailed off as he slit the tape at the top of the box, narrowly missing the tip of his finger, and I took a deep breath in an effort to control my temper. He needed to get out of my kitchen, *now*, and take his insects with him.

"I ordered these specially from Brazil. Overnighted them. They're incredibly expensive, so you'll need to make them a Chef's Special. I hear they're salty, like potato chips," Damien said, pausing to wipe the back of the hand holding the knife against his perpetually sweaty forehead. My heart skipped a beat as the tip of my knife just missed his eyes, because while I did enjoy a good maiming, even I would turn squeamish if he popped his eyeball out.

What happened next was like when a sports team wins a big championship, and the celebratory cannons explode confetti across the arena—except replace confetti with grasshoppers.

Live grasshoppers.

While typically I have good reflexes—an important trait in any kitchen—my brain quite simply could not process the catastrophe I was witnessing. Hundreds, no, *thousands*, of grasshoppers pinged around the kitchen, bounced off walls, and landed on any available surface.

"They were supposed to be *dried*, not alive," Damien shrieked, waving his hands in the air, and I narrowly dodged the knife he threw when a grasshopper landed in his open mouth. My breath caught as the knife clattered to the floor while Damien gagged on the grasshopper.

"You *idiot!* You almost killed me." I was also shrieking at this point, but not from fear. Oh no, the last few weeks of buried rage surfaced, as though someone had dropped a match on spilled gasoline, and now I let the inferno engulf me. Crouching, I snatched my knife off the floor and returned it to its case, before slamming the lid closed on the grasshopper box. Not like there were all that many insects still in the box. It was hard to put a bomb back together after it detonated, wasn't it?

"Idiot? You can't talk to me like that. Don't forget who signs your paychecks, doll," Damien had the gall to say to me with a grasshopper perched on his head.

"Look at what you've done," I seethed, holding my hands out to protect my face from grasshoppers that bounced around the room like someone had tossed a bucket of superballs into the kitchen. "Everything has gone to shit since Suzette died. You keep coming in here and screwing

things up. You're ruining a good thing, Damien, and I for one, am not interested in sticking around to watch you destroy Suzette's legacy. You should be ashamed of yourself. Your poor mother would be devastated at what you're turning her dream into."

"My mother didn't know what was cool. This place is old and boring. At least I'm here to make it fresh." Damien smashed his hand onto the prep table, squashing a few grasshoppers, as I gaped at him in surprise.

"This? *This* is your idea of fresh?" I swept my arms out and ducked as several grasshoppers flew past. Technically speaking, he wasn't wrong. When the food was still moving, it was about as fresh as it could be. "It's stupid is what it is. And I'm not sticking around to clean up your mess."

I made to move past him, taking my knife with me, and he shouldered his way into the hallway to block me.

"If you leave, you're fired, Lia."

"That's kind of the point, isn't it?" I needed to get out of this insectarium immediately. There weren't enough showers I could take to rid me of the creepy-crawly feeling of grasshoppers in my hair. My pulse kicked up when Damien leaned close, his breath heavy with stale cigar.

"You think you can make a name for yourself without me? I'll blackball you in this town faster than you turn men off with your ginger hair and bad attitude."

"Excuse me?" I couldn't think straight, not between the rage that twisted my gut into knots and the sizeable number of insects that were currently doing their best to vacate the kitchen through any means possible.

"Screw it. I never liked this restaurant anyway." Damien crossed his arms over his chest and huffed out a breath. "I think I'll make it a club. Lots of young, hot women in here dancing each night. Yeah, it's gonna be slick as hell."

I gaped at him, honestly at a loss for words, as I thought about the beautiful restaurant that I'd devoted years of my life to.

"I *hate* you. You're gross, and it makes me sick what you're doing to this place," I said, not caring if I burned any bridges. I didn't want to work with someone like Damien anyway. He was as dishonorable as the day was long, and I'd rather start my own gig than take orders from a sleaze like him.

"Maybe, but I don't care what you think, doll." Damien winked at me. My lip curled in disgust. Being called "doll" was a pet peeve of mine. "Gingers aren't my type anyway. I like them rail-thin with the big titties."

He was slime. Repulsive slime, and I...I had to go. Right now. Before

I did something stupid like burn the restaurant down so I didn't have to watch him ruin it. At this point, that might be the best option anyway what with the grasshoppers taking up residence.

