

THE SINS *of a*  
HIGHLAND  
*Beast*

**KENNA KENDRICK**

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# THE SINS OF A HIGHLAND BEAST

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*She was the only one he wanted, and she could never know...*

**TALES OF LOVE AND LUST IN THE MURRAY CASTLE  
BOOK 3**

**KENNA KENDRICK**



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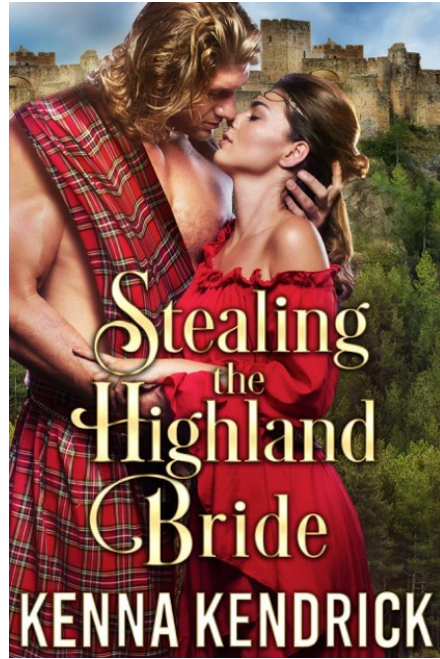
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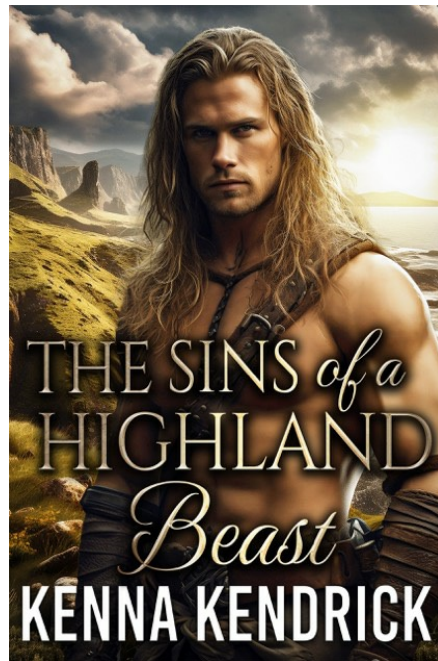
The Sins of a Highland Beast



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## ABOUT THE BOOK

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*“I tricked ye intae fallin’ fer a man who doesnae exist.”*

When Tate Murray agrees to do **his best friend a favor**, he has no idea what he’s getting himself into. His mission involves taking his friend’s place as laird, **abducting** a lass and... **marrying** her.

*The worst part? After they marry, he falls for her... All while her real husband is expected back any minute to take his place...*

A pawn in a game of power, Lana Hay is abducted on her wedding day only to be **forced to marry another man**. A laird **no one has ever seen**, for he hides his face under a **mask**.

*Yet while she vows to flee, she cannot escape her treacherous heart that longs for the man who doomed her life...*

**Tate knows that there are sins he can never atone for. Like the impossible choice between his closest friend and the woman he loves...**

*She was the only one he wanted, and she could never know...*



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## PROLOGUE

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*E*ighteen months earlier

Tate's boots sank into the mud as he walked over to the man he was supposed to meet. It had been raining all morning, but now the clouds had parted, letting the sun shine down on the Hay Castle. The village streets, deserted only a few hours prior, were now filled with people, and Tate didn't know if that was a good thing or not. On the one hand, the more people milled about, the more cover Tate would have for what he was supposed to do. On the other hand, it was easier for someone to spot him with so many people around.

Still, the plan had to be carried out.

Walking up to the man with the cart standing by the village tavern, Tate pulled a small bag full of coins out of his pocket and handed it to him.

"Half an hour," he reminded him. "The lass will meet ye over there by the apothecary."

“Aye, as discussed,” the man said. He was an older man, a farmer, with hair as grey as his beard, and he was willing to do a lot for some coins. “I’ll be waitin’.”

Tate nodded and left quickly, not wanting to be seen lingering around him. He made his way to the tavern instead and sat at one of the tables outside the establishment, despite the benches and the tables still being damp from the rain. It was the only place he could sit and watch both the castle and the apothecary without drawing any suspicion, and get a cup of ale, too, while he was at it.

He needed it, after all the hard work of the past few days.

Before he could even order the ale he so desperately wanted, a figure sat down at the table next to his. Tate kept his gaze in front of him, and he knew the other man was doing the same without needing to look at him.

He never needed to look to know what Kian was doing. After all the time they had spent together, Tate knew him like he knew himself. Every mannerism, every quirk of Kian’s was engraved forever in Tate’s mind, and he would recognize him anywhere.

Not that it was a difficult thing to do when Kian wore that mask. Tate had never even seen him without the blasted thing, the sterling silver mask that covered the entirety of the left side of his face, as well as the lower part of the right side. All he had ever seen were his long, blond hair and his dark blue eyes, one of them always obscured by the shadow of the mask. Same as his. If someone didn’t know them, they’d say they were twins.

“All done?” Kian asked. His voice was low, barely audible over the bustle of the village.

“All done,” Tate confirmed. “We only have tae wait fer the lassie tae come out o’ the castle now.”

It wasn’t much of a plan that he and Kian had come up with to get Lana Hay out of her father’s castle. They hadn’t had the time to think of something more elaborate, something safer that would guarantee a smooth escape. Ever since Tate had visited the castle the other day as her father’s guest and seen the cruelty the young woman had to suffer at his hands, he had known that they had to do something to help her leave the clan.

“Good,” Kian said. “The last thing we need is Eógan Hay gettin’ the alliance he wants with the Cummings clan. If we manage tae ruin this marriage, we ruin the alliance.”

“An’ we save Lana Hay,” Tate reminded him. Though putting a stop to the wedding between Lana and Balfour Cummings was important for the safety and prosperity of Kian’s clan—the Drummond Clan—Tate couldn’t help but feel that rescuing Lana from both her father and an unwanted marriage was a more pressing matter. He couldn’t bear the thought of anyone having to live their lives in such sorrow, and though he couldn’t help everyone, he could try to help Lana, at least.

“Aye, I suppose that’s an added attraction,” Kian said. “I cannae imagine the kind o’ life the lassie would have if she ended up married tae Balfour Cummings. He’s worse than her faither. It’s a good thing ye could help her.”

“It’s a good thing we could help her,” Tate said. “I couldnae have done it without ye. If anythin’, yer the one who always helps people.”

“Ach, who else have I helped?” Kian asked, waving a hand dismissively as he tended to do whenever he was too embarrassed to accept any praise.

“Me,” Tate reminded him. “Ye saved me from certain death.”

“Aye, but that was a long time ago.”

Tate shook his head in disbelief with a small laugh. Kian made it impossible to say a good word about him or to thank him for everything all he had done for him, but that didn’t mean Tate would stop trying.

He was about to respond when he spotted Lana rushing around the village, her eyes wide as she looked left and right either for the man with the wagon or for a potential threat. She seemed frightened, her hand clutching her shawl tightly around her shoulders, but Tate could hardly blame her. If her father or her betrothed found out she was trying to flee, there was no telling what they would do to her.

*They’d probably keep her locked in the castle.*

“There she is,” Tate told Kian. “Right on time.”

“Let’s go,” Kian said as he stood and made his way towards the man with the cart. Tate followed close behind; he never did get to drink that ale, he thought with a wistful sigh.

However, they had only taken a few steps when a drunk man fell right onto Kian, the two of them stumbling as Kian tried to hold both their weights. Tate came to a stop next to them, his hand shooting out to steady Kian.

“Watch where ye’re goin’!” the man shouted, much to Tate’s chagrin. He looked around them, knowing that the man was drawing too much attention to them, but not knowing what to do about it. Now that everyone in the street was looking at them, it would be difficult to slip away undetected as per their plan. Everyone had seen them, and they were bound to remember the scuffle.

“Ye’re the one who fell on me!” Kian said, rather unhelpfully. Tate wished he would just apologize and put an end to the fight before it even started, as the drunkard’s intentions were crystal clear. His gaze held a malice that was enough of a warning for Tate, but Kian didn’t seem to care.

The drunkard said nothing more before he grabbed Kian by his shirt and tried to throw him to the ground. He was a smaller man, though, while Kian shared Tate’s tall and muscular frame, towering over everyone he met. All the drunk man managed to do was pull Kian even closer to him, which instantly put him at a disadvantage.

Kian swung his fist. His knuckles connected with the drunkard’s cheek, but Tate could tell his friend was holding back, unwilling to hurt the man too much. The drunk fell to the ground, dazed and unable to stand on his own two feet, and Tate thought that would be the end of it. Swift and clean. He gave Kian one last look before he turned to join Lana by the cart, but before

he could take even a single step, he saw something glinting in the drunkard's hand.

*He has a knife.*

Kian hadn't noticed. He had his back turned to the man and was walking away, oblivious to the threat right behind him. The man recovered quickly, too quickly, standing up and rushing towards Kian, and all Tate could do to stop him was throw himself at him.

Once more, the man fell to the ground with a pained moan, and Tate tumbled on top of him. His hand was wrapped tightly around the man's forearm, pinning it down to the ground so that he couldn't use the knife, and though the other struggled, kicking out his legs to shove Tate off him, he could hardly move.

Kian turned around and, once he noticed what was happening, he rushed to Tate's aid. The problem was that several other men did as well, while others came to the drunk man's rescue. Before Tate knew it, he and the man were separated, but the fight only grew. Some were looking for an excuse to exchange blows while others, offended by the punches they had already received, sought revenge.

A fist collided with Tate's jaw, though in the chaos, he couldn't tell who had attacked him. And to be honest, he didn't even care. Now that everyone had stopped to stare at the fight, he and Kian had no chance of getting out of there unnoticed unless they managed to slip through the crowd. So, instead of engaging in the fight, he decided to look for Kian and get out of there.



He found him with his arms around another man, trying to restrain him, unsurprisingly. If anything, Tate was expecting him to do something even worse in the heat of the moment. Once he reached him, Tate placed a hand on Kian's shoulder, which resulted in him almost getting a blow to the face, before Kian realized who he was.

“What are ye doin’?” Kian asked. “I could have hurt ye!”

“Leave him, let's go,” Tate said, doing his best to disentangle Kian from the other man, but both Kian and the stranger were eager to continue with their confrontation. It took him a few moments, but in the end, he and Kian were weaving through the crowd, quickly making their way towards a small alley where they could both hide.

The fight continued without them, the men too impassioned to stop. Tate pressed himself against the wall of a house, keeping himself as invisible as he could, and placed a hand on Kian's chest to force him to do the same.

“What were ye thinkin', gettin' intae that fight?” Tate hissed, as he tried to spot Lana. He hoped she hadn't been spooked by the crowds and fled. He couldn't see her in the village.

“Well, I clearly wasnae thinkin', was I?” Kian said.

Despite himself, Tate laughed. “Of course, ye werena. We have tae find the lass now.”

Pushing himself off the wall, Kian walked to the end of the alley, shoving Tate's hand away when he tried to pull him back. Tate cursed under his breath, but at least no one seemed to notice them.

"There she is," Kian said, pointing at the cart that was already rolling down the path away from the village and the Hay clan. "At least it worked out in the end."

Tate let out a sigh of relief and let his head fall back against the wall. He hadn't managed to speak to Lana, but he hoped everything would work out for her now that she had managed to escape, even without him giving her instructions on what to do next.

"I never asked ye... how did ye even manage tae tell her about the plan?" Kian said, as he hid himself in the shadows once more.

"It wasnae too difficult," Tate said with a small shrug. "When her faither had that ball a few days ago, I snuck inside the castle as a guest."

"An' ye managed tae speak with her? I thought he'd be more careful than tae let a strange man talk tae his daughter."

"Nay," Tate said. "I barely saw her at the ball. I had tae flirt with a maid an' she told me where tae find her."

"I'm sure ye didnae enjoy that at all," Kian said, his tone dripping with mockery.

“What would ye have me dae?” Tate said. “I had tae speak with her somehow.”

The fact that the maid was a pretty girl and more than receptive to his advances was merely a bonus. It had been the only thing Tate could think of at the time, and he was lucky it had worked. Had it been anyone else, he probably wouldn't have managed to get the information he needed out of them.

“What is she like, then?” Kian asked. “Lana Hay?”

“I dinnae ken,” Tate said. “I didnae speak with her at all, actually.”

Kian looked at him in confusion and disbelief, and Tate chuckled before he added, “I only passed her a note. I wanted tae speak with her, but I didnae have time. She didnae even see me. I walked up behind her, passed her the note, an' left.”

He hadn't wanted to risk being found out by her father or her betrothed, so had had to be quick in his movements, leaving before too many people could see him. He had gotten good at it ever since Kian had first asked him to pose as him while he was away. Impersonating Kian meant that he had to be careful of who saw him as himself and when, in order for his cover not to be blown.

“At least we managed tae help her flee without any problems,” Kian said, and as though his words had summoned trouble, the men who were still fighting

seemed to realize that the two of them were gone. It took them only seconds to band together and start looking for them, and then only a few more seconds to find them in the alley.

“They’re here!” one of the men shouted, attracting everyone else’s attention. Tate and Kian had no choice but to run, heading out of the village towards the woods in the hopes that they could be lost among the trees.

The crowd followed them, some of the men keeping them in their sights while others seemed to be confused as to where to go. Tate glanced at them over his shoulder every few seconds and steered Kian towards where they would have better chances at losing their pursuers.

“Well, I’m glad we didnae have tae opt fer the other plan,” Kian said, shouting as they ran. He was out of breath, the mask surely not helping, but he didn’t seem too bothered by the fact that an angry mob was chasing them.

“What other plan?” Tate asked.

“If this didnae work, I’d have had tae marry the lass meself,” Kian said. “How else would I stop Balfour Cummings from marryin’ her?”

Knowing Kian, Tate had to agree that not having to marry Lana was probably for the best.

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## CHAPTER ONE

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*P*resent day, Murray Castle

Lana sat in the portrait gallery of Murray Castle with little Robert in her arms. He loved it there, always fascinated by the paintings that depicted the Murray family, and Lana often brought him there when Evelyn, the boy's mother, was busy and couldn't look after him.

"When ye grow up, ye'll have yer own portrait here," she told him, though the boy couldn't yet understand her. He, too, would be a laird one day, the title passed on to him from his father, Laird Scott Murray.

In response, Robert giggled and made a few sounds that weren't quite yet words. It made Lana giggle as well, delighted by the child in her arms.

The gallery was often quiet, as not many people visited it. She knew Magnus, Scott's younger brother, came there at night sometimes, but rarely in the mornings, so she and Robert had the entire place to themselves. Lana liked to sit on the plush couch by the window and read to him, passing the hours until

she was needed.

It was a nice routine she had set up for herself in the Murray Castle. She found life there much easier, much calmer than her life back home. Her father had often made her miserable, as though his sole purpose in life was to make her as unhappy as he was, and she knew that things would have only gotten worse if she had married Laird Cummings, as per her father's plan.

But all that was in her past now. The Murrays had been kind to her. She had a good life, even if it wasn't the life of a laird's daughter. Besides, now that she was helping the clan's healer instead of working as a maid, as she had been upon her arrival after Scott had saved her, she had found a passion, something that she actually enjoyed doing.

"I thought I'd find ye here," a voice called from the door, and Lana turned to see Alba, Magnus' wife and Evelyn's older sister.

Originally, she had been promised to Scott, but after a series of situations he and Evelyn had fallen in love. This happened much to Alba's delight, as she had never had any intention of ever marrying. However, to avoid another unwanted marriage, she had asked Magnus to pretend to be her husband, to everyone's surprise as they did not get along. Needless to say, they had ended up falling head over heels for each other as well.

Lana smiled at her and gestured at her to join them on the couch, an invitation that Alba eagerly accepted.

"Robert likes this place," Lana said, grinning at the boy. He reached up with

his small hands and grabbed a fistful of her hair, tugging a few fiery red strands out of her updo before she could stop him. “Ach... ye’re a wee menace.”

“Just like his maither,” Alba said. Lana wouldn’t have guessed it when she had first met Evelyn, but she knew Alba was right. Though Alba and Evelyn were sisters, Alba shared none of Evelyn’s unruliness or her desire for adventure.

*They certainly share their stubbornness, though.*

“Where’s me sister?” Alba asked. “I’ve searched the entire castle an’ I cannae find her.”

“She’s with Scott,” Lana said. “They’re havin’ a meetin’ about the army again.”

“Again?” Alba asked. “That lass... she couldnae keep herself busy with somethin’ other than armies an’ fightin’?”

“I dinnae think she’s particularly fond o’ looms,” Lana pointed out. It was another thing that had surprised Lana when she had first come to the Murray clan. Scott not only didn’t mind it when Evelyn assisted him with clan matters and strategy, but he even encouraged it, asking for her opinion. Though she didn’t join him for the council meetings, as they were both certain the council would frown upon such a thing, Scott made sure to tell her everything that had been discussed.

“I ken that,” Alba said with a long-suffering sigh. As the oldest, Lana knew she felt responsible for her sister’s wellbeing and reputation, and though she wasn’t fighting any wars anymore, there was no telling what she would do if another war broke out.

“Dae ye need tae speak with her?” Lana asked.

“She told me tae remind her tae feed Robert, because she would be too busy tae keep track o’ the time,” Alba said. “I thought I’d find ye here with him, but I didnae ken it would be this difficult tae find her!”

“I can take him tae her,” Lana said, already standing with Robert in her arms. “It’s nae a problem.”

She had taken only a few steps before Alba called to her again.

“Ach, I almost forgot again!” Alba said, joining her by the door. “I keep meanin’ tae tell ye somethin’ an’ I keep forgettin’ tae.”

“What is it?” Lana asked.

“Ever since ye told me that story o’ how that man saved ye from yer faither, I’ve been lookin’ fer that mark that ye described tae me,” Alba said. “Ye said he had a mark on his hand, did ye nae?”

“Aye, he did,” Lana confirmed, her heart filling with hope. Could it be that



Alba had found the man she had been looking for? It had been over a year since then, and no matter how much Lana tried, she could never figure out who her savior was. She had only gotten a glimpse of his hand as he passed her the note that night, and even though she had tried to run after him once she had read his words, she hadn't managed to catch up with him.

“Ye've heard o' Tate,” Alba said. It wasn't a question. Though Lana had never seen Tate, she had heard of him, as his family talked so much about him. He was the baby out of the three brothers, and though he was often away travelling, they always spoke fondly of him. “I realized the other day that he has a mark on his hand. Look.”

As she spoke, Alba pointed at Tate's portrait on the wall. His hand was visible, and the painter had definitely painted something on his skin that could have been a birthmark, although Lana couldn't tell if it was the same one she had seen or not. She would have to see it in real life to know for certain.

“I dinnae ken if that's it,” Lana said. “I... I'm nae certain.”

“Well, ye'll see it when he returns from his travels,” Alba pointed out. “Wouldnae it be strange if all this time, yer savior was Tate?”

It would be a strange coincidence, indeed, Lana thought. She wanted nothing more than to find the man and thank him for saving her from a miserable fate, so if it was Tate, then all the better. She didn't know how she could return such kindness, but she would at least try.

“Thank ye fer showin’ me, Alba,” Lana said. “I hope ye’re right.”

“I hope so too,” Alba said. She, like everyone else in the castle, knew how much this meant to her.

With that, Lana was off, taking Robert to Scott’s study. She knocked on the door and entered, finding him and Evelyn hunched over the table as they discussed their plans. Evelyn stepped back as Lana entered, shoulders going stiff. She only relaxed when she realized who it was, and her face split into a grin when she saw Robert.

“Is it time already tae feed him?” she asked, as she reached for her son. Lana handed him to her, nodding.

“Aye, Alba came tae find me,” she said. “He’s been a wee angel all day.”

“Has he?” Evelyn asked. “Well, that’s new.”

Lana and Scott laughed, both knowing how much of a handful Robert could be sometimes, especially now that he was growing and getting curious about the world around him. He wasn’t a fussy child, though, and Lana rarely heard him cry.

“Thank ye fer bringin’ him, Lana,” Evelyn said. “Will ye stay fer supper?”

“Nay, nay... I must go back tae the cottage,” Lana said. “I need tae gather

some supplies for the healer.”

“As ye wish,” Evelyn said. “But ye’re always welcome.”

“Thank ye,” Lana said, giving them both a small bow before she left the study. She often spent her afternoons and evenings at the healer’s cottage, a little further down the path from the castle, and she preferred it there. It was much quieter, nothing like the castle she had called home for so many years.

She didn’t want to be reminded of her past. It was all too painful, too much to bear. All she wanted to do was spend her days immersed in her new job, learning everything there was to know about healing people and saving lives. There was no point in revisiting the past and dwelling on every cruel thing her father had done to her.

Lana greeted all the guards and the clansmen and women as she walked through the castle and then the courtyard, before exiting the castle walls. She had taken that same path countless times, but it never failed to amaze her how beautiful the place was, each side of the dirt road stretching out into the forest. Flowers and herbs bloomed by the path, and Lana stopped for a moment to gather some hedge nettles for the healer to use. She pulled her small knife out and started cutting a few stalks, making sure to get the freshest ones.

Thankfully, it was a nice day and the sun was shining through a smattering of clouds. Every time she had to take the path when it was raining, she delayed it for as long as possible, loathing the mud that caked her shoes when even just a little rain had fallen.

With an armful of hedge nettles, Lana continued down the path, but something made her pause. She felt as though there were eyes on her, much like she did back home, every time her father had one of his guards—sometimes even multiple of them—following her every move. She was accustomed to the feeling, that tell-tale shiver down her spine notifying her that there was something wrong.

Nonetheless, when she looked around, she couldn't spot anyone. There was nothing but trees, bushes, and a few birds flying from branch to branch.

*Could it all be in me head?*

Lana doubted it. She was far from paranoid. Even when she had been living in her father's castle, she never worried without reason.

Her instinct told her that there was someone there, hiding among the trees.

But what other choice did she have than to keep going? She was too far from the castle to ask for help. The cottage was closer, and maybe if she made a run for it, she could get there before whoever was watching her could catch up with her.

Taking a few steadying breaths, Lana reached for her knife once more. She held it tightly in her hand, though she didn't know how effective it would be during an attack. It was barely sharp enough to cut through stalks, let alone human flesh. Also, she had never even been in a fight before. How could she defend herself if there was a brigand after her?

*Why me? I'm nae one important, nae anymore.*

It didn't matter. She could figure that out later. All that mattered was getting to the cottage on time, where she would be safe.

In an instant, she dropped the hedge nettles and broke into a sprint. Her feet thudded against the ground, clouds of dust rising behind her with every step she took. It didn't take her long to hear another set of footsteps behind her, louder and heavier than her own, but she didn't dare look back at the person who was chasing her.

Although she was running as fast as she could, the footsteps sounded closer and closer with every passing second. Her pursuer was catching up to her. Lana tried to run even faster, to push herself even more, but she had no more strength left. All she could do was hope she wouldn't trip and fall, and that she would be fast enough to escape.

That hope faded when a hand grabbed her and brought her to a halt. Lana screamed and tried to tug her arm away from the man's grip, but he was too strong. He only held her even more tightly, one arm wrapping around her waist as the other wrapped around her throat, choking her.

In her panic, Lana's breath rushed out of her. She couldn't draw any air into her lungs. She couldn't fight the man. Her legs kicked out, and her hand swung the knife wildly in the air, trying to hurt him even a little, just enough so that she could escape, but he was too strong. He grabbed her wrist and twisted it, making her drop the knife with a pained wail, before he continued to choke her.

*He'll kill me.*

She didn't understand why. She didn't know why he had chosen her or why he had decided to kill her, but she knew that was his intention. His arms were too tight, pressing against her stomach and her throat. His chest was a solid wall against her back, and she had no chance of making him move.

Tears began to stream down her cheeks, carving hot paths in their wake. The world tilted and started to go dark and fuzzy at the edges as she lost consciousness, though she didn't know if it was because of the lack of air or the panic that was bubbling up inside her. Either way, she knew she wouldn't be awake for long.

She had to find out who the man was. She had to sneak a look at him, just in case she managed to survive this, so she craned her neck trying to get a glimpse but no matter how much she tried, she couldn't.

What she did see was the ring he was wearing. It was a ring that many of her father's men wore, gifted to them when they rose up the ranks of his army. Lana would recognize it anywhere.

*Me faither sent him... he's here tae take me back.*

She didn't know how anyone had found out where she was. Lana thought she was safe there and that her father would never find her, but she had clearly been wrong. She had been wrong about the man, too. He wasn't trying to kill her; he was only trying to incapacitate her.

Still, that didn't comfort her in the least. She would rather die than go back to her father, to that daily abuse and misery. She would rather the man end her life right then and there, because she would never agree to stay with her father.

However, she couldn't speak. No words would come out of her mouth, just like she could not get any air into her lungs.

Her limbs were soon too heavy for her to struggle. Her head was filled with cotton, making it impossible to think. And then, everything went black.

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## CHAPTER TWO

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Lana opened her eyes slowly and with great difficulty. They burned with the remnants of sleep and her lids felt heavy, closing over and over again, no matter how much she tried to stay awake. Her head was pounding, and when she finally managed to open her eyes properly, the sunlight blinded her making her wince.

Her surroundings were terribly familiar, though she hadn't been in that room for a long time. It was her bed chamber, back in her father's castle, with its rich blue tapestries and the bed of oak. How had she gotten there?

It took her a few seconds to remember what had happened, but then it all rushed back to her like a torrent. Her heartbeat quickened as the memories of the attack came back to her, the panic and helplessness still lingering.

Before Lana could calm herself, a figure jumped onto her bed and into her arms, and though she was startled at first, it didn't take her long to recognize her sister. Deirdre still looked the same as the last time Lana had seen her, her face bright and full of joy under the head covering of her convent.



*At least she seems tae be alright.*

Lana wrapped her arms tightly around her sister and held her close, though she didn't understand why she was there. It had been a long time since she had stepped foot in the castle as she rarely left her convent, so her presence there, though welcome, alarmed Lana.

“Deirdre!” she said, pulling back just enough to look at her. “What are ye doin’ here?”

“I’m so happy tae see ye, Lana,” Deirdre said instead of answering her question. It couldn’t be a good thing, Lana thought. Her sister was never one to avoid difficult conversations, so this could only mean that the reason for her arrival was something she didn’t want Lana to know. “Ye look well. Have ye been well?”

As she spoke, Deirdre cupped Lana’s cheek in a motherly way that was far beyond her twenty years of age. Though Lana was older than her by six years, in that moment, it seemed to her as though Deirdre was the mature one, the one who knew more of the world than she did—if not from experience, then from being surrounded by older women her entire life.

“I’m fine,” Lana assured her, though it was far from the truth. She had been fine until one of her father’s men had grabbed her and taken her back to the keep. Whatever reason her father had to bring her there, it couldn’t possibly be good.

Despite her reassurance, Deirdre didn’t seem to believe her. For a moment,

her smile faltered, and Lana felt her hand tremble against her cheek. But then she forced that smile back on her lips and reached for Lana's hand instead.

"Good," she said. "Good."

"How are ye?" Lana asked her, as desperate to change the subject as she was to know the truth. But the truth could wait for a little while. For just a few minutes, she could pretend that everything was fine and that her reunion with her sister was all that mattered in the world. "It's been so long since I last saw ye. Ye've grown up."

"It's been too long," Deirdre said. "Ach, I dinnae think I'm that different."

Lana didn't have time to respond before the door to her room was thrown wide open and a flurry of maids rushed inside. Some of them were carrying tunics, shoes, and pins, while others carried water and a wooden tub.

They all tore through the room like a storm as they worked.

"What is happenin'?" Lana asked, but her sister seemed reluctant to tell her, biting her bottom lip.

It was the voice of her father that rang out in the room and brought all the maids to a halt, lowering their heads in respect. Laird Hay stood at the door, imposing as ever, his hair as ginger as Lana's own, his blue eyes narrowing menacingly when they met hers. Though he was average in height and slim, he seemed to dominate the room.

“What is happenin’ is that ye’re gettin’ married,” he said. “As ye should have two years ago.”

Lana shook her head. She didn’t want to believe it; she couldn’t believe this was happening again. Whatever deal her father had made, she didn’t want to be a part of it.

“Faither, please,” she said, though she knew well that pleading would get her nowhere when it came to him. “Why are ye doin’ this?”

“What good are ye tae me if I cannae marry ye tae a powerful clan?” Laird Hay asked. “Yer maither gave me nae sons. All I have is the two o’ ye an’ neither o’ ye can lead this clan when I’m gone, can ye?”

*Perhaps if we were given a chance, we could. If you had taught us instead of imprisoning us both.*

Lana didn’t dare say those words out loud, she knew what would happen to her if she did. Her father had no tolerance for disobedience, and everyone in that room had found out early on that they could never get away with disrespect.

Next to her, Deirdre shook. Out of the two of them, she was the most terrified of their father, always close to tears in his presence. Lana could hardly blame her. She had only been a baby when their mother had passed, and she had been sent to the nunnery shortly after. The only memories she had of their father was the few times she had seen him since and Lana was ready to bet

that all of those instances had been unpleasant.

“Ye will marry Balfour Cummings, as was the plan from the beginnin’,” her father added, and after that, Lana stopped listening even though she could see his lips moving.

She couldn’t hear anything other than the buzzing of her ears, the rush of blood to her head. When her father first told her that she was to get married, she had assumed that her betrothed was someone else, a man from another powerful clan that her father had managed to convince. She would have never thought that Balfour Cummings would *still* want her as his wife after she had managed to escape.

*It cannae be... I cannae marry him.*

Lana had met the man, and she had experienced his cruelty firsthand. He hadn’t even bothered to pretend that he was kind in her presence, and had revealed his awful, dark side to her when he had berated and insulted her for expressing an opinion, and had then proceeded to humiliate a maid for pouring him too little wine.

She didn’t think she could handle an entire lifetime by the side of a man like that.

“Lana.”

Her sister’s voice was distant in her ears, but when Deirdre started to shake

her, her hands on Lana's shoulders, her panic began to subside enough for her to come back to reality.

When Lana's eyes focused once more, she saw the concern painted on her sister's beautiful features, her hazel eyes mirroring Lana's own, an inheritance from their mother. Lana gripped her sister's hands tightly, a pit opening up in her stomach.

Her father had already gone. Around her, the maids were continuing with the preparations, pouring water into the tub for her.

"I cannae dae this," she told Deirdre. "I cannae marry him. I'd rather take me own life than marry a man like him."

"Dinnae say that," Deirdre said, holding back just as tightly. "It's a sin, Lana. An'... an' I wouldnae ken what I would dae without ye."

"How did Faither manage to get Laird Cummings tae agree again? " Lana asked.

"Faither tried tae give me tae him," Deirdre said. Her voice was quiet, like it always was when she talked about their father, the fear and sorrow in it palpable, a heavy weight that Lana didn't want her sister to have to carry. "But Laird Cummings didnae wish tae marry me, he only wanted ye."

It had never occurred to Lana that her father would do such a thing. To disregard the fact that Deirdre had taken her vows was vile, but then again, he

was a vile man. She should have known that he would stop at nothing when it came to this alliance with Balfour Cummings.

Lana couldn't rest until Deirdre was safe. But how could she keep her safe if she was married to Laird Cummings? No, she had to escape once more and make sure to build the kind of life that would allow her to protect her sister.

"Deirdre..." Lana said in a low voice, though she doubted that the maids would ever tell her father that she was plotting to leave, since they, too, wanted to be free of him. "I must leave this place. I cannae marry Laird Cummings."

"I'll dae anythin' tae help ye, I promise," Deirdre said. "I dinnae want ye tae marry him either."

"After I leave, promise me ye'll go back tae the nunnery," Lana said. "Dinnae let Faither convince ye tae stay here."

It was unlikely that he would even try. Their father only wanted Deirdre at the castle when it suited him, but the longer Deirdre stayed there, the more likely she was to be the target of his wrath.

"I promise," Deirdre said. "I'll dae me best tae leave as soon as ye dae."

Lana nodded gratefully. She wished that she could do something to help Deirdre right away, but she would have to trust in her own abilities to escape their father. She had no time to waste, even a moment's hesitation would be

enough to allow her father to overpower her.

“Alright... here is what we’ll dae,” Lana said.



The day was warm and pleasant and entirely the opposite of Lana’s sour mood as she walked towards the small chapel, where she knew Laird Cummings and her father were already waiting for her. It would be a small affair, she knew, a short ceremony during which she wouldn’t have much chance to cause any trouble.

Of course, Lana wouldn’t go to the chapel, because if she did, there would be no chance for her to escape.

She thumbed the small blade that she kept hidden in her tunic as she and Deirdre walked down the path, accompanied by two guards. Everything was ready; there was a horse prepared with everything she would need to flee—a change of clothes, some money, food, and water—and Deirdre knew what to do to distract the two guards so that Lana could swoop in and incapacitate them with her blade. All she had to do was trust that she could make it and never once falter.

She glanced at Deirdre from the corner of her eye. Lana didn’t know if she wore the tunic out of a sense of duty or an actual desire to be a nun. Whenever she tried to ask Deirdre if she was only doing it so she could be away from their father, she never got a response.

They were nearing the chapel when there was finally a commotion right

behind Lana. She grabbed her blade and whipped around, ready to pounce on the two guards, when she realized that Deirdre wasn't the source of the noise. Instead, she was being held by a man Lana had never seen before, his hand muffling her screams as the two guards being were surrounded by a small army of men.

*There must be at least a dozen o' them!*

It was clear that whoever was attacking them had expected much more resistance than they found. When one of the men approached her, she brandished her knife and attacked him before he could harm her, slicing his arm open right above the elbow. The man stumbled back, eyes wide in shock as he clutched his arm, and Lana set her sights on the next one.

*I willnae let them harm Deirdre.*

“Deirdre!” she shouted, trying to be heard over the commotion. “Kick him! Kick him an’ run!”

Lana didn't have time to see if Deirdre did as she was told. Next thing she knew, no fewer than three men grabbed her and began to drag her away. She tried kicking, screaming at them to let go. She tried thrashing and twisting her body left and right to escape their hands, but there were three of them and only one of her.

They had no trouble picking her up and restraining her as they carried her away. One of them snatched her blade from her hand and threw it to the ground, leaving her entirely defenseless.



Behind her, she could hear Deirdre's panicked screams. She could hear her plead with the men to let go of her sister, to leave them both alone, and Lana's heart broke at all the sadness in her voice. There was nothing either of them could do now. The more Lana fought, the more she hurt herself, her skin bruising under her captors' hands.

It wasn't how she had expected the day to go. She had prepared herself for failure, but she hadn't prepared herself for being abducted by someone else.

Lana didn't know what was worse: marrying a man like Laird Cummings or being snatched away by someone she didn't even know for a reason she couldn't even begin to fathom?

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## CHAPTER THREE

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“*I*’ll nae help ye kidnap the lass!”

Tate could hardly believe that he was having this conversation with Kian at all. It was one thing helping Lana Hay escape her father and her marriage to Balfour Cummings, and another snatching her away now that her father had managed to arrange a second marriage between them. Perhaps that was her fate, after all. Who was Tate to meddle with fate?

“We’re nae kidnappin’ her,” Kian said, although he didn’t sound very convinced, and he certainly couldn’t convince Tate of it. “We’re only takin’ her away from a man who wishes tae hurt her. We’re helpin’ her.”

“It sounds like we’re kidnappin’ her tae me!” Tate said. He let his head fall onto the very impressive oak desk in Kian’s equally impressive study, sending his inkwell and pen rattling on the surface. “I will have nae part in this.”

“Tate,” said Kian, reaching over the desk and urging his head back up. “We

cannae let Laird Hay have this alliance. Lana Hay cannae marry Balfour Cummings, an' there is only one way tae avoid it now that her faither found her."

"An' what would that way be?" Tate asked, as he leaned back onto his plush armchair with a sigh. Under the soft light of the candles in Kian's study, his friend's mask glinted and cast its own pale glow on the rest of his face.

"I'll marry her meself," Kian said.

Tate didn't respond at first, simply because he thought he had misheard him or, at least, that Kian wasn't serious.

"I mean it," Kian continued. "If I marry her, then her faither will have nae other choice but tae let go o' that alliance."

"Is it truly worth it?" Tate asked. "Is it truly worth it tae dae this just tae stop Laird Hay?"

"Eventually, I'll have tae find a wife," Kian pointed out. "Lana Hay is as good as any."

"Even if her faither despises ye?" Tate asked. "Even if he can make yer life impossible?"

"He can try, but I'll have Lana."

Kian shrugged, seemingly unperturbed by the fact that Laird Hay wouldn't care if he had Lana or not and would certainly attack the Drummond Clan if it suited him. The only thing that such a marriage would achieve would be that Laird Hay wouldn't have his precious alliance with the Cummings Clan, at least not through Lana. But the man still had another daughter to give to Laird Cummings if it came to it, and so Tate didn't think an intervention would make any difference.

However, it was far from an easy task to change Kian's mind. Whenever he got an idea in his head, it was almost impossible to take it out.

"I simply dinnae think it's a good idea," Tate said half-heartedly. "Tae kidnap her."

"I willnae kidnap her," Kian said. "I willnae dae anythin', in fact, because I have some business tae attend tae. Ye'll be the one tae dae it."

"Pardon me?" said Tate, his eyes widening as he shook his head fervently. "Nay... nay, Kian, ye willnae involve me in this."

"Dae ye wish fer yer clan tae end up destroyed?" Kian asked, suddenly so serious that all the air in the room seemed to disappear in a vacuum of his own creation. He could be very domineering when he wanted to, Tate knew, though he blamed at least half of it on the mask. "Because that is what will happen if the Hay Clan an' the Cummings Clan come tae an agreement. They will start nae a war, but wars. Several o' them. An' their most likely targets will include me clan and yer own clan."

Kian had a point, Tate knew. An alliance between those two men would be devastating. They were both lairds of powerful clans, their numbers stronger than anyone else in those parts. Even if the Murray Clan and the Drummond Clan managed to form alliances with a few others, there was no guarantee they would win the war. Besides, as far as Tate was concerned, the point was to avoid a war altogether. The last thing he wanted was to march his clansmen to their deaths or mourn the lives lost to starvation and illness.

“Even if that’s true, we should try a different way,” Tate urged. “We took her out o’ that castle once, we can dae it again.”

“Aye, but if I dinnae marry her, then there’s nae point tae it,” Kian pointed out. “Besides, there is nae time tae waste. There’s word that her faither will arrange the weddin’ as soon as possible. We must get tae her afore he does. We cannae wait tae make another plan or coax her gently intae leavin’.”

A headache was starting to creep into Tate’s temples, and he rubbed at them, trying to retain his composure. He couldn’t do what Kian was asking him to. His conscience wouldn’t let him.

“That’s why ye must go an’ take her,” said Kian, acting as though he was asking Tate to fetch him a cup of tea.

“I will dae nae such thing, Kian, and I mean it!”



Tate had an armful of a screaming, kicking Lana Hay. He cursed himself for

ever allowing Kian to talk him into this, but it was too late now. He was already in the Hay keep, having infiltrated it with great difficulty along with a dozen of Kian's men, subduing the guards and tracking down Lana as she was walking to the chapel to marry Balfour Cummings.

They had gotten there in the nick of time. Had they arrived only a few minutes later, it would have been too late.

It took two more men, along with Tate, to drag Lana away from her sister. The whole time, she screamed and kicked at them, and even attacked one of the men with her hidden blade, which Tate himself only narrowly avoided. With the mask limiting his vision and the bandage around his hand, it was far from an easy task.

He had never regretted anything more in his life.

When they had finally managed to drag her far enough from the keep for the guards not to be an imminent threat, Tate finally put her down, though he didn't let go of her. Lana had gotten tired, it seemed, and though she still struggled, he could hold her there on his own, without the help of other men.

"Ach, lass... calm yerself," he said, already exhausted by what he liked to think of as a rescue, rather than a kidnapping. If he had to do it, then he would name it something that didn't offend his sensibilities as much.

"Calm meself?" Lana shrieked. "Ye think ye can simply drag me away like this an' I'll *calm meself*? Why, I ought tae have yer head! Who are ye even?"

“Laird Kian Drummond,” Tate said. Kian had convinced him to wear the mask once more,

“What dae ye want with me?” Lana asked, lowering her voice but turning no less murderous.

“I want tae get ye on this horse an’ leave,” Tate said, his patience wearing thin. They had to get out of there before they got caught. Laird Hay wouldn’t simply have them hanged for this. Tate could hardly imagine the torture he would have to endure before he was granted death.

“I’m nae goin’ anywhere,” Lana said, and promptly kicked him in the groin.

Tate saw stars. He let out a muffled groan as he curled in on himself, the pain too strong to even allow any anger to surface. A hand came up to clutch at the nearest object, which happened to be one of the other men’s sword hilt, and he held onto it for dear life, waiting for the pain to subside.

Distantly, he was aware that Lana was trying to escape, but the men were quick to stop her and bring her back the few steps she had managed to take. They even went so far as to tie her with a spare length of rope, binding her arms in front of her, much to her very clear and very loud chagrin.

It took Tate several moments before he managed to ignore the lingering pain and stand up straight once more, though he was anything but comfortable. When he looked at Lana, he found no hint of remorse in her face; quite the opposite, in fact. She looked rather smug.

“Alright. Ye listen tae me well,” Tate said, once he found his voice. “Ye can either stay here an’ marry that brute o’ a man or ye can come with me an’... well, nae marry him.”

Much to his surprise, Lana seemed to consider his offer. For someone who had gone to great lengths trying to escape him, she didn’t seem to be in any rush to leave now.

Before she could give him an answer, though, thundering footsteps started to sound nearby, echoing around them. The Hay army would be there at any moment, and Tate had no more time to spare.

“Ye have tae choose right now,” he said. “Dae ye wish tae stay here or come with me?”

Lana hesitated. She looked at him, and then glanced at the source of the commotion. Though the men hadn’t appeared in their field of vision yet, they would soon be there, and they would spot them.

“I’ll come with ye,” she said in the end.

Tate let out a sigh of relief. He didn’t know what he would have done if Lana had decided to stay there instead. What would he have told Kian? That he had given her a choice? That he had failed his mission on purpose, just because he didn’t have the heart to take her with force?

Luckily, he didn’t have to worry about that anymore. He had more pressing



matters to think about, now that he had an entire army after him.

After helping her on his horse, Tate jumped right behind her, and he and the rest of the men rode off, hurrying down the path. Their horses were fast, and all of them were experienced riders. He had no doubt in his mind that they would manage to escape, since he couldn't hear anyone following them.

After an hour of riding, Tate decided that it was safe enough to slow down, and they fell into a more leisurely pace to give themselves and their horses a break. It was then that Lana turned to face him as best as she could and spoke to him for the first time since their escape, finally releasing her death grip on the saddle, which she had maintained the entire time, despite Tate's best efforts to keep her upright.

"Where are ye takin' me?" she asked, sounding uncertain.

Tate looked at her, taking in her big, round hazel eyes, her fiery hair, the freckles that covered her face. She was a beautiful woman.

*Kian is a lucky man. Maybe it's nae so bad that he'll marry her.*

Of course, her character was not quite as gentle and tender as one might look for in a wife and it didn't help that Kian was a stubborn man. For all Tate knew, the two of them would start a war of their own.

"We're goin' tae another weddin', actually," Tate said.

“A weddin’?” Lana asked. There was a tremble in her voice, in a way that suggested she already knew what Tate was going to say. “Whose weddin’?”

Tate smiled at her, though she could hardly see it under the mask, and said, “Ours.”

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## CHAPTER FOUR

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Trading one wedding for another didn't sound ideal to Lana. She had always known that her fate was to be married off and produce heirs, but that didn't mean the thought of it had ever become more palatable to her. She couldn't stomach the fact that this was her fate simply because she had been born a woman.

She was more an object than a woman to these men anyway. They did as they pleased, with zero regard for what she wanted.

On the other hand, at least she wasn't going to marry Balfour Cummings. She figured that counted for something, even if her new betrothed was hidden under that silver mask.

*Why is he wearin' it?*

Surely, it couldn't be simply to hide his identity, since it didn't cover his entire face and it was much more conspicuous than a simple rag. Could it be that he was hiding something else, like an injury?

Lana didn't want to ask. For all she knew, he would find it rude and she didn't want to anger him and play with his temper further. On top of that, he had a bandage on his hand, too, and Lana couldn't help but wonder if the two injuries—assuming that was what the mask was hiding—were connected.

“Well, I'm nae pleased about it,” she said, turning around to face straight ahead once more. Her wrists ached from the rope, and her thighs and arms burned from the effort it had taken to keep herself upright while bound on a horse, but that was the least of her worries now. “Ye cannae simply take a lass out o' her home.”

“Dae ye wish fer me tae take ye back?” Kian asked. “Because I can certainly dae that.”

“Nay!” Lana was quick to say, her hands gripping the saddle tightly, until her knuckles went bone-white. “Nay... I suppose I will have tae take me chances with ye.”

For all she knew, Kian was a cruel man, too. She had only known him for a little over an hour, and that was hardly enough time to find out his true character, so Lana didn't let her guard down. How could she, when the man had practically kidnapped her? Yet, he couldn't be worse than her intended.

“Dae the ropes hurt ye?” Kian asked a few moments later, much to Lana's surprise.

“They certainly are uncomfortable,” she said.

That didn't seem to faze Kian, though, who simply moved ahead along with the rest of the men. He only came to a stop a while later, glancing behind him as if on instinct.

Even Lana could tell that her father's men couldn't have followed them all this way. No, her father was bound to look for her, but he would do so with his armies prepared for a battle, once he and Laird Cummings were ready.

Kian jumped off the horse and then helped Lana to do the same, taking her under the shade of a large pine near the path. The rest of the men gathered the horses and brought them to the stream that ran a short walk ahead, but Kian stayed with her, sitting next to her under the tree.

"Let me see the rope," he said, and Lana extended her arms, allowing him to take her wrists in his hands. His touch was soothing as he rubbed at her forearms to release the tension, but then he made no move to take the rope off.

"Will ye nae untie me?" she asked, perplexed. "Surely, ye dinnae expect me tae run. There's naething around here!"

"What would stop ye from takin' one o' the horses an' fleein'?" Kian asked.

"The other men," Lana pointed out. "I couldnae run even if I wanted tae."

For a few moments, Kian seemed to consider it, looking at the rope around her wrists, but in the end, he only shook his head. "I cannae untie ye, lass. Ye

kicked me in the groin!”

“Aye, but I thought ye were tryin’ tae hurt me,” Lana said. “Any lass with some sense would have done the same.”

“Is that so?” Kian asked. “Or is it simply that ye’re spirited?”

“I dinnae see anythin’ wrong with either,” Lana said with an indignant huff. “If ye dinnae like me spiritedness, then perhaps ye shouldnae marry me.”

Kian looked at her with equal measures of fondness and exasperation. “I’m afraid what I think o’ yer character is irrelevant tae our weddin’. Are yer wrists better?”

Though she loathed to admit it, Lana nodded. “They’re fine,” she said. “Although, they would be better if ye untied me.”

“I’m sure,” Kian said, but once again, didn’t remove the rope. “Are ye thirsty?”

Lana nodded once more. She hadn’t realized just how thirsty she was until Kian asked her, but now she was desperate for some water—and for some food, for that matter. She hadn’t eaten in several hours, because she hadn’t managed to stomach a breakfast either.

“Here,” Kian said, offering her his flask. He uncapped it for her, and Lana

brought it to her lips, some of the cool water trickling down her chin as she gulped it down.

She didn't stop until it was almost empty. When she gave the flask back to Kian, he reached over and wiped away some drops that clung to her chin with his thumb, much to Lana's surprise. The gesture made her recoil for a moment, as she hadn't been expecting it, and Kian was quick to move his hand back.

"Forgive me," Kian said. "I didnae—"

"It's quite alright," Lana assured him, the tell-tale heat of a blush creeping over her cheeks. "I simply wasnae expectin' it."

Moments of silence stretched uncomfortably between them. Lana looked away, gazing at the forest that spread ahead of them, so vast it was seemingly endless. From the corner of her eye, she could see Kian busying himself with his satchel, rummaging through it until he found what he was looking for. He pulled out some salted meat, a bannock, and two apples, and then switched his water flask for another, taking a swig out of it.

"Here," he said, tearing the bannock in half and handing it to Lana. "I'm sure it's been a while since ye last had somethin' tae eat."

As if on cue, Lana's stomach rumbled, and her blush only deepened as she looked at Kian with wide, embarrassed eyes. He only laughed, though, giving her a small shrug.

“I thought so,” he said. “Eat. The keep isnae far, but it will take us all day tae get there.”

The two of them ate in silence. Along with the bannock, Kian gave her half of the salted meat and one of the apples, sharing everything he had with him. He even peeled the apple for Lana with his knife, taking care to remove the rind and every bruised part before he handed it to her.

No one had ever peeled an apple for her before. No one had made sure she would only get the best parts of the fruit, removing the bruised ones. Even when she lived in her father’s keep, the food she received was good simply because it was what her father ate, too. Save for her old governess and a few of the older maids who had helped raise her, everyone else was too scared of her father to pay her much attention.

But Kian was. He was making sure she was comfortable and that she had everything she needed for the ride, and Lana couldn’t help but warm up to him a little.

If she was to be kidnapped, then she may as well be kidnapped by Kian. Better him than her father or Laird Cummings, she figured. Still, it didn’t answer the question of why he had taken her in the first place.

“Kian... why did ye take me away?” she asked. “Ye said we’re goin’ tae our weddin’. Why take me from one weddin’ only tae bring me tae another?”

“It’s the only way tae stop the alliance between yer faither an’ Laird Cummings,” Kian said. “I’m very sorry it had tae be this way, but stoppin’



this alliance is what matters most. If I dinnae marry ye, war will ravage every clan in these parts, but if I dae, then Balfour Cummings cannae have ye, so he cannae have a solid alliance.”

It made sense, of course, that Kian would want to protect his clan and his allies, and Lana couldn't even blame him for kidnapping her and forcing her into another marriage when the stakes were so high. She had no doubt in her mind that he was right. If the Hay and the Cummings clans came to an agreement, it would mean the end for their enemies.

“I wonder if me faither will try tae give him me sister again,” Lana said. “She told me that Laird Cummings wouldnae accept her as his wife, but if I marry ye, then what other choice will he have but tae wed me sister?”

She hoped such a thing wouldn't happen. She hoped Laird Cummings would remain steadfast in his decision to not marry Deirdre, but now Kian would be backing him into a corner, and there was no telling what the man would do for power.

“He already tried tae give him yer sister?” Kian asked with a small frown. “Then we must move fast. We cannae risk that weddin' happenin'.”

“Ye cannae let it happen,” Lana said, leaning a little closer to look him in the eye, her gaze pleading. “Please. Anythin' ye must dae tae prevent it, dae it. Deirdre is too young, too... soft. She's lived in a convent her entire life. She's a gentle lass, she willnae survive bein' wed tae him.”

It took Lana a few moments to realize that her breath was running short, the

air not quite reaching her lungs. Her chest tightened uncomfortably, burning with the effort it took to expand it, and before she knew it, her fingers began to grow numb with panic.

She couldn't let Laird Cummings get his hands on her sister. She couldn't let him hurt her, but she had left her behind.

*Why did I leave her? Why did I let her stay there?*

It would have been preferable to drag her along. With Kian, she would have been safe. Safer than with their father anyway. Now there was no guarantee that their father would allow her to return to the convent, not if he had a use for her. Not if Laird Cummings wanted her.

“Lana... Lana, breathe.”

Kian's voice cut through her panic, though barely. She could hardly hear him, his voice distant and dampened by the buzzing of her ears, but his hands were solid on her arms, gripping her tightly.

“Breathe,” he repeated. “I promise ye, I'll dae anythin' in me power tae help yer sister. I willnae let her suffer.”

“Ye promise?” Lana asked, her voice cracking with desperation.

“I promise,” Kian said. He pulled her into his arms and Lana could do little

other than sag against him, laying her head on his shoulder.

It took Lana a short while to return to herself, but gathered her wits when she heard the other men approach. She pulled back from Kain abruptly, straightening the collar of her dress just as the first men appeared through the trees, joining them under the pine.

She didn't know what had taken over her. Even in the most desperate times in her life, she had never fallen into the arms of a stranger like this, seeking any comfort she could get, and now she couldn't help but worry that she had acted in such an inappropriate manner that Kian was bound to misunderstand her. Surely, he had said nothing because he felt pity for her, but perhaps his perception of her had been altered past the point of repair.

*An' what if the others saw me? What would they say?*

When she chanced a glance at Kian, though, he didn't seem to be bothered by it at all. He was just talking with his men, congratulating them for their victory.

Lana sat under the tree and watched them, until Kian declared it was time to leave. She could not stop thinking about her sister, about how she was now at their father's mercy, and she could only hope that he would send her back to the convent before it was too late.

The rest of the ride to the wherever they were going was a quiet affair, all the men just as tired from the day's events as Lana was. As the sun started to set, her fatigue caught up to her, and she could hardly keep her eyes open.

She was glad to see a castle appear on a hill as they approached it, its distant fires welcoming. All she wanted was to sleep and forget about the entire ordeal, though she worried that even if she slept, she would be plagued by nightmares of Deirdre being in danger. And by her stupidity not to realize it earlier.

*I'm a terrible sister.*

“This is it,” Kian said, as they passed through the castle gates and brought Lana back to reality. It was just like every other castle Lana had seen, with its stone walls and its sprawling courtyard. Guards stood on every corner of the defense walls and in the towers, watching over the castle and the people inside it, which meant that even if Lana wanted to, she could hardly leave that place.

When the gates had closed and Lana and Kian were off the horse, he finally cut the rope that bound her wrists. Lana rubbed at her skin, wincing at the burns.

“Ye could have simply untied me when I asked ye tae,” she pointed out. Had he, perhaps her wrists wouldn't hurt so much.

“I told ye why I didnae,” Kian reminded her yet looked remorseful, as he gestured at a passing maid to approach. “Miss Hay needs a room an' some clothes. See tae it that she is comfortable.”