"Eat shit, Damien. I quit." I went to move past him, and Damien put his arms out, stopping me in my tracks.

"It's Saturday night. We've got a packed house." Damien didn't budge.

"Get out of my way," I said, stepping forward. "If you think that I'll stay and clean this up, you're out of your damn mind."

"You *will* stay. And you *will* cook. Because that's your job." As soon as Damien put his hands on my shoulders and shoved me backward, I did what I'd been dying to do for years now. I brought my knee up solidly between his legs just like my brothers had taught me. With a pained grunt, Damien crumpled to the floor, a soft keening noise coming from his lips, like a balloon letting out air.

"Big tree falls hard," I mumbled.

"Lia! What's going on?" Savannah, the head bartender, came upstairs with a case of beer in her arms, which she immediately dropped upon seeing the grasshoppers. The smash of glass was beyond satisfying as I stepped neatly over Damien.

"Damien's turning the place into a club. Oh, and he wants to feed people grasshoppers." Other servers were walking in the door for their shift, and at my words, they scattered back outside. "I'm leaving."

"I'm with you. I knew this place would go to hell with him in charge," Savannah said, reaching behind the bar to grab her purse. As one, the waitstaff and I pivoted and left Damien, curled on the floor and covered in grasshoppers, screaming after us.

"Screw that guy. Want to go get drunk?" Savannah asked, looking around North End. "I think this is the first Saturday night I've had free in ages."

"Yes, yes, I do." I mean, I didn't, not really. I wanted to go home and shower for weeks on end. But I'd just quit the single most important thing that I'd done in my life, and alcohol was needed.

Savannah hooked my arm, pulling me down the street, and before I knew it, we were ensconced in a proper Boston dive bar, yelling at the Sox on the brightly lit screens, and eating delicious fried food. By the time I staggered into my building, I was well and truly numbed from the shock of quitting my job.

There, I plopped down onto my tiny loveseat in my tiny utilitarian apartment and looked around at my bare walls. There was no cat to greet

me, no houseplant to water, only a pile of unfolded laundry on the small breakfast bar. My life, quite literally, had been at the restaurant. Suzette's. My home. My baby. My everything. But it had never really been mine, had it? I'd been running my whole life, away from the little girl who wore hand-me-downs, and now fear lodged low in my stomach as the debt I'd accrued from attending culinary school loomed in my mind.

My phone pinged with a text message.

Carlo: What's up with the picture of you and Savannah at the bar tonight and her saying you guys quit?

I rolled my eyes at the text from my brother Carlo. He was the most protective of my brothers and knew how seriously I took my job.

Me: I wish she wouldn't have posted that until I was ready to share. But yes, I quit. Or Damien let me go. Either way, I'm done. He wants to feed people grasshoppers and turn the restaurant into a club.

Carlo: Grasshoppers? What the hell? I hate him. I've always hated him. Stupid move on his part. Might as well sell the restaurant. He'll make more money than trying to run it himself.

Me: He's ruined everything.

Carlo: Come home. Ma will cook Sunday dinner for you. You haven't been home in months.

Me: I need to sleep. And take a moment to process this. Will call you tomorrow.

Carlo: You'd better be at dinner or I'm telling Ma you got fired.

Me: Dick move.

Carlo: Love you. See you tomorrow.

I sent him a photo of me flipping him off and then sighed and dropped back onto the cushions. I loved my family, loud and overbearing though they were. With four brothers, an Italian mother, and a Scottish father, my childhood had been chaotic, even on a good day. And there had been more good days than bad, even though we'd been dirt poor, and my parents had barely been able to make ends meet. However, what I'd lacked for in material goods had been more than made up for in love. We were a tightly connected bunch, sometimes too tightly, judging from my brother's midnight text message.

I couldn't move back home.

Leaving my small town to live in Boston had been an opportunity to make something of myself. Suzette had taken a chance on me, a naive and tender-hearted girl fresh from high school, and she'd been pivotal in providing me with an environment in which to flourish. I never, ever, asked anyone for help, and I'd been determined to prove myself to Suzette.

Through several long years of culinary school, and late nights at the restaurant, I'd worked my way up from dishwasher to head chef at Suzette's. When the article in Boston Magazine had come out, my mother had spent almost her entire paycheck on buying multiple copies to give to everyone she knew. I'd *had* every intention of framing that article myself. My blank walls now mocked me.