“Of course,” the maid said, and began to usher Lana towards the entrance to

the main part of the castle. Lana glanced at Kian one last time over her shoulder as she followed the maid, wondering what would happen to her now.

Well, for one, she supposed, she would get married.



Tate kept the mask on until he was in Kian's study, since the only other person who knew his true identity was Macauley, Kian's most trusted advisor, who was already waiting for him. The last thing he wanted, was to risk someone seeing him around the castle when he wasn't supposed to be there.

He hated wearing the damn mask. He couldn't help but wonder how Kian could have it on for hours every day, never letting anyone see him without it.

"I saw the lass in the courtyard," Macauley said instead of greeting him, as he poured them both a cup of wine. Tate grabbed the one meant for him and drained it, so tired from that day that he felt it in his bones. "I assume it went well."

"It went fine," Tate said. "She's here now an' it's ye're issue tae deal with. I'm nae goin' tae involve meself in this any longer."

"I dinnae understand why ye're so against this," Macauley said. He was a wall of a man, tall and broad, with hair as black as ink. "Ye said it all went fine, did it nae?"

“Aye, it went fine,” Tate repeated. “If ye dinnae consider the fact that we took a lass out o’ her home an’ now her father will either attack or have Laird Cummings marry his younger daughter.”

“Dae ye think it’s a possibility?” Macauley asked, leaning forward a little, a bead of sweat forming over his brow.

“That he’ll attack? Och aye, surely.”

“Nay, nay,” Macauley said. “We ken he’ll attack. We left him nay choice. Dae ye think he’ll give the younger one tae Laird Cummings?”

“He might,” Tate said. “At least this is what Lana Hay fears. I told her I’d help the wee lassie, but I dinnae ken how tae dae that without makin’ everythin’ worse.”

“Our goal fer now is fer Kian tae wed Lana Hay,” Macauley said. “Everythin’ else is secondary. But I wanted tae speak with ye about this.”

“About what? The weddin’?” Tate asked. “I dinnae think I’m the right person tae talk tae about it. Ye can ask the housekeeper if ye have questions.”

“Och, dinnae jest,” Macauley said. “This is serious. I’m afraid ye cannae be done with this matter quite yet.”

Tate didn’t like the sound of that. He had agreed to it because Kian had other

matters to attend to, but he had made it clear that bringing Lana to the castle was all the involvement he would have. “Why?”

Tate had never seen Macauley fidget and turn this way and that in his chair before, as though he couldn't sit still. It only served to make him even more nervous, wondering what he had in stock for him.

“Tell me,” Tate urged, already certain that he wouldn't like what he would hear.

“Well, ye see... the weddin' is in two days.”

“Aye, I ken that. That was the plan from the start.”

“Aye,” Macauley said, pausing for a moment to take a deep breath. “Unfortunately, Kian willnae be back on time.”

With another sigh, Tate closed his eyes and let his head fall back against the chair. “Alright. Then we'll have tae delay the weddin', I suppose.”

“We cannae dae that,” Macauley said. “Time is o' the essence. We dinnae ken when Laird Hay will attack. The weddin' must happen afore that.”

“What will ye have me dae?” Tate said. It wasn't as though he could simply go and fetch Kian in the two days he had at his disposal, prone as Kian was to disappearing.

“Ye’ll have tae wear the mask an’ marry her,” Macauley said carefully, as though he feared what would follow.

And fear it he should.



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## CHAPTER FIVE

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“Ye cannae be serious,” Tate said, a laugh escaping him. Surely, Macauley was simply joking. No one in their right mind would suggest such a thing.

“I wish I wasnae,” Macauley said. “But what other choice dae we have? Kian will nae be back on time, an’ we dinnae have any time tae spare.”

Tate shook his head. “I willnae marry her.”

It was as simple as that. How could he be the one to stand at the altar when Kian was the one she was supposed to be marrying? It wasn’t a simple lie. It was deception, and a big one at that. Just the fact that he had pretended to be Kian and introduced himself to her as such was too much already. Tate was good at imitating his friend, but imitation could only go so far, and he could never know if Lana would figure it out. Besides, it wasn’t right. It wasn’t moral.

“Ye will only have tae stand there!” Macauley said. “It willnae make any difference. Once Kian is back, he will take over the role happily... or, well, at

least without any complaints.”

“Ye’re askin’ me tae make a vow that I cannae keep,” Tate pointed out. “The vow will come out o’ me own lips. It will be *me* there, vowin’ tae be loyal tae her in the presence o’ the Lord.”

“Ye’ll only be actin’ as a proxy,” Macauley insisted. “If I could dae it, I would, but I dinnae very much look like Kian, dae I? Only ye can dae it.”

“I willnae dae it!” Tate hissed, slamming his hands on the desk as he stood. He rounded it and began to pace back and forth, cursing Kian under his breath. Had it not been for his sudden disappearance, none of this would be happening. Tate couldn’t even understand why he had had to leave, why he had had more pressing matters to deal with. What could possibly be more important than his own wedding and the destruction of the alliance between the Hay and Cummings clans?

“This is what happens when he disappears fer nae reason!” Tate continued, stomping his feet as he walked around in circles behind Macauley. “Where has he even gone? Why isnae he here? An’ when is he comin’ back?”

“Tae the Sinclair Clan because they are complainin’ about somethin’ or other, an’ in ten days or so,” Macauley said calmly.

Tate didn’t share his calmness. “Ten days?” he shouted, throwing his hands up in the air. “Ten days! He is supposed tae be marryin’ an’ he willnae be back fer ten whole days!”

“Aye, well... ye ken how complex it is tae keep the peace with the Sinclairs,” Macauley said. “Anyway, sit down. Dinnae fash, everythin’ will be fine. If ye dinnae wish tae take his place, then I suppose we could put her in one o’ the cells and increase security around the castle.”

That brought Tate to a halt. “Put her in one o’ the cells?” he asked incredulously. “She’s nae a prisoner, Macauley. She’s goin’ tae be the lady o’ the clan an’ ye want tae put her in a cell?”

“Ye dinnae leave me with any other choice!” Macauley protested. “It will be the safest place fer her if the marriage doesnae happen. Her faither is plannin’ an attack as we speak. Dae ye think he’ll show mercy tae any o’ us? Nay. Nay, what he will dae is he’ll try tae kill us all an’ then snatch her right out o’ our hands, regardless o’ what she wants.”

Tate supposed that Macauley had a point. As preposterous a thought as it was, he was starting to think that marrying Lana in Kian’s place was at least better than the alternative.

Tate couldn’t understand how he always managed to get himself wrapped up in some nonsense like this. Ever since he had met Kian, his life was nothing but one thing he didn’t want to do after the other. But he couldn’t say no to him. Kian had saved his life.

And besides, despite everything, Tate loved the man. He was like a brother to him, and unfortunately, he was also often right.

“Fine,” Tate said. “Fine, I’ll dae it. But I’m nae happy about it.”

“That’s what ye say every time,” Macauley pointed out. “Dinnae fash, Tate. All ye have tae dae is keep pretendin’ ye’re Kian fer a while longer. Ye’ve been doin’ that fer so long already, what are a few more days?”

Tate had been doing it for a long time, but he had never had to marry someone else in his place before. He felt like it crossed a line that he didn’t want to cross at all, but it was too late now. Macauley was right; they couldn’t let Lana’s father find her before she was married to another man.

“I suppose, in a way, we’re doin’ her a favor,” Tate said, though deep down, he knew he was only saying it to make himself feel better about all the lies and the deception. “It’s better tae dae this than let Balfour Cummings have her. He would only be cruel tae the lass.”

“Precisely,” Macauley said. “Ye dinnae want her tae suffer, dae ye? This will keep her safe. It will keep us all safe.”

Tate nodded absentmindedly. Despite the fact that he knew it was true, that this wedding had to happen soon and it was the only way to ensure that both Lana and everyone in the Drummond and Murray clans would remain safe, he still couldn’t help but feel a weight in the pit of his stomach, a sense that he was doing the wrong thing.

He would do what had to be done. But he would also have to make it up to her somehow, just without her ever finding out the truth.



Two days. It had been two whole days since Lana had last seen Kian, and she had no idea where the man was or what was going to happen next. She was simply locked in a room which, though large and very comfortable, was starting to feel like a prison. No one would tell her anything, and she had seen no people other than the maids this entire time.

The servants brought her everything she asked for, no matter how outrageous the request. Lana had started small, asking for some paper and ink, not because she had anyone to write to, but rather because she thought it would be a good way to let out some of the frustration she felt. There was little else for her to do, after all, and writing seemed like a good outlet. Then, she began to ask for a few books, for a new tunic, and even for an egg custard tart, and the maids brought her everything she wanted within hours, if not minutes.

It didn't make up for the fact that she had no idea what was going on and no news regarding her upcoming wedding. If this was how Kian was going to be their whole lives, then Lana didn't know if she was willing to marry him after all, especially if it meant that he would keep her locked up in a room in the tower.

She hoped it was a temporary measure, more for his peace of mind than anything else, but then again, she couldn't be certain. She knew nothing about him, and so she figured it was better to be cautious than give him the benefit of doubt.

In the late morning of the third day, Lana lay in bed with a book, reading to pass the time, when half a dozen maids rushed in. She knew what she was up against now, having gone through the same thing only a few days prior, when they were getting her ready for her wedding to Laird Cummings. This time, however, she wouldn't be as cooperative.

“I wish tae speak with Laird Drummond,” she said. “I believe I am entitled to a conversation with me future husband afore we marry.”

“I’m afraid Laird Drummond is occupied at the moment,” one of the maids, the oldest of the group, said. She spoke gently, as if she was trying to get a petulant child to go to bed. “But we are here tae prepare ye fer the weddin’ an’ ye’ll see him soon enough.”

“I have been in this room fer two days!” Lana said, her frustration spilling out of her. “Laird Drummond hasnae told me a single thing an’ now I am expected tae simply dae as he wishes?”

The maid looked at her kindly as the others prepared her bath for her, but she didn’t say a single thing. Lana’s eyes found the tub filled with warm water, and she shook her head vehemently.

“I willnae bathe,” she said, hoping that would be enough to keep her future husband away.

“But it’s yer weddin’ day,” the maid pointed out. “An’ ye’ve been travellin’.”

“I willnae bathe,” Lana repeated. She had no desire to do what Kian wanted when he wouldn’t even see her, nor did she want him anywhere near her after the wedding. As long as he refused to talk to her and apologize, she didn’t want him around at all.

“Please, be sensible,” the maid urged. “A bath will help ye look very bonnie

fer yer husband.”

“I dinnae wish tae look bonnie fer him,” Lana insisted, as she reached for the tunic the women had brought her. It was a deep green color, clearly chosen to compliment her hair and eyes, and Lana looked at it with disdain. “I can dress meself. I have managed tae dae it every day so far.”

“We are happy tae help,” the maid said, but Lana shook her head.

“I’ll dae it meself,” she insisted. “Please, leave me alone.”

She could see that the maid wanted to argue in the way she hesitated, but in the end, she only called the others out of the room and left Lana alone, as she wished. The moment they were gone, Lana sat on the bed with a sigh and looked at the tunic in her hands, wishing she could tear it apart.

*An’ why shouldnae I? I am a simple pawn for everyone, am I nae?*

She had no reason to play nice for Kian. Perhaps if she looked as wild and untamed as possible, he would be inclined to give her a wide berth.

Grabbing the quill from the table, Lana brought it to the bed and pierced the fabric, tearing it in numerous places. She grinned maniacally as she did, pouring all her anger and hatred for Kian and Laird Cummings and her father out until there was nothing left in her.

Once she was pleased with her handiwork, she put the tunic on and then proceeded to run her fingers through her hair again and again, ruffling it until it was standing up at all directions.

Lana looked at her reflection in the looking-glass. She looked thoroughly unkempt, as though she had spent several nights outside in the wilderness, just as she had hoped. There was nothing appealing about her now. Surely, Kian wouldn't want to be anywhere near her.

Once she stepped out of her chambers, she found that the maids were still waiting for her, along with several guards. They all looked horrified upon seeing her, and the oldest maid approached her once more, in the same kind and gentle manner as before.

“Perhaps it would be best if ye allowed us tae help ye with yer dress an’ yer hair,” she suggested with a smile.

“Nay, I’m ready,” Lana said, returning the maid’s smile, only her own was smug and self-satisfied. “We can head tae the chapel.”

For a few moments, no one moved. They simply stood there, looking dubiously at Lana, until the maid gestured at them to go.

“We’re late already,” she said. “Take her tae the chapel.”

The guards did as they were told, two of them walking ahead of Lana while the other three remained behind her. It seemed like Kian had learned from her



father's mistake and had made sure that she had plenty of guards to accompany her to the chapel, but he was still going to get a very bad surprise.

Lana followed them out of the castle and to the chapel. The entire time, her heart thumped in her chest, its beat reverberating throughout the rest of her body. Despite the fact that she wanted it all to go terribly, she couldn't help but be filled with anxiety at the thought that this time there was no way out of this wedding. Even if she looked less than palatable, Kian would still marry her. Neither of them had any other choice.

Once they reached the chapel, Lana took a moment for herself, along with a deep breath. Then, she walked in.

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## CHAPTER SIX

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This wasn't how Tate had expected his wedding day to be. At sunrise, he was awoken by a maid with his breakfast and water to bathe, along with fresh clothes for him to wear. Kian's clothes, in Kian's chambers, surrounded by Kian's things. It was nothing new to him, of course, but he couldn't deny the awkwardness of inserting himself in another man's world.

*This isnae me weddin' day. This is Kian's weddin' day, an' I'm just a proxy.*

He only had to endure this charade for a little longer, and then Kian would be back to take his rightful place and Tate would finally be left alone.

He could hardly stomach any food. The wedding had been scheduled for noon, so when the time came, Tate made his way out of the castle, eager to bring this all to an end as soon as possible.

Macauley was waiting for him by the castle doors, a big smile spreading over his lips when he spotted him. Tate couldn't bring himself to return it, and he was certain that his gloominess infused the air around him.

“Big day,” Macauley said, as he slapped Tate’s shoulder amicably.

“I think ye forget it’s nae me own,” Tate mumbled, shooting Macauley an unimpressed look.

“Big day regardless,” Macauley said, waving a hand dismissively. “Are ye ready?”

“As ready as I can be,” Tate said. He would be much sterner with Kian moving forward, he thought, lest he finds himself in other ridiculous situations in the future. Once he returned, Tate would make it clear to him that they couldn’t keep doing this. Something had to change.

He and Macauley walked down the path to the chapel, and once there, everything started to become real for him. Lana would be there at any moment, and he hardly had any time to calm himself, his nerves getting the better of him as his hands began to shake.

He clasped them behind his back. It wasn’t the time to show his feelings.

Distantly, he was aware that Macauley was chatting with the priest, though he didn’t pay any attention to what either of them was saying. Instead, his gaze was glued to the path that stretched towards the castle, and he kept trying to listen out whether anyone was approaching. He wished that Lana wouldn’t show, that the whole wedding would be called off, but he knew that not only would that not happen, but that he also shouldn’t be wishing for it.

This wedding had to happen for the good of the clans.

It was only moments later that Lana appeared, but when he saw her Tate was more than a little surprised. She looked as though she had been chased through the woods by a pack of wild animals, her hair messy under her veil and her dress torn in multiple places. Even so, she approached as though nothing had happened, and Tate could even detect a hint of smugness in the way she carried herself, standing proud and smirking at him.

*She did this on purpose.*

There was no other explanation. Surely, the guards she had with her, who were now standing right outside the chapel, wouldn't have let anything happen to her. No, Lana had done this herself, perhaps in an attempt to make herself as undesirable as possible.

It wasn't working, in any case; messy hair and some holes in her tunic were hardly enough to make her undesirable when her eyes were so bright and her lips so rosy, so inviting.

Besides, Tate couldn't help but chuckle with amusement at her antics. The sight of her like this brought a smile to his lips, making some of his anxiety and tension dissipate. Even his hands stopped shaking, and he could finally let them fall by his sides.

There was a certain form of solidarity Tate felt, although Lana surely couldn't. It was good to know that she wanted this just about as much as he

did, which was not at all. Tate wished he could say something to her, assure her that everything would be fine.

“Ye have an interestin’ appearance fer a bride,” he told her when she came to stand next to him. “Perhaps we should go out in the woods an’ marry.”

“Dae ye like it, me laird?” Lana asked, her tone dripping with mockery. “I did it just fer ye.”

Tate shook his head, glad that Lana couldn’t see his amused smile. Kian would have a handful waiting for him when he returned, and Tate, for one, couldn’t wait to see it. It served him right, he thought, for everything he had put Tate through.

“Very much,” Tate said, just as the priest began the ceremony. It went smoothly, much to his surprise. The priest was to the point, seemingly just as eager to bring everything to an end as he was. Tate could hardly blame him, with the way Lana looked.

There was a hiccup in the ceremony when Lana remained silent after being prompted to speak her vows. Tate frowned and turned to look at her.

Lana remained silent. She was probably only being defiant, but the more she stalled, the more agitated Tate became. He didn’t have the time or the patience for this. Though he understood that Lana didn’t want to marry him, he at least expected her to do the mature thing and cooperate, for everyone’s best interests.

“Lana,” he said through gritted teeth. “Yer vows.”

Lana still didn't speak. She only looked at him through narrowed eyes, her hands clenched into fists by her hips.

Tate took a step closer and grabbed one of those hands, pulling her towards him until their noses were almost touching. Lana was startled by the sudden movement and tried to snatch her hand back, but Tate wouldn't let her go.

“I've been kind tae ye, but it doesnae mean that I willnae dae anythin' that is necessary tae get ye tae cooperate,” he said quietly, staring into her eyes. “Dae ye understand? If ye dinnae dae it yerself, then I'll have tae make ye.”

As he spoke, he loosened his grip on Lana's hand, and she was quick to pull it back. Her mouth was pressed into a thin, firm line, and Tate could see the glint of unshed tears in her eyes, but she didn't let them fall.

Instead, she said her vows quickly, mumbling them. It was good enough for the priest, though, so it was good enough for Tate, too. As long as they could get on with the ceremony, he was happy.

The two of them, along with the priest and Macauley, made their way into the chapel for the mass that followed the wedding. There was no one else there, not even the guards, who stayed outside, and once again, the priest was quick to bring the ceremony to an end.

There would be no grand celebration, none of the usual feast for the whole

clan to mark this moment. Not only did he not want to a celebration and was certain the same was true for Lana, but the more he was around people, the more likely it was someone would figure out he wasn't Kian.

“Will ye please have some food sent up tae our chambers?” Tate told Macauley. Now that his nerves were settling, Tate found himself starving. Besides, he was in dire need of some wine.

“O' course,” Macauley said. “Congratulations, me laird.”

“Thank ye,” Tate said drily, before he turned to Lana. “Let's go.”

“Will there be nae feast?” she asked.

“Dae ye want one?”

For a moment, Lana considered it, but in the end, she simply said, “Nay.”

“I thought that may be the case,” Tate said. “Come.”

The two of them walked back to the castle in silence. Neither of them spoke a single word until they were in Kian's chambers, where a maid was waiting for them with a tray of food and wine. Sometimes Tate couldn't understand how Macauley managed to get things done so quickly, but that was precisely why he was Kian's most valued advisor.

Tate recognized the maid as one of Kian's favorites, a young woman he often took to his bed. To keep up the pretense, he leaned close to her and whispered a *thank you* in her ear as his hands took the tray from her, his fingers gliding over her own for a moment, a promise that he would find her later.

Well, *he* wouldn't; but he was certain that, eventually, Kian would.

Once he had closed the door, Lana removed her veil, revealing not only the state of her hair in full, but also her backside. Tate's eyes widened when he saw that one of the tears in her dress was right on her rear, something she must have failed to notice before leaving the room that morning.

He was glad she had been wearing that veil. The only thing that covered her now was the thin fabric of her chemise, and Tate could see the curve of her body under it, soft and enticing. Within moments, he was hardening under his tunic, the sight of her forcing his blood to rush to his groin.

He said nothing on the matter, wondering how long it would take Lana to notice on her own. Instead, he put the tray down and poured them both a cup of wine, handing one to her.

"Well, ye got what ye wanted," she said, as she slammed the drink back in a way that he hadn't even seen men twice her size do. At this rate, she was bound to get drunk, but when she finished it, she didn't ask for another. "Will ye force me intae yer bed now too?"

Tate sighed, running a hand through his hair. "I willnae force ye tae dae



anythin' ye dinnae wish tae dae," he said. "Nae in bed, at least. I'll bed ye when ye beg me tae."

It was something Kian would say, he thought. He took a sip of his wine and then, in true Kian fashion, he began to remove his clothes one by one, until he was fully naked. He doubted Lana would come close enough to notice his body to the point where she would be able to tell the difference between him and Kian later, and besides, she had to get used to seeing her husband in the nude. Kian made a habit of it, much to Tate's chagrin. He had walked in on him in the nude enough times to know to ask now before entering his chambers.

"What are ye doin'?" Lana shrieked, swiftly turning around so that she wouldn't have to look at him. "Ye said... ye said ye wouldnae!"

"I said I willnae force ye," Tate pointed out. "But these are me chambers, an' I like tae be nude. I'm more comfortable this way."

As he spoke, he walked over to the bed and made himself comfortable—or at least as comfortable as he could be, considering that he was painfully hard. With the way Lana stood, facing the other way, he had a full view of her backside, and there was only so much he could do to keep the fantasy of the two of them together out of his mind.

It was just that, though: a fantasy. He wasn't about to try and seduce his friend's wife.



It was clear to Lana that she had been mistaken about Kian. He was not as kind and gentle as she had thought. If anything, he was a brute, who very rudely threatened to force her to do his bidding, and who was now walking naked around their chambers.

*That beast! He couldnae even wait a minute afore he undressed!*

Lana refused to turn around. The last thing she wanted was to come face to face with him when he was wearing nothing. She would much rather spend the rest of the day staring at the wall.

“Well? Will ye take off yer mask, as well?” she asked. He had taken off everything else, why not the mask too?

The answer came swiftly and coldly. “Nay,” he said.

That surprised Lana. She couldn't help but wonder what he was hiding if he refused to take off the mask even now. Was he planning on spending the rest of his life with the mask on at all times? Would he never take it off now that they were sharing their chambers?

Lana didn't question it. She didn't see a reason to care. She only stood there in silence, wishing she had insisted that she be given her own chambers instead.

She lost count of how long she had been standing there. Behind her, she could hear Kian shift, eating from the tray and even standing up for a

moment, before leafing through a book. Eventually, her legs started to hurt, and she wanted to sit, but she didn't want to look at him.

There was only way to fix this, she decided, and then closed her eyes firmly before she made her way to the bed—or at least so she thought. She took a few steps and collided with a chair instead, a grunt escaping her at the sudden pain blooming on her shin.

There was a laugh from the bed, bright and amused, and Lana's rage bubbled over. She couldn't help but open her eyes to tell him off, but the sight of him stretched out on the bed with his manhood straining against his stomach rendered her speechless for a moment.

Only for a moment, though.

“What are ye doin’? Ye said ye wouldnae!” she shouted. “Why are ye... why is it...?”

She couldn't even say the words. Her face was flaming, the blood rushing to her head, and she felt like she would collapse on the floor at any moment. Her hand reached out to steady herself on the chair, but none of it helped with the dizziness from the sheer force of her sudden embarrassment.

“Well, I'm nae forcin' ye tae dae anythin' about it, am I?” Kian asked with a small shrug. “But I am a man, ye ken. An' yer backside is showin'.”

Instantly, Lana forgot all about Kian's nudity. “Excuse me?”

“Yer backside,” he repeated. “Ye must have torn yer dress on the wrong spot. Thankfully, the veil was coverin’ ye.”

Lana whipped her head around, trying to look for the tear. At first, she couldn’t see it, but when she shifted the fabric of her tunic with her hands, she spotted it with ease.

And she wished she would drop dead.

How could it be that she hadn’t noticed earlier? How could she have been so careless? The fact that she had been wearing the veil was a small mercy, at least. No one else had seen her body.

But Kian had, and he was aroused because of it. Lana didn’t think she could turn any redder, her face burning like the sun as she rushed behind a screen in the corner of the room, where she could hide and change her clothes. Just as she reached it, though, she stumbled once more in her hurry and fell face-first to the floor, a thud and a groan echoing around the room.

Kian had the gall to laugh at her again, and that perhaps hurt more than falling on the stone floor. Lana had lost every single shred of dignity she had, and she hated Kian for rubbing salt into the wound.

It would be a long marriage. Unless she could help it, of course.

With a huff, Lana stood and took off the tattered tunic she was wearing, replacing it with another, intact one. Then, she wore one more over it for good measure, before she gathered every single spare piece of clothing she had and headed to the bed. She tried to ignore Kian's naked body as she built a wall in the middle of the mattress, making sure that no part of them would be touching when she would go to sleep that night. When she was happy with her handiwork, she took a step back.

"There," she said.

"Is this necessary?" Kian asked, and though Lana couldn't see it, she knew he was smirking at her from the way his eye crinkled in the corner and sparkled with mirth.

"I believe it is," she said. "I dinnae wish fer ye tae expect anythin' from me."

"Dinnae fash," Kian said. "I expect naething."

Somehow, Lana didn't believe that. The wall was a small comfort, just like the layers she was wearing, but it helped keep her calm. She knew that the wedding meant nothing if they didn't consummate it, but they could lie their way through that. She didn't actually have to perform any of her wifely duties, and so she wouldn't.

Kian could go and fetch the maid if that's what he wanted, Lana thought bitterly. After all, he seemed terribly fond of her.

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## CHAPTER SEVEN

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Tate had a problem. In fact, Tate had several problems, but the most pressing one that morning was that he was fully awake and painfully aroused. His body didn't seem to understand that Lana didn't want anything to do with him, and even if she did, it wasn't his place to do anything with her at all, since she belonged to another man.

And not just any other man. Tate's best friend, the man who had single-handedly saved his life. He would never betray Kian that way. He couldn't.

Turning on his side on the bed, he gazed at Lana, who was still asleep. She hadn't changed out of the layers she had worn the previous day to hide her body from him, and that wall of fabric was still between them, but none of that stopped him from thinking about what would happen if he reached out and touched her.

*Which I willnae dae. She doesnae want me. I dinnae want her, either. Nae really.*

Of course, he didn't want Lana. She was a beautiful woman, that much was

true, but she was also impossible to be around. The only reason Tate was so attracted to her, he told himself, was because he had caught a glimpse of her body and it had been a while since he had last been with a woman. He was simply frustrated. He needed to blow off some steam and then everything would be fine, and those thoughts would disappear.

It didn't help that he had had to sleep with that ridiculous mask. It had taken him a long time to fall asleep the previous night, and even when he finally did, he kept waking up whenever it rubbed against his skin. He couldn't wait to go to Kian's study and remove it for a while.

Quietly, he stood from the bed. He dressed, trying to make as little noise as possible so as to not wake Lana, and then he slipped out of the room.

Instantly, he could breathe easier. That was all he needed: some distance from her. The good thing was that she was bound to give him the distance he needed gladly, since she didn't want to be around him, either.

*I hope Kian doesnae blame me fer her behavior once he returns.*

Tate had his breakfast in Kian's study, just like Kian himself. Once he was done, though, the restlessness and frustration returned. He needed to do something about it before he ended up doing something that he would regret, and so he decided that the best course of action would be to train with the men. That always helped him focus and forget about everything else.

The training grounds were full of men by the time Tate made it there. Some were sparring, while others were simply standing and watching, chatting

among themselves. The first thing Tate did was to grab one of the dulled practice swords and throw himself into the arena, waving the blade around.

“Who wishes tae train with me?” he asked.

There was no shortage of men with whom Tate could spar. Everyone was happy to spend some time training with the laird of the clan, and thankfully, Tate could match Kian’s skills rather well. Both of them had been training since they were children, and their own sparring sessions often ended in mutual annihilation. Tate was glad they were allies. He would hate having to fight such a formidable enemy.

The first young man who stepped up to the challenge was Hamish, one of Kian’s more rowdy and enthusiastic soldiers. He was a few years younger than Tate’s twenty-six, years of age and the mere mention of a fight made his green eyes light up.

Hamish walked around Tate, circling him slowly. Tate remained still, tracking the movement from the corner of his eye. That was the problem with Hamish, one Tate had pointed out to the man before: he liked to show off. Tate only wanted to win.

Once he had walked a full circle around him, Hamish charged. Tate was quick to parry the blow, their blades colliding with a clang. Instantly, he felt better. There was no focus like the one he had to have in battle—even if said battle was fought with dulled swords—and for a little while, he could forget all about Lana and how terribly Kian’s plan was going so far.



Hamish stepped back, grinning at Tate. Then he approached again, swinging his sword to hit him across the shoulder, but Tate ducked, avoiding the blow, and brought his fist down on Hamish's stomach.

Dropping his sword on the ground, Hamish stumbled back and doubled over, clutching at his injury. He looked at Tate with wide eyes before his legs gave in and he fell onto the ground, too, collapsing to his knees.

Two other men rushed to him as Tate sank his sword into the earth with a sigh. He walked up to the other man and offered him his hand, helping him back up to his feet.

“Take him tae the healer,” he said. Tate doubted his punch could have done any serious damage, but it was better to be safe than sorry, he figured. The last thing he needed was for something to happen to one of Kian's men while they were under his supervision—and because of him, on top of that.

The two men dragged Hamish away. Once the arena was empty, Tate's gaze fell on his next victim, a tall, broad man who surely wouldn't be as easy to knock out. He gestured at him to join him, and though he did so reluctantly, he approached with another sword in his hand.

Tate had him on his knees within minutes. Then he fought another and another, until those who were left were too scared to spar with him.

“Me laird.”

Macauley's voice cut through the sound of Tate's heavy breathing. Tate turned to see him there, standing by the bushes that lined the training area.

"Aye."

"May I have a word?"

Tate glanced back at the men, who were avoiding his gaze. No one wanted to be the next to fight him, so there was little point in forcing them.

Tate handed his sword to one of them and then walked over to Macauley, who led him away from the training grounds and back towards the castle.

"What is it?" Tate asked. "Any news from Kian?"

"Nay," Macauley said. "I simply wanted tae spare the lads from ye."

Tate rolled his eyes at Macauley, unable to stop himself. "I didnae hurt them. Nay much."

Sure, he had thrown a few punches and he had hit them hard enough with his sword that they were bound to bruise, but it was nothing they hadn't experienced before. He hadn't been so hard on them, or at least he didn't think so.

“Well, it certainly looked like ye did,” Macauley said. “An’ ye seemed frustrated. I didnae wish tae risk ye killin’ one o’ them.”

“I wouldnae kill them!” Tate couldn’t believe that Macauley would even suggest such a thing. “I didnae even have a real sword!”

“I’m merely jestin’,” Macauley said, giving Tate an amused look. “But we cannae have ye fightin’ with them like this when ye have the mask on. It’s nae good fer the morale.”

“It’s nae good fer them tae ken that they have a strong laird?” Tate asked. “I would think it would be worse if they could defeat me.”

“It’s good fer them tae ken their laird is strong, but it’s nae good fer them tae fear him,” Macauley said. “I cannae believe I have tae explain this tae ye. Ye should ken better than that.”

“This is why I’m nae a laird,” Tate said with a grin and a small shrug. He had never liked all the rules and responsibilities that came with being a laird, and he was glad that he didn’t have to worry about assuming such a position. The Murray Clan was safe in the hands of his brother. The Drummond Clan was safe in Kian’s hands. Tate never wanted to be the head of any clan.

“Thankfully, Kian will be back soon enough an’ ye willnae have tae pretend tae be one,” Macauley said. “An’ ye willnae have tae put up with the lass either. I ken she can be... frustratin’, but perhaps there are better outlets fer ye than fightin’ with the lads. A maid, fer example. Plenty o’ them in the castle.”

“What are ye suggestin’?” Tate asked, though he knew perfectly well what Macauley was trying to tell him.

“I’m suggestin’ ye bed a lass afore ye become so angry that ye turn insufferable,” Macauley said. “Ye’re nae actually married tae Lana. Ye have nae reason tae remain celibate. It’s only a week until Kian returns, but a week may be too long fer ye. When was the last time ye even bedded a lass?”

That gave Tate pause. Of course, he knew that he wasn’t really married to Lana and that he could very easily pick one of the maids to sleep with and release some of that tension building up inside him, but it somehow didn’t feel right.

There was something about Kian’s return that also made something cold and heavy coil in his stomach. He didn’t know what it was, that strange void that seemed to want to swallow him whole. Every time he thought about it, the relief he felt at not having to pretend to be him anymore was marred by something he couldn’t name.

“I’m nae discussin’ this with ye,” he told Macauley.

“Is it because it’s been that long?”

When Tate turned to glare at the man, he found him smirking, clearly too amused by this conversation. It had, in fact, been very long, longer than Tate would have liked, and being around Lana didn’t help. However, he wasn’t about to admit any of this to Macauley.

Perhaps the man was right, as much as Tate didn't want to admit it. Perhaps it was time to give in and pick a maid with whom to spend some time. It could be quick. Lana wouldn't have to know, and it wouldn't sully Kian's reputation if he removed the mask.

"I'm only sayin' ye should consider it as an option," Macauley said.

"Aye," said Tate. "I'll consider it. Is there anythin' else I need tae dae while Kian is gone?"

The two of them stepped into the castle, automatically heading towards Kian's study. It was where they spent most of their time, whether Kian was in the castle or not, and Tate was grateful for it, since he could finally remove the mask.

Inside the study, Macauley poured them both a dram, and the two of them sat opposite each other, with Tate in Kian's chair. He removed the mask and placed it gingerly on the desk, even though he knew this was one of many spares Kian had, and grabbed the cup, draining it in one long sip. He leaned back on the chair and closed his eyes with a sigh, some of the tension melting off his shoulders.

Perhaps the answer to all his problems was whiskey, he thought.

"Have ye considered what will happen after Kian returns?" he asked. It had been a question that plagued him ever since he realized he would have to be around Lana for much longer than he was around others as Kian. "Surely,

they will consummate the marriage.”

“That is the plan, aye,” Macauley said.

“What happens” Tate asked “if Lana will be able tae tell the difference.”

That seemed to give Macauley pause. He blinked at his cup a few times and then brought it to his lips, deep in thought.

“I dinnae think either o’ us considered this,” he admitted. “Well, the good thing is that the lass seems tae want tae stay as far away from ye as possible... an’ therefore, Kian.”

Tate failed to see how that was a good thing when they were supposed to produce heirs, at the very least, if not be a happy couple. He supposed it suited their little scheme, but apart from that, it seemed like an inconvenience at best and a tragedy at worst.

“Nay one else has realized so far,” Macauley added. “If the lass continues tae hate ye... well, Kian, then eventually she will ask fer her own chambers an’ she’ll see him as little as possible. It willnae be an issue.”

“An’ if she doesnae?” Tate asked. “If she... if they fall in love?”

The question left a bitter taste in the back of his throat. Tate refilled his cup and took a sip, trying to chase it away.

“Then that’s a problem we’ll have tae solve when an’ if the time comes,” said Macauley, giving him a shrug. Tate couldn’t understand how the man wasn’t more concerned about this. He seemed to be the only one always on edge, always worrying that things would somehow go wrong. Both Kian and Macauley were more than happy to take risks, time after time.

“Fine,” Tate said with a sigh. There was no point in arguing with either of them, after all. So far, they had been proven right. No one suspected Tate and no one had figured out that Kian was gone.

Tate’s thoughts drifted back to Lana and to the unhappy future that lay ahead of her. He wished there was something he could do about it, but there was nothing he could do. He hoped her children with Kian would bring her happiness. He hoped she would have other things to look forward to, even if love wasn’t one of them.

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## CHAPTER EIGHT

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Lana had nothing to do. She had never experienced such all-encompassing ennui, such an urgent need to do something, anything, before she lost her mind. Even when she lived with her father, who rarely allowed her to do anything, she could at least walk around the castle grounds in peace, making the most out of her days.

But now she wasn't allowed to go anywhere without a guard or two. She didn't know what it was that Kian feared so much. There was nowhere for her to go after all, not with the amount of guards posted around the castle walls at all times of the day and night. Escape wasn't even in her mind, not when she knew she wouldn't get far.

In the sunroom by the great hall, Lana was sprawled over a heavy couch, her head pillowed on her arm on the plush blue seats. She groaned in frustration as her restlessness grew, her eyes narrowing when she turned to look at the two guards who were following her around that day.

They always rotated. Lana didn't even have time to learn their names properly sometimes.



The sun streamed into the room through the large windows on the stone walls, bathing the place in golden light. It was such a nice day, after days of overcast weather, and all she wanted to do was go outside the walls on a ride.

But Kian would never allow it.

“I am tired o’ sittin’ here all day!” she complained, but predictably, there was no answer from the guards. She didn’t know what she was expecting. Everyone grumbled when it was their turn to watch her, and she was well aware of that. Those men weren’t trying to be her friends.

She was treated as a prisoner in what was now supposed to be her own home. She was the lady of that castle and yet no one was acting like it.

Exasperated, Lana swung her legs and stood, fixing her updo, which had fallen into pieces around her face. The guards didn’t seem to take notice, but she could feel their gazes on her, never leaving her alone.

“Well, I cannae stay here all day,” she said and then marched to the door. Predictably, the two men followed closely behind, trailing after her as she walked around the castle grounds.

She always made sure to stay away from the gates, just in case the guards got it in their heads that she was trying to escape, but otherwise, she decided that she wanted to explore the castle. There were still plenty of parts she hadn’t seen yet.

Lana started with the courtyard. It was such a beautiful day that she didn't see why she should be confined within the castle, so she walked around the gardens, greeting everyone she met on her way.

It seemed the people weren't as eager to greet her. Though everyone was polite, bowing to her, they barely met her gaze.

It wasn't until she was by a small door that she finally met someone who looked at her properly, not avoiding eye contact. The door was open and Lana could see into a room filled with dried herbs and jars, where a large table stood, covered in papers and all sorts of trinkets. The woman who stood outside was picking some flowers from a nearby bush, her dark hair pulled messily back and her white apron stained with so many things that it was like a patchwork of fabric.

"Good mornin'," the woman said with a cheerful smile.

"Good mornin'!" Lana was instantly fascinated by the woman. There was a warmth to her, that drew Lana to her. "I dinnae believe we've met."

"Nay, we havenae," said the woman. "I'm Elspet, me lady. The clan's healer."

"I'm Lana," Lana said. "Lana Hay."

"Lana Drummond," Elspet corrected her. It hadn't occurred to Lana before that she wasn't Lana Hay anymore. She didn't know which one she preferred.

Either way, she was branded as a woman who belonged to a terrible man—either her father or her husband.

“Aye... that’s right,” Lana said quietly, turning the idea over in her head for a moment, before she forced herself to smile. There was no point in burdening anyone else with this. “May I ask what ye are doin’?”

“I’m picking borage flowers, me lady,” Elspet said. “Good fer many uses, borage is. Keeps the heart healthy.”

Lana knew precisely what borage was used for, but she had never seen it before. She looked at the flowers in Elspet’s hands with curiosity, reaching out to brush her fingers over some of the petals. “They’re very bonnie.”

“Aye,” Elspet said. “Would ye like one?”

“Och, I wouldnae want tae waste it,” Lana said.

“It’s nae a waste at all,” Elspet said, as she handed her one of the flowers. “There’s plenty o’ them around here. Laird Drummond’s grandfather brought the seeds here decades ago and they have flourished.”

Lana looked around them and noticed that this part of the garden was, indeed, full of patches of this flower. She took it from Elspet, turning the stem over in her hands as she admired it. “Thank ye.”

As they spoke, Elspet's gaze fell on the two guards and she smiled warmly at them. "Are ye alright, lads?" she asked. "Why dinnae ye go and see if ye can find me some tonics in town?"

"We're meant tae follow Lady Drummond at all times," one of the men said. "But we can have someone else bring ye the tonics."

"It's fine," Elspet said, waving a hand dismissively. "I'll watch over her while ye're gone. And ye can get some ale tae drink, too."

She reached into her pockets and produced a small pouch of coins, handing them to a bewildered guard, who looked like he didn't want to take it, but had no other choice.

"Go on then," Elspet said, all but shooing the two of them away.

The two guards turned around slowly and left, much to Lana's surprise. No matter what she had tried to tell them, it hadn't worked. They never left her alone, unless Kian was there, but now they barely argued with Elspet.

"Dinnae get me intae trouble," Elspet said. "I figured ye may want tae spend a few hours without them over yer head."

"I dinnae ken how tae thank ye," said Lana, her mouth hanging open just slightly. "I've been tryin' tae get away from them fer days, their mere presence is making me feel like a prisoner!"

“Aye, well... the poor lads are only doin’ their job,” Elspet pointed out. “Come now, me lady. I’ll make ye a cup o’ tea.”

“Please, call me Lana,” she said. “I dinnae feel like Lady Drummond.”

“I’m nae surprised.” Elspet led Lana into the room, and she was surprised to find that it was much bigger than she originally thought. There was a row of beds pushed against one wall, though all of them were now empty, and then another door that led somewhere else at the far end of the room. There was even what looked like a small kitchen, with a hearth and a few pots and pans.

Lana took a seat by the table as Elspet hurried to clean up, pushing everything to the side. “Forgive the mess,” Elspet said. “I dinnae usually have anyone in here.”

“It’s alright,” Lana assured her. If anything, she liked to see all the little things Elspet had strewn on the table, from herbs to vials and from books to scribbled pages. It was a cozy space, like an extension of Elspet herself. “Have ye been the clan healer long?”

Elspet busied herself with the tea, putting all sorts of herbs in it. Lana didn’t know what half of them were, but it smelled divine.

“Och aye, over two decades now,” Elspet said. “I started as a wee lass, trainin’ under the previous healer, and I havenae left since.”

Lana itched to ask Elspet why Kian was wearing that mask. If she had been

the healer of the Drummond clan for so long, then she had surely treated him for whatever it was that he was hiding and she knew better than anyone else what the damage was. And yet she couldn't bring herself to ask. It would be terribly rude, she feared. It would be best to let Kian take his time and tell her himself.

Then again, he was never particularly polite to her.

*I willnae stoop tae his level.*

"I've studied some o' this, too," Lana said. "Unfortunately, me faither didnae allow our healer tae teach me, but I learnt what I could from books and from what he would tell me when faither wasnae near. Later I had the opportunity tae work with a healer away from home."

It was her biggest regret, that she hadn't managed to learn more about healing from the healer in the Murray castle, she had had so much more to learn. Lana loved to help people, but she didn't think she had the knowledge she needed just yet to be useful to anyone on her own.

"That's nae very nice," Elspet said. "Perhaps I could teach ye, if ye'd like. The books can only teach ye this much."

"Would ye dae that?" Lana asked, her eyes widening in surprise. "Fer me?"

"If ye'd like," Elspet said with a smile. "It's always nice tae have an apprentice who wishes tae learn. And I'm afraid I have nae apprentice yet."

Nae children o' me own, ye see. Nae one tae pass down the craft.”

“I would love tae learn,” Lana said earnestly. She wished she could have learnt more sooner, but it was never too late, she figured. Elspet could show her everything the books couldn't.

Perhaps it wouldn't be so bad, after all, her life in Drummond Castle. Even if she had to put up with Kian, she would at least have this. Besides, Kian didn't seem to be particularly interested in her, so Lana could probably spend most of her time with Elspet, doing what she liked the most.

As long as she didn't have the guards over her head, and as long as she didn't have to fight with Kian all the time, then she could be content.



The talk with Macauley had put Tate in deep thought. The unavoidable truth of the matter was that Tate was on edge all day, every day, because of Lana. He was always ready to explode, and it was the poor soldiers who usually had to put up with his wrath.

It was no way to live. He didn't want to frighten the men, and he certainly didn't want to make Lana any more miserable than she already was, just because he was miserable, too.

It was time for a change, he decided. He had to put his anger aside, as much as he could, and try to be patient. His troubles were almost over. Only a few more days and Kian would be back.

He didn't dwell on the possible reasons why that thought didn't make him feel much better.

After putting on the mask, he left Kian's study and made his way to the kitchen. Mrs. Beaton, the elderly housekeeper, was there as always, giving orders to the other servants.

"Have ye never peeled a carrot afore, lass?" Mrs. Beaton asked one of the servants who was hunched over a pile of carrots. She held up the one the girl had just peeled, looking at it carefully. "Half the peel is still on!"

"Mrs. Beaton," said Tate, smiling at her under the mask. "May I have a word?"

"Me laird!" Mrs. Beaton exclaimed as she approached him on stubby legs. "Are ye hungry? Shall I cook ye somethin'?"

"Nay, nay... I only wish tae take Lady Drummond tae a ride on the morrow," Tate said. "We will need tae take some food with us."

"O' course," said Mrs. Beaton. "Leave it tae me. I will prepare ye everythin' ye'll need."

"Nae too much," Tate warned her. "Or I'll have tae carry it."

"Will ye nae take any servants with ye, me laird?"



Tate shook his head. “Nay, it will only be me and Lady Drummond.” He didn’t want to take anyone else with them, since he wasn’t as used to being followed by guards and servants at all times as Kian was. He put up with it when he had to, but there was no reason for him to take half a dozen more people with him for a ride in the woods, especially when he was trying to avoid anyone that could see that he was not really Kian.

Mrs. Beaton regarded him with concern for a moment. “I see... well, in that case, perhaps ye could tell me what ye’d wish tae take with ye.”

“Aye, I’ll have a maid bring ye a list,” Tate said. “Thank ye.”

“Are ye alright, me laird?” Mrs. Beaton asked, just as Tate turned around to leave. “Yer voice... it sounds... different?”

Tate cursed under his breath and cleared his throat. He was usually good at impersonating Kian’s pitch, but sometimes, he forgot himself. “Quite well, Mrs. Beaton. But perhaps I should pay the healer a visit.”

“Certainly so,” said Mrs. Beaton. “Ye should take better care o’ yerself.”

Tate gave the woman a curt nod and left the kitchens, putting as much distance as he could between them before she could make any other remarks about his voice or any other strange changes, she had noticed in him. The last thing he needed was for everyone to find out that he wasn’t Kian.

He had to be more cautious, he thought. Especially in Kian's own castle, he thought, he could never be too careful.

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## CHAPTER NINE

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Lana had had a good night's sleep, which was rather odd, considering that she had been restless every other night she had spent in that castle, always worrying that Kian would get too close. But now the bed was warm and cozy, and Lana was so comfortable that she thought perhaps Kian wasn't in bed with her at all, and her mind had somehow figured that out while she was sleeping, putting her into a state of deep relaxation.

And then she felt it.

What was around her wasn't a blanket or a wall of fabric at all, but rather an arm. A very big, strong, warm arm.

She should open her eyes. She should open her eyes and yell at him for getting so close to her, for thinking he could violate her boundaries so easily.

Only she could feel the wall of fabrics that she had built right under her, as though she had climbed it to get closer to Kian. And, well, if she were honest with herself, she was awfully comfortable, more than she had been in several days.

Kian was a furnace against her, his chest a solid wall of muscle where her head was tucked into his neck. Lana's breath hitched as Kian shifted against her, though she wished she could stay unaffected. She didn't want to think about him like this. She didn't want to think about his body pressing up to her own, pinning her onto the bed. She didn't want to think about him kissing her, making love to her, even just holding her like this, and yet her thoughts kept drifting to these things, taking away the fragile peace of the first waking moments of the day.

As much as she didn't want to admit it, she knew that she wanted him. On the one hand, it was a good thing she supposed, since she was his wife, and it was better for a wife to desire her husband than be repulsed by him. On the other hand, she could never let him find out. Her pride was at stake, and she wouldn't let herself be swept up by her desires if it meant that she would give Kian the satisfaction.

At least for the moment, she could stay where she was and enjoy the warmth of his skin, the safety of his arms, the slightly tickling sensation of his fingers as they caressed small circles on her shoulder.

Lana's eyes flew open. Kian was awake, she realized, if he was moving.

"Good mornin' lass," he said with a smug grin, just barely visible under the mask that he didn't seem to take off even in bed.

With a scream, Lana pushed him away as hard as she could, though she was the one who ended up rolling across the bed with the force. Kian laughed, a full-body, rumbling laugh that had her fuming with anger. She couldn't

believe how eager he was to taunt her, how much joy he got from it.

“What dae ye think ye’re doin’, comin’ so close tae me?” Lana demanded, sitting up on the bed with her hands on her hips. “I put all this between us so ye wouldnae come this close.”

“Ye’re the one who moved closer tae me,” Kian pointed out.

“Well, then ye should have pushed me back!” Lana said. “I willnae have ye so close tae me. I dinnae care if we’re married now. Ye have nay right tae touch me.”

“Alright, alright!” said Kian, raising his hands in surrender as he stood from the bed. Lana was quick to avert her gaze, resisting the temptation to take just a little glance at his body. It was nothing she hadn’t seen before, since Kian was so adamant on walking around naked, but it was for the principle of the thing. She wasn’t going to give in to her urges. Taking a peek at him could be a slippery slope that led to other, more terrible things. “But then ye should probably nae touch me, either. Since ye were the one tae come tae me last night.”

“I was asleep!” Lana protested. “How could I have kent?”

“Were ye asleep this mornin’ too? Just now?” Kian asked.

“O’ course I was!”

Kian let out a soft chuckle as he started getting dressed. “Did ye ken that when ye wake, ye twitch yer nose?” he asked. “It’s very endearin’.”

“So?”

“Ye twitched yer nose this mornin’,” he said. “I ken ye were awake.”

Lana was plunged into a bottomless pit of shame within moments. Her entire face burned with embarrassment, and she was certain she was as red as an apple, which would surely only serve to amuse Kian even more.

He loved to laugh at her expense, it seemed.

“I only just woke up!” Lana said. “I didnae ken what I was doin’! Dae ye always ken where ye are first thing in the mornin’?”

“Depends on how much I had tae drink the night afore,” said Kian.

Dressed as Kian was now, Lana could pin him with an unimpressed stare, her lips pursing into a thin line. “I’m sure ye think that ye’re very funny, but I disagree. I dinnae care what ye dae, as long as ye’re nae near me.”

“Fine,” Kian said with a resigned sigh. “Then I suppose that ye dinnae wish tae come with me on a ride in the woods.”

Now that had caught her attention. She hadn't left the castle in so long that any chance she could get to leave these four walls sounded more than appealing, even if it meant spending an entire day with him. "I wish tae come."

"Och? But I thought ye didnae wish tae be around me," Kian said. Though she couldn't see his smirk under the mask, she could hear it in his voice.

"I dinnae wish tae be around ye, but I dinnae wish tae be kept prisoner in this castle, either," Lana pointed out. "I've been here fer too long. Ye dinnae let me dae anythin'!"

"It's fer yer own protection, lass," Kian said. "Once we ken that yer faither isnae after ye or me, then I'll let ye dae as ye wish."

Lana narrowed her eyes suspiciously at that. It wasn't that she had any reason not to trust Kian, since as far as she knew, he hadn't lied to her about anything, but that didn't mean that she trusted everything he said, either. It was difficult, trusting someone who had taken her away from her home against her will, even if it was probably for the best.

"I promise," Kian said, perhaps noticing that she was reluctant to believe him. "I have nae reason tae keep ye in here, as long as I ken that ye're nae in danger and that ye willnae try tae run away."

Lana found that she couldn't promise the latter. If she had a chance to run, she would. She could go back to the Murray Clan, she figured, and hide there.

Then again, she didn't want to put anyone there in danger. If Kian found out she was with the Murrays, there was no telling what he would do.

"Fine," Lana said. It wasn't the time to discuss this anyway, since she doubted Kian would let her out of his sight any time soon. "If we are tae go on a ride, I need tae dress."

"Go on, then," Kian said, looking at her in a way that made her skin erupt in goosebumps. She couldn't decide if it was a good thing or not.

"I willnae dress in front o' ye!" Lana said. "Some o' us have decency."

"I'll leave ye tae it, then," said Kian in a mocking tone, before he headed towards the door. "Dinnae take too long or I'll leave without ye."

Lana resisted the urge to throw a pillow at him. That would be juvenile, and the last thing she wanted was to give him more fuel for his mockery. Instead, she waited for him to exit the room, and then she dressed, taking her sweet time.

She didn't think Kian would actually leave her behind.

Once she was dressed, she made her way out of the room and down the stairs. As she passed the kitchens, she saw Kian there, talking with the housekeeper, so she decided to take her chance and visit Elspet once again.



Lana found her in her study, laboring over a mortar and a pestle as she ground something into a paste. When Elspet saw her, she smiled and beckoned her over.

“Come,” she said. “What dae ye smell in it?”

Lana took the mortar and brought it to her nose. “Clove, cinnamon... honey?”

“All correct,” Elspet said. “Anythin’ else?”

“Several things,” Lana said. “Nae one o’ which I can name.”

Elspet chuckled softly, nodding. “That’s alright,” she said. “Ye’ll learn tae identify everythin’ just from scent alone soon enough. How come ye’re here so early in the mornin’?”

“Laird Drummond is takin’ me on a ride in the woods,” Lana said. “I thought I would come and greet ye afore I leave.”

“How lovely,” Elspet said. “Dinnae keep him waitin’.”

“I think he deserves tae wait fer a while.”

Elspet gave Lana a curious look, eyes narrowing just slightly at her cold tone. “Dinnae ye pity yer poor husband, waitin’ fer ye?”

“He threatened tae leave me behind if I didnae hurry, so now I’m takin’ me time,” said Lana indignantly. “Had he nae said that, then he wouldnae have tae wait.”

“That is naughty,” Elspet pointed out, though there was mirth in her gaze.

“He mocks me all the time,” Lana said with a shrug. “If he didnae, then perhaps I would find him more agreeable.”

It was then that Elspet became a little more serious, standing up straighter as she regarded Lana. “Dae ye nae find him agreeable?”

Lana’s first instinct was to say no. Of course, she didn’t find him agreeable. How could she, when he was always bothering her?

But there were other parts of her that found him very agreeable, indeed, at least certain aspects of him. She would be lying if she said that she wasn’t curious about certain things or that she didn’t wish that he wasn’t so difficult to get along with, so that she could get to know those parts of him better.