Blinking down at my phone, I noticed my voicemail indicator. I hadn't heard the ring in the loud bar, and now I stared at the UK number with a shiver of anticipation. *That was odd.* Punching in my code, I pulled up my voicemail.

"Hi, Lia, my name is Sophie, and I'm calling from MacAlpine Castle in Scotland. We've heard talk of your legendary prowess in the kitchen and are hoping to lure you to Scotland to work for us in our restaurant. What do you say? Fancy a chef's job in an honest-to-goodness castle? You'll have free rein with the menu, of course. Please let us know. It's quite urgent, but we'll move on to the next name on our list if you're not interested. You're our top choice, naturally." She rattled off her contact information. Surprise had me dropping my phone, and I stood up to pace my small living room. Seven steps forward. Seven steps back.

Scotland.

The thought alone made me smile. *Oh, what incredible timing.* It wasn't that unusual for other restaurants to try and pry me away from Suzette's, but I'd never had an offer from someplace as far away as Scotland. Maybe...well, just maybe. Nerves skittered through my stomach. Glancing around at my empty apartment once more, I took a deep breath and picked up my phone.

CHAPTER TWO



L_{IA}

Carlo picked me up from the train station, a smirk on his face, and I rolled my eyes as I got into his aging pickup truck. Paint splattered his jeans, though his sweatshirt was clean, which meant he'd changed before he'd come to get me.

"I only came because I didn't want to cook today," I said, poking him in the ribs as he started the truck. "Not because I wanted to see your raggedy self."

"Raggedy? This is my best sweatshirt," Carlo protested, honking at the car in front of us who dared to wait until the light turned fully green before moving forward. "*Come on...learn how to drive.*"

The driver ahead of us offered a one-fingered salute that Carlo cheerfully returned. Driving in Boston was not for the faint of heart, and most people fell into two camps—they either enthusiastically strode into battle each day, or like me, they defaulted completely out of the game and took the train everywhere. Plus, it wasn't like I could afford to keep a car in Boston, not with the outrageous parking fees. The city was easy enough to get around in, and the train was there when the weather became too bothersome for walking. In the winter, when the nor'easters would blow through, people would often spend an entire day shoveling out their parking spots. Once a spot was cleared, the driver would put a chair in the spot to claim it as their own, and it was considered sacrilege to steal someone else's cleared parking spot. Of course, things didn't often go that way, and I'd spent many an afternoon peeking through my window as my neighbors got into arguments in the snow. I didn't get a lot of time off, and when I did, it wasn't going to be spent arguing with strangers over parking.

Except that had all changed, hadn't it?

I still was a touch nauseous over my decision to quit Suzette's, though the email and subsequent telephone call I'd had with this Sophie woman in Scotland had eased some of the queasiness regarding my abrupt decision to leave my job. Now, thoughts of castles and Scottish cuisine whirled through my head, and I had trouble focusing as my brother wound us through the streets of Medford toward our childhood home.

"You're gonna tell them, right?" Carlo asked, as he cut a car off to snag a parking spot in front of my parents' house. A triple-decker-style house, they had rented the first-floor unit for as long as I could remember, though I was told we'd moved into the apartment when I was two. With two bedrooms, one bathroom, and a generous living area, I'd grown up without the concept of personal space. When I'd become a teenager, I'd abdicated from the room I'd shared with my brothers and had claimed a storage closet as my own. Although it had taken up much-needed storage space, my mother had recognized the need for me to have some personal space away from my rough-and-tumble siblings, and together, we'd managed to fit a narrow mattress into the space. I'd hung a pretty shade I'd found at a rummage sale over the lightbulb and had used the upper shelves that lined the walls for my meager belongings and a few knickknacks. It was cozy, albeit at times suffocating, but having my own door to close had meant everything to me.

As the second oldest of five children to two very busy parents, I'd been tasked with raising the rest of my siblings when my parents weren't around to discipline us. Now, I found it funny how my brothers tried to muscle their way into my life and offer me their opinions on everything from whom I should date to how I should spend my money. Which was rarely, mind you, as evidenced by my empty apartment and even more empty love life.

"Like I can keep anything a secret in this family," I said as I got out of the truck and took a deep breath. I hated knowing that I was about to break my mother's heart. She'd never been so happy as when I'd become head chef, following her own love of cooking, and now I had to tell her that I'd quit. Carlo came around the truck and slung his arm over my shoulders, pulling me close.