Sometimes, he could be funny. He could be sweet and kind. He could be the kind of man Lana would want as her husband.

But most of the time, he was nothing but a nuisance.

“I suppose he has some redeemin’ qualities,” Lana said quietly. She hated to admit it, but she couldn’t lie to Elspet. The woman seemed to have a sense for what was true and what wasn’t, and Lana didn’t want to get caught in a lie.

“Well, it’s good that ye think so,” Elspet said. “It’s a terrible thing when a wife doesnae find her husband agreeable, but very common, unfortunately. And husbands are... inescapable.”

Lana was beginning to understand why Elspet had never married. She seemed to have a distaste for husbands, and from the experience Lana had so far, she could hardly blame her for it.

But the conversation had put her in deep thought. Did she hate Kian as much as she thought she did? As much as she wished she did? It was true that much of what he did bothered her, but that was because she was often flustered by his mere presence. He teased her often, that was true as well, but perhaps he was doing it lightheartedly rather than to make her feel bad.

Lana didn’t know how to feel about him. On the one hand, he had saved her from a marriage with Laird Cummings, but on the other, he had forced her into a marriage with him. He was now taking her for a ride so that she wouldn’t have to stay in the castle all day, but he was perfectly fine with threatening her at their wedding. She didn’t know which side of him to trust. She didn’t know if both sides were just as real, and she could never be certain which side she would get.



“Is everythin’ ready, Mrs. Beaton?” asked Tate. This time, he made sure that his voice sounded as close to Kian’s as he could manage, ad Mrs. Beaton didn’t seem to notice anything out of the ordinary.

“Everythin’ ye asked fer, me laird,” Mrs. Beaton said, as she handed him a basket full of all the things on his list. “Are ye certain ye dinnae wish tae take any servants with ye?”

“Och aye,” Tate said. “I can manage on me own, thank ye. We willnae be back until late.”

“I’ll keep supper warm fer ye and Lady Drummond.”

It was a simple comment, but it made Tate’s heart sink to hear Mrs. Beaton call Lana by Kian’s name. It was what was always meant to happen, of course. From the beginning of this plan, Kian was supposed to be married to Lana, and yet Tate simply couldn’t bear the thought sometimes. He knew Kian had no more regard for Lana than was expected of a decent man. Surely, he would take care of her and he would make sure she never lacked anything, but would he love her? Would he cherish her?

He supposed there was only one way to find out, and eventually, he would. It wasn’t long until Kian returned, and then Tate would be able to see if he and Lana could be happy together.

*But what will happen if they’re nae happy?*

It was a foolish thing to think that there was something he could do about it. Plenty of couples were unhappy in their marriages and sought happiness elsewhere, especially within the nobility. Tate didn't have a reason to be so preoccupied with the idea of happiness.

He told himself it was only because he valued Kian as a friend. He wanted him to be happy.

He tried not to think about his concern for Lana at all.

“Thank ye, Mrs. Beaton,” Tate said one last time, before he headed out of the kitchens and took a look around the courtyard.

Of course, Lana was nowhere to be found.

*I dinnae ken what I expected. She's still in the room, most likely.*

He hardly had time to finish that thought before Lana appeared outside the healer's study. She had some lavender sprigs in her hands, smiling as she smelled them. The morning light fell softly on her, a curtain of gold over her charming features, making her red hair blaze like a fire. Just gazing at her was enough to cut Tate's breath short, but he tried not to show it.

Instead, he only rolled his eyes at her. “I was just about tae leave without ye.”

“Ye wouldnae,” Lana said, sounding less than certain about it.

“I would,” Tate said. “In fact, I still might.”

“Ye are such a brute!” Lana grumbled as she stomped up to him, a frown marring her face. “Well, I’m here now. Let’s go.”

Tate did quick work of the horses that the servants had brought them, making sure everything was ready before he helped Lana get on one of them. It didn’t take him long to recover from his momentary lapse in judgement. The moment she had opened her mouth to speak, he remembered why he was glad Kian was married to her and not him.

*She’s bonnie. But there are plenty o’ bonnie lasses.*

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## CHAPTER TEN

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The woods were quiet, as always. Tate loved the stillness of the place, the only disturbances being the wind and the small animals that called it home. There was no one else there but the two of them. No responsibilities, no one to scrutinize him a little too closely and find out that he wasn't who he was pretending to be.

He was still careful, of course. The last thing he needed was for Lana to figure out that Kian was a different man when he returned home because he had been careless.

Lana was silent too, for the most part. The two of them rode without saying anything, but it didn't feel awkward to Tate. It was a comfortable silence, as if they had known each other for years and didn't need to say anything to fill up the empty space between them.

Tate didn't know many people with whom he could simply sit quietly like this. Kian and Tate's family were the only ones he felt comfortable enough with not to speak a word for hours. And now he found that, apparently, Lana was one of them, too.

It wasn't until they got to a small clearing after, hours of riding, that they stopped. By then, they were deep in the woods, deeper than Tate would have thought to go, but the ride had been so pleasant that he had forgotten himself. Besides, as long as they returned to the castle before dusk, it was fine.

Once he tied the horses to one of the trees, leaving them to graze leisurely, he returned to Lana and the two of them sat under one of the thicker oak trees, lounging in its shade.

“Are ye hungry?” he asked her. “Mrs. Beaton prepared plenty o’ food fer us.”

As he spoke, he opened the basket she had given him, pulling out everything from dried meat and cheese to apples, chestnuts, and even some honey. It was definitely more than what he had written down on his list, but Mrs. Beaton always loved to feed him and Kian. Every time Tate passed by the kitchen, whether he was dressed as himself or as his friend, Mrs. Beaton insisted on giving him something to eat, no matter how much he insisted he wasn't hungry.

Lana looked at the basket and its never-ending contents in awe as Tate continued to pull more and more items out of its depths. “How many people did she think we'd be?”

“An army, it seems,” Tate said with a sigh. He would be the one who would have to take all of it back. “Here,” he said, tossing Lana an apple. “Ye like those, dinnae ye?”

Lana caught it mid-air, biting into it happily. “Aye... how did ye ken?”



“Well... I’ve watched ye in the mornin’, when we break our fast,” Tate said with a small shrug. “Ye always eat an apple.”

He had noticed, but he didn’t think it was a big deal. He and Lana ate breakfast together often, so it was difficult not to notice what she was having.

And yet his cheeks still heated at the admission.

It was silly of him, he knew. He shouldn’t be embarrassed about it, and he certainly shouldn’t give Lana the impression that he was. Thankfully, she didn’t comment on it—neither on his reddened face nor on the fact that he knew what she liked. For once, he was thankful for the mask.

“Ach... I suppose I dae,” she said around a mouthful. “They are delicious.”

Tate nodded in agreement, biting into another apple. For a while, they sat there in silence, picking at the food, until Lana spoke again.

“Yer hand... I’ve meant tae ask what happened,” she said.

Tate looked at his bandaged hand. He always forgot about it, since it didn’t actually bother him in any way, save for limiting his range of motion. He had to remind himself to appear injured still, which was easier said than done.

“It’s naething,” he said. “I hurt meself a short while ago and it’s still nae healed properly, so I keep it bandaged.”

“I could... I could take a look if ye wish,” Lana offered. “I ken some things about healin’ and Elspet is showin’ me even more, so I could help ye.”

“That’s fine,” Tate said, shaking his head. “It’s nae a problem. It will heal.”

“It’s nae bother fer me,” Lana insisted. “It’s better fer me tae take a look than ye gettin’ an infection.”

“It’s naething tae worry about,” Tate said, hoping that Lana would drop the subject. He couldn’t show her his hand. Elspet had tried to take a look at it, too, and he had been avoiding her ever since.

Lana hesitated, but thankfully, she didn’t push him. Tate wouldn’t know what to tell her even if she did, and he would probably have to anger her to get her to drop it.

He was glad that didn’t happen. He wanted to be as nice to her as he could, given the circumstances, and he wanted to avoid fighting with her as much as he possible—though teasing her was still tempting.

“Well... if ye dinnae mind, lass, I’ll have tae relieve meself,” Tate said after a few more moments of silence, which seemed to him to be an awkward one this time. He stood and walked a little further away, where Lana could neither see him nor hear him, and for a few moments, he just breathed.

He was so close. He couldn't let anything ruin his plan now.



Lana was alone. Truly alone for the first time, without anyone near her. There were no guards, no maids, not even Kian. It was the longest she had been left alone since she had arrived at the Drummond Castle, and it was the biggest chance she had ever gotten to escape.

How could she simply ignore it when every part of her being was screaming at her to run away as fast as she could? With any luck, she could be gone before Kian even made it back, if she was fast enough.

She couldn't go towards the path, since not only was Kian near it, but it was also the first place he would search for her, surely. She had to go deeper into the woods, dangerous as it was. It didn't matter. She was determined to make it.

As for her wedding with Kian, it hadn't been consummated yet, so it meant nothing. If she ran, if she made it to Murray Castle, then perhaps everything would be fine.

Lana wasted no time. She ran. She made her way towards the nearby river, following the sound of running water and thinking that perhaps Kian would have some trouble coming after her with an injured hand and two horses to look after. But when she made it there, the sight of the river gave her pause.

It was much bigger than she had thought it would be. She couldn't jump over it, nor could she cross it in any other way than swimming, as there was no bridge in sight. The waters of the river foamed near the bank, white froth rising to its surface, and Lana's heart raced at the thought that she would have to jump in its waters.

There was no other choice. She wouldn't go back there, not when she had a chance to save herself and her sister with the help of the Murrays. It didn't matter how kind Kian could be sometimes. What mattered was that most of the time, he wasn't. What mattered was that he treated her like a possession, just like her father and Laird Cummings did.

Lana took a deep breath and then plunged into the river. The moment her body hit the water, her breath was knocked out of her, and she struggled to take another. The water was freezing cold around her, making her entire body shake as she tried to swim across the river to the other shore, and the current was so strong that she was barely making any progress.

She couldn't plant her feet to the bottom and steel herself. There was nothing for her to grab, either, no matter how much she looked around for anything to hold onto: a branch, a rock, even a piece of solid earth.

It didn't help that her clothes, now drenched, were heavy, dragging her down. Every move she made was laborious, every breath she took burned her lungs with effort.

Still, she tried to push herself to the other side of the river, kicking her legs and moving her arms in despair, doing anything in her power to stay afloat. She didn't want to die like this. She didn't want to leave her sister behind, all alone.

But there was little she could do in the face of the current. The river was too powerful, dragging her to its depths no matter how much she fought it. She wasn't strong enough to swim against it, nor could she pull herself out of it with how drenched her clothes were.

Panic gripped her within moments. *God, what have I done...*

Lana looked around frantically, but there was no one there to help, of course. She had chosen just the right moment to run, when no one could see her. And now she was drowning, and her limbs started turning numb from her fear, her chest constricting until she could not breathe.

The river swallowed her whole, its waters rushing over her head as she sank into its depths. The current roared in her ears, or perhaps it was the rush of blood that defeated her, one last, desperate attempt of her body to give her the strength she needed to survive. But she was tired and frozen in terror, and she could do little other than surrender to the darkness that quickly surrounded her as she started to lose consciousness.

And then she was suddenly out. A firm hand gripped her and pulled her right out of the river, laying her gently on the damp bank. Lana coughed and sputtered, her lungs trying to expel all the water she had swallowed, and she turned onto her side, spitting it all out.

She couldn't believe she was alive. In those last few moments in the river, she had been certain she would meet her end.

When she could focus her eyes again, she saw Kian hovering over her. Though she couldn't see his face, his concern and his panic were palpable, so real in the air around them that they were almost like living things. His eyes were wide as he watched her, his hands only inches above her, as if he couldn't decide whether to touch her or not.

Lana fell back down on the ground, staring at the sky as she heaved, trying to catch her breath. It was far from an easy task when her lungs and chest burned so uncomfortably, but she was just glad to be breathing again.

Kian had saved her life.

“Are ye... are ye alright?” he asked, his voice small and terrified.

Lana could only nod in response. She didn't want to worry him any more than she already had.

Before she could say anything, Kian grabbed her and pulled her to his chest, hugging her tightly. For a few moments, Lana sat there, frozen in shock, before her own arms wrapped around him gently, trying to soothe him.

*Was he that worried?*

It seemed to go beyond the kind of worry that anyone would have for another human. Kian was clinging to her as though he feared she would dissipate, as though he feared he would lose her, and Lana would have never thought her loss would affect him so much. After all, they had only been married for a

short while, and their marriage had been anything but pleasant for them both.

“I cannae believe I almost lost ye,” Kian said, whispering quietly in her ear. “What were ye doin’ in the river?”

Once again, Lana panicked. “I... I thought I’d go swimmin’,” she said. “I didnae realize—”

“In yer clothes?”

Lana fell silent. It was all Kian said, but she knew he was aware of what she had been trying to do. Still, he didn’t say anything else on the matter and instead only held her even more tightly, much to Lana’s surprise.

She thought he would yell at her, berate her for trying to escape. She thought he would threaten to keep her locked up in the castle from now on and never let her go anywhere else for the rest of her life. But all he did was sit there and hold her, tucking her head in the crook of his neck.

When he pulled back, he did nothing but gaze at her for a while. Then, he leaned closer, and Lana didn’t stop him.

Their lips met softly, the kiss little more than a mere brush of skin against skin. It was a little awkward with the mask, and Lana wished he would just take it off, but she didn’t want to pressure him. She only wished that he could understand that whatever he was hiding could not possibly be as hideous as he seemed to think.

Despite the mask, Lana's heart fluttered in her chest with every passing second. It was a tender kiss, full of the kind of sweetness and desire she wanted from him. It was that side of him again, the one that was soft and kind and so appealing that it made the thought of putting up with everything else almost bearable.

When they parted, Kian held her gaze. The parts of his face that Lana could see were a bright red, and she had to suppress a giggle at that. She didn't think he was the kind of man who would be so affected by a mere kiss, but it was a sweet surprise.

*If only he was always like this.*



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## CHAPTER ELEVEN

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*F*ate couldn't calm his racing heart. Even though he held onto Lana for several minutes, he couldn't convince himself that she was alive and well, that she was there with him.

When he had returned to the clearing and didn't find her there, he knew she had run. Rage filled him, threatening to bubble over, and he rushed towards the only place where she could have gone: the river. But when he saw her in its rushing waters, trying desperately to stay afloat, the fear that surged through him drowned out his rage entirely. He couldn't be angry with Lana when he was so concerned for her safety.

But then he had kissed her. He knew perfectly well that he wasn't supposed to, that he should keep his distance from her, but he couldn't stop himself. He was so glad to see that Lana was alive, so relieved to know that she had survived her ordeal, that he couldn't keep himself away anymore.

*Why do I care so much...*

He wished he could say that he regretted it, but the only thing he regretted

was that he kissed her under false pretenses. If anything, he wanted to kiss her again, to rip that mask off his face and taste her lips properly this time, with nothing to come between them. He wanted to kiss her as Tate, not as Kian. He wanted her to want this as much as he did.

But he wasn't going to ruin everything he and Kian had worked so hard for. Besides, he knew that Lana would never forgive him if she found out the truth.

The more Tate calmed down, though, the more his anger returned to him. What Lana had done had been nothing short of foolish, and she could have very well died had he not rushed to her rescue. If he had only taken a few more seconds to get there, or if he hadn't found her, then she would be dead now. And where could she even have thought to go since they were in the middle of nowhere? How could she be so naïve!

"I cannae believe ye did this," he said, shaking his head just a little. "Ye could have died."

"I ken that," Lana said bitterly. "I wasnae thinkin'."

"Nae... nae, I suppose ye werena," said Tate with a heavy sigh. He didn't want to fight with Lana, especially not now that she was so shaken by her experience. On top of that, the two of them had kissed. There was too much between them now, and Tate didn't know where to start untangling the mess he had made. "Are ye alright? Dae ye need anythin'?"

Lana shook her head. "Nay," she said. She sounded more guarded now, as

though she was expecting a fight, and Tate winced a little. He supposed he could be hard on her sometimes, but he was trying to fix that, though he didn't seem to be doing a great job at it.

Tate tried to think of something to say, but he had nothing. It was better to head back to the castle, he thought, since it would soon be dark anyway, and so he stood, offering his hand to Lana. "Let's head back, lass," he said. "I'm sure ye'll need tae rest, and I want Elspet tae take a look at ye."

"I'm fine," Lana insisted. "I feel fine."

"I would feel better if I kent that ye are fer certain," Tate said. "Ye wouldnae be the only one tae die after takin' in so much water."

Lana pinned him with an exasperated look, but in the end, she relented, nodding. "Alright," she said. "I suppose there's nae harm in Elspet takin' a look."

Tate knew that Lana had taken a liking to the healer and he was glad about it. It meant that she had at least one person in the castle whom she could talk to, and it put him at ease, knowing that Elspet would be there for her no matter what, even if Tate couldn't.

The two of them walked back to the horses, and for a moment, Tate looked at Lana doubtfully. "Can ye ride?"

"Aye, o' course I can ride," she said. "I didnae hurt me legs, did I?"

“Nay, but if ye dinnae feel well enough, ye can ride back with me,” Tate offered. It was better to have her on his horse, so he could help her if she needed it, rather than let her fall off her own.

“I’m fine,” Lana said sternly. “I can ride just fine. I dinnae need any help.”

Once again, Tate decided not to push her. He only helped her on her horse, gave her the blanket he had brought for their outing to wear over her shoulders lest she freeze in her wet clothes, and the two of them began to ride back to the castle.

The day hadn’t gone as Tate had planned. He had hoped for something more relaxing, something that would help Lana unwind after so many days locked up in the castle, but it had done the complete opposite. He shouldn’t have suggested this in the first place, he thought, since he knew that Lana didn’t want to be there. He should have known that she would try to escape. He should have predicted it.

As they rode down the path, Tate kept a close eye on Lana, looking for any signs that she wasn’t doing as well as she claimed, but there were none. She seemed perfectly capable of riding on her own and she was alert, which put him at ease. At least she wasn’t showing any signs that something was wrong with her, but that could change at any moment, he knew. Even if she claimed to be fine, she could be lying to him.

The sun had started to set when Lana pulled her horse to a stop. Tate stopped next to her with a small frown, taking a good look at her.

“What’s wrong?” he asked. “Are ye feelin’ unwell?”

“Nay,” said Lana. “Dae ye hear that?”

Tate strained to listen, but there was nothing there other than the rustle of leaves in the wind that had picked up while they were riding. “Nay,” he said. “What dae ye hear?”

“A bairn,” Lana said quietly, shushing him at the same time. “I’m certain I heard cryin’, Tate. Maybe somethin’ happened.”

“I dinnae hear anythin’,” Tate said. “And it’s gettin’ dark. We dinnae have time to roam around the woods lookin’ fer a bairn.”

“But what if it’s hurt?” Lana asked. “What if it’s all alone and lost? We cannae leave a bairn out here!”

“There’s nae bairn!” Tate insisted. He began to wonder if she was inventing excuses to try to escape again, or if maybe Lana wasn’t as well as she claimed to be, after all. Even if she wasn’t physically injured, almost drowning was bound to leave some sort of psychological mark on her. “I dinnae hear anythin’, Lana. I’m sure it’s fine. Why would a bairn be in the woods at this time o’ the day, all alone?”

“I dinnae ken, but I ken that I heard it,” Lana said. “An’ if ye dinnae help me find it, then I’ll dae it on me own.”

Tate drew a deep breath as he pinched the bridge of his nose between his fingers, trying to stave off an oncoming headache. All he wanted was to make it back to the castle before it got too dark, but if he knew one thing about Lana, it was that she would do as she pleased, no matter what anyone else said.

For a few moments, both of them were silent, and yet Tate still couldn't hear anything. "Are ye certain that ye heard somethin'?" he asked. "I still cannae hear a thing."

"O' course I am!" Lana said, getting visibly impatient, her hands tightening around the reins. "The bairn may be in danger and we're sittin' here, discussin' whether or nae I heard it. I'm goin' tae look fer it."

With that, Lana turned her horse around and headed deeper into the woods. Tate cursed under his breath and followed her, looking around both for signs of danger and for the child she claimed she had heard.

"There he is!" Lana called after a few minutes, glancing at Tate over her shoulder. "I see him."

Tate squinted a little as he urged his horse to move faster, and though it took him a few moments, he finally spotted the child. The boy was alone, it seemed, sitting under a tree. Tate couldn't help but feel that something was wrong. His gut was telling him that there was danger lurking nearby.

The boy wasn't visibly distressed, Tate noted, as he dismounted his horse and followed Lana to him, making sure to stay close to her. He seemed perfectly

fine, as though someone had simply placed him there. There was no dirt on his clothes or his face, and though he couldn't be any older than seven or eight, he didn't seem frightened by his surroundings or the falling dark or even the fact that two strangers were approaching him.

“Good evenin’,” Lana said to the child softly, crouching down so she would be at his level. “What’s yer name, laddie?”

“Rory,” said the boy without any hesitation.

“Rory... what are ye doin’ here, all alone?” Lana asked. “It’s very late. Shouldnae ye be home?”

The boy said nothing. He only looked up at Lana and Tate with his wide, blue eyes, and Tate could tell that something was wrong.

“We have tae go, lass,” he told Lana. “This isnae right.”

When Lana looked at him, her face was a mask of horror. “And leave the bairn here?” she hissed. “How can ye say that? We must find his family.”

“I’m tellin’ ye, somethin’ isnae right,” Tate insisted. “Look at him. He looks fine, doesnae he? We can take him tae the castle if ye want, but we have tae go.”

“That doesnae mean that he is fine,” Lana pointed out. “I must check him fer

injuries.”

“Lana,” Tate said firmly, grabbing her arm. “Whoever brought the bairn here is still here. This feels like a trap.”

“Who would use a bairn tae trap us?” Lana said. “Nae one is this despicable, surely.”

Just as she spoke, three men jumped out of the shadows of the forest. All of them were armed, and all of them looked at Tate and Lana as though they were a delicious meal.

But they weren’t brigands, Tate could tell. They were well-trained, well-fed, and well-equipped. Their swords looked too expensive for mere brigands, and their clothes only solidified Tate’s knowledge that they were soldiers.

“Go on, laddie,” one of the men told the boy. “Head back to yer mother.”

Tate looked at Lana from the corner of his eye as the boy ran off. “Ye were sayin’?”

“How could I have thought someone could dae that?” Lana protested, before she turned to glare at the three men. “How dare ye put a wee bairn in danger like this!”

“There’s nae danger,” the man said. “It’s very simple. We’ll just take ye tae



Laird Cummings.”

“I suppose we ken who is despicable enough tae use a bairn like this now,” Tate mumbled. He wasn’t surprised. He wouldn’t have been surprised if it had been brigands, either. Lana seemed to believe that no one could do such a thing, but he had seen what men were capable of.

“I willnae go tae Laird Cummings,” Lana said. “And ye’ll dae well tae leave and tell him it’s better tae leave me alone.”

“I dinnae think ye have a choice,” the man said, before he rushed towards Tate, his blade ready to strike him down. Tate was quick to draw his own weapon and parry the blow, pushing the man back to put some space between them. He needed to make sure that Lana was safe first.

But one of the men was already advancing towards her, while the other blocked Tate’s way. Suddenly, he had two opponents, and both of them threw themselves at him at the same time, leaving him no space to get to Lana.

“Lana! Run!” Tate shouted at her as he jumped to the side to avoid the next swing of his opponent’s sword. He brought his own blade down, trying to strike one of them, but the other was quick to throw all his weight on him and push him off-balance.

Both men were fast and strong, and Tate had little chance of escaping unharmed, so he decided that his best bet was to do as much damage as he could, while trying to survive. He had to get Lana out of there, or at least give her a chance to escape if he couldn’t.

With a shout, he launched his attack on one of the men, turning his back to the other one momentarily. His opponent was caught off-guard, and though he tried to defend himself, Tate took his chance and pushed his sword through the man's chest before he could stop him. But just as he drew his sword back and turned to face the other one, Tate was struck on his shoulder, the blow making him stumble back.

Pain radiated down the left side of his body from the wound. For a moment, it paralyzed him, it was all he could think about, but then he tightened his grip around his sword. He had already killed one of them. He could kill two more.

Blood seeped through his clothes, drenching them in crimson. He would have to be fast, he knew, if he wanted to kill two more men, since the blood loss was severe, and he was already getting dizzy. When the man approached him, Tate was ready, blocking his sword before he delivered his counterattack. The man parried it with enough force to send Tate stumbling back, but he was getting tired. Beads of sweat gathered on his forehead and his movements became slower, less coordinated, giving Tate the opportunity to pierce him through the stomach.

The man crumbled to the ground, gasping softly as the blood drained out of him. Heaving, Tate looked around, searching for Lana, and it didn't take him long to spot her.

She was standing over the last man still alive, a bloodied blade in her hand.

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## CHAPTER TWELVE

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Lana had been silly perhaps, to think that the child wasn't a trap, but she could have never believed someone would do such a thing. Besides, she would never forgive herself if it turned out that the boy needed help and she hadn't provided it.

But a trap it was, and now Kian was trying to fight off two men, while another one was coming towards her.

He wasn't going to kill her, though. Lana knew that well. Laird Cummings wanted her alive, and those men would never risk harming her too much. Perhaps they would be willing to hurt her, maybe even knock her unconscious, but as long as they didn't intend to kill or maim her terribly, she had the advantage.

The man who approached her was big, but not the biggest of the three. He was older, too, and slower than the others, it seemed. If nothing else, Lana could at least make it difficult enough for him to drag her away while Tate was busy with the other two.

The man approached her, but Lana didn't try to run. Despite what Kian had told her, she couldn't leave him there to fight them all alone, even if there wasn't much she could do. If he got hurt, there would be no one around but her to help him, and she wanted to make sure that he would survive this fight.

He had saved her life, after all. She owed him the same.

The man grabbed her arm and Lana was quick to kick him in the groin, making him double over, groaning in pain. It didn't take him long to recover, though, or at least recover enough to glare at her as he stomped over, his face twisting into a snarl.

"Did ye think that would help ye?" he asked. "After we kill him, there'll be nae one tae help ye."

"Ye can try tae take me, but I willnae go," Lana said with an indignant huff. "I'd rather die than marry Laird Cummings."

The man shook his head. Lana was perfectly aware of the fact that he didn't care what she did, as long as he could take her to his laird and say the job was done. Whether she lived or died had nothing to do with him, as long as she died after he had delivered her to the man.

He stumbled over to her, and Lana backtracked, trying to put some space between them, but it wasn't long after that her back hit a tree trunk. Suddenly, she was trapped between him and the tree, and the man grabbed her once more, only this time, he tried to restrain her.

Screaming, Lana kicked at him. He struggled to keep her still, twisting left and right with every movement of her own body, and Lana took it as a good sign. She could wear him out. She could exhaust him so much that he would have no choice but to let go, and then he would be easy for Tate to fight.

But suddenly, the man pressed a blade against her throat. It was a small knife, and Lana knew he wouldn't kill her, but she couldn't move without hurting herself.

“Be still now,” the man said, panting as he tried to catch his breath. “It would be a shame fer such a lovely neck tae be ruined.”

Lana's mouth pursed into a thin line. Every instinct in her body told her not to move, but she knew that she was in no real danger. Even if she moved, the man would pull the blade back. He wouldn't risk harming her like this.

The more she stayed still, though, the more he seemed to lower his guard, his arm loosening a little around her. It was then that she brought her elbow to his stomach, and made the man drop the knife he was holding to the ground.

“Ye wee...” he said through gritted teeth, curling over himself once more. “I cannae kill ye, but I willnae hesitate tae hurt ye.”

Lana bent down and picked up the knife. She was uncertain, her hands shaking as she approached the man, but not as much as they did the first time she had plunged a blade into someone. She had done it before and she could do it again.

With a shout, she stabbed the man in the gut. It took him a few seconds to realize what had happened, but when he did, he looked at her with wide, shocked eyes as he fell to the ground, writhing in pain.

Lana took a few steps back from him, the blade still in her hand, dripping blood onto the soil. Her own eyes were just as wide, and her heart was beating fast in her chest, but she was glad she had done it. She was glad that she could at least help Kian somewhat.

She turned to look at him, and what she saw made her blood run cold.

He was hurt. The other two men were on the ground, already dead, but he wasn't faring much better. There was a lot of blood dripping down his left hand, his sleeve was drenched with it, and he was pallid, his skin coated in a thin layer of sweat.

"Kian!" she shouted, rushing over to him. "Ye're hurt."

"It's fine," Kian said, though it didn't sound like it. Even his voice was weak and strained, as though he had to force the words out.

As he walked over to her, he started to stumble, and Lana caught him just in time, helping him to steady himself.

"Did ye kill him?" Kian asked, nodding his head in the direction of the man she had stabbed.

Lana shook her head. “Nay,” she said. “But if he doesnae get help soon, he’ll die.”

And so would Kian. She had to get him somewhere safe, somewhere where she could take care of his injury and stop the bleeding.

“We have tae go,” she told him. “We must find shelter. Come.”

With her help, Kian got on his horse, and the two of them continued their ride. It was late in the evening, and Lana knew they would never make it back to the castle like this, so she looked around for any place that could host them for a night.

The entire time, she also kept an eye on Kian. The more time passed, the worse he looked, his skin turning even paler, his eyes drooping as he struggled to keep them open. Lana hated to see him like this. She wished she could do something to take his pain away, but she had nothing with her; no medicine, no analgesics, nothing that could possibly help him.

A little while later, she spotted a cottage in the woods. She could not believe their luck. There was no fire, no light coming out of the windows, nothing to show that someone lived there, but perhaps they could spend the night there, before heading back to the castle the following morning.

“Kian,” she said, making him jump a little in surprise after all that time they spent in silence. “Look, there’s a cottage. We can stop there for the night.”

“Aye,” Kian said, making his way towards it. “Good lass.”

The two of them left the horses by the fence and pushed the door open. It looked abandoned, a thin layer of dust covering everything that was left, but someone had lived there recently. Perhaps the owner had gone to visit relatives or was engaged in one of the many battles that raged through the Highlands. All Lana knew was that they had been extremely lucky to find it and that they now had a roof over their heads.

“Sit here,” Lana said, pulling a barely standing chair for Kian. “I’ll light a fire.”

“Alright,” said Kian.

Just the fact that he didn’t even try to help showed Lana how hurt he was. He was gritting his teeth through it, forcing himself to move and stay upright, but he was surely in terrible pain. Lana’s concern bubbled up inside her, and she didn’t like the idea of leaving him alone, even for a moment, but she knew she had to make sure they had a fire to stay warm, if nothing else.

She rummaged around the cottage, and she managed to find two old blankets. After dusting them as best as she could, she brought them over to Kian and draped them over him, finding him shivering, though it was probably from the shock and the pain rather than the cold. Then, after finding some logs, she started a fire in the hearth, and helped Kian closer to it.

“I need tae take a look at yer injury,” she said finally.



“It does nae feel very bonnie, Lana,” Kian said.

“That is why I must care fer it,” Lana said with a small, fond smile. “I only care that it heals without an infection. Let me see.”

Kian hesitated, but then he allowed Lana to help him take off his tunic and look at the injury. The bleeding had stopped, and it didn’t seem so bad after all, despite her shock at her first glance.

“I’ll need tae clean it,” she said, as she walked over to their discarded picnic basket and picked up the water canteen. “And once we get tae the castle, Elspet and I will take care o’ ye.”

“Just be quick,” Kian said.

Lana tore some fabric off her own tunic and used it to clean the wound. Throughout the entire process, Kian made no sound, but Lana could tell that he was in pain from the way he shut his eyes firmly, tilting his head back. She tried to be quick, like he had asked her, but at the same time she wanted to make sure that there was no blood or dirt left on the wound before she bandaged it with a little more fabric from her clothes.

The entire time, she tried not to stare at Kian’s torso.

“Are ye blushin’?” Kian asked when they were almost done, probably in an attempt to lighten the mood. Apparently, not even the pain was enough to stop him from teasing her.

“I’m nae,” Lana said, though it was clearly a lie. She could feel the heat in her cheeks.

“I’m yer husband now,” Kian reminded her. “There’s nae reason fer ye tae be so shy.”

Lana glared at him for a moment, pressing the fabric against Kian’s wound just a little too hard and drawing a hiss out of him..

Once she was done she said told him to get some sleep. “Ye’ll need tae rest afore we leave on the morrow.”

“Lana,” Kian said, grabbing her arm to stop her as she stood to create a makeshift bed out of the blankets. “Thank ye. I would have died if ye hadnae been there.”

“And I would have died if ye hadnae been at the river,” Lana reminded him. “We are even now.”

She only hoped that neither of them would have to save the other from certain death ever again.



Tate was in a decent amount of pain, but he didn’t want to show it to Lana. He didn’t want her to worry, especially since there was nothing they could do

about it until they got to the castle. He knew that Elspet would probably give him a nice mix of analgesics, but he also knew that the night and the journey back would be very, very long.

At least he wasn't bleeding anymore and his wound was clean and taken care of. All he had to do was try to get some sleep.

But sleep was difficult. Not only was he in pain and uncomfortable on the floor, even with the blankets thrown over it. He also couldn't stop thinking about the attack.

The three men had come very close to the Drummond Castle. For all he knew, they could have made it all the way inside had they not encountered the two of them in the woods.

Did they know he and Lana would be there that day? Had they come for her or was it simply a coincidence?

They must have come for her, he decided. Why else would they have planned the trap with the child to take her away? Those were Cummings men, and Laird Cummings was most certainly after her, trying to take her back. Someone must have informed them about Lana's movements, but who?

Tate needed Kian to return as soon as possible. There was too much at stake, and the marriage with Lana still wasn't consummated, which meant that Laird Cummings could take her away, annul it and marry her at any moment if they weren't careful. The marriage had to be consummated, and he wasn't the one who was going to do it.

Then there was another problem, one that neither he nor Kian had thought about, simply because they had both assumed this charade would only last a day or two. Tate had now been around Lana for several days. He had tried to keep his distance from her, but with his injury, she had seen his body up close. Lana was neither stupid nor blind; she would surely be able to tell the differences between him and Kian, and he didn't know how Kian expected to deal with it.

Lana would demand to know the truth, after all, like anyone in their right mind would. But would he tell it to her? Did he have any other choice?

Tate doubted she would take it very well, though, and he couldn't help but think that this would ruin their marriage before it had even properly started.

And on top of everything else, he had kissed her. Would Lana reveal that to Kian? Tate's stomach churned at the thought that his best friend would find out he had kissed his wife, but how could he stop her from telling him?

Perhaps it was better, in the end, for Kian and Lana to know everything. A single secret could lead to many more, and Tate didn't want to find himself tangled into such a lie.

"Ye're awake still," Lana said from where she lay next to him. "Ye cannae sleep?"

"It's the pain," Tate said, which wasn't exactly a lie. Part of it was the pain, indeed.

“Does it hurt a lot?”

“Aye,” Tate said. “But I’ll survive.”

“Ye better.”

In the darkness of the room, Tate could just make out Lana’s small smile. He smiled at her, too, though she probably couldn’t see it in the darkness, under the mask.

“I’ll try to sleep,” he promised.

He would hate to worry her even more.

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## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

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Lana spent a restless night watching over Kian. It was clear to her that he was in a lot of pain from the way he writhed, even in his sleep. For a long time, she couldn't fall asleep, worried that Kian might need her, but in the end, she managed to get a few hours of precious rest.

When she awoke, she rolled over to find Kian already awake. She greeted him with a soft smile, one that he returned. He looked exhausted. Lana couldn't help but wonder if he had gotten any sleep the previous night. He had told her that he would, but perhaps he hadn't managed to because of the pain.

“Good mornin’, lass,” Kian said, turning only his head to look at her, but at least he looked better than the previous night. Some of the color had returned to his face, and he seemed to be better at hiding his pain, which Lana hoped meant it had lessened.

“Good mornin’,” she said. “Did ye manage tae sleep?”

“Aye, fer a while,” Kian assured her. “I feel much better already.”

“We should head back to the castle.”

It was still early in the morning, but Lana wanted to get there as soon as possible. For one, Kian needed treatment. But it wasn't only that which made her want to leave.

For all they knew, there were more Cummings soldiers in the woods. They weren't entirely safe in that cottage, and they couldn't risk another attack, especially with Kian injured like this. In the castle they would be safe.

But when she stepped outside and looked at the sky above, she saw that leaving might not be a very good idea, after all. It was a windy day and clouds had started to gather in the horizon, thick and grey. It was clear that a storm was approaching, and the last thing Lana wanted was to be caught in the middle of it while she and Kian rode back to the castle.

She headed back inside the cottage, disappointment coloring her features.

“What's wrong?” Kian asked, as the first thunder struck.

“There's a storm,” Lana said. “I dinnae think it's wise tae ride back in it.”

Kian pushed himself up into a sitting position and looked out of the small window. “Ach... it doesnae look good,” he said. “I suppose we have nae choice but tae stay here.”

“Dae ye think we are safe?” Lana asked, her concern bleeding into her tone. “What if there are more o’ them? What if they find us here?”

“I dinnae think there are more o’ them,” Kian said. “If there were, they would have come already.”

That did not sound very reassuring to Lana, given it meant they could have died during the night. But she supposed Kian was right, so the danger had already passed.

“So now we just stay here?” Lana asked.

“Fer a few hours at least,” Kian said, as he stood. For a moment, he swayed on his feet. “Well... we are lucky tae have food and drink. We have a fire still and there is more wood tae burn if we need tae. All we need now is a way tae pass the time. I’m sure there must be somethin’ around here,” he said, as he started rummaging through cabinets and the nooks and crannies of the cottage with his good hand.

“I dinnae think ye should be movin’ around so much, Kian,” Lana said. She stood too, just so she could help him and make sure that he wouldn’t push himself too hard. “What are ye even lookin’ fer?”

“I’ll ken when I see it,” Kian said, rather unhelpfully.



The two of them looked around for a while longer and Lana found some more blankets that would probably come in handy. It was getting chilly in the cottage, but with all the blankets and the fire, they were bound to be comfortable.

“Here we are,” Kian said, as he held up a small box.

When he opened it, he revealed a chessboard and the pieces that went with it. It was a simple thing, carved out of wood, but he seemed to take great delight in finding it, judging from the way his eyes lit up at the sight of it.

“Are ye happy now?” Lana asked. “Will ye sit?”

“Aye, aye,” Kian said, waving his hand dismissively, along with the box. “But I’ll go tend tae the horses first. I must make sure they are well.”

“Then I shall help you, you must store your energy” Lana stated.

They made their way to the door and braced themselves for the cold and the wind before opening it. They took care of the horses, Lana trying to do the more physically exerting tasks. She listened to him talking to them softly, soothing them with gentle touches.

It warmed her heart to see him so gentle with them. Despite his pain, he made sure to take care of the creatures.

When they returned to the hearth, they bundled up with the blankets after Lana had stoked the fire and added a few more pieces of wood. Then, she brought the basket over and laid out some of the food for the two of them.

“It’s a good thing Mrs. Beaton prepared as much as she did,” Lana said. She couldn’t imagine what they would do if they hadn’t had this basket or if they had eaten it all. At least now they wouldn’t go hungry, and they would have enough for another meal or two if necessary. They should try to be frugal, Lara thought, as they didn’t know how long they would have to stay there.

“And tae think I complained tae her about it,” Kian said as he bit into a bannock.

“Well, let’s hope that this never happens again,” Lana said matter of factly.

They ate some of the food, and though they had to be careful not to eat too much, Lana urged Kian to eat more, to build up his strength. When they were finished, Lana put everything away, and Kian was quick to pull the chessboard out once more, setting up the game.

“Are ye certain ye wish tae play chess instead o’ restin’?” Lana asked him. “Ye didnae get much sleep last night.”

“I’m fine, lass. Stop yer worryin’,” Kian said. “If ye’re too scared tae play with me, ye can simply say so.”

“I’m nae scared!” Lana scoffed, shaking her head. “I’ll have ye ken that I am

very good at chess.”

“So am I,” said Kian confidently. “Nae one has ever defeated me.”

“Perhaps I will be the first,” Lana said, trying to provoke him, but also telling him the truth. She was good at chess, and she had no doubts that she could win this game. It was better for Kian to be prepared to lose to her.

“How about this,” Kian said, as he finished setting up, and looked at Lana right in the eye. “Fer every piece that each o’ us takes, we can ask a question.”

Lana narrowed her eyes. She didn’t know what Kian was trying to do, but whatever it was, she didn’t think she liked it. “What kind o’ questions?”

“Just questions,” said Kian with a small shrug. “So we can get tae ken each other better.”

“Will ye ask me the kind of things I may nae want to reveal?” Lana asked suspiciously.

“Nay, I promise,” Kian said. “I wouldnae be so cruel.”

It was only a game, after all, Lana thought to herself. Besides, they really don’t know each other, even though they were married. If this helped them to get better acquainted with each other, perhaps it was worth the effort.

“Fine,” Lana said. “But if ye say anythin’ foolish, I’ll stop playin’ with ye.”

“Sure,” Kian said, as though he was certain it wouldn’t be an issue. He picked up two pawns and held them in his hands, letting Lana pick. After she chose the hand that held the white, she started first, moving her first pawn forward.

For the first few moves, the two of them spread to the center of the board. It didn’t take long for Lana to realize that Kian did, in fact, know what he was doing. Nonetheless, she drew first blood, taking one of Kian’s pawns, and then looked at him for a few short moments, trying to decide what to ask.

“Where is the rest o’ yer family?” Lana said after a few moments of consideration. “I havenae seen any o’ them around the castle.”

“I dinnae have a big family,” Kian said. “Me faither and me maither both died when I was young. They only had me. I have an aunt, but she doesnae live with us.”

“Ach... I’m sorry,” Lana said. Perhaps she should have chosen a different question, she thought, one that didn’t have so much potential to ruin the mood.

“It’s alright,” Kian said. “It was a long time ago.”

As he spoke, he made his next move. The game continued for a short, until Kian took one of Lana's own.

"Me turn," he said, placing the piece aside. "If ye could be anywhere, where would ye go?"

"Anywhere?" It was an odd question, one that Lana didn't know how to answer. She supposed she would want to see the world, to travel as much as she could, but that was a dream so distant that she didn't even entertain it as an imaginary option. However, there was one place where she would like to be, more than anywhere else she had ever been before. "I suppose the Murray Castle," she said. "That's where I was afore me father took me to marry Laird Cummings. I lived with them fer a while and they're like a family tae me. I'm sure they're very worried."

For a few moments, Kian was silent. He only gazed at Lana with a strange look in his eyes, one that she couldn't decipher. But just as she was about to ask what was wrong, he spoke again.

"Well, I'm sure we can visit them sometime," he said. "I have ties with that clan, too."

Instantly, Lana's mood brightened and she grinned widely a Kian. "We can?" she asked. "Ooh, Kian, I would love that! I've missed me friends terribly. Could I write tae them when we return tae the castle?"

"O' course ye can write tae them, lass," Kian said with a fond chuckle. "Ye're nae actually a prisoner, ye ken. Ye're the lady o' the clan, ye can write

tae whoever ye wish.”

It didn't feel to Lana like she was the lady of the clan. In fact, she often felt like a prisoner in the castle. That was precisely why she had tried to escape the previous day. It didn't seem like Kian understood that and she didn't know how to properly explain it to him.

But at least now she knew that she could write to the Murrays and that she could visit them, as well. She had missed them all terribly, but with everything that was happening with her father and the Cummings Clan, she doubted it would be soon enough.

As the game progressed, Lana found out more and more about Kian. He told her that he loved animals and she told him that she hated embroidery. He told her he had gotten into all sorts of trouble as a boy and she told him that she had made her governess' life much more difficult than it would have otherwise been, had they not worked for her father.

But when Kian took the next piece, he asked something that she didn't want to answer.

“Why does yer faither treat ye like he does?” he asked. “How come he has nay regard fer either o' his daughters?”

Lana didn't know if the reason her father had for treating them so terribly was the death of her mother or not, but she knew it was something that had affected him deeply. Ever since she had died, he had not been the same man.

Not that Lana remembered that man, but she had heard the stories. He had never been overly generous or kindhearted, apparently, but he had loved her mother dearly, and her death had cost him terribly.

It was a difficult thing for her to share, even with Kian, even now in this game. She shook her head just a little, trying to brush it off, hoping that he wouldn't pressure her.

"I'd rather skip this question," she said. "I dinnae wish tae talk about it."

"Well... if ye skip a question, ye should have some sort o' punishment, dinnae ye think?" Kian asked mischievously. "It's only fair."

"How is it fair?" Lana asked. "I told ye I wouldnae answer any questions I didnae wish tae answer."

"Ye said ye wouldnae answer any embarassin' questions," Kian reminded her. "I dinnae think there's anythin' rude or embarassin' about what I asked ye."

Lana couldn't disagree with that. His question hadn't been rude; she simply didn't want to think about her father. "Fine," she said. "What dae ye want the punishment tae be?"

For a few moments, Kian thought about it, or at least pretended to. Lana was almost certain that he already had something in mind when he first suggested it, so she simply waited for him to answer.

But nothing could have prepared her for what Kian suggested.

“I think ye should take a piece o’ yer clothin’ off,” he said, his grin so wide that it was almost fully visible under the mask.

For a few moments, Lana could do nothing more than stare at him in horror.



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## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

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While they played, Tate realized that he hadn't given much thought to his plan. Lana's questions were often so specific that he had to remember to answer them as Kian and not as himself, and in the end, it was only he who found out more about her. Tate himself revealed almost nothing, at least not when it came to him. Thankfully, he knew Kian well enough to be able to answer almost everything about him and his life.

He was surprised to hear that she missed the Murray Clan so much, though he should have known better. His siblings and their spouses were very likeable. It pained him to hear that she missed them all so terribly, and he hoped that Kian would be fine with her visiting the clan after he returned.

Perhaps the three of them could go together. It had been a while since he had last seen his family, and he missed them, too. But he realized that a trip with the three of them together could end in a disaster rather easily.

It wasn't until Lana refused to answer one of his questions that he got the idea of upping the stakes. It was a stupid thing, he knew, something that he should have never suggested, but the thought of it was almost irresistible, as much trouble as it could get him in. He couldn't lie to himself. He wanted Lana, and though he knew he couldn't have her, he thought that perhaps he

could have some parts of her, whatever scraps he could still get while Kian was away. And it would be a fun way to while away the hours waiting for the storm to pass, without thinking too much about his discomfort.

Besides, it was fun to tease her. Tate didn't really expect her to rise to the bait, but then she removed one of her shoes, and he raised a curious eyebrow at her.

"Well? They count," she said. "And I'll have ye naked long afore ye have me."

"From the look on yer face, I thought ye would never agree tae it," Tate said.

"It was yer foolish idea," Lana said. "And I'll make ye regret it."

*Ach... so that's what this is.*

Like always, she was simply being competitive. Tate would be lying if he said that he didn't like that side of her, the side that constantly challenged him. Now the game had gotten even more interesting, and a part of him was happy that they were stuck in that cottage because of the raging thunderstorm outside.

The game continued, the two of them asking each other questions. They answered some of them and avoided others, until they were both in their undergarments. Through the thin fabric of her chemise, Tate could see the curves of Lana's body, the gentle swell of her breasts, the pebbled nipples

that pressed against the fabric, and he couldn't help himself. He knew his hardness was visible, and he wasn't trying to hide it.

When he took her rook, he asked, "Dae ye ken what happens between a man and a woman?"

Lana blushed a furious shade of red, like she always did when she was embarrassed, but she nodded slowly. "I dae," she said, her voice barely a whisper, before she got a little bolder, daring to meet Tate's eye. "But I dinnae ken if what they say is true."

"What dae they say?" Tate asked with a confused frown.

"That it hurts fer the lass," Lana said, so quietly that Tate barely managed to hear her. "Some o' the maids say that it hurts a lot, especially the first time, but... but I've heard it can be very good, too."

Tate laughed softly at that, shaking his head. "It doesnae hurt," he said. "At least nae if the man does it right. It can hurt but... I wouldnae hurt ye."

When their gazes met, it was as though the lightning from outside was now between them, electrifying the space around them. Tate wanted nothing more than to kiss her, to make love to her, to give her all the pleasure she didn't know she could have.

"Ye wouldnae?" Lana asked, sounding a little uncertain.

“Nay,” Tate promised.

Lana opened her mouth to speak, but nothing came out and so she closed it again. Tate smiled gently and took her hand, saying, “What is it? Ye can tell me.”

Lana let him hold her hand, taking a deep breath. “Can a lass feel the same pleasure as... as ye? As a lad?”

“Och aye,” Tate said. “In fact, if ye dae it right, the lass can feel even better.”

For a few moments, there was nothing but silence between them. Tate rubbed small circles on the back of Lana’s hand as she drew her bottom lip between her teeth, her gaze falling to the hardness between his legs.

“Dae ye want me tae show ye?”

He was playing with fire. He knew that what he was doing wasn’t right, but Lana was like the apple in the Garden of Eden, tempting him with every breath she took. When she nodded, there was no stopping him from approaching her and pressing a soft kiss to her lips, wishing that he didn’t have to wear that damn mask once again.

“I told ye when we married that I wouldnae dae anythin’ tae ye unless ye asked me tae,” Tate reminded her. He was going to keep his word. If Lana wanted him to pleasure her, then she had to ask for it.

But at his words, she only stared at him, unimpressed and saying nothing.

So that was how it was going to be, Tate thought. Well, if she wanted to be stubborn, then he too, had a few tricks up his sleeve.



Lana couldn't believe that she had agreed to any of this, nor could she believe that she was now sitting in her undergarments, kissing Kian. She wanted him, that much was obvious to them both, but she would never tell him so. She was too proud to admit it out loud and besides, he already knew it. Why did she have to go through the mortifying ordeal of saying so?

But as Kian trailed kisses down her neck, his hands barely ghosting over her breasts, her thighs, her waist, she didn't think she had any other choice. He didn't touch her at all, and yet heat pooled deep in her stomach, her desire growing with every brush of his lips against her skin.

When his fingernail grazed just lightly over her nipple, she couldn't help but moan.

"Kian... please," she finally said, knowing there was no other way to get what she wanted. Kian could draw this out forever and he would, just to spite her. "I want it. I want ye tae touch me. But I worry about yer injury, yer pain..."

The moment those words were out of her mouth, Kian's hand cupped her breast through her chemise and his mouth sucked a bruise onto the sensitive skin of her neck. Apparently, he was well enough judging from his actions,

so Lana decided to succumb to her feelings. She arched into the touch, trying to get more, to chase that new and exhilarating feeling, and Kian was happy to give her just what she wanted.

His hands pulled her chemise off, leaving her nude in the cold air of the room. Her skin broke into goosebumps, but he warmed her with his roaming touch and with his mouth, which wrapped tightly around a nipple.

Lana had never felt anything like it before. It was as though every part of her was on fire, her body burning with desire for Kian. For all she had tried to stay away from him and to push him away from her, now she wanted nothing more than to let him give her the pleasure he had promised her. Her body ached for him, her hands reaching out to pull him closer, until they didn't know where one ended and the other began.

When she felt his fingers trail down her stomach and between her legs, she gasped, the sudden pressure more pleasurable than she could have ever imagined.

“Dae ye feel this?” Kian asked, swirling his fingers around her folds with a sigh. “Dae ye feel how wet ye are fer me?”

Lana could feel it. She wasn't entirely unfamiliar with the sensation, as she had felt it before, for example when she had seen Kian naked in their chambers, but now it felt much more intense. His fingers teased her, coaxing more of that wetness from her and rubbing a spot that made her legs fall open wider, a moan escaping her lips.

Kian kissed her and then mumbled, “Can I taste ye?”

Lana wasn't sure what he meant, but she was happy to give him anything he wanted in that moment, so she simply nodded. Then, Kian started moving lower, scattering kisses on her torso until he could settle between her legs, taking a moment to simply look at her.

“Ye're so bonnie, Lana,” he said. “Lay back. Let me make ye feel good.”

Lana did as he was told just as Kian's tongue darted out, getting a taste of her. It was then when she understood what he had meant and she gasped, the sudden surge of pleasure knocking her breath out of her. She glanced at him as he moved his tongue around her most sensitive spot, but she soon found out it was a mistake, since Kian met her gaze with his own.

It was so intense that she didn't know what to do. She quickly looked away, letting her head fall back as her cheeks burned, just so she wouldn't have to hold his gaze as her pleasure crested.

When Kian slowly pushed one of his fingers inside of her, Lana saw stars behind her eyelids, her entire world exploding into satisfaction. The deeper Kian went, the more Lana wanted him to never stop, his finger hitting something deep inside her that made her hips move on their own accord, chasing all the pleasure he would give her.

“That's it, lass,” he said. “Is it good?”

Lana could only moan in response, every other thought having left her head a long time ago. She could only focus on the feeling of his hand and his mouth against her, inside her, where she wanted him the most, until he brought her to the edge and her pleasure crashed over her with a shout of his name on her lips.

For a few moments, Lana lay there and panted, trying to catch her breath. It seemed like Kian wasn't trying to fool her when he said that he could give her more pleasure than she thought possible, and all that she could think about was experiencing it again.

But just as she thought that they were about to properly consummate the marriage, Kian pulled back from her. Lana stared at him for a few moments, wondering where he was going and why he had stopped, but it quickly became clear to her that he had no intention of continuing.

*Should I say somethin'? Did he nae enjoy it?*

She didn't know what was wrong or if she had done something to make him stop, but she didn't want to ask, either. It was far too embarrassing and even if she tried, she doubted that she could get the words out. Perhaps it was because of the pain? But just a few moments before he had seemed to be feeling fine.

Lana felt terribly confused, all she knew was that she wanted more from him. She wanted him to take her. She wanted him to show her who he truly was. Before she could think about what she was doing, she reached out and placed her hand on his mask, trying to pull it away.



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## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

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Tate knew that he couldn't sleep with Lana. What he had done had already taken things too far, and he knew he should have been smarter than to think it was a good idea to pleasure her like this. He certainly hadn't been thinking with his brain when he took that decision. He had already betrayed Kian more than he should have, and he wasn't about to make it even worse.