"Want me to run interference?"

"Oh sure, now you want to be the nice guy. After you threatened to tell her I was fired yesterday?" I glared up at him. I'd inherited my mother's temper—which ran hot and burned out fast—while my dad often quietly absorbed difficult news with an air of disapproval. I couldn't say

what was more difficult to handle when breaking bad news, but either way, I wasn't looking forward to this dinner.

"Ma! Lia's here." Carlo pushed the door open. "And she's got big news."

"Wow, really?" I glared at my brother as my mother came bustling out of the kitchen, a dish cloth in her hands, her brown hair springing out in ringlets around her head.

"Mia cara. Mi sei mancata." My mother, Giana Maria Elenora Blackwood, hugged me with a worried look hovering in her pretty brown eyes. I'd also inherited her brown eyes and olive skin, which contrasted with the ginger hair my father had passed down to the lot of us. To this day, my mother still shook her head at her five red-haired children, as though she couldn't believe we'd come from her blood.

"I've missed you too." I hugged my mother, a shorter and rounder woman than me, and breathed in the scent of basil and garlic. Staples in our kitchen, I'd learned to cook the most basic of Italian food at my mother's hip before my head even reached the countertop. There, she'd also taught me to add her favorite ingredient—love. How many times had I heard her? "*Cecilia Giana, when you can't determine what's missing in a recipe, look for love, because love—being in love, loving another—is always the perfect ingredient.*"

"Nerd alert!"

That was all the warning I had before my brother Luca tackled me from behind. We hit the ground in a tangle of limbs, and I twisted, wrapping my arm around his neck, and squeezing until he gasped for air.

"Ma! Lia's hurting me!" Luca cried.

"Cecilia Giana Blackwood, let go of your brother this instant."

I relaxed the grip on my youngest brother's neck, rolling my eyes at his smug grin. He'd always been the baby of the family and still lived with my parents today. When he stood, my mother swatted him on the side of his head, and he ducked.

"What's that for?"

"That's no way to treat a lady, Luca. It's no wonder you're still single. I could have grandbabies, couldn't I? But nothing from *you*." My mother subsided into muttering in Italian as she strode back to the kitchen to stir the sauce that simmered in her favorite pot on the stove.

"You hear that, Lia? Time to start popping them out," my second youngest brother, Gio, teased from where he played video games on the couch with Enzo. The five of us all had Italian names, as my mother still couldn't quite get over the fact that she'd fallen in love with a Scotsman.

Her argument to this day was that since we carried my father's surname, it had been her right to pick the rest of our names. My father had been wise enough to not argue the point. Not that he ever argued much with my mother, instead almost always bowing quietly to her wishes. To this day, I'd never seen a man so besotted with his wife. Their love was a towering example to live up to in my own relationships. Who was I kidding? My dating life was as barren as my *Womb of Disappointment* as Enzo had lovingly nicknamed my uterus.

"The only thing I'm going to pop is my fist into your nose if you don't shut up." I lifted my fist in warning, though I kept my voice low. The fear of a rebuke from my mother was real. This was the first time we'd all been together in ages, and I knew she'd be furious if we bickered too much.

"Lia, plates." At my mother's call from the kitchen, I brandished my fist once more at my brothers and went to help set the kitchen table that dominated a large amount of the living space in the apartment. It was another point that my mother had steadfastly refused to acquiesce. We could live with a smaller couch, but the kitchen table was where family gathered. Over the years, the wooden table had grown worn with use, and the accompanying chairs had been re-covered more than once. The table itself had taken on its own place in our family, as that is where we met to share news, have difficult conversations, or even just to sit in companionable silence while my father read the paper.

"Lia, your mother tells me you have news?" my father said after he'd eaten a good portion of his fettucine al pomodoro and could relax under the watchful eye of my mother who was convinced we were always just minutes away from starvation. My father, Colin Blackwood, was a broad-shouldered man with kind eyes and an easygoing disposition. His personality was the perfect foil for my mother's heated temper and passionate nature.

My stomach twisted, and I put my fork down, nerves making me reach for my glass of wine. After a healthy sip, I looked up at the silence that had fallen around the table. In a family of seven people, silence was rare.

"I quit my job...and I might be moving to Scotland." I rushed out the last bit in one long breath, afraid that if I didn't say it now, then I'd never work up the courage to say it at all. Let alone actually do it, that is. Moving to Boston was one thing, but to Scotland? I waited, holding my breath, as my family exploded in varying degrees of reactions.