It would be a mess when he returned. Tate couldn't get the thought out of his head, and he didn't know what he would say to him. How could he excuse his actions? What was there for him to say? Kian was bound to be furious and rightly so.

*Can I even salvage this friendship now?*

The only thing he could count on was the fact that Kian wasn't in love with Lana. The entire marriage was nothing but a way to keep her away from Laird Cummings, so perhaps he would be lenient with Tate. Even so, Tate would never manage to rid himself of the shame that he felt at betraying his best friend.

*And what if he never forgives me? What if our friendship is over?*

Tate had his family, but Kian, though well-liked, had few people to whom he was close. This only made him feel worse.

He was pulled from his thoughts, though, the moment Lana reached for the mask.

Tate was quick to shove her hand away, and for a moment both of them froze.

“Forgive me,” he said. “I didnae mean tae be so rough with ye.”

Lana only stared at him, her mouth hanging slightly open. “I... I only wanted tae—”

“Dinnae ever try tae remove this mask from me face,” Tate said. “If I wish tae show me face tae ye, I will. But I dinnae wish tae dae so now.”

That seemed to be the wrong thing to say, judging from the way that Lana’s gaze hardened and her arms came to wrap around her protectively.

“I dinnae ken what ye think is so wrong with yer face, but I dinnae care,” she said. “Ye’re me husband and I still dinnae ken what ye look like. This is ridiculous! How am I supposed tae be married tae ye when I dinnae even ken what ye look like?”

It was a fair question, but Tate had no answer for her. He only wished that she wouldn't push the matter, as he didn't even have a choice in it. He had to wear the mask. although he hated it just as much as she did.

Besides, Tate was rather certain that Kian wouldn't want to take his mask off around her, either. Perhaps he would, eventually, but he never took it off in front of others, not even around himself and Macauley, the two people he trusted the most. Lana had to come to terms with the fact that her husband would simply wear the mask for the rest of their lives.

"I willnae take the mask off," Tate insisted. "And I dinnae wish tae discuss this."

"O' course ye dinnae," Lana scoffed shaking her head. "Ye never wish tae discuss anythin' with me!"

"I answered most o' yer questions," Tate pointed out. It had been anything but easy on him. "But I willnae give ye this. Trust that I have a good reason fer it."

Silence fell over them, before Lana lay down on the blankets and turned her back to him. "Whatever it is ye're hidin', it's nae as bad as ye think it is."

Tate was certain that she was right. He had told the same thing to Kian before, but the man never listened, and it wasn't Tate's business to tell him what he could and couldn't do. Kian felt more comfortable with the mask,

and so Tate had never mentioned it again.

He only hoped that Lana wouldn't constantly bother him about it, since it was a sensitive subject for Kian.

With a sigh, Tate lay down as well and moved closer to Lana, wrapping an arm around her waist as he molded his body against her own. Though she stiffened for a moment, she didn't push him away, and Tate took it as a good sign.

He had started to fall for her, he realized. Everything he had learnt that day about her had only made his attraction towards her grow, and now he didn't know what to do about it or how he could even resist her. She was a beautiful woman, but it was more than that. She was kind and intelligent, and she challenged him in a way that few people did. Tate wished that she could be his own, but such wishes were only foolish. Everyone knew now that she was married to Kian. There was nothing to be done about it. Tate simply had to bury his feelings for her as deep as he could and never touch her again.

"I'm sorry about everythin'. About being so sensitive about me appearance. And about making ye feel rejected. I am not in me best shape... it has nothin' tae dae with ye," he whispered into her hair.

Lana didn't say anything but she also did not move.



It was only a short while later that the storm died down and the two of them could leave. Tate's shoulder ached with every movement he made, and he

had bled a little through the makeshift bandage, so they had to get back to the castle as soon as possible. It didn't help that he didn't know how to behave around Lana anymore. She hadn't said a single word after she had tried to take off his mask, and neither he nor she seemed to know what to say as they packed everything and took the horses back home.

They spent the entire ride in awkward silence.

The moment they were inside the castle doors, Macauley was upon him, asking him a million questions before Tate had even managed to dismount his horse.

“Where were ye?” he said. “We thought somethin’ happened tae ye! What were ye doin’ all this time out in the woods? Have ye lost yer mind? Everyone has been lookin’ fer ye!”

“Macauley,” Tate said with a sigh, raising a hand to silence him. “I’ll explain everythin’. I need tae see Elspet.”

“Elspet?” Macauley asked. “Are ye hurt?”

“Aye,” Tate said, pulling his jacket back to reveal his shoulder. “It’s nae too serious but it hurts. Come with me. I’ll tell ye everythin’ on the way.”

He left without another glance at Lana. He didn't want Macauley to find out what had happened between them, and so he rushed them both out of there, leaving her behind.

On the way to Elspet's study, he explained everything to Macauley, leaving out the parts that weren't convenient for him to share. Macauley listened intently, his eyes widening with every word Tate spoke.

"I cannae believe this," he said. "How did they get so close?"

"I dinnae ken, but we must be more alert now," he said. "We dinnae ken what else they might dae. They want Lana, I think. It's the only thing that makes any sense."

"O' course they dae," Macauley said. "They need this alliance just as much as her faither needs it. It's important tae Laird Cummings. He'll dae anythin' in his power tae take her back."

"If it was just the alliance, he would have agreed tae marry Laird Hay's other daughter," Tate pointed out. "But he didnae want her. He only wanted Lana. This is more than just an alliance. It's personal, Macauley."

"I see," Macauley said. "I suppose he's very angry that ye took his betrothed away from him on the day o' their weddin'. It's an insult... and it shows that he may nae be as strong as everyone thinks he is."

It made sense for Laird Cummings to want Lana back, but Tate would do anything in his power to keep her safe and away from that man. It wasn't just that she was married to Kian, supposedly, but also that he didn't want her to suffer in Laird Cummings' hands. He would never let him take her. He would never let him subject her to such a terrible fate.

“Well, I’ll take care o’ this,” Macauley continued, just as the two of them reached Elspet’s study. “I’ll make sure tae post more guards and tell them tae look out for Cummings’ men. In the meantime, ye have tae visit the village.”

“The village?” Tate asked. “Like this? But I’m hurt.”

“I understand, but in Kian’s absence, there are certain duties that must be carried out,” Macauley reminded him. “It’s an urgent matter,” he said. “They are unhappy with the amount of grain we demand from them. And I understand, I dae, but we have several mouths tae feed here.”

Tate sighed, a hand coming up to brush through his hair. This was far from what his duties were, and he wouldn’t even know how to talk to those people. Kian was better than him at these things, born and raised to be a laird. Tate would only end up saying something wrong or making a fool of himself – of Kian for that matter – and that was the last thing they needed if the villagers were unhappy.

“Trust me, I wouldnae send ye either if I had a choice,” Macauley added. “I dinnae want ye speakin’ tae too many people, even if ye sound so much like him. It’s better tae keep ye as hidden as possible.”

“Why can we nae wait until Kian comes back?” Tate asked. “Ye said he’ll be back soon.”

Macauley hesitated for a moment, and Tate didn’t like that one bit. He

narrowed his eyes at him, stepping in front of him to block his way. “He is comin’ back soon, is he nae?”

“Och, I dinnae ken!” Macauley said. “I never ken with him! This is just as bad fer me as it is fer ye.”

“I very much doubt that,” Tate said. Macauley didn’t have to pretend to be someone he wasn’t. He didn’t have to give up his life every now and then and lead a completely different one, nor did he have to pretend that he wasn’t in love with his best friends’ wife just to keep some semblance of sanity. “What dae ye ken?”

“I only ken that he hasnae written in a while,” Macauley said. “That can mean that he’s on the road or it can mean that he’s caught up in somethin’ else now. I told ye, I never ken with him.”

“Aye, o’ course ye dinnae,” Tate said with a sigh. No one knew anything when it came to Kian. They all had to keep guessing.

“I’m sure he willnae be much longer,” Macauley said, though it was hardly reassuring after he had told Tate that he didn’t know where Kian was. Still, Tate said nothing on the matter. He would simply have to do this, just like he had done everything else. It was, after all, for the good of the people.

Maybe he could even come up with a solution that Kian wouldn’t think of. Maybe in the end, it would be a good thing, though he would have to be very careful.



If one of the villagers found out who he really was, there would be a riot, surely. No one could know apart from the people who already did.

Which made Tate thoughtful.

“Macauley... Elspet has treated Kian a lot, has she nae?” Tate asked.

“Och aye,” Macauley said. “She treats all o’ us, ye ken that. She’s even treated ye.”

“Aye... aye, she has.”

Which could only mean that she knew what he looked like and she knew what Kian looked like, and she wouldn’t be fooled once his shirt was off. But his shoulder needed attention, and Tate would rather risk her knowing than risk dying because he couldn’t get his wound treated properly.

“Och...” Macauley suddenly exclaimed. “Nay, ye cannae have her see ye! She’ll ken who ye are!” He must have been having the same train of thought as him.

“I dinnae have a choice!” Tate said. “What else am I supposed tae dae?”

For a few moments, Macauley stayed silent, deep in thought. Then, he raised a finger as though he had come up with an idea. “There is a healer at the village,” he said. “We’ll take ye there and he can help ye. He has never

treated Kian. He willnae ken the difference.”

Tate wished there was another option, but he knew that was their best bet. Reluctantly, he nodded, and the two of them turned around, quickly walking away from Elspet’s study, just in case she came out and saw them before they could make their escape.

They only stopped once they were in Kian’s study, the two of them closing the door firmly so that Tate could finally remove the mask. He sat down and let his head fall onto the desk, closing his eyes for a moment.

He hadn’t slept, he had barely eaten, his shoulder was killing him, and he had a terrible headache. He was starting to think that this ploy would be the end of him.

“Are ye alright?” Macauley asked, as he took the seat across from him.

Tate raised his head slowly to look at the other man. “Nay... nay I am nae alright!” he shouted, his anger rushing out of him like a wave. “How can I be? I was stabbed! In the shoulder!”

“Ach, surely ye’ve had worse,” Macauley said. “I ken I have.”

Tate didn’t even know what to say to that. Yes, he had had worse, and that was precisely why he wasn’t in bed, writhing in pain, but it didn’t mean that it was a pleasant experience. Quite the opposite, in fact. And it wasn’t just the pain from his injury, but everything else, as well, which had brought him

quite close to his breaking point.

“Macauley,” he said.

“Aye?”

“Shut yer mouth.”

“Fine, fine,” Macauley said, raising his hands in surrender. “I’m sorry. I ken that ye’re in pain, but this will all soon end.”

“Ye said ye dinnae ken when Kian will return,” Tate reminded him.

Macauley paused. “This is will all soon end, *probably*.”

Tate let his head fall back onto the desk with a groan. It was a few moments before Macauley spoke again, breaking the tentative silence around him.

“I’ll bring ye some wine and somethin’ fer the pain. I’ll tell Elspet it’s fer me,” he said. “And then once ye’re ready, we can head tae the village.”

“Today?” Tate asked.

“Better today than tomorrow,” Macauley said. “We have tae tend tae yer injury.”

That much was true, Tate knew. He was exhausted, but he supposed he could sleep at the village if it came to it. Taking some time away from the castle and especially Lana would do him some good, he thought. It would be his chance to sort out his feelings and remind himself once more that she wasn't his and would never be.

He needed that reminder more than ever.

When Macauley left, Tate closed his eyes and let himself relax for a little while. When he returned, Tate drank the the tea Elspet had made, downing the latter in one gulp. He knew the herbs would work soon. Then he had the wine, which on the other hand, helped him feel better immediately.

Then, he stood with whatever strength he had left and put on the mask, heading for the door. “I'll go and change. Meet me by the gates.”

“Aye,” Macauley said. “I'll prepare everythin' we need.”

Tate made his way to his room on unsteady legs. When he opened the door, he found Lana there, and the sight of her gave him pause for a moment, before he managed to cross the threshold and start gathering some of his items.

“I must head tae the village,” he said. “I willnae be gone fer long.”

“Now?” Lana asked. “Shouldnae ye take some time tae heal?”

“I have nae choice,” Tate said. “The villagers, they... well, there are some issues that I need tae address. It’s naething serious, but it needs tae be done soon.”

Lana stood from the bed and walked over to him, though she didn’t dare come too close. Tate knew it was because of the incident with the mask, and though he wished he could make her feel better about it, he didn’t want to risk another attempt on her part, so he said nothing on the matter.

“May I come with ye?” she asked. “I would like tae see the village.”

It was a bad idea. Not only would they be forced to spend more time together, which was the last thing Tate wanted, but the village wasn’t as well-protected as the castle. He would have men with him, of course, but Lana would still be more exposed to danger there.

“I think it’s best if ye stay here,” Tate said, gently but firmly. “I dinnae wish fer any harm tae come tae ye.”

“But ye’ll be there,” Lana said. “And ye’ll have guards, will ye nae?”

“I’m injured, and there’s only so much me guards can dae tae keep ye safe,” he said. “It’s better if ye’re here. It’s safer.”

“Kian... please,” Lana said. “Dae ye truly think that a day or two in the woods was enough fer me? I... I cannae stay here fer weeks at a time just because ye think it’s safer. I’m sure yer guards can dae their jobs properly. Why nae let me come with ye?”

The guard excuse was a weak one and Tate was well aware of it. However, he couldn’t come up with any other excuse, everything seemed to hurt at that moment and his mind was blank.

“Fine,” he said, relenting. “Ye can come. But ye’ll have tae dae as I say. I want tae make sure ye’ll be safe.”

“O’ course,” Lana said. “Thank ye, Kian. I truly appreciate it.”

She was trying to placate him, Tate realized, perhaps because she thought that he was still angry about the mask. Tate couldn’t blame her for her curiosity since he had also always felt just as curious, but Kian would have remained angry for a long time, so that meant that he had to pretend to be angry, too.

“Get ready, then,” Tate told her. “We’ll leave soon.”

The two of them didn’t exchange another word while packing, and the silence between them continued even as they joined Macauley by the gates. When he saw Lana there, he raised a curious eyebrow, but Tate shook his head just slightly, only for him to see.

He didn't want to talk about it, especially in front of Lana.

In fact, he didn't want to talk about anything at all. He only wanted some peace and quiet.

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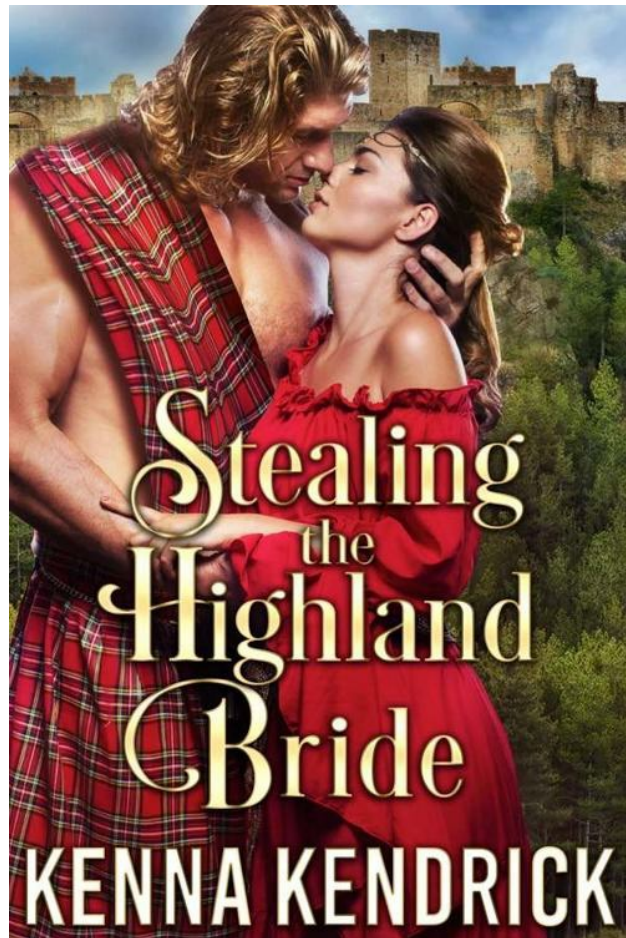
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## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

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The road to the village was torturous for Tate. He had done his best to avoid Lana but now there was no avoiding her at all. The two of them rode to the village together in silence, followed by Macauley.

The traitor had left Tate all alone, keeping pace with them a little farther away, much to Tate's annoyance. Macauley could have easily saved him from the tension of a silent ride, but he preferred to stay behind, avoiding the awkwardness as best as he could himself.

At least the ride to the village was a short one. Once they made it there, Macauley was once again on him like a vulture, dragging him away from Lana so they could talk to the people. But I all honesty, he was grateful for the distraction.

However, he could hardly talk to anyone, he had to be careful of his mannerisms, and he didn't always know the extent of the problem. Kian was the kind of laird who took care of everything himself, and Tate only knew what was relevant for him to know as an unofficial advisor.

“I wish ye would have told me more about this afore we came here,” he told Macauley through gritted teeth as an old man talked to him about the loss of many of his farm animals to disease. “What dae ye expect me tae dae?”

“Listen,” Macauley said, “that is all they wish tae have from ye now. He doesnae expect ye tae solve his problem right this instant!”

That much was probably true, but the more Tate heard about the villagers’ problems, the more he wanted to help them as much and as fast as he could, but Kian could only do so much. He had so many responsibilities that it was impossible for him to focus on everything at once. He also often refused help unless it came in the form of Tate wearing the mask and pretending to be him.

From the corner of his eye, Tate watched Lana. She listened to the old man intently, her eyes glued to him as though there was no one else in the world but the two of them. When the man finished talking, Lana reached for his hand and held it tightly in her own.

“There must be somethin’ we can dae,” she said, turning to look at Tate and Macauley. “Perhaps we could spare some animals. We have plenty. Or... or some coins so he can purchase more cattle.”

Tate glanced at Macauley. His first instinct was to help, too, but not only could he not make such a decision for Kian, but giving the man animals would be a slippery slope. Perhaps he needed them, but if the castle gave animals to everyone, then there would be none left for those who lived in the castle.

“We shall discuss it,” said Macauley. “Rest assured that we have listened tae yer requests and we will dae anythin’ in our power tae support ye.”

“Aye,” said Tate.

Lana gave him an incredulous look, but there was nothing he could do about it. He would rather have her be displeased with him than make a choice that wasn’t his to make. The old man lingered for a few more moments, but left when Tate had nothing else to say to him, and it was then that Lana grabbed Tate’s hand and pulled him aside.

“Where are ye goin’?” Macauley asked. “There is still work tae dae!”

“I’ll bring him right back,” Lana promised, but Tate had the impression that this wouldn’t be a short argument. Once they were out of earshot, Lana said, “Will ye nae help him?”

“O’ course I’ll help him,” Tate said. Kian would help the man. Kian helped everyone. He just didn’t know what he would want to do in order to help him. “But there is naething I can dae fer him now. I must return tae the castle first and discuss it with Macauley, and then we’ll see.”

“What is there tae see?” Lana asked. “The solution is very simple.”

“It’s nae as simple as ye think it is,” Tate said. “Allow me tae ken some things better than ye.”

Lana's expression hardened, but she said nothing. Despite the fact that she was clearly angry with him, Tate couldn't help but marvel at her desire to help the villagers. The entire time the two of them and Macauley listened to them, Lana made sure to pay attention and to reassure them with kind words and smiles. It didn't matter how long they took to explain their problem, nor did it matter how long the three of them sat there. Lana's attention never wavered, and she didn't tire.

She could listen to them for hours, Tate thought to himself. But they soon realized there was not enough time in a day to listen to all the villagers, so Macauley and Tate decided to separate in order to hear everyone out.

Lana and Tate were standing in front of a cottage saying their farewells to an elderly woman who had offered them a cup of tea, when they heard a faint cry. They both turned towards the source of the sound at the same time, but Tate couldn't figure out where it was coming from.

"Did ye hear that?" Tate asked.

"Aye," said Lana. "It sounded..."

"Like a bairn."

They both ran towards the general direction of the sound, trying to find the child. No one else seemed to have noticed it, busy as they were going about their daily chores. So they continued to follow the sound as best they could.

The cries became louder as they neared what seemed to be a hole in the ground, a pitfall of sorts. Tate gasped as he noticed a young girl holding onto edge for dear life, her legs dangling in the pit.

“Help! Mama!” the girl sobbed.

Thankfully, the wee lass didn’t seem hurt, just frightened. Tate went to her rescue just as Lana reached the pitfall as well, her skin pallid with fear. She jumped into action, helping Tate pull the girl out. With his shoulder injured, Tate could only use one of his hands, but with their combined strength, they managed to pull the girl out safely.

Just as her feet touched the ground, though, the soil gave way under Lana and she tumbled into the hole with a scream.

Tate managed to grab her hand and hold her suspended in the air for a few moments. When their gazes met, her terror was palpable, her eyes wide and fearful as she looked at him. He held her tightly, but he could do little more than that with one useless arm.

“Kian!” Lana shouted as she tried to find her footing on the side of the hole. “Dinnae let go o’ me!”

“I willnae!” Tate promised. But then, his own feet began to slide in the dirt, and no matter how much he tried to keep both of them safe, there was nothing he could do when the ground gave way once more and he, too, fell inside.

He managed to land away from Lana and on his good shoulder, minimizing the damage. However, when his back met the ground, the air was punched out of his lungs and he let out a grunt of pain, trying to get his bearings once more as he sat up.

“Are ye alright, lass?” he asked Lana.

It took her a few moments to stand, but when she did, she looked relatively unharmed. Her tunic was soiled and her hair was in disarray, but she didn't complain, so Tate took that as a good sign.

“Ach! Look at the state o' me *lèine*,” she said, before she seemed to notice that Tate was still on the ground. “Are ye hurt?”

“It isnae too bad,” Tate said, as he pushed himself up to his feet and dusted off his own tunic. He looked up at the lip of the ditch and realized that there was no way they could get out of there. There was nothing to hold onto, nothing to use to climb, and the hole was deep.

Fortunately, when he looked up, he noticed the girl was still there, watching them. She seemed frightened and unsure of what to do. She was staring down at them with eyes as big as saucers.

“What's yer name, lassie?” he asked her.

“Caitriona,” said the girl shyly.

“Caitriona, dae ye think ye can go and get us some help?”

The girl nodded and was gone before Tate could tell her anything else. Now all they could do was wait.



Once again, Lana was stuck with Kian, with nowhere to go. At least she hadn't gotten injured because of her fall, and neither had he. The last thing he needed was yet another injury.

At first, it seemed like a good idea to Lana to go with Kian to the village. But now, she was starting to believe that maybe she should've stayed at the castle. The tension between them was almost too much to bear. Ever since Lana had tried to remove Kian's mask, he had been trying to avoid her, and though at first she thought it would be enough for the two of them to talk about it and move past it, she now thought that perhaps her insistence to be around him and try to force him into a conversation was a bad idea.

Kian clearly didn't want to talk about it. In fact, he seemed to not want to talk about anything with her.

“Next time, try tae stay out o' the hole,” Kian said, though his tone wasn't berating, but rather teasing. Lana could have sworn she saw a hint of a smile under the mask.

“I could say the same fer ye,” Lana said. “Had ye nae fallen in, we wouldnae be in this situation now.”



“What did ye want me tae dae?” Kian asked. “I’m an injured man! I couldnae hold ye!”

“And now I’m stuck here with ye,” Lana said, more bitterly than she had intended, her frustration getting the better of her. It wasn’t just the fact that she had fallen into the hole; that was the least of her problems. Help was coming and they were both unharmed. Her real issue was that she could actually help in the Drummond Castle although she was forced to be with Kian against her will, and he could be so infuriating at times.

It also didn’t help that she couldn’t get him out of her head, despite all this. He was always on her mind, consuming her every waking thought, no matter how hard she tried to busy herself with something else. Ever since that night in the cottage, she couldn’t think about anything else, and that angered her more than he ever could.

She was stronger than that. She wasn’t going to be a good, obedient wife to him just because he had given her a kind of pleasure that no one else had.

Their marriage was still, technically, unconsummated, after all. She could find another husband if she so wished.

“Och aye, what a terrible fate,” Kian said, his tone dripping with sarcasm. He, too, sounded annoyed now, and Lana pursed her lips into a thin line as she glared at him.

He didn’t have the right to be upset, not when he was the one who had started all this in the first place.

“If ye hadnae forced me tae marry ye, then perhaps we wouldnae be here now,” Lana said through gritted teeth. This was it, she thought. This was the crux of everything between them. “Why? Why did ye force me intae this marriage?”

She couldn’t hold it inside her anymore. It was far from a pleasant conversation, but it was a necessary one.

Even with the mask, Lana could tell that Kian’s face softened at the question. He sighed heavily, his gaze dropping to the ground for a moment. “Ye ken why,” he said. “We’ve discussed this. Ye werenae safe with Laird Balfour. He’s a terrible man.”

“Aye, so ye said,” Lana said. She knew it to be true, but this wasn’t the real reason why Kian had taken her, or at least she didn’t think so. He had already told her he couldn’t allow her clan to become allies through such a marriage with the Balfour Clan, and she couldn’t help but think that this was the only reason why he had taken her from her home. It wasn’t to protect *her*. It was so that he could protect himself. “Ye also said that it would be disastrous fer yer clan if I married him.”

Kian pinned her with a careful gaze. “Aye, that’s true,” he said.

“So ye admit that it wasnae fer me own good,” Lana said. “Ye admit it was fer yer own.”

“It was fer both o’ us,” Kian said, his voice now carrying a sharpness Lana

hadn't heard before. "What did ye expect me tae dae, let the clan and every other clan in these parts be in danger? But dinnae think fer a second that I didnae consider yer situation, too. I saw what Laird Balfour is like. I kent what he would have done tae ye had I let ye marry him. I didnae want ye tae suffer such a fate."

It would have been difficult for Lana to believe if Kian didn't sound so sincere. Lana moved closer to him, so close that she could hear his ragged breathing, as his emotions spilled out. She was so close that she could kiss him.

Slowly, with trembling fingers, she reached for it. To her surprise, Kian let her slip her fingers under it, and Lana had to hold back a gasp at the intimacy of it. She would finally see his face properly. She would finally know who was the man she married.

But just as she was about to take the mask off, footsteps approached them and Kian yanked back, putting distance between them.

When their eyes met, his gaze was filled with horror.

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## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

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This was madness. Tate could hardly believe how close he had allowed Lana to get. Had the people arrived only a few seconds later, she would have pulled off the mask, and then there would have been nothing to save him or Kian, once she found out the truth.

He had been mesmerized. Every part of him had wanted to kiss Lana, to pull her close and never let her go, and because of it, he had almost ruined the entire plan for which he and Kian had worked so hard. He couldn't believe how careless he had been in that moment. He had allowed his baser instincts to take control, not for the first time in the past day, when he should have kept his distance from Lana, as he had intended to do from the start.

That was what he had to do. He had to keep himself away, as much as he could, even if it meant that Lana would question his behavior. It would be up to Kian to fix things. If anything, he deserved it for what he had put Tate through with all this.

“Are ye alright down there?” asked a gruff voice. Tate looked up and saw several men standing there, looking at the two of them with concern etched on their features.

“Aye, we’re alright, but we cannae get out,” Tate said, thankful for the distraction. As long as there were other people around, it was easier to avoid Lana. “Dae ye have a rope or a ladder?”

“Aye. Lower the ladder, lads.”

Two men lowered a wooden ladder into the hole, and he and Lana were out of there in no time. The moment they were back on firm ground and Tate was certain that Lana was alright, he busied himself talking to the village people, thanking them for their assistance.

“Ach, there ye are,” called Macauley, as he rushed towards him. “What happened? I was getting some of grain needed for the castle, when I heard the commotion”.

“We fell into the pit, helping a lass,” said Tate. “But we’re both alright.”

Despite Tate’s reassurances, Macauley looked them over for injuries. Only when he was satisfied did he motion for them to follow him.

“We should head back tae the castle,” he said. “The people seem happy and ye need tae rest.”

Tate had the suspicion that any issues with his appearance were linked to what had just happened between him and Lana and not to his shoulder injury or the fact that he was tired. Still, Macauley didn’t need to know that and

besides, if they did return to the castle, it would be even easier to avoid Lana.

Also, it seemed that Macauley had forgotten about the village healer, which he was grateful about. He didn't want to have to give Lana explanations as to why he was having another healer see him .

This time, as they rode down the path, Tate made sure to stick close to Macauley. He didn't want to be left alone with Lana for even a moment, lest he do or say something he shouldn't.

The moment they were in the castle, Tate rushed to Kian's chambers with the excuse that he was tired, as the trip and his injury had taken a lot out of him. He knew that Lana would follow, eventually, but he hoped that he would either be asleep when she did or that he could slip out of the room, claiming he had had enough rest.

For the remainder of the day, he didn't see Lana at all.



When Tate woke up the next morning, the bed was empty, much to his surprise and delight. A part of him missed the time he spent with Lana. Her absence was like a void in his stomach, but he knew that he couldn't be around her anymore. It was for the best. He had to stay away from her, despite the hurt, despite his burning desire to see her and talk to her and hold her in his arms.

He dressed quickly and made his way straight to Kian's study, where he took his breakfast. He had hardly crossed the threshold, though, before Macauley

was upon him, grabbing him by the arm to drag him away.

“What is it?” Tate asked in alarm, his mind jumping to the worst possible conclusion at once. “Did somethin’ happen?”

“Nay, nay... ‘tis the villagers. They have come tae thank ye fer savin’ the wee lassie. They’ve been waitin’ fer ye.”

Tate let out a small groan. Though it was already late in the morning, he had only just woken up and the thought of being assaulted by a group of very grateful people didn’t sound particularly attractive. Sometimes, he understood why Kian did things the way he did. Neither of them wanted the praise and attention that came with doing good deeds, as thankful as they were to be loved by the people of the clan.

Well, at least Kian was loved.

“Have they been waitin’ long?” Tate asked.

“A while,” Macauley said. “But it’s alright. Lana is keepin’ them company.”

Tate cursed under his breath. He had nurtured the delusion that he would be able to avoid her entirely for the next few days, until Kian returned, but it seemed like any possibility of doing that had been already been thrown out the window. He steeled himself for the moment he would see her, and he couldn’t help but wonder if she would be angry with him.

*O' course she will. She doesnae ken why I'm avoidin' her.*

When Macauley pushed him into the great hall, Tate found a small group of people there, seated around a table and talking to Lana. Their entrance caught everyone's attention, and they all turned to look at him, but he did his best to never let his gaze meet Lana's. It was far from easy, especially since he could tell that Lana was glaring at him, her narrowed eyes following him as he walked around the room to join the villagers.

For a while, Tate sat there, nodding and smiling politely. He did his best to answer in as few words as possible and as pleasantly as possible, despite his sour mood.

“We'll never forget what ye did fer wee Caitriona,” the girl's mother said, grasping Tate's hand, the one that wasn't cloth-wrapped. “I cannae thank ye enough.”

“Nae need,” Tate said. “I'm glad she's alright.”

That was all that mattered to him, really.

“Had ye nae been there, who kens what would have happened tae her. That pitfall was used by yer father to catch prey. It hasnae been used in a long time and the cover needed replacin', so we were making a new one. We warned all the villagers, but Caitriona wandered off without tellin' anyone... She could have been badly injured...” said one of the men, probably her father, with a stricken expression.



“Dinnae fash about that now,” Tate said and then, just so he could change the subject, he added, “Would ye like tae stay fer dinner?”

He could handle that, he thought. He only hoped they wouldn’t stay for supper, too.

Just as Tate had expected, the villagers were more than happy to stay and enjoy some food in the castle. Tate himself hadn’t even broken his fast yet, but he supposed it was almost time for the midday meal anyway.

He had taken great care to sit across from Lana, all the way at the other side of the long table. That meant that he didn’t have to talk to her, but he was straight across from her and his gaze flew over her a few times. Each time she looked angrier than before.

The entire meal was a tense affair for Tate, though he tried not to show it. The villagers didn’t seem to notice anything, much to his relief, but Macauley did. He kept glancing between Tate and Lana in a rather unsubtle way, and Tate couldn’t wait for it all to be over. He could hardly take a single bite of his food, with the stress of having an angry Lana so close to him.

The moment the villagers were out of the castle, he fled the great hall. He couldn’t stand being around her. The mere sight of her had a wave of panic crashing over him, fearful that she would either find out the truth or that he would lose control and kiss her again.

He had to do something about it. He had to get his mind off her and focus on something else.

Just as he rounded a corner, he fell right onto a young maid. Her name was Ailsa if he was not mistaken. He steadied her with a hand on her shoulder, and he made to leave before he came to a halt once more.

Maybe this was the answer to his problems. Maybe he just needed to find another outlet for all this desire.

“Ailsa,” Tate took a shot with the name and by her smile he knew he guessed it right, and he took a step closer to the woman. She was pretty, with brown hair and eyes. Most importantly, she looked nothing like Lana.

“Aye, me laird?” asked Ailsa with knowing eyes shifting her body closer. Not that it did anything for him.

“Come with me.”

Tate took her to Kian’s study and locked the door. There was no pretense. They both knew why they were there, and Ailsa wasted no time before she wrapped her arms around him and started kissing his neck. Tate let his head fall back, his hands landing on the maid’s hips to hold her close.

When she let him go, Tate took a seat and watched her undress, revealing the ample curves of her breasts. She smiled at him as she straddled his lap and Tate—

Tate felt *nothing*.

With a sigh, he took her wrists in his hands and stopped her just as she was about to sit in his lap. “Forgive me,” he said. “I think... I think I cannae dae this.”

There was no substitute for what he felt for Lana, no matter how much he tried. He would have to find a way to get over her first. Perhaps it would be easier, he thought, once Kian was back and Tate would see the two of them together. Perhaps it would drive home the fact that he had no other choice but to forget Lana, to suppress his feelings for her.

There was the issue of *when* Kian would return, of course. He had already been gone for much longer than any of them expected, and Tate was starting to worry. Kian was more than capable of defending himself, but he could still not be certain that he was safe.

Tate had half a mind to go and look for him, but then he would be leaving the clan in a time of danger. It wasn't that he didn't trust Macauley to make the decisions—if anything, he thought the man was a better leader than he was. But in times of crisis, the laird had to be there, and so Tate couldn't leave.

“It's alright, me laird,” Ailsa said, as she quickly dressed. “I think it may be better this way.”

Tate smiled at her from under the mask. She was a kind girl, and Tate hated to make her feel bad. “I didnae ken... I'm sorry. I shouldnae have called ye here. I hope ye willnae misunderstand me.”

“There is nae need tae apologize, me laird,” Ailsa said. She seemed a little disappointed, her gaze downcast—or perhaps she was embarrassed by the whole ordeal. “I understand.”

“Thank ye,” Tate said truthfully, taking her hand in his for a moment. As she left, he added, “Will ye tell Macauley I wish tae see him?”

“O’ course.”

With that, she was gone, leaving Tate alone.

He had no choice but to speak to Macauley. He had to tell him the truth. He had to tell him everything that had happened between him and Lana, explain to him how he felt for her. He would know what to say to him, what to do about all this.

It was better to tell Macauley than Kian.

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## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

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“*T*his is bad,” said Macauley.

He and Tate were sitting in Kian’s study after Tate had told the man everything. He even told him about that night at the cottage, simply because he couldn’t keep any more lies inside him. He trusted that Macauley wouldn’t tell Kian. It wouldn’t do any of them any good—if anything, it would only risk causing a drift between him and Kian.

“Aye, I ken it’s bad,” Tate said with a sigh, as he took a sip of wine. “Dae ye think I dinnae ken that? I’ve been thinkin’ about how bad it is ever since it all started!”

Macauley responded with a sigh of his own. “Well, it willnae be long now.”

“We should have never done this at all,” said Tate. It had been a terrible plan from the beginning, and none of them had been wise enough to figure out just how horribly it could go. “It wasnae worth it.”

“It’s done now,” Macauley reminded him. “And there is naething tae dae but wait fer Kian tae return.”

“Aye, but when is he comin’ back?” Tate asked, his frustration threatening to bubble over. “It’s been days! He was supposed tae be back a long time ago now.”

“I told ye, there were some issues,” Macauley said. “But he’s on his way. I promise ye. Ye willnae have tae dae this fer much longer.”

“And what dae I dae until then?”

He had been doing his best to stay away from Lana, but not only did circumstance force them together, it was also terribly rude of him. Whatever bad feelings began to brew inside her would only worsen the longer Kian took to return, and by the time he would be back, Lana would despise him.

“Whatever ye’re doin’ so far,” Macauley said. “Keep yer distance. Be patient. It’ll all be over soon enough.”

Tate let his head fall to the desk in front of him with a groan. For a moment, he closed his eyes and then laid his cheek on the polished surface to glance at Macauley. “I’m a terrible friend,” he mumbled.

Macauley’s expression softened and he reached over the desk to lay a hand on Tate’s shoulder. “Dinnae blame yerself fer bein’ attracted tae her. Ye’ve been pretendin’ tae be her husband fer so long that it’s only natural ye want

her. Besides, she's a very bonnie lass."

"But she's Kian's wife, nae mine," Tate pointed out.

"That she is," Macauley said. "She's his rightful wife and ye shouldnae let yer control slip again, but ye cannae continue tae blame yerself. The actions ye can control, but the feelings are something else Tate. Dinnae fash. Find another lass. Ye're a good lad. I'm sure it's easy fer ye."

It didn't matter to Tate if it was easy or not. The only woman he truly wanted was the one he couldn't have.

"Fine," he said as he sat back up, busying himself with his cup of wine. He wasn't entirely convinced he could forget all about Lana nor that he could ever feel better for betraying his best friend.



Lana had seen them. She had followed him out of the great hall and she had seen how Kian had taken the young maid away, holding her by the hand as he brought her to another part of the castle—not their chambers, his study, perhaps, where he could be certain they would be alone—keeping her close to him.

He had been avoiding her for a while now, but it all became unbearable during the meal with the villagers. Kian couldn't even meet her eye, and Lana couldn't understand what it was that had changed things between them so much. Just yesterday, he was about to let her remove his mask, and ever since, he had been doing anything in his power to keep her away.

Could this all be because of the mask?

Still in their chambers, Lana waited for him, her fury growing by the second. It didn't matter if it was because of the mask, she decided. In fact, nothing really mattered other than the fact that he thought he could fool her. He had pretended to be kind and loving, only to turn around and bed one of the maids.

Who knew how many others he had bedded since their wedding? Sure, it was a marriage of convenience for him—and a marriage of inconvenience for Lana—but that didn't give him the right to sleep with any woman he wanted. Although, the way things worked, it actually did, she harumphed.

It was hours later when Kian finally returned to their chambers. Lana was sitting on the bed, staring at the door, her arms crossed in front of her as she stewed in her anger. She hadn't even realized how much time had passed or that the room was now plunged in darkness. She could see little other than Kian's silhouette, illuminated by the light from the corridor.

“What are ye doin' in the dark?” Kian asked.

It was the first thing he had said to her ever since they had climbed out of that hole in the village. Lana scoffed, shaking her head.

“I didnae realize,” she said bitterly, her lips pursing into a thin line. “Where have ye been?”



“With Macauley,” said Kian without hesitation. It seemed like he had already prepared his lies. As he walked around the room, he busied himself with the candles, lighting some of them so they could both see.

Lana watched him in silence, wondering if he would continue to avoid her or if he would perhaps confess what he had done. As the minutes passed, though, it became clear to her that he had no intention of saying anything.

Lana couldn't understand what had happened to make him change his attitude towards her so suddenly. Could it be that he hadn't enjoyed that night at the cottage? Could it be that not only had he not enjoyed it, but had, in fact, been repulsed by her?

*Maybe this is why he bedded the maid. Maybe he doesnae think I'm attractive at all.*

“I saw ye,” she said when the silence became unbearable. “I saw ye with the maid.”

Kian froze. In the soft light of the candles, Lana watched him pale as he slowly turned to face her. At least he had the decency to look remorseful, even if perhaps he wasn't.

“Naething happened with the maid,” he said, his voice barely a whisper.

“Ye must truly think I'm a fool,” Lana said as she stood from the bed and approached Kian. “I saw ye. How can ye expect me tae believe yer words

when I saw ye with me own eyes?”

“I’m tellin’ ye the truth,” Kian insisted. “Aye, ye saw us together, but naething happened between us. I promise ye.”

“Stop lyin’!”

Kian jumped a little when Lana shouted at him, her anger getting the better of her. It was either shouting at him or crying, and she certainly wasn’t going to cry in front of him. In fact, she would prove to him that he was wrong. He was wrong for finding her unattractive, for going to another woman to get what he wanted.

With a sharp inhale, she tugged at her clothes, removing them in a rush until she was standing in front of him fully nude, everything she had been wearing only moments prior now discarded on a pile on the floor. Even so, Kian made no attempts to move. He only stared at her, his gaze taking in the curves of her body.

Lana wouldn’t have that. She stepped up to him and grabbed his hands, placing them both on her breasts. “Take me,” she demanded.

Once again, Kian was frozen like a pillar of salt, looking at her with shocked, wide eyes. “What?”

“Take me,” Lana repeated slowly, her expression a mask of determination. “Take *me*. Nae the maids, nae anyone else. I am yer wife; I am the one ye

should be bedding. I want this.”

Still, Kian didn't move. In her frustration, Lana grabbed one of his hands again and pulled it between her legs, gasping when his fingers found her opening.

It was then that Kian finally moved, plunging two fingers inside her without warning. Lana keened, her own hands grasping at his tunic, his shoulders, anything she could reach to ground herself. He was suddenly like a wild man, his other hand falling to her hip and squeezing, his lips on her neck.

It didn't feel like a man who didn't want her. It was as though Kian was starved for it, grabbing anywhere he could reach, sucking on her delicate skin. When he crooked his fingers, Lana's hips chased the movement of his hand, a moan tumbling from her lips.

Even now, Kian refused to remove his mask. This time, though, Lana didn't try to force him. She didn't want him to put up his walls again and, if she were honest, she didn't particularly care. She was trying to make a different point now.

When Kian spun her around, Lana went easily, letting him press his chest against her back as he continued to pleasure her. She could feel his manhood, firm against her rear, and she couldn't help but imagine what it would feel like when he finally took her.

Kian's hand molded around the swell of her breast, his fingers inside her bringing her closer and closer to the edge. With his chin, he nudged her head

to the side, making her gaze into the small looking-glass that stood on the vanity. From the way it was positioned, all she could see was how Kian's fingers disappeared inside her with every flick of his wrist, how his palm ground against her sensitive spot.

And it was too hot for her to handle.

Lana gasped at the sight of them like this. She liked what she saw, so she couldn't understand why Kian preferred other women over her. Watching their reflection in the mirror was enough to push her to her climax, and her own fingers wrapped around Kian's wrist to guide his movements in those last few moments.

When she came down from her height, Kian was still holding her, his lips scattering kisses on her neck.

"How can ye think I want anyone else but ye?" he asked, whispering in her ear. "How can ye think that I could look at another lass?"

Lana didn't know what to believe anymore. Could Kian be telling her the truth? If so, what had he been doing with the maid? Lana knew what she had seen, and she was certain that her eyes didn't deceive her. But Kian sounded sincere. Could it be that he was so good at fooling others?

Lana said nothing. As much as she wanted to believe him, she wasn't going to allow herself to fall into what could be a trap. She wasn't going to let him fool her.

Kian let go of her long enough to take off his own clothes and then he was upon her once more, his hands finding their way to her hips. He was already hard, and Lana reached out tentatively, trying to get past her own shyness, to wrap her fingers around his length, giving him an experimental tug.

He groaned, low and deep in his throat, hips canting forward, his gaze glued to Lana's own. It was so intense that Lana had to look away for a moment, heat rising to her cheeks.

His body was irresistible to her. Her other hand traced the contours of his chest, the hard muscles of his stomach, feeling the heated skin of his torso. He looked as though he was chiseled from marble, and every movement of his body only served to highlight his perfect build.

"Ye dinnae ken how much I want ye," Kian said, as he guided Lana towards the bed. She moved backwards until her thighs met the mattress, and then lay back as Kian climbed on top of her.

"Show me, then," Lana said. It was a challenge, one that he took seriously. Kian looked at her for a moment, still and silent, and then slowly pushed his hardness inside her, twin sighs escaping their lips.

It was unlike anything Lana had felt before. Neither his mouth nor his fingers could have prepared her for this, for the intimacy of having Kian take up all the space within her, filling her up so completely. It was almost overwhelming, the way he surrounded her entirely, draping himself over her and claiming her in such an absolute way.

Lana gasped with every slow thrust of his hips. Her fingers curled around his shoulders, the drag of his manhood against her sensitive flesh an exquisite torture that had her writhing on the bed, desperate for more.

When she had imagined this moment, she had always thought that Kian would be almost animalistic in his desires, taking her selfishly and roughly. But now Lana could only describe him as tender and sweet, making love to her slowly, almost reverently. It caught her off-guard, especially when he brought his hand up to cup her cheek, his burning gaze boring right into her own.

She couldn't escape him like this. She didn't even want to.

"Ye take me so well," Kian praised, drawing a moan out of Lana. Her legs spread wider for him, giving him the space he needed to grind his hips in maddening circles against her. "Dae ye feel me? Here?"

As he spoke, he pressed his hand over Lana's stomach, and the sudden pressure had her back arching off the mattress. She nodded fervently, trying to form words around a groan.

"I dae," she said. "Dinnae stop."

She never wanted him to stop. She wanted to drink in as much of this pleasure as she could, to keep Kian deep inside her forever.

"Ye were made for me, Lana. We fit so well," Kian whispered in her ear and

kissed that soft spot behind her ear sending shivers through her body. Pleasure built within her, pooling low in her core. Kian's hands found her own and he laced their fingers together as he rocked against her, holding onto her tightly.

"That's it," he said, as her legs began to tremble, her hips moving on their own to meet Kian's. "Let me hear ye, Lana. Let me see ye come apart."

Moans tumbled out of her lips unbridled, the sound of Kian's voice spurring her on. She had never heard him sound like this before, his voice a deep rumble that reverberated through her body, reaching the deepest parts of her. She wound her legs around his hips to keep him close as Kian's thrusts quickened, signaling to her that he, too, was close.

Her climax washed over her like a wave. She reached it with Kian's name on her lips, her entire body shaking with the force of her pleasure. Lana squeezed rhythmically around him, tingles travelling all through her body, and it wasn't long before Kian joined her, pulling out of her quickly and spilling onto her stomach.

For a few moments, the two of them stayed like that, panting against each other. Then, Kian spoke quietly.

"I swear tae ye. I didnae touch the maid."

Lana looked at him with wide eyes, still uncertain of what to believe. From what she could see of his face, Kian looked pained, as though having Lana think he had betrayed her hurt too much to bear.

*Can a guilty man look like this?*

For a moment, she considered trying to take off his mask once more, but then she decided against it. Every other time she had tried, it hadn't gone well. For a little while, Lana wanted to pretend that everything was fine, and that her feelings for Kian—the ones she couldn't deny she had anymore—wouldn't end up hurting her, proving to be in vain.

Kian rolled off her, but he didn't go far. He only lay next to her and gathered her in his arms, and Lana let him, snuggling even closer to him. She could still feel him, deep inside her core, as though he still lingered there.

But there was still too much Lana didn't know about Kian. She didn't even really know what he looked like under the mask, let alone when he lied or when he told the truth. She couldn't yet trust him completely. She couldn't let herself believe everything he said just because it was what she wanted to hear.

Maybe he wasn't lying when he told her that he didn't bed the maid. Maybe he was just as sincere as he sounded. But Lana wasn't ready to believe him, not without concrete proof.



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## CHAPTER NINETEEN

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When Tate woke up the next morning, the sun already high up in the sky, the previous night slowly came back to him. He looked down at himself, noticing that he was entirely naked, and then at Lana, who was still in his arms, sleeping soundly next to him.

*What have I done?*

It had been a grave mistake. Tate could hardly believe how foolish he had been to give in to his desires and make love to Lana, after all this time of keeping himself in control. And this, right after his discussion with Macauley. The man had told Tate to stay away from her and what had he done?

He had walked straight into the mouth of the beast.

Tate cursed quietly to himself. He had been selfish, so selfish that he had done something he could never take back. He had completely betrayed his best friend. He had completely betrayed Lana, too, who didn't know who he truly was.

What was he supposed to do now? Could he lie to Kian when he returned home? Would it even matter? Their scheme had gone too far and the truth was bound to be revealed sooner or later.

With a sigh, Tate extricated himself from Lana as slowly and quietly as he could. He made sure to be silent as he dressed and left the room, leaning against the door for a moment once he was outside so he could breathe.

It was the biggest mistake he could have made. No matter what he did or said now, nothing could save him or fix any of this.

While he was walking to Kian's study, a guard stopped him with a rather bewildered look on his face. "Me laird," he said. "We were looking fer ye! Macauley wanted me to remind ye about the feast today."

"The feast?" Tate asked with a frown, before he remembered what day it was. Macauley had told him about a feast for him and Lana, one that Tate would much rather have avoided, even though he couldn't. He didn't want anyone to suspect anything, and besides, it would be rude of him to refuse to attend a feast that was thrown in Kian's honor by his council. Naturally, he couldn't allow Kian to appear anything other than grateful. "Och, aye... I remember. I'm... I'm preparing fer it now."

With that, he turned around and walked back to Kian's chambers, though he was reluctant to see Lana again. It was even worse now, and his desire to avoid her had only grown, to the point where he wished he would never see her again, silly as the wish was. Of course, he would have to see her. He was still pretending to be her husband, after all.

When he entered the room, he found that Lana was awake, but still in bed. When their gazes met, Tate tried to force a small smile to his face, one that she returned, if a little reluctantly.

“It’s the feast today,” he said. “I had forgotten about it, but it’s already late. We should start preparin’.”

“The feast!” Lana exclaimed. She, too, seemed to have forgotten all about it. “I cannae believe I didnae remember.”

“It’s alright,” Tate said. “I’m sure if we’re late, it willnae—”

Before he could finish his sentence, there was a knock on the door and Macauley entered, looking worse for wear. It seemed as though he had hardly slept, and Tate couldn’t help but wonder if the council had put most of the work for the feast on his shoulders.

“Me laird, me lady,” said Macauley, before he gestured at Tate to follow him. Tate stepped out of the room and closed the door, since Macauley seemed to want to speak to him in private.

“It’s Kian,” Macauley said. “I received a letter this mornin’. He’s well on his way.”



Lana frowned as she heard Kian's name from the small gap in the door that Kian had neglected to close. Lana could hear Macauley speak about a letter sent by Kian. But how could Kian have sent a letter when he was right there? Could there be another man with that name?

"Ach, that's good," said Kian. "I was beginnin' tae worry fer him."

"I willnae lie... I was worried, too," said Macauley. "All these days without a word. Well... he's very grateful fer what ye did and thanks ye."

"O' course," Tate said. "Though I didnae have much o' a choice."

"Aye, aye, I ken," Macauley said. "But ye ken why he does it."

There was no response from Kian, at least not one that Lana could hear. When the door opened once more, only Kian entered, Macauley having already left.

She got out of the bed and approached Kian, but just as she was about to ask him what they were talking about and what the letter was, a flurry of maids entered the room to prepare the two of them for the feast and so Lana didn't have the chance to ask him anything. Not with the way that the maids were all over them, rushing around to get the two of them ready.

Once they were dressed, it was time to head to the great hall. It would be an all-day affair, Lana knew, and she couldn't wait until that night to ask him about his conversation with Macauley.

“Kian... may I ask ye a question?” Lana said, just as the two of them reached the great hall.

“Aye, o’ course,” Kian said, looking at her in confusion.

“Me laird!” said a clansman Lana didn’t recognize. Even though she had spent quite a while at the castle, she still hadn’t managed to meet everyone. She spent most of her time away from Kian with Elspet. “Come in, come in. The feast is about tae begin.”

“Would ye start without us?” Kian asked, in a teasing tone that said he knew the answer to his question would be negative, but also that he was quite familiar with the man.

“Ach, o’ course we wouldnae,” the man said. “After all, this feast is fer ye and fer our lady.”

As he spoke, the man turned to smile at Lana, but she got the impression from him that she was mainly an afterthought for them. It didn’t surprise her. She was little more than a means to an end to those people—perhaps to Kian, as well. Perhaps all she really was to him was a way to get to her father, no matter how much he denied it.

The man stepped aside and Kian led Lana to their table at the end of the room, where they would sit facing everyone else. Macauley was already there, waiting for them, and so were a few others.

Lana didn't know how she would get a chance to speak to Kian now. Something told her that if she asked him in front of Macauley, the man would take over instead, and he seemed like a much better liar than Kian.

There was one thing Lana knew for certain: something was wrong. It felt as though they were hiding something from her, although she couldn't tell what it was.

The feast began with the servants bringing out copious amounts of food and drink for everyone. The tables groaned under the weight of the platters and the mugs, and the clansmen and women filled the room to the brim. Lana had never seen all of them in the same place before, and she marveled at the size of it.

She could however see that her father's was bigger. Big enough to be a threat to them, it seemed.

For a long while, Lana said nothing. Kian kept himself busy talking to Macauley or the other men around him, and Lana simply watched the people as they talked and danced, the music flowing over her just as the wine did. At the same time, she kept her ears open for anything that could answer her questions, but neither Kian nor Macauley spoke of it.

Instead, they were discussing more clan business, as usual. Lana couldn't believe that she would have to spend the whole feast like this, and then she decided that perhaps she didn't have to.

“I wish tae dance,” she told Kian.

For a moment, he looked like prey caught by a predator. “Well... I’m nae a very good dancer.”

“It doesnae matter,” Lana said. “I am. I can show ye.”

“Dinnae ye think ye should dance with someone who is better at it?” Kian said.

“I wish tae dance with me husband,” Lana said firmly, giving her hand to Kian. “Come. Ye must accompany me.”

She gave him little choice other than to follow her. Kian took her hand with a sigh and stood, the two of them walking to the area dedicated to the dancing couples. Everyone stepped out of the way for them, and for a moment, Lana wondered if it was a bad idea, after all, if Kian was as bad as he claimed to be.

But then a new song started, the band playing it just for them, and Kian’s words proved to be false. He was a fine dancer, keeping up with Lana and the rest of the dancers around them with ease.

“I thought ye didnae dance,” she told him when the steps brought them back together.

“I dinnae... nae usually,” Kian said.

It wasn't the kind of answer Lana wanted. It was clear to her that Kian simply didn't want to dance with her, since he claimed to be bad at it when he was clearly rather skilled. Still, she decided to finish the dance with him, as it was the polite thing to do. However, when the song ended, she didn't even have the satisfaction to walk off first. Another man came and took Kian away, leaving Lana on her own once more.

With a sigh, she walked back to the table and threw herself on her chair, her hand reaching for her cup of wine. She continued to watch the rest of the clan, the entire time, wondering where Elspet was. Perhaps she could spend the rest of the night with her.

But there was still the matter of the conversation between Kian and Macauley. Lana had to find out what it meant before it would drive her crazy.

She had to come up with a plan, if she wanted to talk to him without distractions.

Determination etched on her features, she stood and approached Kian, who was just finishing his conversation with the other man. She placed a hand on his arm and pulled him a little further away, smiling at the people they passed.

“Can ye accompany me tae the garden fer a while?” she asked.



Kian gave her another perplexed look, not for the first time that night, but he said, “Aye. O’ course. I only need a minute here. Ye go ahead and I’ll come find ye.”

Lana wished he would just go with her, but she didn’t try to push him. Instead, she walked out to the gardens alone and found a quiet bench away from the main entrance of the castle, where the two of them would likely be undisturbed. She sat there, watching as the sun began to set on the horizon, its last rays bathing everything in golden light.

There was something strange about the air that evening, it seemed to Lana. It was as though she could sense something that she couldn’t see, something that lurked in the shadows around her.

She wished Kian had gone with her in the first place or that, at the very least, he wouldn’t be taking so long to join her. Perhaps it was all in her imagination, perhaps she was too vigilant these days, too careful after everything that had happened, bordering on paranoid.

It wasn’t long after that she heard steps approaching, quick and light, and she breathed a sigh of relief. Kian had finally come and join her, and the two of them could clear all this up.

But Kian never came. Instead, a rag was pressed tightly against her mouth and nose, gagging her, while a pair of strong hands kept her still. For a moment, Lana froze in terror, not knowing what to do. But it was far from the first time something like this had happened to her. It seemed to her as though someone was trying to capture her every other day.

Her arms flailed as she tried to push her captor away, thrashing in his grip, but the man was too strong and wouldn't let go of her.

It occurred to Lana that perhaps it was time for her to learn how to fight properly. She couldn't keep putting herself in such danger, and she couldn't keep relying on others to save her. If she ever survived this, she would make sure to ask Kian to train her.

In the silence of the twilight, a war cry sounded. Several other men rushed into the courtyard, and Lana recognized some of them as her father's men. She wasn't surprised at all to see them. If anyone attacked Clan Drummond, it would be them. The only enemies Kian had were her father and Laird Balfour.

More men poured into the gardens, this time belonging to the Clan Drummond. The commotion had alerted the guards, and every man in the castle was grabbing his sword to fight.

The air was filled with the clang of steel against steel. The shouts of the men were deafening in Lana's ears, and many of them fell to the ground, dead, within minutes. Lana herself continued to struggle, and she managed to escape her captor when his arms loosened around her. She didn't know what had happened to make him let go of her and she didn't stay long enough to find out. She only ran as fast as she could, heading towards Elspet's study so she could hide there.

She would be safe there, she knew. The place was very familiar to her and she knew every hiding spot. Besides, she could bolt the door so that no one could enter.

She simply had to make it there.

Panting, more out of fear than exertion, Lana made her way through the gardens towards the study. She managed to dodge a few blades on the way, ducking and jumping to the side, until she could see Elspet's rooms.

But before she could make it there, a small group of men blocked her way. Lana came to a halt and looked at them with disgust, before she tried to find another way to escape.

Suddenly, she was surrounded.

"Yer faither is waitin' fer ye," one of them said. "All will be forgiven if ye come with us and marry Laird Cummings, as ye should."

"I will never marry him," Lana spat. "I dinnae care what me faither says. I will never marry that man. Besides, I am already married tae Laird Drummond. I cannae marry another man."

"Neither yer faither nor Laird Cummings care about that," said the man. "And Laird Drummond will be dead by tonight."

Lana's eyes narrowed as she glared at the man. It was now or never, she decided, as she tried to push her way through the circle of men around her. She couldn't break the circle, though. Two men grabbed her and began to drag her away, and no matter how much Lana fought, she couldn't make them let go.

“Kian!” she shouted. “Kian!”

There was no response. No one came to her rescue. Another man approached her and began to tie her legs and arms with rope, binding them so tightly that she was certain the rope would burn through her skin.

Was that it, she wondered? Would her father finally get what he wanted?

Had she always been doomed to marry Laird Cummings?

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## CHAPTER TWENTY

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“*K*ian!”

The familiar voice cut through the chaos of the battle. Tate didn't know when or how it had all started. All he knew was that one moment, he was talking with Macauley, and the next, there was a battle outside the castle.

He also knew that the enemy were the Hay Clan and the Cummings Clan. Kian had no other enemies, and Tate was certain they had come there for Lana once more.

He couldn't let them have her. Even if he couldn't have her, he wasn't going to let Laird Cummings lay his hands on her.

When he heard her voice, he searched for her and saw her being dragged away by several men. He didn't have time to think or formulate a plan. He only had time to throw himself at them, rushing towards them to stop them before they could take her too far, hoping that his wound wouldn't cause an issue.

A few other men, seeing their laird was rushing away, followed him. The two sides collided, and Tate was glad to have the backup, since Lana had been taken by half a dozen men, all of them armed with large, heavy swords. Tate attacked the first one who stood in his way, their blades clashing harshly, with enough strength to send them both stumbling backwards. It took Tate only seconds to regain his balance, and once he did, he attacked again, this time aiming for the man's chest.

He pierced him, drawing a soft grunt of pain from of his lips. Blood fountained out of his chest as Tate pulled his sword out, letting the man crumple onto the ground.

It was moments later that another soldier threw himself at Tate, swinging his sword as he rushed towards him, trying to get a quick hit in. Tate dodged the blade and then parried the second blow, sweat coating his forehead from the exertion of the fight. All around him, he could hear the screams of the soldiers, and he wondered how many belonged to the Drummond Clan.

He had faith in those men. He had trained with them several times a week, and he knew they could defeat their enemy in a fair battle. But this time, they had caught them all by surprise.

With a grunt, Tate struck the man down, piercing him through the stomach. He watched him for a moment as he took his final breaths, and then he searched for Lana. She was his priority. She was the only thing that mattered.

For a few moments, he couldn't find her. There was no sign of her, though she would certainly stand out among all those men. But then he spotted her

on the ground, laying between other bodies, and Tate's blood ran cold.

She couldn't be dead. She couldn't.

Tate rushed to her, ignoring everything else around him. The battle didn't matter. All that mattered was that Lana was unconscious, hurt, perhaps even lifeless. When he reached her, Tate fell to his knees next to her and grabbed her, looking for any blood, anything that could point to an injury, but there was nothing.

Then he saw it: a trickle of blood in the strands of her hair, like someone had hit her on the side of the head.

"Macauley!" Tate shouted as he let go of his sword and picked up Lana in his arms instead. "Macauley!"

"Aye!" called Macauley, his voice carrying over to Tate through the sounds of the battle.

"Lana is hurt," Tate said. "I cannae... I cannae stay. I have tae take her tae Elspet."

Just as Macauley plunged his sword into another man, he turned to face Tate. "Go," he said. "I'll take care o' this."

Tate gave him a grateful nod and then ran. Macauley was a capable man and

a good leader. Tate wished he could stay there and help. He wished he could fight alongside the rest of the men, but he couldn't leave Lana all alone. He had to protect her, to take care of her.

And he had to be there to make sure she woke up. The mere thought of losing her was unbearable. He didn't know how he could survive her loss, how he could go on living if she died.

Thankfully, Elspet's rooms were close, and Tate tried to kick the door open when he reached them, but he was unsuccessful. It seemed like Elspet had taken care to barricade it, but in his frustration and fear, it only served to anger Tate.

"Open up!" he shouted. "It's Kian. Lana is hurt!"

Almost instantly, Tate heard noise from the other side of the door, like wood sliding against wood, and the door was soon thrown open. Elspet stood there, panting, and when she saw Lana's state, she gasped in horror.

"Come in," she said, quickly composing herself. "Lay her on the bed."

Tate did as he was told, and though it hurt him to step away from Lana, he knew he had to sit aside and let Elspet work. He stood in the corner of the room and watched as she examined Lana, taking her pulse and checking carefully for injuries, holding his breath the entire time.

He only breathed again when he saw the relieved slump of Elspet's



shoulders. Once she was finished with her task, Tate approached and perched himself on the bed next to her, holding her hand.

“She’ll be alright,” Elspet said. “Her heartbeat is strong. We only need tae wait fer her tae wake.”

It was easier said than done. Even now that Tate knew Lana wasn’t in danger, his heart beat fast in his chest, threatening to escape the confines of his ribs. He wished there was something he could do to help her, anything that would make her wake up faster, but all he could do was sit there with her, praying to God that she would be alright.

Slowly, the sounds of the battle died down, but Tate didn’t dare leave Lana long enough to find out what had happened. Soon, it turned out he didn’t have to, as Macauley entered the room, accompanied by Elspet. He was covered in blood, and Tate could only hope that none of it was his own.

“It’s over,” Macauley said, as he approached Tate. “It wasnae much o’ a battle if ye ask me. It seems like they wanted tae send a message rather than try an’ fight us.”

Tate nodded slowly, breathing a sigh of relief. It had been selfish of him, he knew, to sit with Lana instead of helping the soldiers, especially since there was nothing he could do for her. But thank goodness the Drummond Clan had come out of the battle victorious.

“Aye, that’s good,” Tate said. He was still only half-present, most of his thoughts occupied by Lana and her wellbeing. “Did we have many losses?”

“Nay,” Macauley said. “Two dead and a few injured, but nae severely. The lads will start bringin’ them here soon.”

“Thank ye, Macauley,” said Tate. “What dae ye think they wanted tae achieve with this?”

Macauley gave Tate a small shrug. “I suppose they wanted to take Lana, but it wasnae their main goal. Me belief is that they wanted tae disorient us. An attack like this...”

Macauley didn’t need to finish his sentence for Tate to know what he meant. They had managed to infiltrate the castle. They should have never been able to get that close, let alone inside the walls, not with the kind of security he and Macauley had posted around the walls. They also knew the precise time to attack: when everyone was at the feast. It could only mean that they had an informant, someone who could tell them everything they needed to know for their plans to work. Perhaps that someone had even let them inside the walls.

“Ye’ll dae what ye must, willnae ye?” asked Tate.

“O’ course,” said Macauley. “I’ll find out who it was.”

“Good... good. We should have thought o’ this long ago.”

“Aye, perhaps, but there’s naething tae dae about it now,” Macauley pointed out. “Dinnae fash. I’ll find who’s responsible.”

For a few moments, both men were silent. It occurred to Tate that Elspet had left, perhaps so that she could help the wounded, leaving the two of them alone in the room.

It was then that Macauley placed a gentle hand on Tate's shoulder, looking at him with sympathy. "What will ye dae when Kian returns?"

It wasn't something Tate wanted to consider. He knew he had only days, if not hours, before Kian's return, and once he was back, everything between him and Lana would be over. And yet he still somehow held onto a spark of hope that he could stay with her, that the two of them could be together, foolish as the notion was.

"I dinnae ken," said Tate. "What can I dae? I love her, Macauley. I really dae."

As he spoke, he ran his fingers through Lana's hair, cradling her head carefully in his hand. How could he live the rest of his life with her so close and yet so impossibly far?

Perhaps he would return to his clan. It was for the best. There was no way he could stand living with her and Kian, not after everything that had happened between them. It was the only way he could hope to go on. Maybe it would be enough for him to forget her eventually, move on with his own life.

"Sometimes love isnae enough, friend," Macauley said. "I ken that it hurts

ye, but what other choice dae ye have? She isnae yers.”

“Aye... I ken,” Tate said. He didn’t need to be reminded.

With one final squeeze of his shoulder, Macauley let Tate go and then left the room. Tate stayed where he was, holding on tight to Lana’s hand, as though he feared she would vanish into thin air.

In a way, she would. He didn’t have much time left with her, and every time he thought about it, it was like a blade to the heart.

He could only hope that she would get well and have a good life with Kian. He hoped she would be happy, while he stayed far away from her.

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## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

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Lana opened her eyes slowly, squinting against the soft light of the room. She had a pounding headache, a kind of headache she had never experienced before. It felt as though her head was about to split in two.

It took her a few moments to recognize her surroundings. She was in a bed, but not her own. She quickly realized that she was in Elspet's study, in one of the beds that she kept there for the wounded and the sick.

How had she gotten there? What had happened to her?

The memories started to come back to her in waves. She remembered waiting for Kian in the gardens. She remembered the attack, the men trying to take her away. She couldn't remember what had happened next, or how she had ended up in Elspet's study.

When her eyes focused, she saw that Kian was sitting on a chair close to her bed, asleep. She shifted, and immediately his eyes flew open. He was upon her within seconds, holding her hands in his own.

“Ye’re awake,” he said, speaking softly. There were curtains around Lana’s bed, so she couldn’t see past them, but she was certain there were others there, probably the men who had been injured during the battle. “How are ye feelin’? Are ye in pain?” He kissed her forehead.

“Aye, a bit,” said Lana, deciding it was better not to lie to Kian. He was already worried sick, she could tell, even though she it was hard to see his expression under the mask. It was evident in his tone, in the way he held onto her desperately. “But it’s nae too bad. Dinnae fash.”

With a sigh, Kian leaned back onto his seat, clearly relieved. He never let go of Lana’s hands, though, and she laced their fingers together, holding him just as tightly.

“When I saw ye on the ground... ye werenae movin’. I didnae even ken if ye were breathin’,” Kian said and his voice broke. “I thought... I thought I had lost ye.”

Had it been Kian who had saved her? It sounded very likely. It also sounded like the prospect of losing her had terrified him, and it filled Lana with a warmth that spread from the center of her chest all through her body. In times like this, she couldn’t help but think that he really did love her, or that he at least cared about her. Even when things were tense between them, he always came to her rescue.

“I’m here,” Lana assured him. “I’m here, Kian. And I willnae let me faither take me.”

That's right, she thought. She had wanted to ask Kian to show her how to fight. She still wanted to. If her father was going to keep attacking the clan and coming after her, then she had to learn how to protect herself. Kian wouldn't always be there to do it for her.

It was hardly the time to ask for such a thing, though, so instead, she asked, "Could ye take me tae our chambers? I feel well and I would rather be there."

"I dinnae ken if Elspet will agree," Kian said. "Ye're still hurt."

"I'm alright," Lana insisted. "Please, Kian. If I feel unwell, I'll call fer her, I promise."

Kian hesitated for a few moments, but in the end, he nodded and helped Lana stand. Thankfully, she wasn't dizzy and she didn't need to hold onto him for support. She only had a headache, and even that seemed to be subside now that her eyes had gotten accustomed to the light. They found Elspet in the other room, and once she checked Lana's pupils and confirmed that she was not nauseous or dizzy, she agreed to let her go back to the castle, under the condition that she call for her at the smallest problem.

"How long was I unconscious?" she asked, as the two of them walked back to the castle through the gardens. It was night, the sky was an inky black, but Lana couldn't figure out the exact amount of time that had passed. It could have been hours or it could have been a day or more.

"A few hours," said Kian, and relief washed over Lana. She was glad it had only been for a few hours, as she didn't want to even begin to imagine in

what state Kian would be otherwise.

“Ach, that’s good,” she said. “Ye see? I’m fine.”

Furthermore, Lana didn’t know how many people had been wounded in the battle, and she didn’t want to hoard one of the beds in Elspet’s study for no reason.

When they entered their chambers, Kian helped Lana undress and get in bed, but as she got comfortable, he made no effort to join her.

“Will ye nae come tae bed?” she asked.

“I… ye’re hurt,” Kian said hesitantly.

“Aye,” Lana said, perplexed. “Dae ye think ye’ll hurt me more?”

“I might! In me sleep!”

Lana laughed softly at that, shaking her head. “I’m nae that hurt, Kian. Nor am I that fragile. Please, come tae bed.”

Kian hesitated once more, but then he undressed as well and slipped under the covers next to Lana. She moved closer to him, laying her head on his



chest, her fingers trailing slow, smooth paths over his skin.

For a while, they lay in silence, simply enjoying each other's company, but then Kian said, "I thought I had lost ye. I didnae ken what tae dae."

Lana tilted her head to look at him and was met with a pained gaze. She pressed a soft kiss to his shoulder and tried to calm him with gentle touches, wishing she could take all that pain away.

"There's naething tae worry about now," she assured him. "I'm fine. I'm sure I'll be even better on the morrow."

Kian huffed out a soft laugh and cupped her cheek gently, looking into her eyes.

"I love ye," he said and his eyes widened as if he surprised himself with the words, too.

It was a simple confession, but it had Lana's heart racing. She looked at Kian, wide-eyed, a smile slowly forming on her lips.

She hadn't yet forgotten the pain of seeing him with another woman, but she was willing to give him the benefit of doubt this once. She was willing to give him another chance, to see if he truly was the man he claimed to be, having never looked at another woman since the wedding.

“I love ye, too,” Lana said quietly, and in that moment, she knew it to be true. She had tried her best not to fall for him, but there had been no way to avoid it. She loved him. She wanted to spend the rest of her life with him, and she wouldn’t let her father or Laird Cummings get in her way.

Kian leaned closer and kissed her softly, their lips barely brushing against each other, as though he was still afraid that he would hurt her. It was time for Lana to be more assertive, she decided, and so she deepened the kiss, her hand running down his chest and stomach and resting, for a moment, just below his navel.

She wanted him. Ever since they had slept together, she had been thinking about little else.

Her hand slid lower, her fingers wrapping around Kian’s manhood and drawing a soft sigh from him. It didn’t take him long to stop her, though, grabbing her wrist to still her hand.

“Ye’re hurt,” he reminded her. “We should wait.”

“I dinnae wish tae wait,” Lana said. Kian’s grip on her wrist was loose, and so she could stroke him slowly, which certainly didn’t help him keep his resolve. “Please, Kian. I want ye. Touch me.”

Kian’s touch was hesitant at first. as he laid his hand over her breast, but then he gave Lana a squeeze and she arched into the touch, seeking more. Kian quickly hardened in her grip, and Lana doubled her efforts, eager to have him inside her.

Kian shifted on the bed until he could roll over Lana. He wrapped his lips around her nipple, his hands finding their way to her thighs and spreading her legs open for him, before he settled between them. The drag of his length against her fold was maddening, and pleas tumbled out of her lips, begging him to take her.

It soon became clear that Kian would take his sweet time, as he started moving lower, scattering kisses over her stomach until he reached her most sensitive spot. He pressed a kiss there, too, soft and gentle, before he dragged his tongue over it slowly with a moan that vibrated against her flesh.

“Ye taste like heaven,” he whispered and the words alone were enough for her to feel even more aroused.

The pleasure was so intense that Lana’s legs attempted to close on their own accord, but Kian was quick to hold them open as he pleased her. He licked into her, one of his fingers teasing her folds before it entered her, and Lana reached for him, burying her hand in his hair to hold him there.

“Dinnae stop,” she said, desperate for more.

Kian turned to suck a bruise on Lana’s thigh as he pumped his fingers inside her, red blossoming over her creamy skin. With every curl of his fingers, she couldn’t help but move her hips to meet his movements, taking him deeper and deeper, until he reached a place within her that made her moan wantonly, tingles running all over her body.

“Will ye come fer me, love? Will ye come around me fingers?” Kian asked, watching where his fingers disappeared inside her.

Lana nodded, at a loss for words. She was close, and it only took a few more thrusts of Kian’s fingers for her to reach her climax with a choked-off groan, before she fell limply onto the mattress.

Kian removed his fingers gingerly and licked them while piercing her eyes, before he brought them to his hardness as he lay back down next to her, stroking himself and spreading Lana’s wetness over his shaft. She watched him through lidded eyes, and then scrambled to get to her knees next to him, suddenly possessed by a need to taste him and pleasure him like he had pleased her. Though she had never done anything like it before, she figured it couldn’t be too difficult. It was a little daunting, so at first, she only gave him a few strokes with her hand, testing the waters.

Then, she descended on him, taking the tip of his manhood in her mouth. His reaction spurred Lana on, the moan that left his lips a delicious sound. She took him deeper, rolling her tongue around him experimentally and chuckled when she saw how hard he was gripping the sheets, trying not to lose control.

Only that Lana wanted him to lose control. She wanted Kian to realize that she could take a lot more than he thought, that she wasn’t as fragile as he seemed to think.

When she had to come up for air, she sucked on his tip and stroked him with her hand, until he stopped her once more, much to her chagrin.

“If ye keep doin’ this, I willnae last,” he warned her. “I want tae be inside ye.”

Lana wanted that, too. She quickly straddled his hips, Kian’s hands finding her waist immediately as she took him in her hand and guided him to her entrance. Both of them moaned when he breached her, the air around them filling with the sounds of their coupling.

With a roll of her hips, Lana took Kian deeper inside her, her flesh parting easily for him. Just like last time, he took up every bit of space within her, filling her up in a way that left her breathless and dizzy with want. She could feel him everywhere, inside her, around her, on her skin, everywhere his hands roamed and touched.

Kian met Lana’s movements with the thrusts of his own hips, before he grabbed her and flipped their positions, pressing her against the mattress. His lips were like a branding iron as he kissed her neck, his fingers digging possessively into her skin. Lana held onto him just as tightly, needing to feel every inch of her skin against her own.

It didn’t take long for Lana to reach her peak once more, and when she did, she shook against Kian, the force of her climax making her scream in pleasure. It was only a few thrusts later that Kian finished, too, grunting her name in her ear.

As he panted over her, gazing into her eyes, Lana’s hand came to rest on his mask. She wanted to see him. She didn’t care what Kian looked like. All that mattered to her was that she loved him, and she doubted his face could change that.

“Will ye let me?” she asked quietly, her fingers trailing over the silver mask. “Please... I wish tae see me husband.”

Kian froze, just as Lana had expected. He knew he would say no, like he always did, but it was worth asking once more.

But then Kian nodded, much to Lana’s surprise. For a moment, she thought she must be mistaken, but when Kian made no effort to move away from her, she slowly lifted his mask, revealing his face.

He was—

Incredibly handsome.

He had smooth, soft skin, a strong jaw and a straight nose, a high forehead. Lana couldn’t understand why he had ever felt the need to obscure such handsome features with a mask. Surely, it couldn’t be so that he could hide his looks.

He was the most handsome man she had ever encountered.

He also looked familiar, but Lana couldn’t place him. He was a laird, so it wasn’t unlikely. Perhaps he had attended one of her father’s many balls at some point.

*Why couldnae me faither have chosen Kian as me husband?*

It would have surely solved many of her problems, if only her father had chosen him.

“Ye’re very handsome, Kian,” she said. “Why? Why dae ye wear the mask?”



Tate knew there was no going back from this. He knew that once he revealed his face to Lana, it would all be over, but it didn’t matter. He had already gotten too close to her, both physically and emotionally, and there was no way she would ever believe that he and Kian were the same person. She would be able to tell the difference immediately. Revealing his identity now would make no difference.

He couldn’t answer her question, though. This was a conversation that they would have to have once Kian was back, since all this had been his own plan in the first place. He wasn’t going to talk to her about it without him there.

“I... I’ll tell ye,” he said. “But nae now.”

Lana didn’t push him for an answer. It was something she never did, Tate had noticed, always giving him the time he needed, even though she had every right to ask these questions.

“Alright,” she said. “Well... will ye at least tell me what ye were discussin’ with Macauley?”

Tate frowned a little, not sure what Lana meant. “When? I discuss a lot o’ things with Macauley.”

“When we were gettin’ ready fer the feast,” Lana said. “Ye were talkin’ about another man named Kian. Macauley said he had sent ye a letter.”

A chill ran down Tate’s spine at that. Lana had heard that conversation? Had Tate been so careless?

He couldn’t tell her about Kian, either. Soon enough, he would be there, and Lana would find out on her own. For now, he only shook his head as he gathered her in his arms, eager to get as much as he could while Kian was still away.

“I cannae tell ye that, either,” Tate said. “But ye’ll meet him soon enough.”

There was no way around it, after all. It had always been Lana’s fate to be married to Kian, not to him. Nothing he could do would change that.

No matter how much he loved her.



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## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

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Lana woke up refreshed. Her headache was gone, and when she opened her eyes, she found Kian there, still sleeping. It seemed like he wasn't trying to avoid her anymore, always running out of the room first chance he got, and it put a smile to her lips to know that he wanted to be near her.

For a while, she only gazed at him. His face had been a surprise, though a pleasant one.

Lana couldn't understand why he always wore the mask, but she was glad that she could finally see his face properly, without anything obscuring it.

It all felt like a dream to her. He had even confessed his love for her the previous night. She knew that there was still the issue of her father and Laird Cummings, but she was confident that nothing and no one could tear her and Kian apart now. They would do whatever it took to stay together.

Leaving him to rest, Lana dressed and made her way out of their chambers. She had her breakfast in the great hall and then sat there for a bit, wondering what to do for the rest of the day.

She felt much better and wanted some fresh air. She knew Kian would be resistant to the idea, but she wanted to go out into the woods and enjoy the day. Perhaps she could convince him to go with her, so that he wouldn't worry. The two of them could spend the day together, alone and away from distractions.

As she waited for him to wake, Lana visited Elspet in her study. Once she entered, she found the other woman crouched over one of the wounded men who were still there.

"Ach, good mornin'," Elspet said. "Come in, come in. I'm about tae finish here."

Lana stepped inside and walked over to the man, giving him a sympathetic smile. His injury was her father's fault. It was her clan that had attacked and tried to kill him and so many others.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I hope ye're nae in too much pain."

"Dinnae fash, me lady," said the man. "I'm alright. And it's nae yer fault."

It felt as though it was her fault, to Lana at least. Had it not been for her, then none of this would have happened.

"Is there anythin' I can dae tae help?" Lana asked, eager to do anything that

would allow her to atone for what she perceived was her fault.

“Well... I suppose ye can gather some herbs fer me if ye’re feelin’ well enough,” Elspet said. “Dae ye think ye can dae it?”

“Och aye,” said Lana. “I wanted tae go tae the woods anyway. I can gather whatever ye need.”

“Thank ye,” Elspet said. “I’ll make ye a list.”

As she finished up with the man, Elspet walked over to the large table that was still covered in all sorts of items, found a blank piece of paper, and started writing the list for Lana. When she was done, she rolled it up and handed it to her.

“Be careful,” she said. “If ye dinnae feel well, come back immediately.”

“I’ll have Kian with me,” Lana assured her.

Just as she was about to enter the castle to look for Kian, he stepped out of the doors, looking around as if he was searching for something. When his gaze landed on her, his shoulders slumped a little, his body deflating as if in relief. Kian rushed to her, pulling her in his arms and holding her tightly.

“There ye are, lass,” he said, his tone tinted with relief. “I’ve been lookin’ everywhere fer ye.”

“I was just with Elspet,” Lana said. “I didnae mean tae worry ye. Forgive me.”

“It’s alright,” Kian said. “How are ye feelin’?”

“Much better, thank ye. I wanted tae ask ye if ye would accompany me tae the woods? I’d like tae pick some herbs and get some fresh air.”

Just as she had expected, Kian was rather resistant to the idea of her going into the woods. He probably thought that she was still not well enough, but Lana didn’t want to spend the whole day—and who knew how many more days, at Kian’s insistence—in the castle.

“Please, Kian,” Lana said, pulling back just a little to look at him. “I feel fine. I dinnae wish tae spend the day here. And ye’ll be with me, so ye’ll make sure that nae harm comes tae me.”

For a few moments, Kian was silent, but in the end, he relented. “Fine,” he said. “I’ll get the horses ready.”

“Ach, thank ye!” Lana said, pressing a kiss to his cheek, the one that wasn’t covered by the mask. She wished that he hadn’t put it back on, but she knew he never let anyone see his face.

No one but her.

Lana rushed to their chambers to change, and when she found Kian by the gates once more, he had the horses ready for the two of them along with a basket. “It’s fer yer herbs,” he said. “So ye can carry them.”

It was a simple gesture, but a sweet one. Lana smiled warmly at him, and Kian helped her climb onto the horse. When he had climbed onto his own, the two of them made their way towards the woods. It was a nice day, though not particularly sunny. The breeze wasn’t cold as they rode, but a few clouds were gathering up ahead, and Lana hoped that it wouldn’t rain. Even that couldn’t ruin the day for her, though. She was happy to be with Kian, and she couldn’t stop smiling.

Every now and then, she would remember the discussion they had had the previous night. Lana knew that he was keeping information from her and she didn’t like it. She wished that he would simply tell her what was going on, but she knew that there was little point in trying to force him. Once he was ready, he would tell her himself.

After a while, they stopped at the small clearing. Kian tied the horses to a nearby tree, while Lana started to gather the flowers and herbs that Elspet had written on her list. The air around them smelled like meadowsweet and marjoram, and Lana couldn’t help but breathe in deeply, enjoying the aroma of the flowers. Once she was done, she joined Kian under the tree where he sat, placing the basket next to her.

“Is it nae very nice here?” Lana asked. “I’m glad ye decided tae come with me.”

“I wouldnae leave ye alone,” Kian said. “Nae with everythin’ that is happenin’. I dinnae think I can ever leave ye out o’ me sight.”

“I wanted tae talk tae ye about that,” Lana said. It seemed like the perfect opportunity to make her proposal. “I’d like tae learn how tae fight. I think I should, if I’m goin’ tae be in danger fer a while.”

Kian looked at her for a few moments and then nodded. “Aye, I think that’s a good idea,” he said. “It’s better if ye ken a thing or two. Ye dinnae have tae fight like me, but at least bein’ able to stall someone fer a while can be helpful.”

“So ye’ll show me?” Lana said, unable to believe that it had been so easy to convince him.

“Aye, I’ll show ye,” Kian said. “But I think that we should dae somethin’ else now.”

As he spoke, he pulled Lana closer and into his arms, leaning in to kiss her. Lana smiled against his lips, but after a few moments, she pulled back from him. “Dae ye have tae wear the mask?” she asked. “I wish tae kiss ye properly and I cannae dae that if ye’re wearin’ it.”

Kian shook his head. “I cannae take it off. Nae here.”

“There’s nae one here,” Lana pointed out. “It’s only the two o’ us. Nae one else will see ye. Ye dinnae have tae worry.”

“Forgive me, lass. I cannae,” Kian insisted. “I have tae wear it, just in case.”

Though Lana couldn't understand it, she nodded. Perhaps she could convince him to remove it later, once they were back in their chambers and he would know for certain no one would enter and see him without it.

For now, she only kissed him, enjoying his company, his closeness, the warmth of his lips in contrast to the chill of the silver mask.

But then, once again, a scream echoed around the clearing, and both Lana and Kian parted, alarmed. They looked for the source of the sound, but there was no one there, at least no one they could see.

“It sounded like a lass,” Lana said.

“Help me!” called the voice, and Lana jumped to her feet, closely followed by Kian. The two of them followed the sound of the screams only to find a woman, curled over the stone fence of a cottage. She was drenched in sweat, her golden hair a mess around her face, and when Lana gave her a closer look, she saw that she was with child.

She rushed over to her and helped her steady herself, her eyes widening when she saw that her tunic was drenched, too.

“I'm... Me bairn is about tae go out,” said the woman through gritted teeth,

before another pained scream ripped itself out of her throat. “Please, help me... I was tryin’... I was tryin’ tae get tae the castle tae get the healer but I cannae make it there. Please... will ye call her fer me?”

“It’s alright,” Lana said calmly, trying to get the woman to look at her. “I have delivered bairns afore. I will help ye. What’s yer name?”

“Mairi,” said the woman.

Lana turned to look at Kian. “Help me get her inside.”

Kian took the woman’s arm and helped her into the little cottage, along with Lana. When she looked at him, his eyes were comically wide, as though he couldn’t believe what was happening.

“It’s too early fer the bairn,” the woman sobbed. “It’s nae time yet.”

“I think the bairn wants tae come whether we like it or nae,” Lana said. It was clear that the woman’s water had broken, and there was no going back from it. “But dinnae fash. Ye seem tae already be far along.”

Mairi nodded, but she didn’t seem any calmer. Lana needed to calm her down before anything started, and so she sat down with her on the bed.

“Listen tae me, Mairi,” she told her, making the woman look at her. “I will help ye and the bairn. Dinnae worry now. Everythin’ will be fine.”



That seemed to help calm Mairi down a little. She took a few deep breaths, relaxing against the bed. Once Lana was certain that she wasn't panicking, she turned to Kian once more.

"I need hot water and clean cloth. A lot o' water," she said and when he didn't move an inch she added, "as fast as ye can, Kian."

It took him a few moments to jump into action, but eventually he did, rummaging around the cottage to get everything Lana needed to deliver the baby. Lana herself positioned Mairi in a way that she would be more comfortable, and then sat with her, feeling for the baby.

"Ach, Mairi... it wants tae come out," Lana said. "Ye'll have tae push."

"I'm nae ready!" Mairi said. "Me husband isnae here. The bairn... the bairn isnae ready!"

"It is!" Lana said. "Ye can dae this. I'm right here with ye. I willnae go anywhere."

"There's already hot water!" Kian called. "Can I use it?"

"Aye!" Mairi shouted around a pained moan. "I put it on the fire when the pain started."

“Good lass,” said Lana. “See? Ye’re ready fer this. Ye ken what tae dae.”

Mairi nodded and then she began to push, just as Kian brought over everything Lana needed. One look at Mairi, though, had him going pale, the color draining from his face. He swayed for a moment, before he took a few steps away from the bed and leaned against the wall, his breath coming in fast.

“Kian... ye cannae panic now,” Lana told him. “I need yer help. I cannae take care of both of ye, ye ken.”

“Aye... aye, o’ course,” he said, though he didn’t sound very convincing. Slowly, he moved back towards the bed and joined Lana, handing her the cloth as she needed it and encouraging Mairi to push. He was trembling and she didn’t know if she should laugh at him or kill him for making everything much more intense.

“This cannae be worse than what ye have seen in battle, I’m certain, with the difference that this is a happy occasion, so pull yerself taegether” she whispered to him. He nodded and thought about her words. Seen from that perspective he immediately felt better. He had seen so much blood, pain and death in war, and so many lives wasted for no reason.

It was far from an easy birth, but Lana was determined to make sure that both Mairi and the baby survived.

“Quickly!” Lana said, just as the baby finally came out. “Grab the bairn.”

“Are ye mad woman! I dinnae ken how!” Kian shouted.

“Just take it!”

“I dinnae wish tae hurt it! And it’s covered in blood...”

“Kian, take the bairn! What else could he be covered with?”

So Kian took the baby in his hands, which were immediately drenched in blood, just like Lana’s own. Lana cut the cord and then smiled at Mairi brightly.

“Ye did it,” she said to the woman who was just coming back to herself, her rasps for air filling the small cottage. “Just a wee bit more now.”

“There’s more?” Kian squeaked, holding the baby as though it was something dangerous. “There’s another bairn?”

“Shut up, Kian and breathe. Nay, there isnae another bairn,” said Lana, “but the birth isnae over. I need ye tae clean the child very carefully and then bring him back.”

“It’s a laddie?” Mairi asked.

“Aye, a wee laddie,” said Lana. “He’s very bonnie, Mairi. We’ll clean him up fer ye and ye’ll have him in yer arms once we’re done here. Kian... get him clean.”

Once again, Kian did as he was told, if a little reluctantly and with shaking hands. Lana stayed with Mairi and helped her deliver the placenta, and then she made sure there was no bleeding.

“Congratulations, Mairi,” she said. “Ye did it.”

Mairi let out a breathless laugh, nodding. “Thank ye. Thank ye so much. I dinnae ken what I would have done without ye.”

Kian returned with the baby and handed it over to Mairi. The woman looked at him in adoration, cooing softly as she laid him on her chest. It was then that she seemed to notice the mask Kian was wearing and her eyes widened.

“Me-me laird? Is it ye?”

“A-aye,” said Kian.

“Ach! And ye did all this!” Mairi said.

“I’m only glad that ye and the bairn are well,” Kian assured her.

Mairi let out a sigh of relief, and then Lana took Kian's hand, leading him away. The two of them needed to wash up, covered in blood as they were.

"Ye did well," Lana said to him too, as she washed her hands with the water that was left over. "Though ye seemed terrified."

"I was!" Kian said. "How could I nae be?"

"Aye, I did," Lana said with a small smile. "I've seen it several times afore. Now ye ken what childbirth is like."

"I wish I didnae," Kian said. He began to unwrap the gauze around his hand, since it was now crimson, and it was then that Lana noticed something on his hand.

Something very familiar. Something she had been looking for.

"Yer hand... it cannae be," she said. She grabbed it so she could take a closer look at it, and even though she could see it with her own two eyes, it was still impossible to believe.

He had the mark that her savior did. She was certain of it. She would have recognized it anywhere.

"What about me hand?" Kian asked. "What is it?"

“I’ve seen that mark afore,” Lana said quietly, all the memories coming back to her. Though she had never seen Kian’s face, she was rather certain that her savior hadn’t been Laird Drummond.

The man in front of her also wasn’t Laird Drummond.

Suddenly, the conversation she had overheard between him and Macauley made more sense. They were waiting for the real Kian to return. But then, who was this man? Why was he lying to her? Why was everyone lying to her?

Or was it that most people didn’t even know? Was that why he had to keep wearing the mask? Could it be that he was trying to fool everyone, including her?

“Is yer name Kian?” Lana asked, tears threatening to spill from her eyes. “Tell me the truth.”

The man she knew as Kian remained silent for what seemed like eons to her. Then, without saying a single thing, he shook his head.

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## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

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Tate didn't know how Lana had figured it out, but when she asked him not to lie to her, he decided to tell her the truth. She had already seen him without the mask, and the real Kian would be there soon, so there was no point in deceiving her any longer.

Lana had said something about the mark on his hand. Was that how she had figured out he wasn't Kian? Had she managed to see his hand at some point, back before they knew each other? Perhaps when he had passed her the note that fateful night?

It was quite possible. Tate cursed under his breath, but it was too late now.

"What's yer real name?" Lana asked him.

"Tate," he said. "I'm sorry, Lana. I didnae... I never wanted tae hurt ye."

Before Lana could respond, a man entered the house freezing upon seeing them all. "Me... me laird! What are ye doin' here?" he asked before he

turned to look at Mairi. “Och! Is this our bairn?”

“Aye... aye, it is,” Mairi said, grinning from ear to ear.

Lana and Tate put on their best smiles as they congratulated the couple, before saying that they had to leave. Neither of them wanted to be there when they were in the middle of such a fight. The last thing they wanted was to sully the moment for the happy couple.

Once they were outside, Lana rushed off, but Tate was quick to run after her. “Where are ye goin’? It’s dangerous. Ye cannae leave like this.”

“I dinnae wish tae be around ye fer even one more moment!” Lana said. Her tone was full of rage, and Tate could hardly blame her. They had deceived her in a terrible way. He had the part of an awful plan and now he was paying for it as he should.

“Alright, but please, dinnae run away,” Tate said. “I cannae let ye go anywhere on yer own when yer father’s men could still be nearby.”

Lana shook her head and turned around, but Tate heard the sob that escaped her lips. “Why?” she said. “Why would ye dae somethin’ like this? Why would ye lie about who ye are? Why would ye marry me?”

She sounded so hurt, so broken, that Tate’s heart shattered in his chest. All he wanted to do was pull Lana into his arms and hold her tightly, but he knew there was no way she would ever want that now, not after what she had found



out.

“Kian... the real Kian was away and we couldnae wait fer him tae return. We couldnae risk it,” Tate said. “We dae this often. Every time he leaves, I take his place. It’s a way tae ensure the clan isnae vulnerable tae attacks. Most o’ his enemies will nae attack as long as he’s here.”

“And why did ye have tae dae all this?” Lana asked, turning to face Tate again. Her eyes were red-rimmed now and filled with tears. “Why all this? Why marry me? Ye couldnae wait a few days?”

“It was decided that we couldnae, nay,” Tate said, as calmly as he could. “I can only ask ye tae forgive me and Kian, but I understand if ye cannae. We deceived ye. What we did was unforgivable. But please... I’m beggin’ ye, dinnae tell the truth tae anyone else. The clan will lose all the faith they have in Kian if they find it out the truth and I promise ye, they need him. He’s a great laird. Everythin’ he does is fer the good o’ the clan, his people are everythin’ tae him. And... it will bring shame tae me own family, too. I dinnae want that.”

“Nay... nay, o’ course ye dinnae,” Lana scoffed. “Did ye ever consider the shame ye would bring upon *me* when ye made love tae me? Ye kent ye werenae who ye claimed tae be. Ye kent ye werenae truly me husband. And yet that didnae stop ye.”

For the first time in a while, Tate felt his cheeks heat in shame. “I ken it was wrong o’ me tae dae that,” he said. “I should have never touched ye. And I’m sorry.”

“I dinnae understand how ye could ever dae this tae me,” Lana said, taking a few steps towards Tate before she seemed to think better of it and came to a halt. “Ye said ye loved me. Why would ye say that? Why would ye dae any o’ this?”

It was unbearable for Tate to listen to the hurt and confusion in Lana’s voice as she asked him those questions. “Me love fer ye was never fake. I dae love ye, Lana, and I hate meself fer it. Kian is me best friend. He saved me life. I dae what I dae because I owe him everythin’ I have, and because I ken he’s a good man. It may nae seem like it tae ye now, but if ye wish tae blame someone, blame me. I was the one who couldnae stay away from ye, even though I kent I should. I was the one who ruined everythin’.”

“If ye truly loved me, ye would have told me the truth by now,” Lana said. “I cannae believe that ye lied tae me about all this, even after ye kent how I felt about ye. Ye let me make a fool o’ meself. Ye let me give everythin’ tae ye. Everythin’ I was supposed tae give tae me husband. What dae ye expect tae happen now? Dae ye expect me tae marry Kian when he shows up? Dae ye expect me tae simply behave as though he has been here the entire time? I cannae dae that. I fell in love with ye, nae with him.”

“We’ll have tae see what tae dae once Kian returns,” Tate said. “It willnae be long now. He’ll be back.”

“I dinnae care what he thinks or what he wants!” Lana shouted, before more tears fountained out of her eyes. “And I dinnae wish tae be near ye. Find somewhere else tae sleep tonight.”

“Lana...”

She didn't let him say anything else before she ran back to the clearing. Tate gave her a few moments and some distance before he followed her, as he didn't want her to leave his sight. He was seriously worried about her wellbeing. For all he knew, her father's soldiers were still near and they still wanted to take her back. Even if she hated him and Kian now, Tate knew that she still didn't want to marry Laird Cummings. No woman would.

Jumping on his own horse, Tate followed her down the path back to the castle, keeping her within a reasonable distance that would allow him to rush to her rescue, if needed, the entire time. She never looked back at him. Tate doubted she would ever look him in the eye again, and it shattered his heart to think that they had already come to an end. He loved Lana. He loved her more than anything and now he had truly lost her.



Lana couldn't believe that the man she had been idolizing for so long was a liar. She had spent so much time looking for him, wondering who it could be, that it never occurred to her that it could be the man by her side.

Everything made sense to her now. He had to wear the mask so that no one recognized him. He had to keep the bandage on for the same reason, but he had been careless around Lana. Not only had he taken his bandage off, but he had taken the entire mask off. He had allowed her to see his true face.

Lana couldn't help but wonder what he had been thinking when he did that. Had he already given up on his plan to fool her? Had he decided that it wasn't worth it? Surely, he knew that Lana would realize he and the real Kian were different people once the other man returned to the castle.

What was Lana supposed to do now? There was no doubt that she had fallen

for Tate. She loved him in a way she had never loved anyone else, but he had betrayed her. It didn't matter if she loved him or not. Some things were beyond love, beyond forgiveness.

She wished she never had to see him again, as she wished she never had to see Kian either, though she admitted to herself that she was rather curious to see who her real husband was. For now, she just wanted to be left alone, though Tate didn't seem to understand that, following her back to the castle the way he was.

Once she made it there, Lana handed her horse to the stableboy and then made her way to her rooms. She locked herself in there, unwilling to meet with anyone now that she knew the truth and she had to keep it secret.

She would keep it secret, not because she wanted to make it any easier on Tate or Kian, but because she knew the clan would be plunged into chaos if she told everyone the truth. Lana didn't want that. She had grown fond of everyone there and besides, none of it was their fault.

Unless their name was Macauley, of course, who seemed to be one of the people who knew everything.

Lana couldn't help but wonder if Elspet knew. Would she have lied to her for the good of the clan? Would she have tried to tell her the truth?

Lana had never felt more alone in her life. There was no one for her to talk to, no one to whom she could turn. She was all alone and heartbroken.

She decided to take a nap and sleep on it, so she undressed down to her undergarments before she slipped under the covers. They still smelled like Tate, and much to her chagrin, his scent still comforted her.

Sleep didn't come easy but eventually, her eyelids became heavy and finally closed. Her dreams were plagued by images of Tate; Tate kissing her, Tate smiling at her, Tate holding her close. Her traitorous heart still loved him.

A while later, she woke up to the sound of the door trying to be pushed open and she rolled her eyes to herself. "Go away," she said. She was certain it was Tate, trying to get into the room even though she had explicitly told him she didn't want him there.

The rattling of the doorknob stopped after a few seconds and Lana let out a sigh of relief. At least he seemed to realize that he wasn't going to get in the room, and hopefully, he had left. Lana didn't care where he spent the night. He could go to that maid he seemed to like so much, she thought rather bitterly, her lips pursing into a thin line. She hadn't forgotten about that. She remembered the ache in her chest, the sting of tears in her eyes as she had watched them.

Perhaps he had lied to her about that, too.

For a while, there was nothing but silence and the distant sounds of the forest. But then there was another sound, like something was right outside Lana's window and she froze where she sat in bed. Who could possibly be scaling the walls? Her father's men, for one, but she doubted they would have managed to enter the castle walls, especially now that security was tighter than ever.

It didn't take long for Lana's questions to be answered. She caught a glimpse of a familiar glint, the kind silver gave off when it reflects candlelight, and she folded her arms over her chest, waiting.

Tate was struggling to get into the room through the damned window. He pulled himself up with a grunt, but he seemed to have little leverage and even less flexibility. He swung his leg once, trying to reach the windowsill, and failed, catching his breath before he tried again.

Lana watched him, unimpressed by his efforts. If she really wanted to, she could push him off, but there would be nothing to break his fall.

"Leave," she told him, glaring at him even as he still tried to climb into the room. "I told ye I dinnae wish tae talk tae ye or see ye at all. That didnae mean climb the wall and creep intae the chambers."

Tate didn't answer as he tried to come in, and then when he finally managed it, he did so by rolling right into the room and landing on the floor with a pained groan. Once again, Lana only watched him, wondering what it was that he was even trying to do. He was making a fool of himself. It would have been much more dignified had he simply done as Lana had told him and stayed away from her. But of course, he didn't listen. He never did.

"Please... give me a chance," Tate said, eyes pleading. "I'm beggin' ye, Lana. I only wish tae tell ye how I feel about ye."

Lana didn't want to hear any of it, as she didn't think it would even make a difference. What was there for Tate to say that could change this situation?

Lana couldn't forgive him, and even if she could, it wouldn't change the fact that he wasn't Kian.

But given that Tate had put all that effort into climb to their room, she figured she could at least hear what he had to say.

"Fine," she said, her narrowed eyes focusing on him. "Speak."

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## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

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Tate stood in Kian's chambers, looking at Lana desperately and trying to think of what to say. He hadn't gotten that far yet. The only plan he had come up with was getting into the room through the window, since had Lana refused to let him in through the door, and even that had gone rather terribly. He had landed on his shoulder, aggravating his injury, and the climb had punched the breath out of him, the exertion too much for his already tired and beaten body.

It didn't help that he was still trying to catch his breath..

In all honesty, he hadn't expected to make it that far. He had thought that he either wouldn't make it into the room, or that Lana would force him to jump right back down. But now there he was, panting and struggling to find the right words to express his feelings for her.

Perhaps if she hadn't been looking at him with such malice, it would have been easier for Tate to figure out what to say.

"I... I really am sorry, Lana. Fer everythin'," he said. "I didnae ken how



much this would hurt ye when we first thought of the plan. And it wasnae supposed tae get this far. It's all me own fault, and I admit that. I am the one who couldnae stay away from ye. I am the one who fell in love with ye, when I kent that ye could never be mine, and then I tricked ye intae fallin' fer a man who doesnae exist."

He wasn't Kian, but then again, Kian wasn't exactly the kind of man Tate portrayed him as. When there were others around, he did his best to make his impression of him as accurate as possible, but with Lana, he often forgot himself. The man Lana had loved didn't exist. He was a mix of the two of them, someone she could never have.

Lana watched him in silence. The more Tate waited for her to say something, the more apparent it became that his words were anything but convincing. All she did was stare at him, her face an expressionless, impenetrable mask. Tate had no idea what it could be that she was thinking. She was usually so open with him, every thought, every desire written on her face, but now it was as though he was looking at a different woman.

"But I didnae lie tae ye about how I feel," he said when the silence became too much to bear. "Never. I tried tae stay away from ye because I kent that there was nae future between us, but I was too selfish tae let ye go. I didnae dae any o' this tae hurt ye or tae trick ye, nae on purpose. Ye werenae a... a conquest fer me."

All Lana did was shake her head and lower her gaze, as though she couldn't bear to look at him. In return, Tate couldn't bear to know she hated him so much.

"I dinnae understand what it is ye wish fer me tae dae now that I ken the

truth,” Lana said quietly. “Everythin’ is... och, I dinnae even ken what tae think anymore!” As she spoke, she stood and began to pace around the room, like a phantom in the dim light. “It doesnae matter what ye say or what ye feel, does it? It doesnae matter when ye’re nae me real husband. Why dae ye care? Why are ye tellin’ me all this? It would be better if ye let me think everythin’ ye did was naething more than a game tae ye.”

Tate longed to reach out and touch Lana, to pull her in his arms and hold her. He missed her dearly, even though she was right there, in the same room. He missed her warmth, her smile when she looked at him.

*Will she ever look at me like that again?*

“I couldnae let ye think that I dinnae love ye,” Tate said. He didn’t think that made him selfish, though perhaps it made everything more complicated for Lana. Perhaps knowing his true feelings for her didn’t allow her to hate him as much as she wanted. “Forgive me if this has caused ye more pain, but I thought ye should ken the truth.”

Lana came to a halt by the window and stared out into the distance. Tate gazed at her profile, illuminated softly, and once again felt his chest constrict at the thought that he couldn’t have her. She would always be there, in his periphery, but never belong to him.

“If ye love me as ye say, then will ye nae find a way tae stay by me side?”

Lana didn’t look at him as she spoke. Her question caught Tate by surprise, though, and he didn’t know what, precisely, she was asking of him. The way

she had phrased it, it sounded as though she wanted him to find a way for the two of them to be together even after Kian's return.

“Are ye tellin’ me that ye wish fer me tae... tae be yer real husband?” Tate asked with a hint of hesitation. If he had misunderstood this, then this question could only make things worse.

“I am tellin’ ye that I dinnae wish tae marry a man I dinnae ken, just like I didnae wish tae when ye took me and when me faither took me, and even afore that, when he and Laird Cummings were still tryin’ tae use me like this,” Lana said, finally turning to look at him. There was an edge to her gaze, almost as though she was challenging him and anyone else to try and force her hand. “I am tired o’ men usin’ me tae achieve their goals. I am tired o’ bein’ naething more than a pawn in yer politics. For once in me life, I wish tae dae what I want.”

Though Tate had never experienced the kind of frustration that came with being a noble-born woman, who had no say in her future or her partner and her marriage, he could understand it. And he couldn't blame Lana for refusing to let it happen to her any longer.

“Ye have done many things tae me that I wish ye hadnae,” she continued. “Ye have lied tae me. Ye have tricked me and ye bedded me when ye kent ye werenae me real husband... but I love ye. I dae. And if ye love me, too, then I wish tae be with ye.”

A part of Tate was still reluctant to believe Lana was asking him something like this. He had been so focused on the plan, on trying to make it work while making sure that no one would suspect he wasn't the real Kian, that he hadn't stopped to consider the possibility that maybe he and Lana could be together.

Kian hadn't wanted to marry her in the first place. He had only made that choice so that Laird Cummings couldn't marry her instead. And Tate wasn't simply a random man he had found, but rather someone from a good and influential family himself. Sure, he wasn't a laird, nor would he ever be, but that hardly mattered, as long as Lana was married to someone.

*Why cannae that someone be me?*

After taking a deep breath to calm his nerves, Tate walked up to Lana and pulled her in his arms, just like he had wanted to do from the moment he had stepped into that room. Lana leaned against him and closed her eyes with a soft sigh, her shoulders finally relaxing.

"Does this mean ye forgive me?" Tate asked tentatively.

"Aye, I suppose it does," Lana said, mumbling against his shoulder. When she pulled back to look at him, Tate couldn't take his eyes off her own. Her hand came up to rest on his mask and she let out a heavy sigh. "Will ye take it off now?"

Tate had no reason to keep the mask on anymore, not when it was only the two of them in the room. He nodded, and Lana carefully lifted the mask off his face, setting it aside onto the windowsill. He closed his eyes as she traced the contours of his face with the pads of her fingers, and then felt her lips press against his own.

When their lips parted, the two of them still remained close, in each other's arms. "I'll talk tae Kian when he returns. I promise ye."

With any luck, he wouldn't consider this as the terrible betrayal Tate knew it was. Maybe he would even be glad to be free of the obligation to marry Lana. Maybe he would consider it a good thing.

Tate could hope.

What he couldn't do was keep himself away from her. It had become clear to him that the more he tried, the more he wanted her. He craved her constantly, his body gravitating towards her whenever she was near. Now that she was kissing him again, her fingers tangling through strands of his hair, he couldn't resist her.