"Mio dio." My mother crossed herself.

“You quit?” Luca looked excited. “Badass.” He ducked when my mother reached out to swat his head for cursing.

“Damien’s a douchebag. You did the right thing,” Carlo said, knowing he was far enough away from my mother’s reach.

“You knew about this?” Enzo turned to Carlo.

“Just last night. Her friend Savannah posted about it.”

“Is Savannah the one...” Gio cocked his head at Carlo and made kissy noises with his mouth.

“You’ve got a thing for Savannah?” I zeroed in on Carlo, distracted for a moment. This was news to me.

“Why do you think he follows her on Instagram?” Enzo laughed, dodging as Carlo tried to punch him in the shoulder.

“Boys! Enough.” Dad turned to me. “Pumpkin. Tell us what happened.”

And so I did. By the time I’d finished, we were all gasping for breath, we were laughing so hard, and I realized just how much I would miss my family if I went to Scotland. No matter the situation, they always had my back. Where I’d woken up today, nervous and uncertain of my future, their support was helping me to understand that I’d made the right decision.

Plus, who really wanted to eat grasshoppers?

“Grasshoppers.” My mother made a disapproving noise with her mouth and then looked up at me, worry filling her warm brown eyes. “But Scotland...it’s so far.”

“It’s not too bad. Six hours on a flight. About the same as to California,” I pointed out. We’d only gone once to Scotland, as a family, years ago when my dad had received a promotion at work, and they’d watched flight deals for a year. It was the only international travel that I’d ever done, which reminded me, I’d have to see if my passport was out of date. Was I seriously considering this job offer?

It was a sweet deal.

Sophie, an American, had recently inherited MacAlpine Castle in Loren Brae, and she was working on a new campaign to encourage tourism. Part of that campaign was to build out the restaurant at the castle, and they hoped to do themed weekends for visiting tourists. She said they’d read about my surprise-themed menus and had thought I’d be a perfect fit for what they had in mind. The offer included housing, a generous salary, and even a moving stipend. My own restaurant. In a *freaking* castle.

It almost seemed too good to be true.

“But...” My mother trailed off at a look from my father. When she

went quiet, the rest of the table did as well. It wasn't often that my father took the lead on things, but when he did, we all listened.

"I think this could be a wonderful opportunity. Why don't you tell us about it?" My father gestured with his fork, and I let out a breath before rambling off all of the details that I knew. By the time I was finished, Luca was nodding along with me.

"This is so cool, Lia. You have to do it. I mean...it's Scotland. I can come visit and be an influencer," Luca said.

"Influence who? Girls into not dating you?" Enzo asked and my brothers started razzing each other.

"Lia? Porch." My dad stood and angled his head to the front door, and I topped off my wine glass before following him outside. The air was brisk, but summer had been kind to us so far, and it wasn't cold enough to have to grab a coat. I settled into an Adirondack chair next to my dad, and we sat in companionable silence for a moment like so many times before. As his only daughter, my dad had often tried to take me aside when he could, giving me small special moments together in his busy schedule. Sometimes it was just like this, sitting on the porch, watching the world go by, talking about whatever was on our minds.

"Will you go?" My dad glanced at me before taking a sip of his beer. "To Scotland?"

"I...I don't know. I'm thinking pretty seriously about it." I shifted in my seat, crossing one leg over the other, and watched a car search for a parking spot on the street. "It doesn't seem real. It still feels like I'll be going back to Suzette's tomorrow to plan the menu for the week."

"Big changes don't always happen on our preferred timeframe." Dad shrugged one shoulder. "I was asked to go back as well. But well, I had your mother to consider. And we had a home here. A family. Friends. It wasn't much, but it was ours. Och, starting from scratch after we'd worked so hard to eke out a living here, well, it didn't suit." Although my father had been away from Scotland for well over thirty years now, the whisper of the Highlands still clung to his voice.

"Who asked you to come back? Your family?" I raised an eyebrow at him. To my knowledge, he didn't have much family left in Scotland aside from his great-aunt. Both of his parents had passed on before I was born.

"No. The people of MacAlpine Castle."

My jaw dropped. "What, the same MacAlpine Castle I've just been offered a job at?"

Dad nodded. "I think...there's something more there that you should know about. Gran, well, you never got to know her, but she was part of a