His own hands gathered the fabric of her tunic and removed it, along with the rest of the layers that hid her body. He revealed her soft skin to himself, the gentle curve of her breasts and hips, and he couldn't help but gaze at her in silence, her beauty robbing him of all words.

He knew, in that moment, that he could never live without her. How could he have tasted the joy of being hers and then continue his life away from her? It would be like falling from heaven.



Lana had given it a lot of thought and she had realized that she didn't want to be a part of those games that the men in her life were playing any more. She had decided that she didn't want to see any of them ever again, at least until

Tate had climbed up to their chambers and apologized while confessing his true feelings for her.

Lana couldn't deny her own feelings for him. Even though she was still angry, even though she hated that he had lied to her and helped another man to use her to further his own political goals, she wanted to forgive him. She wanted to believe that he was a good man, that everything he told her now was true.

And if it wasn't, then it would be her fault for trusting him, and she would make sure to never trust anyone ever again.

Lana let Tate undress her, and then she worked on removing his own clothes, leaving them in a pile on the floor. She smoothed her hands over his chest, tracing the hard muscles under his skin, but her gaze never left his face. She could finally look at him. She could finally see him fully, with no barrier between them.

Reaching lower, she took Tate into her hand, finding him already hard. Their lips met roughly, both of them starved for affection after their argument. To Lana, it felt like days since they had been together, as despair had welled up within her at the thought that she could never be with him again.

But now Tate had promised her he would talk to Kian. Surely, he would understand. And if he didn't, then maybe she and Tate could leave the castle. Just the two of them, away from the people who wanted to tear them apart.

That night, Lana was impatient, and it seemed to her that the same was true

for Tate. He grabbed at her, his lips trailing a fiery path down her neck and chest, and Lana couldn't wait. She wanted him. She wanted them to become one.

Jumping onto the windowsill, Lana pulled Tate closer, making him stand between her legs. She didn't need to tell him what she wanted. Their gazes met as he entered her, and a gasp escaped Lana's lips. She held onto him tightly, her nails digging into his skin as he pushed in deeper. Tate moaned into her ear, low and wanton, their bodies flush as they rocked together, chasing the same pleasure.

There was something different about their coupling now. Even though it was as familiar, seeing Tate's face, gazing into his eyes made it all the more intimate. There were no secrets between them anymore. There was nothing but love, nothing but desire.

"Make me yours, Tate," Lana said, using his name for the first time. Upon hearing it, Tate shuddered, as if pleasure rolled through him at the mere sound of it from Lana's lips. He held her like she was something precious, like something to be cherished. His lips found her own, and then never left, giving her soft kisses that drove Lana crazy with lust.

She had never seen him so passionate before. He was always tender with her, making love to her as though his only purpose was to pleasure her, but now it felt like a claim.

"Ye're so bonnie, Lana," he whispered to her as he drove himself deep inside her, gently cradling her face in his hands. "I love ye. I love ye more than anythin'."

“I love ye as well, Tate,” Lana said, as that familiar warmth built in her core. They clung onto each other, Lana rocking her own hips to meet Tate’s thrusts, her legs wrapping around his waist to keep him close to her. It didn’t take her long to reach her climax after that, shaking against him as her pleasure crashed over her like a wave.

When Tate reached his own peak, he let himself spill inside her for the first time, and Lana gasped at the sensation. He gave her a few more lazy thrusts, and then the two of them stayed like that for a few moments, panting as they tried to catch their breaths.

Lana giggled. She couldn’t help it. It all seemed like a dream to her—some of it a nightmare, but the rest like a dream she didn’t want to wake up from. A part of her feared the moment Kian would return, but she wanted to think that everything would be alright. If Kian and Tate were such good friends, as Tate claimed, then surely, he couldn’t be a bad man.

Maybe he would be understanding. Maybe, for the first time in Lana’s life, she could get what *she* wanted.



As much as Lana wanted to stay in Tate’s warm embrace when she awoke the next morning, the two of them snuggling in bed, her concern for the woman she had helped deliver her child was pressing, and she was too restless to stay where she was. There would be time for them to be together later. Now, Lana wanted to make sure that the woman and the baby were doing well, as she had been dreaming about them the entire night.

Standing up slowly so as to not wake Tate, Lana dressed and left the room. No one stopped her as she walked through the castle, not even when she



stepped out of the gates, which seemed like a new development to her. Could it be that Tate had asked the guards to let her roam in peace? The only person she had encountered was one of the maids, to whom she had mentioned the mother and the bairn.

The last thing she wanted was to abuse that new freedom, since she knew how much Tate worried about her, and with good reason. Her father's men were still out there, waiting for the right moment to strike and she shouldn't go too far from the castle. That would only be asking for trouble, and she didn't want to attract any. Thankfully, the cottage wasn't too far, although it would require a bit of a walk. However, Lana would make sure to be back in no time. It wouldn't take her long to examine Mairi and the baby.

She couldn't remember another period in her life when she had been simultaneously so happy and so stressed. On the one hand, she couldn't be happier to have talked things through with Tate. On the other hand, too many threats loomed in the horizon. It wasn't only her father and Laird Cummings who could come between them, but also the real Kian Drummond.

Only a few weeks had passed since had been living a quiet life with the Murray Clan. Back then, she would have never thought that her life would turn out like this, being hunted down by her own father and hopelessly in love with the man who had saved her life all that time ago. She had been searching for him for so long, wishing that she could somehow thank him for what he had done for her, but then fate had intervened.

When Lana had first seen that familiar scar on Tate's hand, she hadn't known what to think. Her idea of him had been so idealized in her head that Lana had considered him as her hero, the man who had given her a chance to have a better life.

And a part of her still considered him her hero.

It was only then, as she was walking down the path, that a thought hit her. Tate was not only her savior but also the youngest of the Murray brothers! She suddenly remembered Alba talking to her about Tate, who had a mark on his hand. She had suggested that he could be the man who had saved her, but Lana hadn't given it much thought. And then with everything else that had happened, she hadn't had the chance to think about any of this and connect the dots.

Tate hadn't given her his last name, either. It was only now that she realized he was none other than Tate Murray. And now she knew why he had looked familiar!

She could hardly believe how he and Kian had managed to fool everyone. Though she didn't know the other man, she did know that no one seemed to suspect them. Perhaps that was why Tate never spoke much and always locked himself in Kian's study, spending more time there than any laird needed to.

Lana couldn't help but wonder how they would explain all this to the rest of the clan. Everyone knew her as Kian's wife, the lady of the clan, and even if Kian agreed to let her and Tate stay together, it would be difficult to explain it to the clan without revealing the truth.

Would they have to pretend to run away? Would they have to run away for real?

Lost in her thoughts, Lana almost failed to hear the sound of approaching footsteps. They were faint, but they were definitely moving closer. Lana heard the crunch of dried leaves under a pair of boots, the snap of twigs as their owner walked. Her heartbeat quickened and she felt terror invade her stomach at the thought that someone was once again after her.

*Perhaps nae one is after me. Perhaps it's only a traveler.*

Still, Lana rushed to hide behind some nearby bushes, just to be safe.

The bushes were just big enough to conceal her, creating a wall between her and the approaching figure. She could peek through the branches just enough to see who it was but she didn't have time to take a good look.

Within moments, all she felt – once again – was a searing pain in her head as someone attacked her. The pain radiated through her skull, throbbing and nauseating, before darkness quickly enveloped her, seeping into her vision from the corners of her eyes until it was all she could see.

And then there was nothing.

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## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

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The light was blinding when Lana opened her eyes. She blinked a few times, trying to adjust to it, but her head felt heavy and filled with cotton as she turned it to the side, seeking some shelter from the rays of the sun.

She struggled to remember what had happened to her, but at least she recognized her surroundings. Of course, that also meant that her heart dropped once she realized where she was.

The walls of her childhood chambers, the ones she had called home until not that long before, were closing in on her. She felt panic welling up inside her and her skin was soon coated in a thin sheen of sweat, sour and unpleasant. She sat up in bed, her mind racing to think of a plan.

She should have never left the castle, she should have known better. Her father's men had been waiting for her, and she had walked right into their trap, giving them precisely what they wanted. She had been a fool to think she was safe.

*What would Tate be thinking now?*

Perhaps it didn't even matter, not when she knew what her father's plans were. He would try to marry her off to Laird Cummings again, and if he succeeded this time, Lana would never see Tate again.

It wasn't fair, none of it. She had only just managed to find out the truth about him and Kian, and gotten to know the real Tate, and now their love for each other was under threat again. It was up to her now to find a way to put an end to her father's plan once and for all.

Not long after, two maids walked into her chambers. Lana knew both women well. They had been working in her father's castle ever since she was a child and now they regarded her with sorrow, their eyes downcast as they brought her a tray of food and a basin for her to bathe. Lana had half a mind to ask them for help, to beg them to let her go, but she knew they would never be her accomplices. They were too scared of her father to help her. Everyone in the castle was, and Lana couldn't blame them for it. Her father never made threats. He only gave out the punishment.

"Where is me faither?" Lana asked. The sooner she figured out a way to get out of there, the better it would be.

"He'll come tae see ye soon," one of the maids said. She seemed to want to say something else too, drawing in a sharp breath, but in the end, no more words left her lips.

Once again, Lana was a prisoner. She was fed up with her father's behavior,

but she couldn't think of a way out. On the other hand, she couldn't rely on Tate to save her this time. She had to save herself.

"Could ye tell him I wish tae speak with him as soon as possible?" Lana said. "Now would be better."

"O' course," said the woman. As the two of them took their leave, they both stopped at the door, giving Lana one more look. She could have sworn that she saw tears glinting in their eyes.

They pitied her, but they were unwilling to help her.

Once they left the room, Lana let her head fall back onto the pillow with a groan. She could do nothing else but wait, and she didn't even feel like eating. She had no appetite, and her entire head hurt too much for her to even lift it for extended periods of time. She wished she could simply sleep it off, but she didn't want to be asleep when her father came to see her.

She spent the hours like that, lying in bed and trying to force herself to come up with a plan. The sun crested in the sky and then began its descent, and still, her father was nowhere to be seen. The longer he waited, the more likely it was that Tate would come after him and that a war would break out between the two clans. She knew there would be no doubt in his mind regarding who had taken her. It could only be her father or Laird Cummings, and he would make sure to attack both clans.

Lana wanted to avoid that. For one, the Drummond Clan didn't actually belong to Tate, and Lana couldn't know what the repercussions of starting a

war would be for him. And there were also the numbers. United, the Hay Clan and the Cummings Clan were too numerous and mighty for the Drummond soldiers to fight alone.

*War must be avoided. It's too dangerous.*

Besides, her father's men—or at least most of them—bore no responsibility for any of this. Lana knew those men. She had known them ever since she was a child and others ever since they were children themselves. The last thing she wanted was for them to get hurt.

It wasn't until the sun was low in the sky, almost beginning to set, that there was knock on the door. By then, the water in the basinet had gone cold, and so had the food on the tray. Lana thought it would be a maid, there to take everything away, but when the door opened, it was none other than her father.

Lana shot out of bed and stood by the foot; her arms crossed defensively over her chest.

“Are ye ready tae stop this nonsense?” her father asked in lieu of a greeting. “Laird Cummings is still willin' tae marry ye. Ye should be glad about that.”

“Ye forget I am already married,” Lana pointed out. Her sister's vows mattered little to her father, though, and so she doubted that her own would. Then again, how could he ever deny that Lana was already married?

‘With that fraud?’ her father said. A laugh erupted from his lips, cruel and unpleasant. “Did ye think I wouldnae find out the truth?”

*Nay... it cannae be. How did he find out?*

No one knew about Tate and Kian. Or at least that was what Lana had thought up until now. Maybe they had not been as careful as they thought they had been and someone had found out the truth about them.

*Could it be that he has spies in the Drummond Clan?*

It would explain a lot, Lana thought. For example, how his men knew where to find her and Tate. Still, she wished it wasn't true and that her father hadn't managed to gain such power over the Clan.

None of it changed the facts. Now that it was revealed her marriage was nothing but a sham, he had all the more reason to try and marry Lana to Laird Cummings, under the pretense of saving her from a fraud.

Lana had to think fast. Surely, there was some way to prevent this marriage from happening.

“I... I cannae marry Laird Cummings,” she said, drawing out the words just so she could give herself some more time. “Because... because me marriage with Kian... with Tate, has already been consummated. So, it doesnae matter who he is. Either way, it's too late now.”



“It doesnae matter tae me and I am certain it willnae matter tae Laird Cummings,” her father said. “Ye were tricked by the man, were ye nae?”

“Nay, o’ course I wasnae!” Lana said, though it wasn’t strictly true. Tate *had* deceived her. She had simply forgiven him for it.

“Aye, ye were,” her father said sternly. His blue eyes pierced her like a shard of ice as he glared at her. “And I dinnae want tae hear ye say otherwise.”

*What can he dae tae me that he hasnae done already? How much more can he hurt me?*

Perhaps he couldn’t hurt her directly but he could hurt her in other ways. He could capture Tate and torture him, or kill him. That would destroy her, too.

“I... I...”

Lana’s mind raced, trying to find an excuse that her father couldn’t bypass. And then it hit her.

“I’m with bairn!”

*There. What will he dae now?*

For a few moments, her father froze, eyes widening in shock. “Already?”

It was a bit of a gamble. It hadn’t been that long since Tate had taken her to the Drummond Castle, but perhaps if Lana tried hard enough, she could make the math work.

“Aye,” Lana said. “It happened very fast.”

“Well... then I suppose we should have the weddin’ sooner rather than later,” her father said after a moment of contemplation. “And ye’ll be certain tae convince Laird Cummings it is his own.”

It wasn’t what Lana had expected to hear and for a few moments, all she could do was stare at her father, her mouth hanging open in shock. How could he stoop so low as to suggest such a thing? Even for him, it was too far.

“How can ye say that?” she asked. “How can ye even think such a thing?”

With a few large steps, her father approached Lana until she had to take a step back to avoid him, cowering in his overwhelming presence. “This marriage is happenin’ whether ye want it or nae,” he said. “I will let naething stand in the way. Nae ye, nae the wee bastard ye’re carryin’. It doesnae matter what happens when the bairn is born. I dinnae care if it looks just like Tate Murray. What matters is that ye marry Laird Cummings right the now. Ye’ve cost me enough already.”

“And if I dinnae?” Lana asked, standing up a little straighter. “What will ye

dae?”

Her father’s gaze hardened at the question, but when he spoke, he didn’t give the answer she was expecting. “Then I’ll make sure that bairn ye’re carryin’ will never see the light o’ day.”

Though it was hardly a threat, considering Lana wasn’t really with child, the sheer cruelty of it, the fact that it was such an evil threat, made bile rise to the back of her throat. Her hands shook as she stared at him in disbelief, and she could only hope it was an empty threat.

But she knew her father well. He didn’t make empty threats.

“The weddin’ will be on the morrow,” her father said with a finality that left no room for argument. “The maids will come and get ye ready.”

Before Lana could say anything else, shocked as she still was by her father’s threat, the man was gone. Lana perched herself on the edge of her bed, her fingers curling into the covers and holding tightly onto the fabric.

Was that it for her, then, she wondered? Was there no way to avoid this marriage, after all?

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## CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

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Tate woke up with a start. He didn't know if he had been dreaming and if so, what he had been dreaming about at all, only that his heart was racing and he had a feeling as though something was wrong.

No matter how much he tried, though, he couldn't pinpoint the source of the feeling.

The bed next to him was empty. When he looked around him, he realized Lana wasn't in the room, though that wasn't too strange. Perhaps she had woken up before him and was already breaking her fast in the great hall. Maybe she was with Elspet, helping her.

Getting up, Tate decided it was time to start his day. He had already overslept, and though there wasn't much for him to do, it was hardly appropriate for him to be in bed all day. After he dressed and exited the chambers, he stopped the first guard he saw on his way to the study.

"Have ye seen Lana?" he asked.

“Och aye,” the man said. “She left early. I heard her mention she was goin’ tae tend tae the lass with the bairn, she said.”

Tate sighed. It was just like Lana to leave the castle without informing him, but at least she hadn’t gone too far – although in his opinion it was far enough. Tate couldn’t help but worry about her since nowhere was safe anymore. Even Drummond Clan land had been infiltrated by Hay men.

“Did she say when she would return?” asked Tate.

“She said she would nae be long,” the guard said.

“I see,” said Tate. He wasn’t going to worry just yet. He could hardly confine Lana within the castle like a prisoner, and he didn’t want her to feel like she didn’t have any freedom. On the other hand, he did wish she had told him where she was going. He could have sent a guard with her if she didn’t want Tate himself to follow her to the cottage.

“Shall I have a maid bring ye breakfast tae yer study, me laird?” the guard asked.

“Aye, thank ye,” said Tate. He had forgotten all about breakfast in his worry.

He took a deep breath. He was overreacting, surely. The cottage was not too far from the castle and with the Hay men’s defeat, surely, they would be reluctant to attack again so soon.

Tate made his way to Kian's study and waited there for his breakfast. He had it alone, as he usually did when Macauley didn't join him, and then he waited, busying himself with papers he could only half-read, paying little attention to the words.

One hour passed, then two, then three, and Lana was still nowhere to be found. Tate kept straying out of the study, asking the guards and the maids if they had seen her, but none of them knew where she was. One thing was for certain: she was not in the castle.

She should have been back by then, Tate thought. There was no reason for her to take so long, and by the time the fourth hour struck, panic had begun to well up inside him.

Tate decided to go to the cottage himself. He took the fastest horse and rode there, his heart hammering in his chest the entire time. When he arrived, he knocked on the door to the cottage with urgency and shortly thereafter, the woman's husband opened it, gasping when he saw Tate.

"Me laird!" he exclaimed. "Ye're here again."

"Aye," said Tate, giving the man a small smile. "Lady Drummond... is she here?"

"Lady Drummond?" the man asked in confusion. "Was she meant tae be here? We havenae seen her."

Tate's heart stopped altogether. "Has she nae been here at all today? Ye havenae seen her?"

"Nay," the man said. "Nae one has come here today."

Tate cursed quietly under his breath. There was no doubt in his mind now that Lana was in danger, and that her father and Laird Cummings had her. They were relentless, they wouldn't even give up after their men had already been defeated once.

But that attack had been a small one. Now Tate had to take Lana back from them when their men were all assembled and ready for war.

Could he attack the two clans directly? Could he take such a risk?

*Dae I have any other choice?*

"Thank ye," Tate said and then rushed to his horse even as the man shouted at him to wait, asking him what was wrong. Tate was certain the man wanted to help, but there was little he could do.

He rushed back to the castle, sweat gathering on his forehead. The moment he arrived, he called for Macauley to meet him in the study, and then paced upon and down the room as he waited for him. The whole way there, he could hardly see where he was going, and even now, he bumped into the chair, this time cursing loudly as a dull pain shot down his leg.

When Macauley stepped into the room, Tate stopped pacing and turned to face him.

“What is it?” Macauley asked. “The men said ye’re actin’ like a madman, runnin’ up an’ down the corridors.”

“Lana is gone,” Tate said. “She was supposed tae go and see the lass with the bairn, but when I went tae the cottage, they told me she had never made it there.”

Macauley had his own set of choice words, mumbling curses under his breath. “Are ye sayin’ her father has her again? We have done everythin’ in our power tae keep her safe. How did he get tae her?”

“I suppose he could because she left all on her own.” Tate should have been more careful. He should have made sure that there was always someone near her, always someone to help her in the event of an attack. He doubted she could defend herself against soldiers like her father’s.

“Why would she dae that?” Macauley asked. “She kens how dangerous it is!”

“She thought it would be safe tae go tae the cottage, I suppose,” Tate said. “*I* thought it would be safe. It’s rather close tae the castle.”

“Just because it’s very close, doesnae mean that her father’s men cannae get there,” Macauley pointed out. “They attacked within our walls. Did ye think they wouldnae be lurkin’ in the woods?”



“I dinnae think they would attack again so soon,” Tate admitted. “But I also didnae ken she would go tae the cottage. Had I kent, I would have never let her go alone.”

Macauley threw himself down onto the chair with a heavy sigh, burying his face in his hands. Tate supposed he had had enough of all this chaos, and he was tired of having to deal with crisis after crisis.

“Alright,” Macauley said, taking a deep breath as if to steel himself. “Alright. We have tae go and find her. But we cannae be too obvious about it. I’m certain her faither has her. Laird Cummings hasnae tried tae take her himself so far. All the attempts have come from her faither.”

“So, she’s in the Hay Castle,” Tate said. It made sense. He didn’t think Laird Cummings would waste manpower on something Laird Hay could do on his own. “Cannae we simply attack them?”

“They’ll have Cummings men, too,” Macauley pointed out. “And... well, ye’re nae Kian, I’m afraid. I cannae sanction an attack without him here. Besides, goin’ in quietly would be much safer.”

“Fer the clan,” Tate pointed out. “Nae fer us.”

“O’ course,” Macauley said. “But when did ye ever shy away from danger?”

Tate supposed that was a fair assessment. If anything, sometimes he seemed to chase it.

“Very well,” Tate said. “So, we’ll try tae take her back quietly.” It would be far from the first time he had infiltrated a castle. It was always the same kind of plan, though it had never been this rushed. However, he was lucky to have already been in the Hay castle when he had first saved Lana with Kian’s help, so despite not knowing many of the secret passages they at least had an idea of the layout.

“Aye,” said Macauley. “I suppose we’ll have tae figure out the exact plan once we’re there. There’s nae time tae waste. Her faither is insane enough tae have married her off tae Laird Cummings already.”

Tate truly hoped that wasn’t the case. He knew Lana well enough to expect her to put up a fight. She wasn’t the kind of person to do as she was told, even with a threat hanging over her head.

Besides, her father needed her. He couldn’t harm her, not while she was promised to Laird Cummings, which gave her an advantage.

“Go and prepare,” Macauley said, as he stood. “We’ll meet by the gates.”

Before he could leave, though, one of the bookcases in the room shifted to reveal a passage. The wood creaked as the secret door opened, the hidden hinges groaning loudly.

Few knew about the passage. In fact, the three people who knew about it were currently in the room: Tate, Macauley, and now Kian.

He was in a state of disarray, his clothes muddied and wrinkled, his hair flying in all directions and sweat dripping from his brow as he panted to catch his breath.

“I heard,” Kian said, and then he stopped once more, the air in his lungs seemingly insufficient for him to finish what he was saying. “I heard... I heard Laird Cummings is about tae marry.”

“Good afternoon, me laird,” said Macauley. “We already ken.”

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## CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

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Lana looked at the wedding dress the maids had brought her. Though they had insisted to help her put it on, she had made them leave the room. She didn't want to have anyone near her. She only wanted to be left alone.

It was a beautiful dress. Of course, it was. She was supposed to look her best on her wedding day with one of the most important lairds on that side of the Highlands, and she was certain Laird Cummings had made sure to pick something suitable himself. He wouldn't have her looking anything less than perfect.

Not for the first time, she considered ruining the dress, but this time, she didn't go through with it. Ridiculing herself in front of the Hay and the Cummings Clans would surely have worse consequences than doing so in front of the Drummonds.

Halfheartedly, Lana put the dress on. The deep green of the fabric complimented her hair and eyes perfectly, and under any other circumstances, she would have been delighted to have such a garment. But now all she could feel was hatred for this dress that represented everything she didn't want. She looked at herself in the looking-glass, tears prickling in her eyes, stinging her.

She refused to let them shed. Even though she was all alone, she didn't want to show any weakness. If she allowed herself to cry now, she would never stop.

Suddenly, she heard a strange sound, one she hadn't heard in a long time. She turned to face the hearth and just as she expected, she saw the small passage behind it and the little door that led to it open.

Deirdre was crawling through it, too big now to fit in it comfortably. Lana remembered the occasional visit from their childhood, when she would run through the passage to get to her chambers unnoticed.

"Deirdre!" Lana exclaimed. "What are ye doin'? Why are ye crawling' through there?"

"Faither isnae allowing anyone tae come and see ye," Deirdre said, as she came to the mouth of the passage and stood up straight, brushing dust off her dress. "There are guards everywhere. I had nae other choice."

That could only mean that their father thought the two of them together were a threat. Lana liked the thought of him being intimidated enough by them to go to such lengths to keep them apart, even when they lacked the raw brawn necessary to fight their way out.

"I'm glad ye came tae see me," Lana said, as she took Deirdre's hands in her own and pulled her closer. "Faither has said the cruelest things tae me. I dinnae ken what tae dae. None o' what I told him changed his mind at all."

“It doesnae surprise me,” Deirdre said. “Faither isnae very good at bein’ swayed. But dinnae fash. Everythin’ will be fine. Dae ye think Kian will come?”

Lana sighed. She had a lot of explaining to do, it seemed. Her father may have known about Tate, but no one else would. “Kian? Nay. But I ken Tate will.”

“Tate?” Deirdre asked with a frown. “Who is Tate?”

Lana proceeded to explain everything that had happened to Deirdre, and the entire time, her sister looked at her with wide, astonished eyes. By the time Lana had finished her tale, she feared Deirdre’s eyes would pop right out of her skull.

“Ye must be jestin’,” Deirdre said. Lana shook her head. “So, ye’re married tae this Tate now?”

“Aye,” Lana said. “And I ken he’ll come fer me. I only hope there willnae be a battle. I would hate fer anything’ tae happen tae him or any o’ the other men.”

“When he comes, I will help him,” Deirdre said. “I’ll make sure he finds ye, I promise.”

“Ach, Deirdre... thank ye,” Lana said. She pulled her sister into a hug so tight that had Deirdre huffing out in surprise. “But promise me ye’ll be

careful. I dinnae wish tae put ye in any danger. Too much has happened tae ye already.”

“I’ll be careful,” Deirdre promised. “Naething will happen tae me. Faither wouldnae dae anythin’ tae put me life in danger.”

“He can dae other things, though,” Lana pointed out. Deirdre couldn’t even imagine what those things were.

“Dinnae fash,” Deirdre insisted. “He cannae dae anythin’ worse tae me than he can dae tae ye.”

“Maybe... I should try tae leave through the passage,” Lana said. That way, Deirdre wouldn’t be in any danger. “Are there many guards out there?”

“Och aye,” Deirdre said. “Ye would never make it out o’ the castle. I heard most o’ them will be at the ceremony, though, so if Kian... I mean, if Tate comes afore the ceremony, then perhaps ye can leave without bein’ caught.”

Lana knew there wouldn’t be a way to avoid killing, not with how many guards were posted around the castle. But what other choice did she have but to stomach it? As long as Tate and Deirdre were safe, then she couldn’t ask for much more.

“Dae ye ken what time they’ll take me tae the ceremony?” Lana asked.

“It should be in the mornin’,” said Deirdre. “Faither wants it done as soon as possible.”

Lana nodded. She had but a few hours to leave the castle. With the guards all over, her only hope was that Tate would come in time and that he wouldn’t come with troops. She had no way of knowing what he would do, though.

The only thing she knew for certain was that he would be there for her.



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## CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

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“Well... now I wish I hadnae rushed so much,” said Kian as he doubled over, still trying his best to breathe. “How did ye ken?”

“Lana is gone,” Macauley said. “She was supposed tae meet a woman she helped, but she never made it tae her cottage.”

“Have ye thought o’ a plan yet?” Kian asked.

“Aye,” said Tate. “We sneak intae the castle and we take her back.”

“That is hardly a plan,” Kian pointed out. “We cannae walk in there without any plan at all.”

Though Tate wanted nothing more than to find Lana and bring her home, he knew Kian was right. None of them would be of any use to her if they ended up dead.

But there was another matter Tate wanted to discuss with Kian, and it wasn't one that could wait. The moment they found Lana he would see that Tate had developed feelings for her. There would be no hiding it from him. Kian knew him better than anyone and all it would take for him to know the truth would be one glance. Besides, he had promised Lana that he would talk to him about the two of them. It was better to do it sooner rather than later.

"Macauley," he said, turning to look at the man. "Could ye give us a moment?"

At first, Macauley looked at him as though he was crazy, surely eager to come up with a plan, just like he and Kian were. But then, he understood, because he gave him a knowing look.

"Aye," he said, as he walked to the door. "I'll gather a few men."

"Thank ye," said Tate. He waited until Macauley was out of the room, and then he turned to Kian, who was making himself comfortable behind his desk, pouring himself some wine from the jug that the maids kept full on his desk. "It's good tae have ye back."

"I wish it was under different circumstances," said Kian. He looked tired. Even though most of his face was concealed, Tate could see it in the slope of his shoulders, the exhausted way with which he carried himself. "Has she been bringin' ye trouble?"

"Aye, I suppose so," Tate said with a small chuckle, thinking that Lana had brought him more trouble than Kian could ever know. "I need tae speak with

ye.”

“Now?” Kian asked. “Can it nae wait until we return?”

“Nae,” said Tate. “It’s about... Lana.”

That seemed to get Kian’s attention. “Lana?” He asked, sitting up a little straighter on his chair. “What about her?”

There was no easy way for Tate to say what he wanted to say, so he decided the best course of action was to simply say it as quickly as he could. Still, no matter how much he tried to get the right words out, his mouth seemed to have other ideas.

“Well... ye were gone fer a very long time,” he said. “Much longer than we thought ye would. And Lana and I... I mean I... it was me own fault, really. Lana had naething tae dae with any o’ this because she thought that I was ye, ye see, and—”

“What are ye tryin’ tae say?” Kian interrupted. “Whatever it is, ye should just say it.”

“It’s nae that simple,” Tate said with an awkward laugh. He wished it was, but as confident as he had been earlier about this, now that the time had come, he wasn’t as certain.

“O’ course it is,” Kian said. “We tell each other everythin’.”

That much was true, but nothing Tate had ever had to confess before had been as shameful as this. “Promise me ye willnae blame Lana fer any o’ this.”

“Blame her fer what?” Kian asked. “If ye dinnae tell me what it is, how can I promise ye anythin’?”

“If ye’re me friend, ye’ll promise me,” Tate insisted. “If ye wish tae blame someone fer it, if ye wish tae be angry, then be angry with me.”

Kian looked at Tate with concern, as though none of what Tate was saying made any sense. Perhaps it really didn’t make any sense to him, Tate thought. He didn’t have the context. He didn’t know the terrible deeds Tate had done behind his back.

“Fine,” Kian said, finally relenting. “I promise ye. Will ye tell me what’s wrong now?”

Tate nodded. He just had to say it. He just had to find the courage to tell him the truth.

For a moment, he only looked at him, coming to stand in front of the desk, his hands planted onto the smooth surface. Then, he took a deep breath and gave him another nod, this time a decisive one.

“I am in love with Lana,” he said. “I... I tried everythin’ I could tae stay away from her, but I failed. I have betrayed ye. I can only ask fer yer forgiveness, Kian, but I understand if ye cannae give it tae me.”

For a short while, Kian said nothing. Tate’s heart pounded as if he had been running for miles, his stomach churning at the thought that he had just lost his best friend.

“Does Lana feel the same way?” Kian asked in the end.

“A-aye,” Tate said. “She didnae ken, though. She thought I was ye until very recently.”

“Aye, perhaps, but it is ye she loves, nay me,” Kian pointed out. “And if ye love her and she loves ye, I dinnae see what the problem is.”

Tate was so taken aback by Kian’s response that all he could do for a few seconds was open his mouth uselessly, without any words coming out. He had expected at least some sort of disagreement, if not a terrible fight that would leave them both hurt and with one fewer friend than before.

But all Kian had done was speak of it like it hardly mattered. “Are ye nae upset?”

“Upset?” Kian frowned; confusion evident in his features. “Why would I be upset?”

“Because!” Tate said. It felt as though he was the one losing it now. “Lana was meant tae be yer wife, nae mine!”

“So?” Kian asked with a shrug. “All that mattered tae me was that she married someone who wasnae Laird Cummings. It doesnae matter if it’s me or ye. If anythin’, I prefer it this way.”

“Ye dae?” It was Tate’s turn to frown now, not knowing what to think anymore.

“Aye. I didnae wish tae marry but I didnae have another option. I wasnae goin’ tae force ye tae marry her fer the sake o’ me own clan,” Kian said as he took a sip of wine. “Ye’ve already done so much fer me. But if ye love her and she loves ye, then it solves all our problems. We’ll keep her faither an’ Laird Cummings from formin’ an alliance and the two o’ ye can be happy.”

Tate didn’t think there had ever been another time in his life when he had felt such relief. His face split into a grin as he looked at Kian, and he could see that the other man had one of his own under the mask.

“Did ye truly think I would be angry?” Kian asked. “Ye’re me best friend, Tate, I’d dae anythin’ fer ye. I want ye tae be happy.”

“I felt like I betrayed ye. Like I betrayed yer trust,” Tate said. “Ye’ve done so much fer me, Kian, and what did I dae? I fell in love with the woman who was meant tae be yer wife.”

“Dinnae fash,” Kian said. “I’m nae angry, I promise.”

This couldn’t have gone better for Tate, but there was another worry that plagued his mind. Even if Kian wasn’t angry about any of this, even if he supported him and Lana, there was the issue of the clan. “What about the clan?” Tate asked.

“What about it?”

“Well... they all think I’m ye,” Tate reminded him. “And they’ve seen ye marry Lana. What will they think once they see her with me?”

Kian fell silent as he considered the question. “Indeed,” he mumbled, mostly to himself. “I suppose this could be an issue, aye. But yer happiness is more important. We’ll find a way tae fix this. Or perhaps we’ll have tae say the truth.”

“The truth?” Tate couldn’t have that. Not only would it be dangerous if the truth made it past the castle walls, but it would also mean that everything they had done up to that moment had been in vain. All that effort, all those lies would have been for nothing.

“Well, if we have nae other choice, then aye,” Kian said, as though it was far less important to him than Tate had realized. “But afore we dae anythin’ o’ the sort, we should find Lana and bring her back. There is nae point in discussin’ any o’ this when she could be marryin’ Laird Cumminngs right now.”

Tate didn't want to think about the possibility of Lana having already been forced to marry the other man. Of course, such a marriage would hardly count, since she was already married to Tate himself, but he still wanted to prevent it. If Laird Cummings had any sort of claim over her, then Tate and Kian would have to worry about several more enemies than just the Hay and Cummings clans. Their allies would have no choice but to join the conflict.

“When all this is over,” Kian said, “I will be very glad tae finally meet yer bride, Tate.”

Tate couldn't help but smile. Even in the direst situations, Kian always knew how to make him feel better. Just having him there made it easy for Tate to reclaim some of his optimism.

It didn't matter how many men Lana's father had. The two of them together could stop whole armies.



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## CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

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“Come quickly.”

Macauley’s voice was a whisper in the night. Tate and Kian followed him quickly, plastering themselves against the wall that surrounded Hay Castle so that they wouldn’t be spotted by any guards as they snuck around the grounds. Even getting close to the castle had been an ordeal. The land that surrounded it was heavily guarded, not that it was a surprise for any of them. Laird Hay naturally feared an attack from the Drummond Clan, but Tate doubted he expected just a few men to show up for Lana.

The three of them moved quietly under the cover of the night, remaining in the shadows as they approached the castle stealthily. The guards Laird Hay had posted around the land were either too bored or too tired to spot their small group as they made their way through the woods.

No one had stopped them so far. Tate could only hope that no one would stop them once they made it inside either.

“Did ye find an openin’?” Kian asked.

“Aye, there is a wee door here,” said Macauley. “There are nae guards behind it.”

Kian nodded, and he was the first to step into the castle grounds, much to Tate’s and Macauley’s chagrin. Kian was too reckless. He never considered that if something happened to him, the Drummond Clan would be left without a laird.

Tate followed close behind, making sure that there truly were no guards around. Macauley’s assessment seemed to be correct, as always, and the three of them walked into the back of the courtyard without any issues.

They could pass for guards. They had made sure to dress accordingly, borrowing clothes from the Drummond Clan guards, as well as weapons that were not quite as fancy and well-crafted as the ones they usually bore. Kian’s solid sterling silver mask was changed to a simple cover from cloth that now hugged his face. With any luck, they would make it all the way to where Lana was being kept, unnoticed.

That was the problem, however: they didn’t know where Lana was. They would have to look for her, and that made their entire operation risky, too risky for Tate’s liking. He supposed she would be where most of the guards were, too, but then that would pose another problem: how would they get to her if she was surrounded by them?

There were too many unknowns in this plan, but they didn’t have time to

think of anything better. It would have to work. They had no other choice but to take Lana home.

Once inside the castle grounds, they all stood up straighter, trying to blend in instead of trying to remain hidden. There were guards around, but even so, no one paid them much mind as they walked, taking different directions so that they wouldn't seem too suspicious. Tate stuck with Kian, the two of them going in through the main entrance, looking for any signs as to where Lana could be.

"This castle is massive," Tate whispered, trying his best to stop himself from looking around in awe. It would be a very stupid way for him to get caught indeed. "How are we goin' tae find her in here?"

"I dinnae ken," Kian said, mumbling under all those layers of fabric. "We'll simply have tae look fer her everywhere until we find her. We check every room we find."

"A reckless plan," Tate pointed out. Who knew who was behind those doors?

Before Tate and Kian could make it all the way to the end of the corridor where they were walking, a woman jumped out from a small dent in the wall and made them come to a halt. At first, Tate thought that they were both dead men, and that the woman would call for the guards before they could do anything to stop her.

But then Tate recognized her. She was none other than Lana's sister, Deirdre. Tate was certain of it. He remembered seeing the girl when he had first taken

Lana.

“Is either o’ ye Tate?” Deirdre asked, much to Tate’s surprise. Kian seemed to share that surprise, since he gave him a confused look.

“Aye, I’m Tate.” He had no answers for Kian.

“Good,” Deirdre said. “Lana is waitin’ fer ye.”

“She is?” Tate and Kian asked at the same time.

“She has a lot o’ faith in ye,” Deirdre said. “An’ fer good reason, apparently. Come... I’ll help ye.”

Neither Tate nor Kian moved, even though they had both heard Deirdre’s invitation clearly. The two men exchanged a doubtful glance, neither of them willing to trust this girl they didn’t know. For all Tate knew, she was only trying to double-cross them and she would end up taking them to her father instead of Lana.

“Why should we trust ye?” asked Kian.

“Why wouldnae ye trust me?” said Deirdre. “I told ye, I wish tae help.”

“How dae we ken ye willnae take us tae yer faither instead?” Tate asked.  
“How dae we ken ye’re nae on his side?”

At the mere suggestion of Deirdre taking her father’s side, she gasped, looking at the two of them in a way that made Tate’s skin prickle. For a nun, she could surely be intimidating. “I would *never* take me faither’s side. He is a vile man, and I despise him fer what he has done tae me and me sister. I wish tae help because I ken Lana is in danger, and I’d dae anythin’ fer her. She willnae survive this marriage with Laird Cummings. She will either die by his own hand or she will perish by his side, I am certain o’ it. I dinnae wish tae see me sister hurt.”

Tate and Kian exchange another glance, but this time, their gazes didn’t hold as much suspicion. Deirdre sounded sincere to Tate, and it was difficult for him to believe that she would ever do anything to hurt her sister. It made sense that she, too, would hate their father after everything he had done to her, and so Tate decided that the best course of action was to believe her.

They hardly had any other choice, after all. They didn’t know where Lana was. Without Deirdre’s help, they could end up dead.

“Very well,” Tate said. “Will ye take us tae her?”

“Aye,” said Deirdre. “Follow me and be quiet. There are guards everywhere, especially outside her chambers.”

“How will we get there if there are guards?” Kian asked. “They’ll ken somethin’ is wrong.”

“There is a passage nae one ever takes,” Deirdre said. “And few ken about it. It will take us straight tae her chambers.”

“Are ye certain there are nae guards there?” Tate asked. “If there are everywhere else in the castle, they are probably there, too.”

“There are nae guards there,” Deirdre assured him, as the three of them walked towards the other direction, away from Laird Hay’s chambers. “I ken because I took the passage meself today. There was nae one else there. They dinnae ken about it.”

Before long, Deirdre showed them into a room. It was mostly bare, but what little furniture was there looked well-crafted, if worn. It seemed like a child’s room, with pink tapestries and golden threads in the covers of the bed.

“This was me chamber,” she said, as she closed the door behind them. “Well, I suppose it still is, though it is hardly ever used. There is a passage connectin’ this hearth tae Lana’s own.”

Tate and Kian eyed the hearth. It was small, just big enough for an adult to walk through it, though Tate doubted they could do so with any ease. Even for Deirdre, it had to be a tight fit.

“Ye want us tae go through there?” Kian asked, unconvinced. “I dinnae think we’ll fit.”

“Ye’ll have tae fit,” Deirdre said, giving them an amused grin. When she smiled, she resembled her sister quite a lot, Tate noticed. “There isnae any other way tae get tae her.”

Kian sighed, irritated by the thought of crawling through that tight space. He and Tate were about the same size, and so Tate could only share his reluctance, but if it was the only way to get to Lana, then they had to do it. At worst, they simply wouldn’t fit.

“Wait... afore we go there, we need tae find a lass tae take Lana’s place,” Kian reminded Tate. That had been the plan they had discussed before leaving Drummond Castle, but Tate didn’t know who they could possibly find to do such a thing. They couldn’t involve a maid, and they didn’t know if any women that could not only go with them on this mission, but also looked like Lana enough to pass for her for a while.

“I dinnae think that plan is goin’ tae work, Kian,” Tate said.

“Kian?” Deirdre asked, raising a curious eyebrow. “Ye’re Laird Drummond?”

Kian turned to look at the girl, but it was difficult for Tate to know what he was thinking, what with how covered his face was. He supposed the same was true for Deirdre.

“Aye, that’s me,” he said. “I suppose yer sister has told ye everythin’?”

“Och aye,” said Deirdre. “And dinnae fash. I’ll take her place if ye need me tae. I ken I’m smaller, but it shouldnae matter. I doubt faither or Laird Cummings have paid either o’ us enough attention as tae ken we’re different once ye have us in a veil.”

“Nay,” Tate said quickly, shaking his head. “It’s too dangerous.”

Lana would have his head if she knew that he had put her sister in danger on purpose. He doubted Lana would appreciate such a plan at all, and he didn’t think it was a good idea, either. Once Laird Cummings found out Deirdre was there instead of Lana, there was no telling how he would react.

“I can dae it,” Deirdre insisted. “Ye need someone. I’m yer only option.”

“I think we can dae somethin’ else, somethin’ that doesnae involve ye,” Tate said. “Kian is very... fond o’ such plans. We can sneak out o’ the castle the same way we came in and nae one will ken.”

“They’ll find out soon enough,” Kian pointed out. “And when they dae, they’ll come after us. We have tae be far away when they notice that Lana isnae here. We willnae make it back tae the castle on time without Deirdre’s help.”

Tate was far from convinced, but they didn’t have the time to argue about it. He hoped that once Lana heard of the plan, she would forbid her sister from doing something so reckless.



“Let’s just get tae Lana,” he said. “Ladies first.”

Deirdre opened the passageway behind the hearth and made her way inside, grabbing one of the torches that hung from the wall with her. Tate and Kian followed her reluctantly, and just as Tate had expected, it was a very tight fit. He had to duck as they walked, and he had to make sure to take smaller steps, as he was used to walking much faster than Deirdre, who was leading the way slowly.

When the ceiling dipped, Tate banged his head on it and he had to stifle a cry of pain with a hand clamped firmly over his mouth. For a moment, he came to a halt, forcing Kian to run into him and curse quietly.

“What are ye doin’?” Deirdre hissed. “Come on!”

Tate let out a groan of frustration before he continued, but then there was another thud, followed by a muffled moan, and when he turned to glance over his shoulder, he saw Kian’s eyes water in the soft light of the torch.

He, too, had banged his head on the same spot.

“I hate this place,” Kian grumbled, as he continued to follow Tate down the path. It wasn’t long after, though, that the path started to narrow, and Tate’s shoulders got stuck between the walls, drawing some choice words out of him.

“I’m stuck,” he told Deirdre.

She turned around to face him for a moment and then rolled her eyes at him. “Turn sideways, ye oaf.”

“Is this really a proper way fer a nun tae speak?” Kian asked from behind Tate. He sounded amused, though, much too amused for someone who was about to get stuck in a passageway soon.

“It is when I’m dealin’ with men like the two o’ ye,” Deirdre said. “The Lord can only give me this much strength.”

She continued on as if nothing had happened, and Tate did his best to unglue himself from the position in which he found himself. He managed to turn sideways and shuffle his way to the end, and eventually, he made it through to the other side.

The first thing he saw when he pushed himself out of that passage was Lana, dressed in a fine, deep green dress that was proper for a bride like her. She looked beautiful but devastated, her eyes rimmed with red as though she had been crying, but then their gazes met, and she gave Tate the brightest smile he had ever seen.



Though Lana had been expecting Tate, she had thought that he would come in with an army, not with just one more man. Lana had to take only one look at him to know that it was probably Kian, with the way he had concealed his face.

So, he had returned and now he was either there to help Tate or to claim what he thought was his.

Lana's smile fell when she saw Kian. She was excited to see Tate, but she couldn't allow herself to feel any real joy before she knew what Kian had decided about the two of them.

"What is it?" Tate asked, perhaps sensing that something was wrong. "I... I came tae take ye back, Lana. Is that nae what ye want?"

"O' course it is," Lana said. "But I'm nae goin' anywhere until I ken what yer friend has decided."

For a moment, Tate and Kian looked at each other in confusion, before Tate seemed to know what she meant. "Ach, nay... Kian is fine with it all," he assured her.

"Are ye referrin' tae the two o' ye?" Kian asked. "Well, tae be honest, lass, I didnae wish tae marry ye in the first place. I hope ye're nae offended by this. I simply dinnae think I am the right man for any marriage."

Lana regarded him with some suspicion still, but he seemed perfectly sincere. "It's nae offending' me," she said. "I'm glad ye decided tae be understandin'. A marriage between us would have surely been a terrible experience fer both o' us after all, I believe."

"Probably more than ye can imagine," Kian mumbled. "Well, go on, then."

Will ye nae go tae yer husband?”

It was all Lana needed to allow herself to finally do what she had wanted to ever since she first saw Tate come through that passage. She rushed to him and threw herself in his arms, holding him so tightly that nothing and no one could separate them.

“Ye came fer me,” she said quietly, whispering into the crook of his neck.

“I would come find ye wherever ye were,” Tate said. “I willnae let anyone take ye away from me, Lana. I willnae let anything come between us.”

Lana’s chest filled with warmth at Tate’s words. She could finally let herself feel some hope that everything might work out. With Tate there, she didn’t fear her father or Laird Cummings nearly as much.

But when another man burst through the small hearth in her room, Lana almost screamed, ruining the entire rescue plan before it had even properly started. She only managed to stop herself by slapping a hand over her mouth, just as Tate and Kian drew out their weapons and Deirdre rushed to her side, holding onto her in fear.

“Curse this place!”

The voice was familiar and so was the shape of the man who emerged. Macauley stood there, hands on his hips as he glared at the small hearth where he could barely fit. It must have been even tighter than it had been for

Kian and Tate, Lana thought, what with how broad the man was.

For a few moments, no one in the room said anything. Lana, her sister, Tate, and Kian tried to calm their racing hearts at once, while Macauley stared at them impatiently, eyebrows rising to his forehead. He looked around the room, and then his gaze settled on Tate and Kian once more as he spread his arms with a grin.

“Well, lads... what’s the plan?”

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## CHAPTER THIRTY

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“*I* willnae allow this,” Lana said, shaking her head.

Kian had only just finished telling the plan to Macauley, but Lana was already adamant that it couldn’t happen like that. She wouldn’t let anyone put her sister in danger, not after what had happened the last time, when she had left her behind. Lana wouldn’t risk it again. They would simply have to find another way to sneak out of the castle.

“I will,” Deirdre said, before either Macauley or Kian could say anything in defense of the plan.

“I also think it’s a bad idea,” Tate said. “It’s too dangerous.”

“It’s the only way tae keep ye safe,” Deirdre reminded him. “Is that nae what ye and Laird Drummond said? Ye said ye needed time tae get back tae the Drummond Castle.”

“Aye, but nae at yer expense,” said Tate.

Lana appreciated that he, too, was looking out for Deirdre. But when she glanced at her sister, she found that familiar glint in her eyes that meant trouble.

Deirdre had never been a particularly disobedient girl, at least until she got some sort of idea in her head that she would simply not let go of. It was then that she turned stubborn and not hear anything, much like Lana herself.

“I will dae it,” said Deirdre, giving Lana a determined nod. “Faither willnae hurt me, ye ken that.”

“He willnae kill ye,” Lana pointed out. “But he has other ways o’ hurtin’ ye.”

“It doesnae matter!” Deirdre said. “He cannae dae anythin’ tae me that he hasnae already done and soon enough, I’ll be back in the convent. I willnae have tae ever see him again.”

Lana didn’t know how to tell Deirdre that this would all lead to a war that wouldn’t end until their father or Kian and Tate died. A part of her still held onto some hope that their father would change, that he would see reason and that he would come to love his children, but she knew that hope was futile. Laird Hay was who he was. He would never change.

As impossible as a choice like that was, Lana knew she would rather lose her father than Tate if it came to that.

“But if Faither becomes desperate, we dinnae ken what he’ll dae tae ye,” Lana pointed out. That was the issue. He wouldn’t hurt Deirdre physically because he would think he could use her as a means to bargain another deal, but that didn’t mean he couldn’t torture her in other ways. “He already tried tae give ye tae Laird Cummings without a care fer yer future or yer vows tae the Lord. Ye dinnae ken what else he might try tae dae.”

“We’ll come back for her, o’ course,” Kian said, jumping into the conversation. “We wouldnae leave her here.”

“I can stay behind and make sure she is safe,” Macauley offered. “We have three more lads with us waitin’ in the forest for a signal. We’ll take care o’ her.”

“See?” Deirdre said, as if Macauley’s reassurance meant anything to Lana. “They’ll help me. Ye dinnae have tae worry about me.”

“I’ll always worry about ye,” Lana said.

With a sigh, Macauley approached her, placing a gentle hand on her shoulder. “It’s the best way,” he said. “Dae ye nae trust me tae take care o’ her?”

Lana hesitated. She couldn’t deny that Macauley was a capable man, but even so, putting her sister in any kind of danger seemed like a terrible idea. If anything happened to her, Lana would never forgive herself. She still blamed herself for leaving her behind the first time, when Tate had taken her away from the wedding, but mercifully, nothing had happened to her.



She should have stayed there with Deirdre. She should have done her best to fight.

“I dinnae wish tae leave her behind,” said Lana. “I... I simply cannae.”

“Ye willnae be leavin’ her behind,” Macauley pointed out. “I will be here. The lads will be here. We’ll bring her with us as soon as we can.”

Lana glanced at Deirdre; at the encouraging little smile she wore. She took a deep breath and then shifted her gaze to the window, where the first rays of sun were starting to peek through the horizon. It was already morning. Soon enough, it would be time for the wedding. Lana had to make a decision soon.

“I’ll keep her safe,” Macauley said. “I promise.”

The sincerity and earnestness in Macauley’s voice was what made Lana agree in the end. If there was anyone in that castle who could keep her sister safe, it was him.

“Och, alright,” Lana said, nodding. “But if anything happens, forget all about the plan and take her away.”

“I will,” Macauley promised.

“Well... let’s get ye in this dress, then” Lana told Deirdre. She prayed to God the plan would work.



Tate could do nothing but pace around Deirdre’s chambers as they waited for the ceremony to start. It would be the best time for them to sneak out of the castle, he knew, and so they all waited there, trying to pass the time as calmly as possible.

They were all anything but calm. The room was filled with tension, so thick it was almost palpable, curling its tentacles around their throats. They were all waiting for the moment of failure, for something to go terribly wrong, for their plan to be revealed and for Laird Hay’s men to descend upon them, killing them all.

But that moment never came.

Finally, Macauley crawled through the passageway and informed them that the guards were taking Deirdre to the ceremony and that it was time to act.

Tate was glad. He hated sitting idly with nothing to do. It gave him too much time to get lost in his thoughts, his dread threatening to get the better of him.

“Are ye ready?” he asked Lana, as he walked up to her and took her hands in his own. “There is nae goin’ back from this.”

Tate knew that this would be their last chance to put an end to everything.

Neither her father nor Laird Cummings would be much patient with her any longer, and they would be more likely now than ever to attack the Drummond Clan. He was certain that Lana knew what this meant: her father would most likely die.

Unless he managed to kill him and Kian first, of course.

“I am,” Lana said. “Let’s go.”

Hand in hand, the two of them snuck out of the room, along with Kian and Macauley. They were all still in disguise, and this time, Lana wore a plain tunic, the plainest they could find for her in her belongings. It wouldn’t be enough to fool the people who had known her throughout the course of her entire life, but if they rushed and kept to the shadows—and had a pinch of luck—they would make it out of the castle without anyone spotting her.

Kian made sure the hallways were empty as they walked through them quietly, their footsteps barely echoing around them. They made it all the way out to the courtyard, but in order to go out the same way they had come in, they would have to pass by the ceremony, and Tate didn’t like that idea.

“Stay close,” he told Lana. “We’ll sneak by from behind them.”

Everyone there would be distracted. Even the guards would be less alert than usual, and that was what Tate was counting on.

Lana did as she was told, staying close to him as they walked behind the

small chapel. From the sound of it, the ceremony was only just starting, and no one had realized the deception yet. The four of them made it past the chapel, slowly disappearing into the distance, and Tate was just about to let out the breath he had been holding for the past several seconds when he heard a shout.

He whipped his head around to search for its source and found a guard there, pointing at them. The man had a panicked look on his face, and he was calling for all the other guards to chase them.

Tate's blood rushed away from his head. A pit opened in the depths of his stomach, filled with despair. They hadn't made it. They never would have. All the soldiers of Clan Hay were going to rush to their laird's aid, and soon enough, all of them save for Lana would be dead.

Several guards ran over, with her father at the lead. Laird Cummings and, behind him, a veiled Deirdre, followed behind. The guards, however, were still in disarray, as they had clearly not been expecting anything major to happen once the ceremony began.

The confusion of the moment and Tate's surprise at the turn of events had created enough of a distraction for Laird Hay to edge up towards Lana without being noticed and grab her, pulling her away from Tate. He tried to reach for her, but wasn't fast enough. Lana's fingers slipped through his own like water.

"Lana!" he shouted.

His eyes narrowed dangerously as he looked her father in the face. “Let her go.”

“I dinnae think so,” said Laird Hay. His sword was already in his hand, and the blade was pressed against Lana’s throat. “Who would have thought that ye would be so bold as tae try tae take me daughter away like this”. Then turning to look at his daughter, he added “I suppose that means the bride is Deirdre.”

As he spoke her name, Deirdre appeared by his side, her veil thrown back and her eyes filled with tears. “Let her go, Faither,” she said. “Please. Dinnae hurt her.”

“So, both o’ ye would rather betray yer own blood than dae what’s right fer yer clan?” Laird Hay asked, ignoring Deirdre’s pleas. “The Lord cursed me with two useless daughters. But I dinnae care what ye want. Lord Cummings will get married today, whether ye like it or nae.”

Tate’s sword was in his hand, but he couldn’t attack Laird Hay, not while he had Lana under threat. One wrong move, and she could end up dead.

“Ye can dae whatever ye want tae me, but dinnae hurt Deirdre,” said Lana. She was shaking, Tate could see. He hated seeing her like this, terrified and desperate. “Promise me ye willnae hurt her.”

Laird Hay hesitated for a moment, seemingly having some sort of revelation after listening to his daughter’s plea. Suddenly, he let go of Lana and grabbed Deirdre instead, so that she was now under his blade.

“If ye dinnae marry him, I’ll kill her,” Laird Hay threatened, looking Lana directly in the eyes.

At this point, they had all been surrounded by Hay and Cummings men now, but no one was moving. Everyone had come to a standstill. No one had expected Laird Hay to attack his daughters so directly, to actually threaten their lives.

“Ye wouldnae,” Lana said, her voice barely a whisper, but Tate could tell that wasn’t true. The blade was already digging into Deirdre’s skin, drawing a drop of blood.

“If ye truly think I wouldnae, then ye dinnae ken anythin’ at all, daughter,” Laird Hay said, his voice dripping with venom. “Ye must decide right now, fer me patience is running thin.”

Tate looked at Lana, who had frozen in her spot, unable to do or say anything. She was petrified.

He felt worthless. He had promised her that her sister would be safe and he had already failed her. He had to do something about it. He had to make sure that nothing would happen to Deirdre.

*I need a distraction.*

He had to create enough for Laird Hay to let go of Deirdre and react. His first

thought was attacking Laird Cummings, but the man was standing too far from him.

Instead, with a quick flick of his sword, he stabbed one of the guards in the gut. At the first sign of violence, the rest of the guards jumped into action, all of them descending upon him.

The chances of survival were slim for him, but at least he could die knowing he had kept his promise to Lana. To do anything he could to keep Deidre from harm.

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## CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

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Lana could hardly believe that her father would be so cruel, so bold as to threaten Deirdre openly. When she saw the drops of blood slide down her neck, Lana had to face the terrible truth: he would kill her without hesitating, if it meant getting what he wanted.

*I kent this was too dangerous.*

And then, chaos erupted around her. Lana had a mere moment to realize what had happened: Tate had thrown himself on a guard, killing him, before a dozen of other men attacked him.

Once again, she didn't know what to do. She wanted to help Tate, to do anything to keep him safe, but she could hardly join the fight.

But someone still had to save Deirdre.

Lana turned to look at her father, and in the few seconds that he was distracted by Tate's action, she ran towards him, pushing him away. It was a



risk. The blade of his sword could have hurt Deirdre or Lana may not have been strong enough to budge him, but she had to do something.

Fortunately, caught completely off guard, her father stumbled back, and Lana watched him as if in slow motion, while the shock and anger distorted his face. Her arms wrapped tightly around Deirdre as she pulled her away from him, desperately trying to move her sister as far from danger as she could .

The girls' father followed them, blind to the battle surrounding him. He didn't seem to care about anything but the two of them, and Lana's heart broke when she realized that he intended to hurt them. He wanted revenge.

“Ye will marry Laird Cummings,” their father said. “Or I will kill Deirdre.”

There was nothing but rage in his voice. Lana shook her head fervently, trying to think of something to say, but no words came out of her lips. She hesitated for too long. Her father lunged at them, trying to sink his blade in Deirdre's stomach, but before he could, Kian pierced him through the heart from the back with his sword. Lana's eyes widened, just like her father's own when he realized what had happened. He glanced down at the blade that protruded from his chest in shock, and though he parted his lips, he made no sound as life left his body.

The last thing Lana saw before he collapsed to the ground, dead, were his eyes. There was no regret in them.



The situation was dire, and Tate had half a mind to surrender, but then he

spotted three very familiar guards in the crowd. They were Kian's men. They must have moved closer to the walls of the castle, taking advantage of the general distraction once the ceremony had started. They were fighting side by side him, evening out the odds. With Macauley and Kian and the men at his side, Tate started to think that maybe there was hope, after all.

He plunged his blade into another man, piercing him through the chest. The pained groans and dying rattles of the men around him filled the air along with the stench of blood. Sweat coated his skin, and his lungs burned with exertion of it all, but they were too close to victory now for him to stop.

The entire time Tate fought, he kept glancing around for Lana and Deirdre, making sure that they were alive and well. That was when he saw Laird Hay lying lifeless on the ground and felt a mix of relief and grief for Lana overcome him. Then he caught sight of her running away from the battle with Deidre, and finally allowed himself to concentrate fully on the task at hand. He knew the guards wouldn't hurt them, not like their father had threatened to. As long as they were far away from the fight, they would be safe.

But just as Macauley killed one of the last men still standing, more men appeared around them, brandishing their swords. There were too many for them to fight, even if their group of six was still intact for the most part, with only two of the other soldiers having sustained minor injuries.

All they could do at this point was focus on the real enemy. It was their only chance at avoiding defeat.

He and Kian rushed towards Laird Cummings. Kian got to him first, and though Balfour was quick to fight back, it didn't take long for Kian to disarm him, his sword dropping to the ground next to him.

“Stop!” Laird Cummings shouted, Kian’s blade on his neck.

Everyone stopped, Kian’s men included.

Still, Kian’s sword remained in place.

“If ye kill me now, me men will kill ye after,” Laird Cummings said, trying to reason with his captor. “Have nae doubt about that. If I die, ye willnae leave this place.”

“Will I leave this place if I dinnae kill ye?” Kian asked with a smirk, raising a curious eyebrow.

“Ye could, if ye were willin’ tae hear me out” Laird Cummings said. “I have had quite enough o’ this affair. Laird Hay has brought enough shame tae me clan these past years. If ye let me go I will allow ye to leave now. Ye have me promise. But I forbid ye tae speak a word o’ this tae anyone.”

“Yer word means naething tae me,” Kian said.

Tate approached him slowly and placed a gentle hand on Kian’s shoulder. It was a good offer, one they shouldn’t refuse without consideration. He could see the fear in Balfour’s eyes. Tate was convinced that the man feared for his life enough to keep his word. “We could all leave, Kian,” he said quietly, so that only he and the laird would hear him. “Nae one else would get hurt.”

“Dae ye trust him?” Kian asked. “After everythin’ he and Laird Hay have done, ye think he speaks truth?”

“Nay, I dinnae trust him at all,” said Tate. “But he is aware that he doesnae have much other choice than tae find a solution that will work fer all sides. It’s either that or ye kill him.”

Kian stared down at his enemy’s back with disgust.

“Ye have me word,” Laird Cummings repeated. “And if ye ken me, ye ken that that means somethin’ tae me. As long as ye give yer word that all this will nae leave this courtyard, ye are free tae go. Our paths never need tae cross again.”

Kian gripped him a little harder, pushing the blade of his sword, already covered in Lord Hay’s blood, further into his throat. Lord Cummings breathed in sharply.

“Fine,” Kian finally said through gritted teeth. He wanted his pound of flesh, but even he could understand that retreating was the best option now. “Macauley, come here.”

Macauley rushed to his side, taking in the scene. “Aye, me laird.”

“Make sure Laird Cummings doesnae go anywhere until we are long gone,”

Kian said quietly. “And then, stay on here with Deirdre tae fix this mess.”

“O’ course,” Macauley said, bringing out his own sword once more to point it at Laird Cummings’ throat. “I’ll report back within the week.”

“Thank ye, me friend,” said Kian, before he turned to look at Tate once more. “Shouldnae ye be with yer bride?”

Tate’s lips spread into a wide grin. He was certain he looked like a madman, smiling like that while covered in sweat and blood and grime, but he couldn’t help it.

He was happy.



Lana had seen her father die and she could feel nothing but relief. She was certain that the sorrow would come later and that she would mourn him, but as it were, she was only glad that Deirdre was safe and out of harm’s way.

“Are ye alright?” Lana asked Deirdre, cupping her cheeks gently to look at her properly. “Ye werenae hurt, were ye?”

“Nay,” Deirdre said, placing her own hands on top of Lana’s. “I’m fine. I am. Dinnae fash.”

Deirdre had lost her father too. He had hurt her irreparably, and he was willing to do much more, but Lana was certain it pained her to see him like this.

“Lana.”

Tate’s voice cut through the noise. Lana turned to look at him and found him coated in blood, but she hoped none of it was his own.

“Go,” Deirdre said. “We’ll speak later.”

Lana nodded and lingered for just one more moment before she walked over to Tate, throwing herself in his arms. He hugged her tightly, his arms wrapping protectively around her as he buried his face in her hair.

“Are ye alright?” Lana asked. “Are ye hurt?”

“Nay, nay,” Tate assured her. “This blood isnae mine.”

“Is... is everythin’ over?” Lana asked as she looked around. Though Macauley still had a blade pointed at Laird Cummings, the man’s soldiers were slowly dispersing at his orders. She wondered what would happen now that her father was dead. Who would be responsible for his soldiers? Could she and Deirdre command them now?

“It is,” Tate said. “Ye and Deirdre are safe, but I’m sorry about yer father.”

A knot quickly formed in Lana's throat, making it impossible to speak. She could only nod slowly as she held back the tears, the memory of her father's body falling to the ground, lifeless, still fresh in her mind. She wasn't so much mourning the father she had known, she supposed, but rather the man she wished he was; the man he had never been.

*Maybe it was foolish tae think he would ever change.*

After all, a man who was willing to go so far as to kill his own daughter to get what he wanted wasn't the kind of man who would ever change and become a loving father.

"I cannae say that he didnae get what he deserved," Lana said. "I'm glad Deirdre is safe. I dinnae ken what I would have done if he had..."

She couldn't even say the words out loud. She couldn't bring herself to do so. It seemed like such a cruel, twisted thing to her that uttering it was impossible.

Tate only pulled her into his arms again and hushed her. "Ye dinnae have tae think about any o' that right the now," he said. "Everythin' is fine."

It was difficult to believe everything that had happened in only a few short hours. Lana didn't know what any of this meant for her future or the future of her clan. Who would be laird now? And what would happen between her and Tate?

Kian had given them his blessing, but they hadn't discussed what they would say to his people to explain why they weren't married after all and why Lana was with Tate instead.

She had never felt so uncertain in her entire life.

Tate pulled back to look at her, one of his hands coming up to thread through the mess that was her hair now, her updo ruined from all the running and the struggle. She gazed into his eyes, the sight of them familiar and comforting. As long as she had him, then everything would be fine, she figured.

"I ken that we're married, technically," Tate said. "But... I didnae marry ye as meself and I'd very much like tae fix that. Besides, ye deserve a proper weddin'."

Lana blinked at him in surprise before a small frown formed on her face. "What dae ye mean?"

"I mean, will ye marry me, Lana?" Tate asked, beaming at her. "Again?"

Laughter bubbled out of her, unbridled and bright. She nodded eagerly and fell right back into Tate's arms, holding him so tight that it was as though she was trying to burrow into his skin.

"Aye," she said. "Aye, Tate. I'll marry ye again."



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## EPILOGUE

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*O*ne week later

Murray Castle was full of life, especially now that Tate was back. For Lana, it was like coming home. She had spent so much time there, and the people of the clan had become such good friends to her that finally being able to return was like a dream. It didn't hurt that now she had Tate by her side. The two of them hadn't left each other alone for more than a few minutes ever since that fateful day at Hay Castle, and Lana didn't plan on doing so any time soon.

The great hall was filled with laughter and conversation and Lana was trying her best to keep up with everything. She was so happy.

It was wonderful to see Scott and Evelyn and wee Robert again. Evelyn had been her first true friend at the castle and was the only one who had always known her secret, that she was the daughter of a powerful Laird and had escaped him and an unwanted marriage. She hadn't wanted other people to know because she didn't want to cause problems and also for fear that her father would discover her whereabouts.

She had also sorely missed Alba, as well as Magnus, who was chatting away with his good friend Camden. They had fought together when they were younger and he had moved to Murray Castle after helping Alba and Magnus escape the castle of the villainous Laird Stewart, for whom he had been advisor just a few months prior.

Even Kian seemed to be in high spirits. At first, Lana had thought that the man was closed-off and cold, much like Tate was when she had first met him, but now she realized he was only cautious. She still didn't know what it was that he was hiding under the mask, which he had never removed in her presence—or in Tate's presence, for that matter, at least according to what Tate had told her—but she wished that he would open up a little more. He was far from the odd, almost cruel man she had thought him to be, but he seemed to be rather lonely, especially now that neither Tate nor Macauley were by his side.

Macauley and Deirdre were the only two people missing from that table, but work was work, and it had to be done. They had both remained with the Hay Clan, trying to rebuild things after the battle. A part of Lana wished that she could be there with her sister, but there was plenty she had to plan for the wedding. It was up to her now, not up to her father or a man she hardly knew.

“Ye've been with Kian all this time, then?” Scott asked, bouncing Robert, who was gurgling with delight, on his knee. He, like everyone else around the table, seemed to have some trouble putting all the events together. “I thought ye were travellin'!”

“I was travellin’,” Tate answered his older brother. “Up until I wasnae. There was work tae be done and Kian wasnae there, so I had tae dae it.”

“What dae ye ken about bein’ a laird?” asked Scott.

“Naething,” said Tate. “That’s why it went so terribly.”

The table erupted in laughter, and Lana found herself chuckling behind her hand. She, however, didn’t believe that to be true. Certainly, Tate was weary about the work, but she didn’t think he wasn’t cut out for it. If anything, he would be a great laird if given the chance, simply because he cared about his people. It was more than she could say for others, like Laird Cummings. She actually thought there may be a chance that the Council may suggest that she, as the oldest daughter of the deceased Laird Hay, and her husband, who was of noble descent, become the Lady and Laird of Hay Castle. She had discussed it with Tate but it was still way too early to mention anything to their friends and family, as the Council had many urgent matters to be decided upon beforehand. Tate, she knew, was also dubious as to whether he would be up to the task, but she had seen how well he had handled the villagers and made strategic decisions at Drummond Castle.

“We missed ye,” Scott said. “But ye’re here now and that’s what matters.” As he spoke, he turned to look at Kian, giving the man a warm smile. “And thank ye fer takin’ care o’ me brother, it puts me at ease tae ken that he was with ye.”

“Tate is a good friend,” Kian said. “And a good man. He’s helped me more than I have helped him.”

“Well, that’s nae true,” Tate said. “Had it nae been fer Kian, I would have never met Lana.”

He looked at her with a loving smile and reached for her hand, lacing their fingers together. Even now, a week later, she could hardly believe that they were finally free to be together, with no one trying to separate them. For once, her luck had turned, it seemed.

“And Laird Cummings?” Alba said. “Are ye certain he willnae attack?”

“Well, as certain as anyone can be about it,” Tate said with a small shrug. “He did give me his word, but I cannae say with certainty that he will keep it.”

“Why did he let ye go?” Scott asked. “He could have had ye killed very easily.”

“I think he knew I would nae have hesitated tae kill him there and then and he didnae want tae risk it” Kian said, though Lana thought it hardly mattered now. The Murray Clan had already heard most of the story anyway. “But I’ll say this. If he does come, we’ll be ready fer him.”

“Does that mean ye’ll stay Tate?” Alba asked. “Because I have missed Lana terribly.”

“We havenae decided yet,” Lana said. So many places were dear to her heart, and so many people, as well. Staying there would mean that she would be away from Deirdre, as well as Elspet, but returning to her clan would mean that she would be away from the Murrays. Either way, she would have to say goodbye to someone.

“We thought we could split our time,” Tate said with a small shrug. “I have been thinkin’ about it, and I dinnae see why we shouldnae. The clans’ are nae too far from each other, and I will continue tae spend time at Kian’s castle anyway. It willnae hurt tae have a few homes.”

Lana supposed that was the best option for them, although it would become harder once they had children or they became the Laird and Lady of Clan Hay. For now, though, it would work just fine for both of them.

The lie she had told her father had put her in deep thought regarding children. She had never allowed herself to think about anything like that. But now things had changed. She loved Tate, and Tate loved her. The thought of children had crept into her mind and had taken root and now she couldn’t stop thinking about it.

She wanted a big family, she had decided. She couldn’t think of anything better than raising children with Tate.

“Afore any o’ that, ye still need tae get married,” Magnus reminded his little brother, putting his arm around his wife. He then turned to Lana. “Have ye started any preparations?”

“Och aye,” Alba said, before Lana could respond. “Lana and I will throw the best feast ye have ever seen.”

“Better than the one at our weddin’?” Magnus teased.

“O’ course,” said Alba. “That one was the first one I ever had. I have experience now.”

Once again, the table erupted in chuckles. Lana smiled to herself, content to just listen to her new family, to bask in the feeling of finally having a proper home. She had never felt so loved, so welcome before in her life. It was a feeling that left her giddy and smiling all the time, unable to control it.

Even when she thought about her father, the sorrow that she felt didn’t seep into the other areas of her life. Lana had thought the shock of her father’s death would finally hit her at some point—and perhaps it still would, but so far, he only appeared in her thoughts late at night, when she couldn’t sleep. Each time, though, Tate was there to hold her and promise her that everything would be fine in the end. The sorrow would pass and, with it, the sleepless nights.

They had received news just the day before from Deirdre that it had been discovered that their father, and Laird Cumming as a result, had received all the information about Lana’s and Tate’s whereabouts from a girl who worked in the Mrs. Beaton’s kitchen. She had been a new hire and was the cousin of a stableboy at Hay Castle. She had been paid for her information. Needless to say, she had been sent packing immediately by Kian.



Later that night, when everyone else had gone to bed, the two of them walked around the castle grounds. It was a balmy night, and with Tate’s arm wrapped securely around her, Lana could enjoy the gardens.

“Can ye believe it is finally over?” she asked, her voice quiet in the night. “Sometimes I worry that somethin’ might still happen.”

“Naething will happen,” Tate promised her, leaning in to press a kiss on her temple. “It is over, Lana. It’s time fer us tae be happy.”

Lana came to a halt, pulling Tate to her. She stood on her tiptoes to kiss him properly, and he sighed softly against her lips. When they parted, he pressed their foreheads together, his eyes falling shut.

“I am happy,” Lana said. “Happier than I’ve ever been.”

“Aye?” Tate asked. “Ia there anythin’ that would make ye happier?”

“Well, bein’ yer wife of course,” Lana said. “But the time for that will come soon enough. And apart from that, I suppose what would really make me happy would be a bairn.”

“A bairn?” Tate asked, pulling back, his eyes now wide open. “Is it nae too soon tae be talkin’ about bairns? We are nae even married yet.”

“Are we nae?” Lana asked with a teasing smirk. “I seem tae remember gettin’ married tae ye.”

“Ye ken what I mean,” Tate pointed out. “It’s nae that I dinnae wish tae have a bairn with ye. I dae, I really dae. But I think we should wait until we are married. I’d hate tae start any rumors.”

Lana hummed, tapping a finger against her chin as she considered that. “Ye’ve already bedded me,” she reminded him.

“Aye, and I deeply regret that,” Tate said.

“I see.” Lana pulled back from him with a small frown which was hiding yet another playful smirk. She knew what Tate really regretted wasn’t sleeping with her, but rather sleeping with her under false pretenses.

Lana wasn’t really bothered by any of that anymore, though.

“I suppose ye willnae bed me fer another month then,” she said, as she started to back away, giving him a small shrug. “Perhaps we should sleep in different chambers.”

“Wait,” Tate said, quickly following her. “Wait, nay. I dinnae mean it like that.”

“Too late,” Lana teased, turning around to walk back towards the castle. “I’ll go tae me chambers now.”

“*Our* chambers!” Tate protested from behind her shoulder.



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## EXTENDED EPILOGUE

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## AFTERWORD

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Thank you for reading my novel, **The Sins of a Highland Beast**. I really hope you enjoyed it! If you did, could you please be so kind to [write a review HERE?](#)

It is **very important for me to read your thoughts** about my book, in order to get better at writing.

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# TALES OF LOVE AND LUST IN THE MURRAY CASTLE

Book#1

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Book#3 (this book)

The Sins of a Highland Beast

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## DO YOU WANT MORE ROMANCE?

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If you're a true fan of the Scottish romance genre, here are the first chapters of my previous best-selling novel: **A Night with a Highlander**

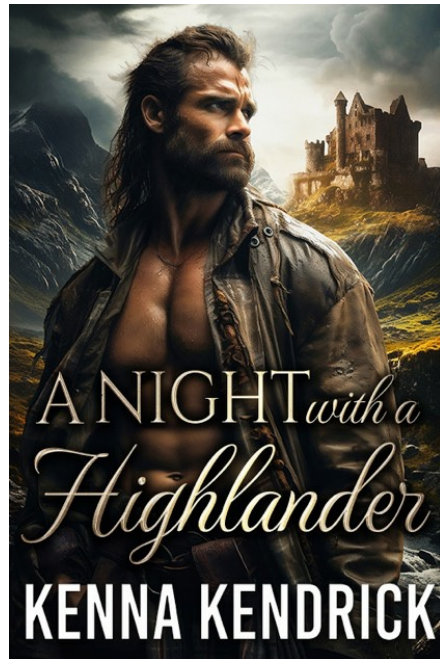
When Arya Macdonell saved a lass' life, she didn't know she'd doomed her own. While hiding from her past, her life takes an unexpected twist when Gillebride MacThomas rescues her. Her savior, her brothers' ally... and the one man who has turned her down. Scarred by his own past, Gillebride is determined to resist their growing emotions, but his forbidden desires are catching up with him as the stakes continue to rise. Because Arya's past is closing in on both of them with alarming speed.



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# A NIGHT WITH A HIGHLANDER

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## PROLOGUE

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*I* sle of Iona, Scotland

*Autumn 1304*

Arya waited until full moon before she made her move to escape. She knew the moonlight would guide her steps from the convent all the way to the sea front. It was long after the ringing of the curfew bell and silence had fallen throughout the nunnery, before she was certain the nuns would be sleeping and she could leave without anyone noticing her slip away.

After tucking a folded note under her pillow explaining where she was going and begging the sisters not to worry about her wellbeing, she flung on her cloak and ventured from the small cell she'd been occupying during her exile here. Closing the door silently behind her she tiptoed down the corridor, her boots clutched in her hand.

Passing on soft feet along the passageways she drew open the creaky old door of the nunnery and found herself in the walled garden. This was where she'd

spent many hours learning about healing and herbs from Sister Dominique. Arya was convinced the old nun, with her amazing depth of knowledge and understanding, must have been a witch before she left the confines of the world and took her vows of contemplation and chastity among the sisters of Iona.

Arya looked around with something approaching regret. Her time on the island had not been without its consolations, and she wished she'd been able to thank Sister Dominique for her teaching, and bid farewell to Maggie Drummond, her loyal maidservant. But her enforced seclusion had now come to an end, and, if her plans were known, there were those who would do their best to forestall her departure.

It wasn't that she was a prisoner. She was a guest of the sisters, not their captive. She was here at the insistence of her older brothers. Payton, her eldest brother, the Laird of the Macdonells, and Taveon, two years younger, were convinced she should remain here, safe from the wicked Sir William de Coughran, who had threatened to kill her in his battle against the Macdonell clan.

More than anything, she wished to aid her brothers. Locked away in this peaceful community, she was no use to them at all. Although she was well aware that leaving the confines of the nunnery would incur their wrath, once they saw how much they needed her with them, she was confident they would see things her way.

Her most fervent wish was that she could earn their respect. Of course, as her older brothers, they loved their little sister. But she was no longer a child but a grown woman of nineteen years. Old enough for marriage and to have a household of her own.



Knowing her own mother had lost her life giving birth to her had always felt like a cruel curse hanging around her neck, weighing her down. The gift of life her mother had bestowed on her newborn daughter had meant depriving her older brothers of their dear mother's love. She'd never known it herself – although she'd felt its absence sorely – but nothing could ever compensate her brothers for the precious mother they had worshipped and loved with all their hearts. No matter how hard Arya had tried throughout all her days to redeem herself she could never rid herself of the guilt.

She sighed. This was her opportunity to prove to them she was worthy. Despite her one brief moment of doubt, she was resolutely determined to make her way home to Macdonell Castle. She fastened her blue woolen cloak tight around her, pulling the hood with its lining of white fur over her red curls, hauled open the door in the garden wall, and set off, the moonlight guiding her steps.

The first part of her mission gave her a tiny niggle of concern. She must take all her courage in her hands and knock on cottage doors seeking the services of a fisherman who would take her across to the nearby Isle of Mull. On her occasional brief breaks from the routine of the convent she'd been permitted to stroll along Iona's rocky foreshore from where Mull was clearly visible. She'd seen the fishing boats pulled up on the shore not far from the village and it was there she was heading.

Her faith in herself grew bolder. She could do this.

Squaring her shoulders, she pulled her confidence around her like a cloak. Once across to the other island, she would make her way to Ardtun, a few short miles away, where she knew she would find sanctuary with the MacKinnon clan. From Mull she would take the rest of her voyage home.

But there was something else about tonight's adventure that set her pulse thrumming. The tiny village of *Baile Mòr* lay less than a mile away and, until tonight, her itch of curiosity about the place had never been scratched.

The sisters were strictly forbidden to ever set foot there and the convent rules were strict, never to be broken. Even though she'd asked around, no one had ever dared pay a clandestine visit there. Mother Superior was unmoved by Arya's numerous pleas to be permitted, just once, to visit the village.

As far as the Mother Superior was concerned, *Baile Mòr* was only second to Hell when it came to wickedness. And, it was certain, the devil himself resided in the village tavern.

Of course, this made Arya even more curious.

Her heart was hammering as she made her way along the woodland path that would soon bring her to the rocky shoreline and, a little further along, to the village.

It was then she heard a strange growling sound. At first, she thought it was an animal, and she quickened her steps. Then the deep growl was followed by a high-pitched whimper and she registered that the noises she was hearing were all too human. These were the sounds of a man and woman locked in a fierce conflict.

She paused, peering through the trees into the nearby clearing. The moonlight shone brightly and she could clearly make out the two figures. Hearing voices raised in anger she crouched low, suddenly afraid of being discovered.

Although she couldn't make out the words they were speaking, it was clear they were arguing. The woman's voice rose higher, until she was almost shrieking, the man's voice was deep and unrelenting with rage.

The woman screamed out "Nay. Nay." and, heart in mouth, Arya craned forward, fearful, but struggling to make out more clearly what was going on.

Creeping toward the couple she saw the man had hold of the woman's arm in a tight grip. She struggled, her nails raking his cheeks. Breaking free of him, she went to run, but fell, tangled in the skirt of her long kirtle. Growling and cursing he was on her in an instant, hauling her to her feet.

To Arya's horror she saw the man draw back his arm and bring his fist up. The woman screamed as he landed a heavy blow to her jaw. Her head jolted back and he raised his fist and delivered a second blow.

From her hiding place, Arya could clearly see the blood streaming from the woman's nose and mouth.

The woman raised a hand to her broken face, making a gurgling sound in her throat. A fierce protective instinct galvanized Arya. There must be some way she could try and save the woman from this brute.

The woman's legs seemed to give way and she sank to her knees. At once the man seized her long hair and forced her head back, dragging her to her feet.

“Ye cursed whore,” he said in a low harsh voice. “I should slit yer throat.”

Horrified, Arya listened as the woman pleaded for her life.

“Please, nay, dinnae kill me. I swear I...”

The man was fumbling for the knife in his belt, the woman fighting fiercely.

Looking around feverishly for some kind of a weapon, Arya’s hand encountered a sharp, heavy stone which she clutched in desperation.

The man pulled up his hand, holding his dirk aloft preparing to slash the woman’s throat as he’d threatened, and Arya’s fingers closed tightly around the rock.

Just as the man was bringing down his weapon, Arya dashed forward. Coming up behind him she smashed the stone as hard as she could against his head. Letting out a roar he released the woman and staggered to his knees, his attention now on his attacker. Arya.

“Curse ye, devil’s wench,” he bellowed at her, scrabbling to haul himself upright, raising his dirk again, this time aiming straight for Arya’s heart.

In a wild panic she struck a second blow as he tried to rise, the heavy rock smashing into his temple. With a loud grunt, he dropped the dirk, fell back, rolled to his side, and lay at her feet, motionless. Blood gushed from the

wounds on his head where the sharp end of the stone had found its mark.

Arya knelt quickly, forcing herself, without success, to feel a heartbeat under the heavy leather jacket he wore.

Finally, rising to her feet, she gazed with revulsion and trepidation into the man's unseeing, lifeless eyes, her hands dripping with his blood. Frantically she grabbed his tartan cloak and wiped her stained hands clean.

Rolling her gaze to the stars, she breathed a prayer.

*Oh, dear God in heaven what have I done? I've killed a man.*

She turned to the trembling lass, her own body shaking uncontrollably.

"Ye saved me life," she heard the woman say. "I thank ye."

"Aye, that I did," Arya mumbled, scarcely able to believe the scene that confronted her. "I saved yer life by making this man pay with his."

In an instant the two girls were in each other's arms, each attempting to reassure the other.

"Ye've done aught tae be ashamed of lass, he was a wicked, wicked man and

the world's a better place without the likes of him in it. I'm grateful tae ye from the bottom of me heart," the trembling woman said quietly. Her words going some way to soothing Arya's shattered nerves.

Arya looked up into the lass' tear-filled eyes, surprised she was only about the same age as herself. She'd imagined her to be much older when she'd first come upon on the couple.

"There is nae need tae thank me fer..." Arya, said staring in true horror at the body crumpled at their feet where he'd fallen. He *had* menaced both of them with his dirk and she had no doubt he'd intended to end the lives of both her and the lass. "...and ye've aught tae be fearful of, now he is... nay more," she said, releasing the young woman from her tight, panicked grip.

Taking a seat on a fallen log nearby, the woman reached for Arya's hand and pulled her down to sit beside her.

"I am named Eleonor," she whispered. "Ye?"

"I'm Arya..." She hesitated, suddenly afraid of revealing the name "Macdonell" to this unknown girl. After all, she, Arya *had just killed a man*. Her head buzzed with a thousand bees. Perhaps she'd already said too much. She sucked in a breath, her eyes widening as the recognition of her own dangerous situation dawned. Once the dead man was found, there would be others seeking to find the culprit who had murdered him.

Shaking her hand free, she pushed herself to her feet. She had to get clear of this place. Now. Before someone discovered the man's body and came

searching for his killer.

The sound of distant men's voices made them both freeze.

"They're coming this way," Arya whispered as the voices grew louder.

Eleonor groaned. "That will be his men seeking him out now that he hasnae returned tae them. We must flee," she took a step toward the path.

Arya went to follow but her skirt was caught, snagged on the fastening on the man's plaid cloak. She tugged at her skirt but it was securely trapped.

"Here." Eleonor swiftly snatched up the dead man's dirk and slashed at the offending cloak. Her speedy action released Arya, but left the brooch and a fragment of the man's cloak still clinging to her skirt.

Arya went to undo the fastening, but Eleonor placed a restraining hand on her arm. "Come now. We must be quick. There's nae time tae fash about that now. We must run before they catch us here."

Turning back toward the abbey, Arya reached for Eleonor's hand. "I will find sanctuary with the sisters in the convent. I can hide there. Come with me. We'll be safe from pursuit."

Eleonor turned away, shaking her head. "Nae, Arya. I cannae go with ye. I have other things I must attend tae. I'll find me way back tae the village and

I'll be safe there. There's none who kens I was tae meet with this man, nae even his own soldiers, so they'll nae look fer me." She turned to go. "Ye bide well."

Desperate as she was to regain the safety of the nunnery, Arya held grave concerns for Eleonor's safety. "Ye must make haste tae hide, lass. But if ye ever need me help ye can find me at the abbey. If I'm nae there, leave a message for Arya with the sisters. They'll ken where I stay and get your word tae me. I'll help if I can."

They gave each other a quick hug and sped on their way, their footsteps racing along the path in opposite directions.

Stumbling along the path to the abbey, Arya's head was spinning. She was hardly aware of where she was until she found herself in the convent garden. The darkness of night was slowly being overtaken by the gray light of early morning and several nuns were pacing slowly toward the chapel for morning prayers. Passing the sisters, she entered the main hall, where preparations were underway for the breaking fast meal that would await the nuns on their return from Matins.

Head down, her hood almost covering her face, she crept along the passageway leading to the cell she'd only vacated a few short hours before.

In that time her life had changed forever. She had left here, her heart full, wishing only to be useful to her beloved brothers. She was returning with the blackest of marks marring her future. Her actions had made her a sinner. She had no right to be here, among the spotless purity of the contemplative women whose refuge she craved.



If she could only make it to her cell and take off the bloodstained kirtle and blouse and join the others in the chapel to pray for forgiveness.

Turning the corner and heading along the corridor that led to her cell, she was pulled up short by a voice crashing into her morbid and hopeless thoughts.

“Goodness child, where have you been so early in the day?”

Arya’s heart sank. It was the Mother Superior. The tall, angular nun studied Arya with an all-knowing expression in her gray eyes.

“Well, lass. I hope ye’ve nae been meeting with a lad outside these walls. Yer brother, the laird, willnae be happy if he discovers ye’ve found a sweetheart while ye’ve been with us.”

Arya shook her head. A lover would be the least of it. If the saintly Mother only knew the truth of the sin she’d committed.

Forcing a shy smile, she shook her head. Mother Agnes returned her smile, making no comment. Her gaze roamed across Arya as if search for an answer to her question, coming to rest on Arya’s skirt where the brooch with its remnant of bloodstained plaid was still attached.

Arya held her breath, fearful of the questions she expected.

Agnes reached down, undid the fastening and rose, clutching the brooch and

the fabric in her hand. She looked sternly at Arya.

“This is the MacQuarrie tartan, and the brooch ye have here is chased gold, bearing the Clan crest.” She tilted her head to one side questioningly. “Only the Laird and his family are able tae wear such treasures. How did ye come by this?”

Arya gasped. “I dinnae ken, I was in the woods, Mother. It must have caught in me kirtle.”

Mother Agnes took a deep breath, exhaling slowly. “I pray ye speak truth Arya. The MacQuarries are a vile lot. If they believe this precious item has been stolen, they will nae spare the life of the thief. I must arrange fer this brooch tae be returned. It would nae dae fer any of the clan to ken it is in the hands of a MacDonell.”

“Oh, thank ye, Mother,” Arya muttered. “I’m of nae mind tae keep it.”

Mother Agnes tucked the brooch into the pocket of her surplice and gave Arya’s arm a squeeze. “Dinnae fash, lass. I’ll arrange fer one of our messengers tae take it across tae Mull, with the word that it was found in the woods by one of the sisters on her daily walk to the farms.” She made the sign of the cross. “I believe the Good Lord will forgive me the lie. Now, dae hurry and tidy yerself fer morning prayers. Yer brothers have sent news and it is now safe fer ye tae return home. After the prayers you can prepare tae leave.”

Arya could scarcely believe Mother Agnes had chosen discretion, and could

only nod as the older woman swiveled and continued her way along the passage. The news of being called home would have overjoyed her just a few hours ago, but now, it was secondary. Her heart was beating fast and the blood was pounding in her veins as the nun's dire words took hold. Feeling her knees buckling under her, she put a hand on the wall to support herself while her stomach roiled and a wave of terror swept over her.

Not only was the man she'd killed a member of a bloodthirsty, vengeful clan, it seemed he was an important member of the clan laird's family.

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## CHAPTER ONE

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*E*arly Spring 1305

*Isle of Iona*

Grimacing, Gillebride slammed the heavy pewter tankard on the sturdy oak table. Ugh! This seedy tavern in the godforsaken village of *Baile Mòr* served what must surely be the worst ale in all of Christendom.

Looking around, he swiped his sleeve across his beard. He despised this place, and was only here on the Isle of Iona at the behest of the Laird, Blaine MacKinnon, who was keen to obtain the latest battle plans from their neighbouring clan, the MacQuarries.

Grumbling under his breath he scanned the motley throng of cutthroats, whores and poorly disguised clansmen seated around him in the fetid, smoky parlour. There was no sign of the man he'd been sent to meet, Beolin, a henchman of Anrias, Laird of the MacQuarrie Clan.

Although the MacQuarries and the MacKinnons were now allies, fighting side-by-side for their King Robert the Bruce, theirs was a long, uneasy history. MacKinnon land bordered that of the MacQuarries on the Isle of Mull and, for as long as Gilly could remember, there'd been ongoing skirmishes along the border and attempted incursions by the MacQuarries. Cattle had been stolen, crops destroyed, fishermen's catch taken. Not only that. They were a bloodthirsty, merciless clan with a reputation for engendering fear of their ruthlessness into all those unfortunate enough to encounter them.

Still, if nothing else, meeting on Iona they were in a neutral place, a short distance from either clan's territory. Despite that, it was a damned nuisance to make the short sea crossing even though, when the tide was out it took a strong oarsman only minutes to cross from one island to the other.

Apart from a few straggling, thatch-roofed cottages, this was the only meeting place on the island and it bedeviled Gillebride's thoughts that a place harboring so much evil was situated so close to the abbey and the nunnery.

Glancing around, his eye was captured by a parchment tacked up on the wall near the doorway. From where he sat, he could just make out a roughly drawn and painted woman's face. The features were indeterminate but what stood out was the mane of red hair cascading over the face, visible even at a distance. He squinted in the dim light, but was unable to read the rough script on the bottom of the parchment. Apart from the grim words "Wanted Dead or Living".

He had more than a little sympathy for the woman, whoever she was and whatever crime she'd committed. If she attracted the attention of the ruffians frequenting this disreputable hideout then pity help her.

A big-breasted woman whose blouse and kirtle were alarmingly low, exposing an expanse of her flesh, sidled up to his table.

“Only a penny fer such a handsome bear of a man as ye, tae take me tae bed,” she said, giving him a lascivious grin, her gaze roaming over his broad shoulders and huge size.

Gilly shook his head. “Nay lass, I’ve nae taste fer what ye’re selling.”

She huffed, shrugged her shoulders, and moved off to another table where one of the men seized her around the waist and pulled her onto his knee. The sound of her false laughter rang in Gilly’s ears as a shadow materialized beside him. He looked up to see Beolin pulling out another stool from under the table and lowering himself into the seat.

He grunted a greeting and Gilly dipped his head. He had no time for Beolin. He’d never trusted the man, despite their frequent meetings to discuss the plans being laid down by the clans in the war against the English. Beolin was a tall, gaunt, grey-bearded man who, to Gilly, always had the hungry look of a half-starved fox about him.

Beolin called the serving-wench over and requested an ale. Gilly shook his head. He’d had enough of the bad brew. Once the woman had placed the tankard on the table the two men bent their heads in conversation, apprising each other of the most recent strategies for the upcoming battles against the English.

Gillebride watched Beolin in disgust as the man licked his lips, his gaze fixed

on the young whores shamelessly parading their wares, half-naked before the men. No doubt after his conversation with Gilly was done, he'd take one of the lasses upstairs and have his way with her, offering nothing more than a small coin for her services.

“Have ye nae shame, man?” Gilly said when the man's obvious lust became too much for him to observe without commenting. “These lassies are young enough tae be yer own daughter.”

Beolin's only comment was a short sniggering laugh and an uneasy shifting in his seat, his hand on his braes.

Gilly shook his head, looking away in disgust. His gaze came to rest again on the rough painting tacked on the wall. “What's the story with the lass?”

Beolin swivelled to stare at the poster and turned back to Gilly, a frown on his gaunt face.

“There's a price on her head. If ye've a mind tae search fer her ye could earn yerself some coin.”

“I'm nae looking fer coin, lad.” Gilly offered a sharp laugh. “What's the lass done tae make her an animal tae be hunted?”

“An animal is too good a name fer her. The whole of Clan MacQuarrie is after her fer killing young Alasdair, the favourite son of Anrias MacQuarrie.”

Gilly raised an eyebrow. “The Laird’s son? Murdered by a wee lass?”

“She’s nae a wee lass, Gillebride, but the spawn of the devil and his bride. She’s a witch who killed the lad by smashing his head with a rock. When Anrias catches up with her he’ll most likely have her walled up fer eternity, to die a slow and hungry death. A quick death is too good fer the likes of her.” Beolin hoicked a blob of phlegm onto the scuffed dirt floor and ran his fingers across his belly and shoulders in the sign of the cross.

Gilly had seen and heard enough. It was time to take his leave and turn his back on this man Beolin and the ugly village of *Baile Mòr*. He placed a coin on the table as payment for the ale and rose to his feet.

“Bide well,” he said to the other man. As he turned to go a sudden commotion broke out.



The boatman lifted Arya out of his small boat and slung her over his shoulder as if she was a sack of barley. He waded the few yards to the sandy, rocky beach and lowered her, none too gently.

She handed him a coin for his trouble. “Wait here fer me, I’ll nae be long. I have business with a lass I’m tae meet in the tavern. Ye’ll get the rest when ye return me tae Mull.”

The man grumbled under his breath. “A decent lass would nae be here at all.”



Arya shivered and pulled her cloak tight around her against the wind, lowering the hood with its white fur trim. She was back in the place she'd vowed never to visit again and the cold breeze whipping off the sea and the drizzling rain simply added to her disquiet.

All these months she'd almost begun to put the memory behind her, almost begun to feel safe. Although, she knew in her heart, she would never be able to forget the awful secret of the man she'd killed.

"Dinnae fash," she told the boatman, "I'll be back in minutes."

As she trudged up the hill toward the tavern her heart was pounding. A pall of wickedness fell over this place. It was clearly no place for a lass on her own. She'd learned it was a stronghold for the feared MacQuarries, even though their territory was on Mull. Despite telling herself she was safe enough to be here, unrecognized, her feelings of unease grew stronger with every step.

*Why on earth has Eleonor sent me a message? It can only mean she is in trouble. And why of all places, has she asked me to meet her at the most dangerous place of all, the tavern in Baile Mòr?*

Following Eleonor's instructions, she'd told no one of her destination. But now, as she approached the dimly lit tavern, hearing the raucous, raised men's voices coming from inside, she questioned the wisdom of her decision. If anything happened to her here, her brothers and her friends would have no idea where to find her.

Outside the tavern, she hesitated. Of course, she wished to aid Eleonor if she needed help, but coming here meant she was risking discovery by members of the MacQuarrie clan.

*But, save fer Eleonor, nae-one kens me part in the death of that man. Surely, I'll be safe.*

Taking a deep breath to settle her nerves, she tightened her cloak and, head well-covered by her hood, she pushed open the door and stepped into the noisy, fetid interior of the tavern.

The instant she was through the door she knew she'd made a horrible mistake in coming here.

All conversation ceased as she stepped into the tavern and every eye turned in her direction. Her eyes searched for Eleonor, but wherever she looked there were men accosting women, some of whom had their breasts bare, being fondled by rough-looking characters. Many of the men seemed drunk and staggering. One man was lying on the floor looking up the skirt of a woman who was bare to the waist and giggling as if she was tipsy.

Arya groaned audibly. There was no sign of Eleonor, even though the message she'd received was clear. They were to meet in the *Baile Mòr* tavern, shortly after sundown.

She waited, unsure of her next move and, after moments, the rough laughter and talk resumed. All the same, she was uncomfortably aware she was being closely scrutinized by several men at a nearby table. Two of them laughed

and nodded to each other as if in agreement with something. She shuddered as they gazed intently at her, their lustful intentions all too obvious

Stomach lurching, she looked away. It was then her eyes were drawn to the roughly-painted poster just inside the door. Her heart, which was already beating much too fast, suddenly felt as if it would jump right out of her chest.

The painting was childish, roughly drawn and colored, but the tilt of her head, the straight nose, the big blue eyes and, most of all, the cascade of red hair were sufficient for her to realize this was someone's attempt at creating a portrait of her – Arya Macdonell.

The words, *Wanted Dead or Living*, underscoring the likeness, sent a stab of ice straight to her heart.

*I must get out of here. I cannae wait any longer fer Eleonor.*

On the spur of the moment she pivoted, determined to flee from this horrid place as swiftly as her shaky legs could carry her. But her hopes of beating a hasty retreat without drawing any further attention were dashed. Her cloak flying out behind her as she turned brought glasses and tankards from a table beside the door clattering and smashing to the floor.

Once again, all eyes were upon her.

Ignoring the commotion she reached a hand to the door, determined to be gone before there was time for anyone to take another breath. But the men

who'd been watching her were already on their feet and in an instant two of them had seized her. One had her around the waist and the other pinioned her arms behind her back in an iron grip.

She screamed, struggling vainly against their tight hold on her.

“We’ll have some sport with ye tonight lass. Ye’ll nae be disappointed I guarantee ye.” one of the men said. “Mayhap we should take ye upstairs with us fer our fun.”

A bawdy laugh went up from the assembled throng. One man waving a tankard in encouragement.

“Let me go,” she shrieked. “Please,” she begged, attempting to kick out at the man behind her.

Her desperation only seemed to encourage them.

“Ah. I like a feisty one,” the man behind her said, leaning down to plant a wet kiss on her cheek. “Ye’ll keep us busy tonight, lass.”

She screamed again, bucking wildly as they hauled her toward the stairs at the side of the parlour.

Looking around beseechingly she implored someone – anyone – to please come to her aid and rescue her from this nightmare.

But the other denizens of the tavern were far too interested in their own debauchery to pay any further attention to her plight.

Except for one man.

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## CHAPTER TWO

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Gilly had only just risen to his feet to take his leave of Beolin when a woman's scream rang out through the fusty tavern.

Looking up, he saw her struggling with two men near the doorway. They had her in a firm grip, laughing at her cries for help.

Gilly felt his blood begin to boil. No woman would venture into this filthy place unless she was a whore, but that mattered not a jot to him. As far as he was concerned a woman was being forced against her will, and whore or not, he wouldn't stand by and allow that.

Dragging the helpless young woman between them, the two men were heading toward the staircase leading to the bedrooms on the upper floor, close to where Gilly stood. He took one step ahead of them blocking their way upstairs with his enormous bulk.

Startled by his sudden appearance the men looked up as he loomed over them.

“What dae ye think ye’re doing. Let us pass,” said one of the men, keeping a firm grip on the young woman’s arms.

Gilly twisted his mouth into a sneer. “Seems tae me ye lads are nae tae the lassie’s taste. Mayhap she’d prefer a real man such as meself,” he ground out. “I dinnae wish tae hurt ye so I’d suggest ye let her go. I’ll take care of her now.”

The men fell back, clearly afraid of this giant of a man accosting them. They quickly released their grip on the woman.

While the men stood frozen, mouths gaping, he took the still struggling lass with both hands at her waist and in one fluid movement, flung her across his broad shoulder. She kicked and pounded his back, to no avail.

He barked a laugh. “I fancy a feisty one meself this night,” he muttered, and, carrying the young woman as if she weighed no more than a bag of feathers, he strode lightly up the stairs leaving the two men watching him go, shaking their heads.

“Put me down, ye big beast,” she howled pounding her fists against his back.

Reaching the upper floor Gilly was confronted by a short hallway with three doors opening off it. He kicked open the first door, disturbing a couple on the bed. The man looked up, opening his mouth to bellow but Gilly quickly pulled the door shut and moved to the next door. This led him into an empty room.

There was no furniture save for a rickety timber pallet in the corner, covered with a thin mattress and a threadbare covering.

He lowered the lass onto the floor, but instead of her turning her face up with a smile of gratitude for his rescuing her, she beat at his belly with her fists.

“Ye filthy beast, let me go,” she bawled, tears pouring down her cheeks.

For all the damage she was doing she could have been a gadfly battering itself against a large rock.

“Whoa, lass,” he said, trying to grab her hands as she flailed at him.

“Nay, nay. Let me go. I’ll nae oblige yer vile lust.”

“Hush lass,” he said, hoping to quieten her. “I dinnae crave yer body. Yer safe with me.” He ducked his head to avoid her fist. Her aim was good and he rubbed his jaw where a lucky blow had found its mark.

He held tight to her hands. That small fist of hers stung where it landed.

“Come now, I’ll nae harm ye. I didnae bring ye here tae ravish ye but tae get ye away from those two ruffians who were holding ye so tight.”



Chest heaving, she glowered at him, trying to catch her breath. “Ye... ye...?”

Gilly walked to the bed and pattered the faded coverlet. “Come, lass. Sit. Ye’re safe. I swear I’ll nae touch ye.”

She straightened her spine, drawing herself to her full height, and peered imperiously down her nose at him.

“Why should I trust ye. Only thieves and rogues come tae this tavern.”

He chuckled. “That’s coming from a lass who came here?”

“I was tae meet someone here. She may be here now, waiting fer me.”

“Well, if there’s a lass here waiting fer ye she’ll nae doubt be receiving the same treatment as ye. Any lass who’s ventured here before today kens what this place is.” He looked at her quizzically. “What kind of friend is she? Is she a whore? Nae self-respecting lass would ask her friend tae meet her here.”

“I dinnae ken. She’s nae really a friend,” she went on. “I’ve met her once only. And that meeting was nae auspicious. Yet, all the same, I promised tae help her if I could.”

“And is she needing yer help now?”

She looked up him, shaking her head. “Mayhap she is in trouble and needing me help. I dinnae ken. She only sent me a message tae meet her in the tavern but she isnae here.”

Frowning, she tossed her head, and the hood fell back to her shoulders revealing a tumble of bright red curls.

Gilly studied the girl. She was a rare beauty, no doubting it, with a heart-shaped face, wide blue eyes and rosy lips that trembled most enticingly. Yet there was something else snagging his memory. Had he met her before today? The girl’s appearance was troubling.

It was then Gilly realized with a chill just who it was he’d rescued. She was the wee lass from the painting. The one with the price on her head. The one who, it was said, had murdered the son of the Laird of the MacQuarries.

He shuddered. If that was so, then for her this tavern was a very dangerous place indeed.

A low banging on the door of the room broke into his thoughts. He drew his dirk from his belt and moved quietly across the room, signalling to the girl to stay quiet.

“Who’s there?” He growled, holding his dirk ready in case there was trouble.

“It’s Jamie MacEwan, the tavernkeeper,” came the voice. “Ye owe me fer the

room, Dinnae think ye can get away without paying.”

Chuckling, Gilly opened the door. He took a coin from the purse on his belt and handed it to the waiting man. “I fancy some food and a better tankard of ale than ye served me before.”

The man nodded warily. “Aye, lad,” he said sounding more polite now that he was confronting the big man face-to-face. “But ye’ll need tae come down tae the kitchen tae collect yer meal.”

Once the tavern keeper had scuttled off. Gilly closed the door behind him, pulling the latch down firmly. He strode back to the young woman who had taken up position on the edge of the bed.

He sat down beside her intending to offer some comfort and reassurance but she cringed away from him.

“Ye’ve aught tae fear from me, lass,” he said kindly.

She shook her head, her eyes wary. “Why should I believe ye?”

He chuckled. “Because I’m Gillebride MacThomas, lass. Those who ken me ken that me word is tae be trusted. On the other hand, why should I trust ye? I dinnae even ken yer name.”

“Me name is Arya,” she said, the words coming reluctantly. “If ye’ve nae

intention of using me, why have ye brought me tae this room.”

“Using ye?”

“Aye,” a pink flush rose in her cheeks. “Ye ken what I’m saying. Ye said ye had nae intention of ravishing me.”

“Nay Arya, lass. Think of me as a Good Samaritan who only wishes tae help someone in distress.” He shook his head. “Besides, ye’re a child, the same age as me own daughter...” his voice shook, “that is, if I had a daughter. I’m old enough tae be yer father. I’d never think tae lay a hand on ye. Beautiful as ye are.”

Eyes wide, she gazed at him. “I understand. I’m truly grateful tae ye fer saving me. I am ashamed now that I treated ye so harshly. But I didnae ken ye were a good man. I thought ye were one of them...”

She raised a hand to her mouth and drew in a sharp breath that was almost a sob.

He grinned at her. “Now ye can show me that ye’re a polite lass and nae a wildcat.”

There was some gratification in seeing the colour rush to her cheeks at his words.

He was sorely tempted to question her about the poster he'd seen downstairs and Beolin's words that the lass was being hunted for murder. But he held his tongue. He didn't know her well enough to be certain whatever she told him was the truth and he was in no mind to be lied to when there was so much at stake. Later, if and when he decided he could trust her, he'd find the right time to find out more.

She lowered her hands to her lap. As she did so, she turned up her wrists and a mark, like a small pink shell on the underside of her wrist, caught his eye.

He grabbed her hand and studied the mark, a frown on his face.

“Are ye a witch? Is this the devil's mark?”

She pulled her hand away quickly. “Of course nae. That's a daft thing tae say.”

“I dinnae give a fig fer witches.” Gilly said with a soft laugh. “They've never harmed me. But there are men here who would have ye fer a witch if they caught sight of that mark.”

Shivering, she pulled her sleeve down to cover the mark.

“Is that the only one ye have like it?”

She shook her head. “I've a wee mark shaped like a teardrop on me chest,

right next tae me heart.”

Gilly groaned. He had to get this girl away from here quickly. If they took her for murder and saw these marks, it would be a competition to see whether she was hanged or beheaded for murder or drowned or burnt at the stake as a witch.

Her eyes were suddenly bright with tears. “The nursemaid I had when I was a wean told me the tear on me breast was fer me mother who died bringing me intae this world.”

Gilly reached a comforting arm around her shoulders, liking the feel of her warmth against his chest. “Dinnae greet lass, we’ve all suffered the sad loss of loved ones. Bearing a tear fer your lost mother is a fine thing.”

She gave him a watery smile. “I believe that. It keeps me close tae me mother in me heart. When I was at the nunnery, Mother Agnes taught me that it is a gift from God that we all have the free will tae choose what we believe tae be true. Tae me the mark means I have a loving heart. If someone believes it makes me a witch, then they are choosing the devil’s path.”

He nodded. What she said held a great deal of truth. The lass was wise beyond her years. How on God’s green earth had she earned a price on her head for murder?

*Perhaps when they’d finished their meal there would be time fer questions.*

He rose. "I'll bring us some food from the kitchen. I'll nae be gone long but while I'm away, dinnae open the door. Only open it once ye're sure it's me who's knocking."

She pulled in a breath, looking indignant. "I dinnae need yer instructions. I can..."

Gilly shook his head grinning. "Nae lass. Dinnae tell me ye can look after yerself. Have ye already forgotten what those ruffians downstairs were planning? Ye were nae match fer those two. How would ye fare with the whole pack baying at yer heels?"

She subsided onto the bed. "Aye. Ye're right."

He gave her hand a reassuring pat. "Stay here last. Keep stumm. I'll go tae the kitchen and bring us back some nourishment. Dinnae open the door tae anyone but meself."

"Promise ye're coming back?"

"I willnae be long. Just sit tight and bide here fer me."

Passing through the parlour on his way to the kitchen he looked around, seeing no sign of the men who had attacked Arya earlier. He breathed a sigh of relief. He had to get her out of the tavern without anyone recognizing her from that cursed portrait on the wall.

He collected two trenchers from the scullery-maid, with a chicken and potato soup.

“This’ll make the hair grow on yer chest,” she assured him.

Adding a handful of bannocks and another tankard of ale he was soon on his way back upstairs, confident his presence had gone unnoticed by the rest of the tavern’s customers.

He rapped on the door of the room.

“Who’s there,” came a small voice.

“It’s meself. Gillebride. Open the door. The soup is getting cold.”

“How can I believe ye?”

A couple in the corridor paused at the door to the next room, the man’s arm wound around the neck of a buxom whore who was already half-naked.

He gave a drunken guffaw as Gilly knocked again.

“What’s wrong lad? Yer wee whore changed her mind?”



Gilly glared at him and the man disappeared into the room, slamming the door behind him.

“Are ye there lass?” He whispered again.

“I cannae take ye at yer word. Yer hushed voice could be any man’s.”

“Will ye believe it’s me if I tell ye I ken ye have a teardrop birth mark over yer heart?” he muttered hoarsely.

He felt the blood pulse in his groin at the sudden vision of Arya’s soft skin and the mark of a teardrop at her bare breast. He heard the latch being slowly lifted and moments later the door was eased open and he entered.

Arya was scowling. “I dinnae ken the reason fer ye tae announce to the entire tavern that I have a mark at me breast.” She huffed indignantly as he gestured fer her to sit.

He leveled his gaze at her. “Ye’re a contrary lass. Ye wouldnae grant me entry tae the room, yet when I said the one thing, I kent of ye that would convince ye, ye object. What else was I tae say?” He snorted a laugh. “I’ve kent ye fer less time than it takes fer a flea tae take its fill of yer blood.”

Her mouth turned up in a smile. “True. I’m sorry, I wasnae thinking sensible thoughts. Being in this place...” she trailed off.

“Aye, lass. Eat yer meal. The landlord has sold me this room until midnight. By then the place will have quietened and we can leave here unnoticed.”

He reached a hand to brush a curl from her shoulder and tuck it behind her ear. She was truly beautiful, lighting up even in this godforsaken hell-hole.

“*Nighean ruadh*, perhaps ye’ll tell me the true story of why yer face is displayed on the wall downstairs fer all tae see.”

The blood faded from her face and she drew in a sharp breath.

He took her hand, trying to find a way of reassuring her. “Dinnae fash, lass, I’ll nae press ye fer the story. But it seems I’ve thrown in me lot with ye now and any of the rogues downstairs who wish tae take ye captive will need dae battle with me. If I’m tae shed blood on yer behalf I need tae ken what ye’ve done tae set the wolves on yer trail.”

“Aye,” she muttered, supping her soup. “I’ll tell ye everything once we’ve bade farewell tae this evil place.”

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## CHAPTER THREE

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Arya took her time eating her supper. She was nervous around this big man who had come to her rescue, yet being close to him also gave her a feeling that she was safe. She believed him when he said he would protect her.

Now that her identity had been revealed by the awful poster on the wall surely, he deserved to know her deadly secret. *But if he learns the truth about the terrible thing I did, will he nae turn me over the laird of the MacQuarries fer punishment?*

Damping down a rush of panic, she glanced sideways at him as he finished off his meal, scrutinizing his features. Despite his well-shaped forehead, straight nose and high, broad, cheekbones his size gave him a forbidding look. But his dark eyes when they looked at her were kind.

Surely, a man with eyes like his would never do her harm.

His ruffled hair was a rich dark brown, close to black in colour. He wore it longer than her brothers did and to her great astonishment she was suddenly

overtaken with a strong temptation to reach out and smooth it back from his brow.

She wished she could see his mouth, but it was well hidden beneath a thick beard of a similar colour to his hair, albeit touched with streaks of silver. She wondered about his age. He'd said he was old enough to be her father, but to her he looked a much younger man.

He appeared quite unconcerned to be eating his supper seated next to a murderess.

“Where dae ye bide, Gillebride MacThomas?” she asked, wishing to find out more about this man. “Dae ye he have a family waiting somewhere fer ye tae come home?”

He turned to her, his brown eyes roaming across her face.

“Me home is on the Isle of Mull and I've nae family waiting fer me return.” His voice was tinged with sadness as he spoke. “I travel abroad fer much of me time.”

“What was it that brought ye tae this cursed place tonight?”

He shook his head. “Me business was private, lass, I'm nae able tae discuss it with ye.”

She huffed at that. “Well, if ye insist I tell ye me business ye should tell me yers.”

“Hmm,” He rubbed the beard on his chin thoughtfully. “I’ll say this. I met with a man and talked about the war with the English. Nae more than that can I say.”

She could see there was no point in pursing this any further. Mayhap he was a spy or an assassin. Someone no better than she was.

At the sudden intrusion of the distant sound of the Priory bell ringing the midnight hour, they both raised their heads, listening.

“It’s time.” Gilly said softly, “We must leave here.”

He rose and walked silently to the door, lifted the latch and opened it. A murmur of voices greeted them, but the previous raucous, bawdy tavern sounds had faded. He turned to Arya with a whisper.

“Mayhap the patrons are too drunk tae shout or yell, or mayhap most of them have gone.”

“Is it safe fer us tae leave now?” At the thought of re-entering the parlor Arya’s belly curled into a tight ball and she clenched her fists.

Gillebride nodded, reaching a hand to squeeze her shoulder. “It’s as safe as it

will ever be. If we can make our way out of here without being noticed, with luck on our side we'll make it safely tae the Isle of Mull."

She nodded. Pulling her hood down she wrapped her cloak tightly about her tall form and slipped behind him as he tiptoed out the door and down the stairs.

Only a few customers remained seated at the tables. One or two others were head down, fast asleep.

She held her breath. *Two of the men, heads lowered in conversation, wear the distinctive green and red tartan of the MacQuarries.*

They had almost reached the bottom when Arya's foot slipped on the last rotten step. She gave a squawk as the timber gave way under her foot, and if not for Gillebride's strong arm seizing her, she'd have fallen flat on her face. She hastily snatched up the hood of her cloak, covering her hair and lowering her head.

She was too late.

The two MacQuarrie men were on their feet in an instant.

"It's the lass from the poster," one of the men shouted. Two more men appeared seemingly from nowhere, similarly clad in the dreaded plaid, and all four turned to face Gillebride and Arya as they made for the door.

“Quick lass,” Gillebride seized Arya’s arm, shielding her as the men came dashing toward them.

Needing no encouragement, she grabbed for the door and opened it and they raced out into the dark of midnight, closely followed by the men from the tavern in hot pursuit. Without thinking, Arya turned along the path, making a beeline for the beach but Gillebride grabbed her hand, pulling her into the darkness beside him.

“This way,” he muttered, scrambling onto another path leading away from the village. Arya recalled this path; it was the way to the Priory.

They crouched low as the four men passed them by and continued on the path they’d been on.

Dashing along the lesser path had bought them some time but once the men realised, they were not heading for the beach they’d be back, hunting them in the opposite direction.

They hurried on as quietly as they could but it was not long before they heard the sounds of pursuit gaining on them. They veered off the path, proceeding with great caution.

“Listen,” Gillebride said, suddenly.

They paused listening to the sound of a nearby burn tumbling on its way. The sound went some way to masking the noise of their own progress.

Cautiously, they followed the sound down a slope away from the path, to follow the stream where the water flowed faster and noisily.

Arya hiked her skirts above her knees and followed closely behind Gillebride along the edge of the burn.

“We need tae hide,” he said, “Let them keep searching until they give up.”

Arya nodded wordlessly, allowing herself to be led wherever Gillebride would take her. Her life was in his hands now.

They followed the course of the burn as it rose higher into the hillside where the country was wilder and at a greater distance from the Priory. The men’s shouts grew fainter as they raced along the path, quite unaware that the prey was now elsewhere.

As they climbed, Arya felt herself tiring, her breath was coming in little pants, and her legs ached with the unaccustomed stress. Her eyes were not used to the darkness and she looked around frantically as they climbed hoping to find a space where they could hide.

“There,” she said, grabbing tighter to Gillebride’s hand. “I think there’s a cave.” She pointed to a place where a dark space loomed between the trees under the hillside.

They crept closer. “Wait here a moment while I check it,” he whispered.



Watching him disappear into the darkness, Arya was relieved to have a moment to catch her breath. Her chest heaved and her heart pounded almost painfully against her ribs.

In a few moments she felt his presence and made out his tall figure beside her.

“It’s dry, there are nae wolves sleeping there. We’ll hide there until morning when we can make our way tae the other side of the island. The men will have given up on us by then, thinking we’ve got away.”

They groped their way to the small cave which held just enough space for them both to squeeze inside. Arya slumped against a rocky outcropping, resting her back and shoulders. Gillebride stood at the entrance, listening, before crouching beside her and pressing his bulk inside the cramped space.

“This is good,” he said, and she sensed him smiling. “We’ll be safe enough here.”

She reached for his hand. “Thank ye fer putting yerself in danger. If nae fer me, those men wouldnae be hunting us.”

“I daresay ye’re right, lass. And, before we progress much further together, I’d like ye tae explain, truthfully, exactly why those men are wanting tae capture ye.”

She sighed, wishing she could somehow avoid telling him her story. “It’s a

long tale. I'm nae sure I can stay awake tae tell it all this night."

He laughed softly. "Never fear lass. I'll nudge ye awake if yer eyes close before ye've finishing the telling."

"I... er..." She put her face in her hands, her knees drawn up. "This is hard. I ken ye're a good man, but I'm sore afeared tae tell ye me story in case ye think badly of me."

"Why would that be?" he said, keeping his voice low.

"I'm afeared ye'll think so ill of me that ye'll abandon me tae me fate with the MacQuarrie men hunting me."

He shook his head, reaching an arm around her shoulders to pull her close.

"Nae, lass. Dinnae fash. I'll nae leave ye. I've nae liking fer the MacQuarries. I ken them tae be a cruel lot. I'd never stand by and see ye taken by them if I could help if. Dinnae be afeared."

Her tears were flowing again. This was partly because of his kindness and partly because the thought of revisiting that terrible night when she'd smashed the man's head with the rock had brought back so much of the terror and the guilt.

He pressed her head to his shoulder, smothering her sobs. "I can help ye best

if I ken why these men are after ye.”

She hiccupped. *Perhaps he speaks truly, but how can I confide me worst secret tae this man I've only just met?*

“Would it help if I told ye I'd already seen the poster in the tavern, when I first came tae yer aid?” he said gently. “It didnae take more than a moment before I recognized ye. I already kent there was a price on yer head before aught passed between us.”

Clutching his hand, she gasped. “So ye already ken I'm accused of killing the heir tae the MacQuarries?”

“Aye, I ken that, lass. What I want tae ken is, is it true? And if it's true, I want ye tae tell me what happened. I ken ye're nae killer.”

She sighed again, allowing herself to slump against him, gaining solace from the feel of his strong, hard body against her. *He kens about me and he still came tae me rescue.*

He stroked her hair softly and she felt herself drifting sleepily into a snug, warm illusion that this was, after all, the safest place in Scotland. She jolted awake. Holy heavens, what was she thinking? Eyes wide-open she stared around the almost-dark place.

She wasn't resting her head on a plush cushion, safe in her own bedchamber at MacDonell Castle, she was in a dank cave on a hillside on the Isle of Iona,

resting on the huge shoulder of a bearlike man named Gillebride. A man who – giving a lie to his appearance – seemed as gentle as a lamb and the kindest, most courageous person she'd ever met.

Hastily pulling her wits about her she hauled herself, with an uncomfortable thump, back to the present. It was time to tell the truth about the night she wished more than anything to forget.

“And why were ye biding at the nunnery?” Gillebride asked, when she started the story at the point when she'd crept so stealthily from the convent.

“I was there under the protection of the Mother Superior, at the behest of me brothers. They feared fer me safety at the hands of Sir William de Coughran.” She paused. “But that's another story tae tell, involving me brothers and a wicked man who wished me harm.”

“I ken well the wickedness of the man,” Gillebride muttered, nodding.

She went on, sparing no detail of what had happened that night. By the time she had arrived at the conclusion of the story where Mother Agnes had revealed the identity of the scrap of tartan from the dead man, she was sobbing again.

“There, lass,” Gillebride said squeezing her hand. “I need time tae think about yer story. Yet, already, it's clear tae me, yer life and that of the other lass were hanging in the balance. If ye hadnae been so brave tae take the stone and ply it tae the hard skull of Alasdair MacQuarrie there's nae doubt in me mind that two lasses would have died that night. Ye and the other lass

ye were tae meet in the tavern.”

Arya looked up. For the first time she allowed herself to consider that her actions had been worthy. Something courageous. She had saved Eleonor and herself from a brutal killer. Although, to her lasting horror, the result was the same whichever way she looked at it. Whether for good or ill, a man was dead. At her hand.

“Trouble is,” he said rubbing his beard thoughtfully, “I doubt Anrias MacQuarrie would bother with the truth. He’d think ye a murderess nae matter how brave ye were and nae matter the life of the other lass ye saved.” He shook his head. “I’m nae saying this tae frighten ye. I only wish ye tae understand the peril ye are in. He and all his ilk are without mercy. An impulsive, bloodthirsty lot who’d think aught of ending the life of anyone who crossed them.”

She shuddered. Suddenly icy cold, she pulled her cloak tighter and leaned closer to Gillebride.

He rubbed her arm, bringing some warmth.

“Mayhap we could light a fire,” she said, “I am chilled tae the bone.”

Once the words were out, she felt him stiffen beside her, withdrawing.

“Nae. I’ll have nae fire,” he growled, throwing up his hands. “Whatever are ye thinking lass? We’d burn alive in this wee place.”

She was about to argue that it would be perfectly safe to light a fire here for warmth, when she registered the expression on his face. His jaw was set, his eyes staring into the distance. His big hands were slowly clenching into fists. He was somewhere else, no longer sitting warmly beside her, sheltering her.

Wherever his memory had journeyed, it was the mention of fire that had taken him there.

He was lost for only a moment, then he turned back to her. "I'm sorry lass. Nae fire. I'll keep ye warm enough." He pulled his cloak around her and, finally, she wriggled against him, finding a comfortable enough place.

Resting her head on his shoulder, Arya allowed herself to fall into a sweet, dreamless sleep that took her all the way to morning.

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## CHAPTER FOUR

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There was no possibility of sleep for Gillebride. His long years of battle had trained him to stay alert whenever he was in a situation where danger threatened. His ears were tuned in on the sounds of the night – the hoot of the barn owl, the cry of an animal caught in a hunter’s snare, the swift yelp of a fox, the whisper of the breeze in the trees, the distant sound of the waves lapping against the sand. And the gentle, even breathing of the lass he was protecting.

Nothing was disturbing the rhythm of the night. It seemed the MacQuarries had given up their search, at least for tonight. He had little doubt there’d be scouts in the forest at dawn, scouring the woodland for any trace of him and the lass.

He and Arya must be well on their way before daylight.

A silvery beam of moonlight shone into the entrance of the cave, illuminating his charge. Asleep, she seemed so much younger, almost childlike, her features delicate, her face heart-shaped. Dark lashes curled over porcelain cheeks that were much too pale for his liking. Yet, despite their travails her sleep appeared untroubled.

He scanned her clothes and the blue cloak she was wrapped in so tightly. These were not the clothes of a whore, or even a courtesan, but the fine garments a noblewoman would wear.

*Who was this lass whose fate and his were now entwined?*

His mind tormented him with the way her soft curves had pressed against him and her breast had brushed against his arm before she slept.

Again, he felt the heat blood rushing in his veins and a discomfort in his groin. He shifted, suddenly uncomfortable.

*What is wrong with me? The lass is a mere child, young enough tae be me own daughter.*

He gave his head a shake in an attempt to dislodge the impure thoughts.

It was close to dawn when he woke with a start, sweating, heart racing, having fallen briefly asleep. He cried out as flames and smoke engulfed him. He heard the screams, felt the heat of fire and the smell of acrid smoke, the burning sensation in his lungs.

*The fire that cursed his dreams was still as fresh as ever in his heart. Even after all these years.*



Moaning, he placed his head in his hands.

Arya was instantly awake, looking around fearfully.

“Wha...? Are they here? Have they found us?”

He took a deep breath, releasing it slowly. “Nae lass. We’re alone here. But it’s time we were on our way.”

She tilted her head at him, one eyebrow raised. “Are ye well, Gillebride? I thought I heard ye cry out.”

He huffed. “Aught but a bad dream, lass. Sometimes me past comes out of the darkness and grabs me by the throat.”

She nodded, but he could tell from the way her eyes scanned his face she was unsure of his answer.

“I dinna like fire, lass, and it was there in me dreams. Mayhap because we spoke of it last night.”

He reached into the inside pocket of his leather jerkin and withdrew a small silver flask. He took out the cork and swigged a mouthful. After brushing his sleeve across his beard, he passed the flask to her.

“Here lass. A swallow of this will bring ye alive quickly. We must make our move before it’s light. Our pursuers will soon resume their search and we must be gone before then.”

She gulped a mouthful from the flask, coughed, screwing up her face as the liquid went down. “Good whisky,” she muttered, passing it back to him, her pink lips rewarding him with an altogether beguiling smile.

“Ow,” she rubbed the small of her back. “I’ll nae be exchanging a mattress fer a rock.” She gave a wry chuckle.

“C’mon,” he reached a hand to help her up. “We’ll head fer the northernmost part of the island. The lad I came here with should be waiting there with his wee cog tae take me back tae Mull after I’d finished me business at the tavern. If he’s still waiting as we agreed, we’ll be away and safe before the MacQuarries have taken their first morning bite.”

After they’d relieved themselves, they set out in a northerly direction, heading for the coast. By his calculations that was no more than a mile along the path they were on. He was yet to find out exactly where the lass was meant to be heading. But, first things first. Getting off the island and putting as much distance as possible between them and the MacQuarries was his highest priority. Once they were safely away, he could work out the best way of seeing her safely to her home.

They made their way down the tortuous slope, their feet in danger of slipping out from under them with every step. Arya clutching at his hand for balance, warmed his soul. She trusted him and, he discovered to his surprise, that he liked the feeling.

Once they had found the path again, they moved quickly enough.

Arya paused as the track forked.

“That’s the way to the Priory,” she said, her eyes growing round and large, her cheeks pale, her lips trembling.

“Does it hold bad memories?” he asked, searching in his mind for a way to bring her smile back.

She shook her head. “Nae. I have many good memories. I spent many tranquil days with the sisters. They were kind tae me. Mother Agnes must have suspected something when I returned on that terrible night, but she said naught and somehow managed tae return the gold fastening to the MacQuarries. Nae one at the convent ever suspected anything.”

She lifted her head and he was relieved to see a sparkle returning to her eyes. “I learned much when I was there. Sister Dominique taught me a great deal about healing and I believe I can be of use if the fighting comes close tae us. I would like nothing more than tae become a healer.”

He could see purpose written on her face with her slightly drawn-in brows and an upturn to her lips.

The dawn was breaking as they reached the water-side, the sun rising amid glorious streaks of pink and purple washing the sky with colour. They found themselves on another rocky expanse of beach in a small cove but there was

no sign of the cog Gillebride had been hoping would still be waiting.

“God’s blood,” he exclaimed. “The lad’s taken me on me business throughout the isles fer the past weeks and I believed I could count on him tae wait fer me.”

“Look,” she cried. A small boat was sailing around the rocky headland heading into the bay.

Gillebride raced to the water’s edge, waving his hands. He was reluctant to shout out to the boatman for fear his voice would carry and anyone searching for them would be bound to hear it.

Fortunately, the man caught sight of them and waved his hand in response.

It was not long before the small vessel had drawn close enough for him to wade out to it. He quickly took off his boots and slung them over his shoulder, bent and scooped Arya into his arms.

She wound her arms around his neck and for a moment he allowed himself to inhale the sweet scent of roses that drifted in her hair and to revel in the feel of her holding him tight. Then they had reached the cog and he was handing her over to the safekeeping of young Hamish Grant, the boatman.

“I grew concerned when ye were nae here afore dark last night as ye arranged, so I sailed round tae *Baile Mòr* in case ye’d met with trouble at the tavern there.” Hamish said. “They told me there’d been a wee brawl there

with a man who fit a description a lot like yers.”

Gillebride gave a sharp laugh. “Aye, lad. That goes part way tae explaining why we didnae get here on time. Now we’ve an extra passenger travelling with us and because of that little trouble last night, we need tae be away from Iona with all speed.”

Hamish grinned. “At yer bidding melord,” he said, turning his hands to the sail and steering them on a course toward Mull.

Once they had left Iona behind, Gillebride was grateful for an easing in the stiffness in his neck. But there’d be no real release until he was well clear of MacQuarrie territory and was back at Castle Ardtun with the MacKinnons. Once there, he would make whatever arrangements were needed to return Arya safely to her family.

A stiff breeze had whipped up from the south, filling the sails as the cog moved swiftly over the white-capped water. His heart lifted as he watched the mountainous country growing closer and the craggy coastline coming into view.

Arya’s small hand sneaked into his larger one. “Thank ye fer everything ye’ve done fer me, Gillebride MacThomas. If nae fer ye....” She shuddered. “I’d have been taken by those men and....” she shuddered again and he reached an arm around her small waist and drew her close.

“Think nae more on it, lass,” he said quietly. “Ye’re safe now and I pledge that nae harm will come tae ye whilst I am near.”

He felt her body grow looser, moulding to him, making his heart jump. “Dinnae fash. We’ll be safely in Ardtun before too many minutes have passed.”

She sucked in a sudden breath. “Ardtun?”

“Aye lass, that’s where we’re heading now.” He looked down, but her eyes were fixed on the approaching coastline and he was unable to gauge her thoughts.

“Are ye a MacKinnon then, Gillebride MacThomas?”

He laughed. “I’m nae kin tae the MacKinnons. The Laird, Blaine MacKinnon is me oldest friend and it’s true that me allegiance is tae him and his people.”

“Ye’ve left yer own people?” she enquired, shaking her head as if such a thing was not to be believed.

“Aye lass. That I have.” A flash of pain stabbed his gut at the mention of his family. “But that’s nae a story fer today.” He leaned on the bow, pointing, as the boat turned past a headland and headed into the sweep of a bay. “See that rise over there, beyond the cove. That’s Ardtun Castle.”

She laughed, looking at him, eyes wide. “It’s the place I was bound for. I’ve been a guest of the MacKinnons fer these past weeks while me brothers tarry in Glasgow with the court of King Robert.” She smiled up at him and all at

once it was if the sun's rays beamed down to warm him.

Releasing his hand, she took his arm instead. "Why, it seems fate has truly brought us together, Gillebride. If ye ken the Lady Hannah MacDonell, the Laird's sister, she is married tae me brother Taveon."

"Hannah has always been like a little sister tae me," he said wonderingly. "I was at MacDonell Castle fer the wedding. And I was with yer brothers when we rescued her from Lochnell Castle, saving her from the clutches of Sir William de Coughran."

She turned to him with a giggle, eyes glowing, keeping her hold on his arm. "And I didnae meet with ye then. I'd been banished tae Iona tae keep safe." She huffed. "If they'd only realised the danger I'd be in. And I missed the wedding."

As they drew closer it was possible to make out the cottages of Ardtun village and, clearer now, the imposing castle towering on the hill beyond the thatched rooftops. Soon enough they could make out the figures of the villagers going about their business in the narrow laneways.

Once they were close to the shore Hamish and Gillebride jumped from the prow into the water. They hauled the small craft onto the pebbly beach and, once it was secured, Gillebride leaned into the boat to collect a large leather satchel secreted on a wooden shelf near the tiller. He slung the satchel over his shoulder and reached a hand to Arya.

She stepped onto dry land, looking around with curious eyes at the busy

scene greeting them. There were fishermen unloading their catch, and fishwives, their skirts hiked up above their knees, loading baskets of fish and heading to the centre of the village to trade their wares. Children and dogs ran among the crowd and, overhead, hungry gulls wheeled hopefully.

After Gillebride had paid Hamish for their passage, he led her to a path on the other side of the village. It would take them through woodland and up the hillside to the castle.

“Mayhap it is best tae say little about what happened when we met on the Isle of Iona,” Gillebride said thoughtfully as they walked. “At least fer now.”

“Then how can we explain us being together?”

“Easiest tae say we met on this pathway and we’ve kent each other only fer the time it takes tae walk from the village.”

“I dinna fancy lying tae me friends,” she said, “but, ye’re right. I dinnae wish tae alarm them by telling them our tale.”

“Another day,” he said, “we’ll tell them all of it.”

The path grew steeper as they progressed.

“Can we pause a while?” Arya asked, “Me legs are aching and this is such a pretty place.” Daffodils lined the path through the trees, bees buzzed, birds



chirped happily in the warmth of spring sunshine. They paused and Arya made a beeline for a fallen log where she perched, breathing in the crisp morning air. Gillebride ambled over and sat beside her.

Running her fingers through the curls tumbling over her shoulders she untangled a series of knots. "I'm nae looking me best," she muttered with a laugh.

Gillebride's gaze roamed over her. Seated on the log she seemed almost a part of the woodland. A nymph, with her bright hair and her fae features. His heart skipped a beat. He found her utterly enchanting.

"Ye look very fine tae me," he mumbled.

There was nothing to disturb the tranquil moment of respite. This was an idyllic scene, yet his warrior's instincts were forever alert and on guard. He well knew that what seemed peaceful could turn into a battleground in the blink of an eye.

Reluctantly he got to his feet, reaching a hand to Arya. She clasped it, smiling into his eyes as she sprang lightly to her feet. He bit his lip. He was enjoying the touch of her soft hand in his far too much. He struggled to rid himself of this growing tenderness he felt toward her, reminding himself for the hundredth time that she was young. *Too young.*

Continuing along the pathway, they left the woods and joined the road leading to the castle some little distance further along. As they neared the portcullis, he made out two men standing guard. The gate had already been

raised and as he and Arya drew closer two horsemen he recognized set out at a gallop. One of them was Blaine MacKinnon, Laird of the MacKinnons, the other was his younger brother, Errol.

As they approached, he stepped out of the roadside shadows and waved them down. Drawing closer they both hauled on their reins, slowing their horses.

“Arya,” Errol shouted at the same time. “God’s blood lass, we were setting out this minute tae find ye. When ye didnae return last night, Hannah was sick with worry. What are ye doing with this big *mathan*?”

“Gilly,” shouted Blaine. “Fer God’s teeth, we were expecting ye here yesterday, I was afeared something bad had befallen ye.”

Gilly laughed. It was so damned good to be home again with these two men. He noted the bright pink washing over Arya’s cheeks.

“Dinnae fash lads. I’ll tell ye everything once I’ve had a chance tae wash, put on something clean and filled me belly. And...” he added, “I’m looking forward tae a tankard or two of yer best ale.”

He turned to Arya with a wink. “Safe now, little one,” he whispered.

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## CHAPTER FIVE

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Arya caught a look passing between Gillebride and Errol. Errol responded with a sheepish grin and dismounted from his horse, holding out his hand to Arya.

“Ye look weary lass after yer night in the forest, please take me place in the saddle. I’ll walk ye back to the keep.” Out of the corner of her eye she saw Gillebride nod. Errol took the reins and walked beside his horse, leading them through the portcullis and into the keep.

She was just alighting from her steed when a flurry of activity turned her attention to the entrance to the castle. Her brother’s wife Hannah, Errol’s wife Edina, and Blaine’s wife Ivy, braids and skirts flying, burst through the entrance and raced toward them.

“Where have ye been, Arya?” Hannah said as she took Arya into her arms for a hug while the other two stood by, their faces wreathed in smiles. “I’ve been sick with worry.” She gave a nervous laugh. “I was imagining all kinds of things. I was afeared ye’d mayhap been taken by a troll, or eaten by wolves.”

She was all smiles, but Arya could see that behind the light-hearted chatter was a deep worry. They were at war. Castle Ardtun had been attacked only a few short months ago, and it was not long past that Arya's life had been under threat and she'd been exiled to the nunnery on Iona. It was also not too long ago that Hannah had been kidnapped right here by Taveon, Arya's brother, and later held captive by a villain who had tried to force her into marriage with his son.

Hannah seized Arya's hand and looked up with surprise to see Gillebride standing by, watching closely, a grin on his face.

"Gilly," she called, "Ye're back. I hardly noticed ye standing there with all me attention on our darling Arya." She beckoned him excitedly. "Come. You must meet me newest sister."

Arya tried to speak but Hannah was far too animated to pay her any attention.

Gilly strolled over to the group, giving each a courtly bow as he greeted them individually.

Hannah unceremoniously flung her arms around his neck for a quick hug and turned to Arya. "This is me biggest brother, Gillebride MacThomas," she said proudly, "he's been looking after me since I was a wee girl."

Gilly cleared his throat. "Er... I've... already met the Lady Arya."

Hannah's eyes widened. "Ye've met. How can that be?"

Arya piped up, a shy smile on her face. “Gillebride very kindly came tae me aid after me horse was frightened by a wolf and took flight, leaving me lost in the woods.”

Hannah groaned. “Ye should never have gone riding by yerself, Arya.” She shook her head in disbelief. “I ken ye brothers allowed ye tae ride by yerself when ye were in yer own lands, but it isnae safe tae ride alone here.”

Edina chimed in. “Whatever would Payton and Taveon have tae say if they kent their wee sister was attacked by wolves in the forest and we’d allowed ye tae ride alone?”

“Dinnae look so woebegone Arya,” added Ivy. “We ken ye didnae mean tae worry us, but next time ye wish tae ride, please let us ken so we may ensure ye’re safe with a guard beside ye.”

Eyes glinting with mischief, Gillebride nodded, “While I’m here at Castle Ardtun, I pledge tae accompany the lass whenever she wishes tae ride out intae the forest.”

Arya turned to him. “Why thank ye. That’s very kind of ye Gillebride... May I call ye Gilly as the others do?”

“Indeed, lass. Gilly will dae me fine. It’s what me friends call me.”

Hannah clapped her hands. "As long as Gilly is riding with ye, we ken ye'll be safe Arya." She turned back to Gillebride. "Why, he might even take ye with him when he goes hunting or fishing, as we ken ye enjoy those activities."

Gilly nodded. "I'm at yer service melady."

Smiling into his eyes, Arya dropped him a curtsy. "I am in yer debt, melord, and I thank ye most kindly."

At that, Hanna folded Arya's arm into hers and the four women, heads together and chatting, wandered up the steps and disappeared into the castle.

"Now, ye must tell me everything that happened," Hannah said.

Arya took a deep breath. She was unwilling to continue the story she and Gillebride had prepared, as none of it was the truth.

Ivy must have sensed her unwillingness to say any more. "Hannah, mayhap Arya doesnae wish tae dwell on her dismal night in the forest. Let us simply say it is enough fer us tae ken ye are safe now, without needing ye tae tell us all of what happened."

"Thank ye Ivy," Arya said, relieved.

Hannah was momentarily downcast. "I'm sorry I pressed ye fer an account

Arya. Ivy is right.”

Edina chuckled. “When yer brother Taveon and then Sir William de Coghran’s men kidnapped her, she never told us much of what that was like.” She turned to Arya.

Hannah blushed a deep pink at the mention of Taveon. “Aye, I couldnae resist the charm of me wicked kidnapper,” she said with a grin. “Perhaps Arya will fall in love with her rescuer... there’s magic in the woods, ye ken.”

The others laughed as if nothing could be more unlikely, while Arya smiled quietly to herself, hoping none of them would notice her blushing.

The young women had reached Arya’s bedchamber.

“Promise tae meet with us again in the solar when ye’re rested,” said Hannah, reluctantly leaving her at the door.

Arya was smiling, but seeing the loving faces of her sisters-in-law, the awful burden of guilt weighed upon her shoulders. Whatever would they think of her if they knew the truth? Not only had she killed a man, but she risked bringing down the wrathful MacQuarries like a horde of angry wasps onto the entire MacKinnon clan.

Once inside her room, she sat quietly thinking, her head in her hands. There was only one person she could confide her fears to, and that was Gillebride. He was more than her rescuer. In only one night he’d become her trusted

confidant.

She wished she was with him now. When he'd held her close, she'd felt safe and the dreadful guilt that haunted her faded a little.

Sighing, she straightened her spine, allowing her thoughts to wander back to how it felt to be in his arms, pressing her body against his. She marvelled at his strength and the way he'd fought to save her from the men in the tavern. The feeling she was alone no longer tormented her as cruelly as it had done before Gillebride had come to her rescue.

Once the scullery maid her had brought a ewer of warm water, she washed and changed into a freshly laundered blouse and kirtle. A kitchen maid brought in a some mead, which she gratefully drank.

After dabbing some rosewater on her wrists and at her neck, she felt sufficiently refreshed to meet with the others in the garden, where they would partake in their midday meal.

They were waiting for her in the small walled garden. Ivy's children, the twins Mirin and Alba, played with a ball beside a trickling fountain, with Hannah joining them. Their meal was served on a long table under a shady arbor where they were joined by Edina's younger sisters, Skye and Margaret.

It was a happy occasion and there was much laughter and merriment as they ate their fill of cold chicken and sausage, apples and pomegranates, washed down with a tasty brew of mead.



Hannah squeezed her hand. “If ye ride with Gilly by yer side, nae harm will come tae ye.”

Arya nodded. “He is very kind.”

“Aye, he is, and a brave warrior at that. He and me brother Errol fought back-tae-back, keeping each other safe fer three years until Errol was captured by Edina’s father. When Edina freed me dear brother and helped him home tae us, and they fell in love, Gilly was the happiest of us all . And me brother Blaine depends on Gilly to keep him informed about the loyalty of the clans who will fight with us against the English.” She sighed. “I only wish yer brother was here with us now.”

This brought a smile to Arya’s face. She could see the longing in Hannah’s eyes. It had been weeks now since they’d returned to Ardtun after pledging allegiance to the Bruce, but her brothers, Payton, the Laird of the MacDonells, and her younger brother Taveon, who was married to Hannah, had remained at court.

“They’ll nae be away much longer,” she reassured Hannah.

Hannah looked at her sadly. “But, in the meantime, we are preparing fer battle against the English.”

At the mention of the coming warfare, Arya’s mind went to her determination to make herself useful as a healer. She straightened her skirt and got to her feet. “Dae ye want tae come with me tae visit the kitchen garden tae see how the herbs I planted are doing?”

“Nae, thank ye, I’ll sit here fer a while.” Hannah shook her head. “I’m feeling tired.”

Taking her leave of the others, Arya hastened away. Ever since she’d come to stay with the MacKinnons at Ardtun after visiting the King’s court in Glasgow, she’d been nurturing a selection of herbal plants. Some she’d foraged for in the woodland; others she’d managed to find in the village in the home of the oldest resident, Granny Watt, who’d been renowned as a healer when she was younger.

Arya wished to make the most of what she’d learned at the Priory and was determined to make her own aromatic oils, tisanes, poultices and other remedies when her little crop of herbs was sufficiently grown.

Even though Morag, the castle healer, had a small garden beside the kitchen, she was old now, and growing vague. There were fewer and fewer herbs available. As her eyesight was failing, distinguishing between the leaves was becoming difficult. When Arya had expressed her desire to learn the healing arts, Morag was delighted. Now they spent as much time together as they could.

She stopped briefly in the infirmary to bid good-day to the elderly woman.

There were only two patients there. One was an old man, fast asleep beneath his coverlet, the other was a small boy whose finger was being tended.

The old healer looked up, her weathered face breaking into a wide grin at the

sight of Arya. “This lad has broken his finger after slipping on a rock by the burn.”

Arya watched with interest as Morag prepared a small splint for the boy’s finger and she helped to complete the job of binding it tightly to help the bone set.

They sent him on his way with a tear-stained face.

“I heard ye were lost in the night,” said Morag. “Did the faery folk whisk ye tae the other world?”

Arya gave a wistful smile. If only that was what had happened instead of the events that had taken place in the grim tavern at *Baile Mòr*. “I dinna ken, Morag. I’m nae too sure what happened. But Gilly came tae me rescue and brought me safely home.”

The old woman chuckled. “He’s a fine warrior. There’s nae better man. One of these days a lass will catch his fancy and she’ll be a right lucky one tae have him by her side.”

At the old woman’s words Arya couldn’t conceal her smile. She’d been mulling over whether Gillebride had a wife or not. Now, thanks to Morag, she knew he was free.

“Gilly’s nae a MacKinnon?”

“Nae, he’s nae from these lands, but he’s as loyal tae the laird and his family as any of the MacKinnon clan.”

Arya was curious about Gilly’s background. He’d hinted at some great sadness in his past, but he made it clear he had no wish to talk about it. Perhaps Morag could fill in some of the missing story for her.

“Oh? Where is he from?” she asked, innocently enough.

Morag chuckled. “Has he caught yer fancy then?”

“Why nae,” Arya said, a little too quickly. She caught Morag looking sideways at her with a piercing look. “I’m merely curious.”

“I cannae tell ye much about him.” Morag responded. “He’s nae someone tae talk about his past life. I can tell ye that he’s been the laird’s friend fer many a year. They met when they were mere lads, fighting together fer the Wallace. I heard they saved each other’s lives on more than one occasion.”

Arya nodded. Morag had added a few pieces to the puzzle. Yet, somehow, she could tell there was a great mystery still to be unravelled that would tell her what she needed to know about this man who had come into her life in a most unexpected way.

After leaving the infirmary she crossed the keep, where some young squires were practicing their sword play and archery, making her way past the stables to the small patch of earth she’d been allocated by the gardener. The herbs

were flourishing, new green sprouts shooting up, tiny leaves forming. It would not be long before she would have the herb garden she'd been dreaming of.

Beside the tiny garden patch, she dodged around a stack of hay bales destined for the stables, and entered the small, dilapidated timber building she'd been using as a potting shed. It contained an old rickety table on which she had laid out a number of clay pots where the precious seeds she'd collected were sprouting.

As she pushed open the creaking door, she heard a familiar "meow". It was Grimalkin, the cat who spent his days dozing on the table and his nights keeping the mice in their place.

Arya bent and took the tabby cat in her arms. "Greetings dear friend," she said in a singsong voice that was rewarded by a loud purr as she stroked its soft, striped fur. Cradling Grimalkin in her arms she browsed along the neatly lined-up little pots, her eyes lighting up whenever she spotted a tiny green shoot appearing.

Giving the cat a quick kiss between the ears, she placed him on the floor. Picking up her small watering-can she dipped it into the water barrel outside the door and headed inside again to tend to the seedlings.

Humming idly to herself she moved from pot to pot, with Grim winding his way between her ankles, purring, his fluffy tail held high. Her thoughts were fully occupied with sprinkling the baby herbs with just the right amount of water to ensure they thrived, something she counted as a blessed distraction from other dark thoughts that had a nasty habit of intruding.

She was so busy, she failed to see the flaming arrow coming to rest in the hay bales beside the shed.

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## CHAPTER SIX

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Once he'd had a chance to splash some water on his face and hands and find himself a freshly laundered shirt, Gillebride met with Blaine and Errol in Blaine's study.

This was a big chamber at the heart of the castle, with room enough for the clan meetings held there regularly. The trappings of the wealth and power of the MacKinnons were there for all to see in the rich tapestries and embroideries hanging from the soaring walls and in the giant silver and crystal chandelier that could hold a hundred candles, suspended by a heavy silver chain from the ceiling. There was a giant table at the centre where the men would usually be seated on benches.

But today the room was softly lit with only two flaming torches in the wall sconces. Rather than taking a place at the table, Blaine and Errol were seated in well-padded armchairs at the fireside.

Blaine poured them each a wee dram of whisky as they sat before the fire. Last night's chill was still claiming Gillebride's bones and the warmth was welcome, even though he always felt uncomfortable about being close to a fire, even one as tame as this one blazing merrily in the hearth.

He opened his satchel and took out a sheaf of rolled parchments which he passed to Blaine. These were the signed declarations of allegiance to King Robert the Bruce that Gilly had been charged with obtaining from his journeys through the islands over the past few weeks.

“There are some still tae make up their minds, and some who’ve downright refused tae join the fight,” he told Blaine and Errol. “But believe me, I sat in many a great hall, paid a million compliments tae too many crusty lairds, downed many an ale and drunk many drams of whisky tae get all of these.”

Blaine nodded with a short laugh. “Aye, ye’ve done a fine job tae have brought us so many allies.” He frowned, “But there are still many chiefs we cannae count on.”

“Aye, they all have their reasons fer staying out of the war, but none are fer the English king. If nothing else, we can be sure of that,” Gilly countered.

“And the MacQuarries?” Errol asked. “They’re our neighbours and supposedly our allies, but they’re still raiding our lands.”

Gilly’s thoughts raced over the events of last night. *Should I tell them that Arya has a price on her head? That she’s a murderess, and the clan laird, Anrias MacQuarrie has a personal debt tae settle with her?*

There was no doubt he would have to pass on this information. If it came to the notice of the MacQuarries that Arya MacDonell was residing at Ardtun Castle, there’d be all hell to pay. Blood would be shed.



But before he could betray Arya's dark secret, he would need to talk with her and get her agreement. Meanwhile, her brothers had left her under the care and protection of Clan MacKinnon, and that meant they were pledged to keep her safe.

“The MacQuarries are an unpleasant bunch. Although I'm certain loyal tae the rightful king, I dinna enjoy meeting with Beolin. I cannae trust the man, or his master the laird.” Gillebride said, shaking his head. At least he'd made it clear that, as far as he was concerned, their neighbouring clan was not altogether trustworthy.

In the meantime, there were these unwonted feelings – a slight giddiness, a fizzing below his waist and into his groin, a longing to feel Arya's soft body against his and to catch the scent of roses in her hair – that, try as he might, he couldn't shake.

*Ridiculous. I have nae right tae feel this way. I should see her just as I see Hannah, as a little sister. Rightly, she is someone tae care fer and protect, but nae tae dream of holding and kissing, or tae hear, in me sleep, her moaning and crying me name.*

After he'd finished his discussions with Blaine and Errol and eaten a selection of cheese and cold meats, he walked off to the stables. Looking out for his horses would be a way of distracting himself from his lusty thoughts of Arya and take his mind off the danger she was in. Even if it was only for a short while.

He'd been away for weeks and he'd instructed the grooms to bring them in

from the fields where they'd been turned out in his absence. Now he'd give them a vigorous brushing and take them to the blacksmith to clean and trim their hooves and made sure they were properly shod.

He walked toward the stables, whistling tunelessly. He was looking forward to it. He loved his horses and his favourite war horse, the bay destrier, Bayard, had saved his life on more than one dire occasion.

He'd only just entered the stables when he looked up to see Arya emerge from the infirmary and make her dainty way across the muddy cobblestoned keep. She seemed lost in thought and he wondered if she was plagued by thoughts of the heavy load of guilt she was carrying in secret. His heart ached. If only he could take some action that could make her problems dissolve and fade into nothing.

He watched as she ducked into an old timber outbuilding and he noticed, for the first time, the small patch of earth nearby where small green plants were growing. This must be where she tended the herbs that she'd told him about.

Craning his neck, curious to see what she was doing, he smiled to himself as he saw her pick up Grimalkin the mouser who lived at the stables. He felt a sudden flash of envy as he saw her plant a kiss on the moggy's head through the doorway. He was turning back to the stables when he heard the all too familiar 'thwack' of an arrow close by.

He looked up with horror to see flames darting up from one of the hay bales outside the old shed.

*What the devil?*

Realizing at once that a flaming arrow shot by one of the young squires in the keep must have gone astray, he felt his heart leaping like a startled frog in his chest. By all the saints – Arya was inside the little shack and as the flames danced higher, he could see she'd be in grave danger should a spark catch in the thatched roof. Holy Jesus! The old timber building was nothing better than a tinderbox. He felt fear gripping his chest, but he pushed the thought away. Arya was in danger.

Without further thought, he snatched up one of the saddle blankets stacked at the stable entrance and raced across the short distance to fight his way through the flames into the shed.

“Get down,” he shouted, racing through the door and slamming it behind him. Through the smoke already filling the room he could hear Arya coughing.

He grabbed her in his arms and flung them both onto the floor where the air was almost clear of smoke.

“Why did ye nae run the instant the flames rose up?” he muttered, breathing in too much of the smoke. “We canna leave by the door,” he said, coughing. “We must break the window if we're tae get out of here before the fire takes us.”

It was then he saw she was clutching Grimalkin to her chest.

“I cannae leave the wee moggy tae burn,” she said, and his heart softened at the sight of her gentle, caring expression.

*Of course. She'd think of the damned cat and put her own life at risk.*

Loud shouts came from outside, where men were already attempting to quench the flames.

“There's water in the barrel outside,” she whispered.

Holding her and her tabby bundle tight, he hauled her to her feet and flung the saddle blanket over them.

“Keep this pressed against yer nose and mouth so ye dinna breathe any more of the smoke,” he said. “It will kill ye faster than the flames.”

Keeping a kerchief wrapped around his face he guided her to the rear of the shed where one small window high up in the wall offered them a way out. By now smoke was entering from the ceiling and it was clear that the thatched roof was only moments away from bursting into flames.

He grabbed an old shovel that was leaning against the wall and, with one blow, took out the window, glass, frame and all.

“Quickly,” he said seizing both her and Grimalkin in his arms and lifting her up so she could get a hold on the window.

She released Grimalkin, who hovered for only a second on the sill before leaping to the ground below. Grabbing the sill, and with some heft from Gillebride, Arya hauled herself up into the window space.

“Dinnae tarry Gilly,” she cried before launching herself.

Gillebride was close behind. He was tall enough to reach up to the window sill and, praying the rotten old timber did not give way under his weight, he scabbled his way up and dived out.

He landed almost on top of Arya, who flung her arms around him and for a few moments they clung together. Grimalkin sat only a few paces away calmly washing his paws.

“You’ve saved me life again, Gilly,” she said.

Coughing mightily, he shook his head attempting to rid himself of the stark image in front of his eyes of a raging fire, consuming everything in its path.

Pulling himself into a sitting position, knees drawn up, he was all at once overwhelmed by the smell of burning and smoke filling his nostrils. The breath left his body, his head swirled with distant screams and he was overcome with a terrible sense of helplessness. He placed his head in his hands, trying to slow his racing heart.

Arya bent over him. “What is it?” she said.

It was hard to shape his tongue around the word. “Fire,” he managed at last, “me greatest horror.”

She took his hand. “And despite that, ye came through the fire tae rescue me?”

Shuddering, he drew her close. “Are ye all right lass? I was afeared....” He tried, but he could not find the words he sought to finish the sentence.

He allowed himself to drift as he’d done at other times. Like when he’d thought Errol MacKinnon had been killed taking arrow meant for him. It was almost as if he had been observing himself from a great distance. He was aware of things happening around him but he was no longer present.

“I’m perfectly fine, thanks tae ye Gillebride MacThomas, and so is Grimalkin.” Arya gave a tiny moan. “But I fear all me hard work with me herbs may have been lost.”

He did not respond to this and, when she glanced up, she saw his eyes were gazing at nothing in a distant stare and he seemed not to have heard a single word of her prattle.

Staying close, she gently stroked his arm, wishing there was something she could do or say that would relieve his anguish. Clearly, the fire had taken a great toll on him, yet their lives had not really been in grave danger and it

seemed, from the shouting, that the men were having success in putting it out.

“I think the fire will soon be quenched,” she whispered. To her relief he turned to her with a brief smile.

“Aye. Fortunate indeed they were quick and yer water barrel was handy.” He brushed a hand through his hair. “Are ye all right lass?”

She coughed again. “Thanks tae ye, Gilly, I’m nae harmed and neither is dear Grimalkin. But every breath I take makes me want tae cough. It feels like I’m filled up with smoke.”

“That’s one of the perils of fire. I feel the same.” He coughed as if to bring home the point he was making. “The smoke burns ye inside and it hurts when ye breathe.”

She screwed up her nose at this. “It could have been so much worse but fer yer quick thinking.” She leaned in and planted a soft kiss on his cheek.

Mayhap her lips lingered a tad too long and a little too near his own lips, but she saw his mouth quirk in a smile.

“Lass, ye never should be wasting yer sweet kisses on an old man like me,” he said.

But she saw a sparkle in his eye and was left in no doubt that he’d liked the

wee kiss. A trickle of wickedness slid through her at the thought of kissing his lips. Her gaze fell on Gillebride's mouth.

She pshawed at that. "Ye're nae old in me eyes Gillebride MacThomas, whatever ye may tell yerself. Besides, methinks there's nae such thing as a wasted kiss."

Leaving him with that morsel of food for thought, she gathered her skirts and went to stand. He rose quickly and reached a hand to help her up. Grimalkin, having finished his washing, wandered off in the direction of the stables. For a moment, she stayed as she was, her hand enveloped in Gillebride's, her blue gaze fixed on his dark eyes while a riot of delicious sensations rippled through her. Her heart, still beating fast from the drama of the fire and their escape, managed to speed up its pace even further.

It was Blaine who interrupted this heady moment. Rounding the corner of the stables he called out. "Gilly, Arya, thank the Good Lord, ye're safe." He rushed over to them.

"Word came tae me that one of the squires had sent a fire-arrow in the wrong direction, setting the outbuildings alight." He looked around, catching sight of the smashed window behind them. "Thank Christ ye were here, Gilly, tae bring Arya tae safety."

She nodded shyly and bobbed a curtsy. "Aye me laird, me brave protector wasted nae time in coming tae me rescue, yet again."

Blaine placed a hand on Gillebride's shoulder. "Seems the fire is out now,



without too much damage after all and, if nae fer the water so readily tae hand, it would have likely caused a great conflagration.”

Another man came running up. “Fire’s out, me laird. And...” he turned to Gilly, “thanks tae melord Gillebride the lass here was saved. The thatch will need repairing, but it’s a miracle we were able tae stop it in time.” He bowed from the waist to Blaine.

“Good work, I’ll come and thank the lads,” he said turning to follow the man. “And I’ll be having a very stern talk with those young squires who have yet tae learn how tae shoot their arrows straight.”

“I must go with Blaine,” Gillebride said, but he still kept her hand in his.

“And I must see tae me wee herbs,” she said, walking with him, clutching his hand.

The hay bales outside the shed were all but reduced to still-smoldering ashes, and the men were already clearing them away. Two scullery-maids from the kitchen were there with brooms sweeping the blackened remains up and placing them in buckets.

The thatch overhang beside the shed door had burned away but, fortunately, they’d flung enough water over it from Arya’s barrel to quench the fire before it took proper hold. In the process, they’d splashed a great deal of water through the door, saturating the shed to prevent the spread of the fire.

Blaine and Gilly conferred with the men while Arya surveyed the sodden mess inside her shed. She busied herself setting the pots to rights. Most of her plants were sturdy, foraged as they were from the woodland, and the damage was not too great.

But Gillebride MacThomas was another matter. The fire had taken him to a place of deep pain from his past, and Arya was determined to find out more.

Coughing, she straightened her kirtle and brushed a stray red curl out of her eyes. She'd brew them both a steam-remedy that would cure the fire that still burned with every breath she took.

Smiling to herself, she went off in search of just the right aromatic herbs she'd need.

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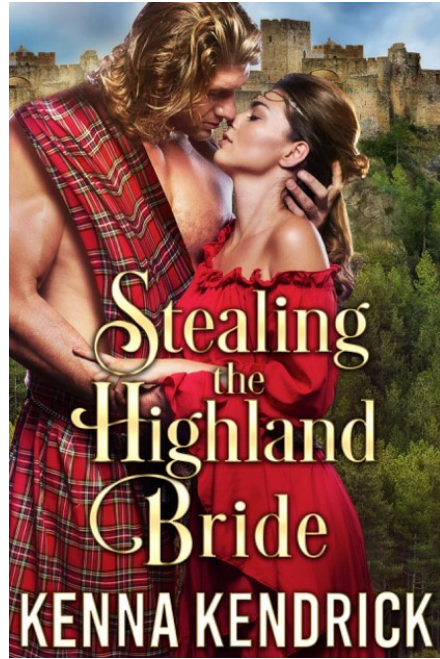
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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Kenna Kendrick is an American based author of Historical Scottish Romance living in Austin Texas with her husband and three children. Her more than 25-year-old experience as an English Teacher has brought her close to the literary world, growing her love for fictional stories.

Her love for literature was also strong because of her father John who used to write crime-stories. While she tried following on her father's footsteps, a trip to Scotland sealed the deal for as she fell in love with the Celtic myths and the bleak Highlands.



*Note from Kenna*

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