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THE
Highlander's
INCONVENIENT
Wife

ELOISE MADIGAN

THE HIGHLANDER'S INCONVENIENT WIFE

A Scottish Historical Romance Novel

ENGLISH LASSES IN SCOTLAND
BOOK III

ELOISE MADIGAN



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ABOUT THE BOOK

“You can’t keep me locked up in here forever!”

“I shall be the one to decide if ye stay in here forever or not.”

Rumored to have killed even those closest to him, losing an eye in the process, Laird Jasper doesn’t let anyone near.

Until a feisty English Lady, Joan, stumbles into his castle.

Fleeing from London and her own dark past, Joan finds herself in the arms of the most dangerous Highlander. And he refuses to let her leave.

But no matter what everyone says about him, it’s not the Beast, but his touches that are holding her captive...

PROLOGUE

Dearest Avery,

I do not have the time for pleasantries, even though I hope your family is well, and so is Melissa's.

By the time this letter reaches you, I shall be in Scotland. I cannot stay in London much longer. Something terrible has happened...

I will explain everything when I reach your home.

Your loving friend,

Joan Moore

Lightning lit up the sky as Joan sat bolt upright in her carriage seat. Something was very, very wrong. The carriage was bumping over the road at an alarming pace; even if they were trying to make up the time, there was no reason for the coachman to be pushing as hard as they were. She had fallen asleep at the last crossing and wasn't sure how much time had passed.

She used her hands on the ceiling to steady her body and stop her head from bumping against the hard wood. It was evident from the gap in the curtains that a massive storm was raging outside the confines of her carriage. Fat drops of rain beat against the glass with thunderous force. The sound was so deafening that she feared the glass would shatter.

Joan struggled to steady her body as she shifted over to the side and fought with the curtains for a few minutes before managing to see out the window. With her cloak covering her hair, she stuck her head out the window and yelled to the coachman, rain and wind stinging her face as she squinted. "Why are we traveling so fast?"

The ferocity of the storm drowned her voice as she looked at the trees that

were passing in a blur; even the road beneath the wheels was barely visible from her vantage point. Her heart leaped in her throat when she suddenly realized that the wheel was dangerously close to the edge of a cliff. There was nothing besides a gaping void at the bottom, waiting for her to slip and fall.

Swallowing hard, she turned her face up and tried again; taking a deep breath, she yelled up to the man who was urging the horses on as if his life depended on it.

“Excuse me!” Her voice managed to reach the man as he suddenly became even more startled than he already was. The horses veered dangerously close to the edge before he gripped the reins and straightened their path.

“Get back in the carriage, Miss!” he yelled down to her with fear in his muffled voice. “It’s not safe for you to be leaning out like that!”

Joan felt her annoyance growing with the man as she gripped the door even tighter to keep her balance. Her dress was soaked from the neck down, and her muscles were beginning to ache from her efforts. “But why are we going so fast? You will throw us over the edge soon if you aren’t careful!”

“There are bandits, Miss!” The man’s panicked voice sent chills down her spine as he once again lifted the reins and urged the horses forward, yelling at them to run faster.

As if the world were moving in slow motion, Joan turned her head to see a group of men following close behind on horses. The largest of the men rode

in front on the back of a white stallion. His dark hair was tied in a braid behind his head. It was clear from their kilts that the men were Scottish. Several of them sported long swords at their sides and daggers tucked into their boots.

Their fierce cries curdled her blood, making the pit of her stomach jolt along with the coach.

Her blood turned to ice when the leader caught sight of her and grinned, displaying his yellow teeth in a gut-wrenching grimace. Moving as quickly as she could, Joan climbed back inside the carriage and closed the window before ensuring that the bolt was securely in place on both doors. There was no telling what would happen to her if the men caught up to them.

The look on the leader's face alone told her that they weren't the kind of gentlemen who would take the belongings and go while leaving her and the coachman unscathed.

Thoughts of panic tumbled through her mind as Joan held on for dear life, praying that they'd make it through in one piece. It sounded to her as if the bandit's horses were gaining on them when the carriage suddenly took a sharp turn, throwing her body against the door with unrelenting force.

It was a good thing she had taken the time to ensure that the door was latched; a hit like that would have very likely thrown her across whatever God-forsaken part of Scotland they were traveling through.

Regaining her footing, she quickly returned to her seat and braced herself for

the worst. It was only a matter of time until the men caught up and dragged her from the carriage. Her ribs ached with a fierce throbbing from the impact. She would definitely have quite a few bruises in the morning.

If I live to tell the tale.

Minutes passed as she sat in her seat and awaited her inevitable fate. It wasn't until the storm began to subside that she realized the carriage was slowing down. The sound of horses and yelling had also faded into oblivion. It couldn't have been more than ten minutes since she locked the door.

Perhaps we lost them.

She took a deep breath before opening the window once again and sticking her head into the misty rain that now came down in a gentle sheet. "Did we manage to shake them?" she called to the coachman after looking behind them and seeing nothing but an empty road and forest. It was difficult to see beyond the darkness that engulfed the lane they had entered.

"Yes, Miss," he called back. "I saw an opening to a road next to a forest and decided that it was our best way of escaping. The men seemed hesitant to follow and eventually fell back." His voice became more audible as the rain petered out to a few drops.

The clouds were clearing but did little to improve the poor visibility they were currently experiencing.

“That’s wonderful; well done,” Joan praised him before looking around. “But where are we now? We should have been at the castle already by my reckoning,” she asked him, eyeing the thick woods suspiciously. Either side of the road was covered in thick pines that made it hard to see what lay beyond. She was beginning to think that there was a reason the men had fallen back.

“Don’t worry, Miss; I have made many a trip into the Highlands. I can find my way through the country without a map,” he said proudly as the horses trotted on. “We will be there soon; it was only a minor detour.”

Joan had her doubts and was about to protest when the woods suddenly cleared, opening the road that led to a castle. The high buttresses loomed in the distance through the mist that hung in the air like a blanket thrown over a bed.

“See,” the man called proudly as he raised himself up in his seat. “I knew exactly where we were all along. You’d be hard-pressed to find me lost in the Highlands of Scotland.”

Finally.

She ignored the man’s boasting and sat back in the carriage as relief flooded her body. The journey had been a long and arduous one, but Avery would welcome her with open arms and take her in — hopefully allowing her to have a very hot bath. She looked down at her dress that clung to her body; she’d catch a cold if she didn’t change out of her sodden clothes soon.

It wasn't long before the carriage came to a halt. Not wanting to waste any more time, she unbolted the door and stepped out, her shoes squelching in the mud from the storm that had passed. She nearly lost her footing but quickly steadied her body on the door before looking around.

The walls of the castle seemed different from how she remembered them; they were higher and far more ominous, but then again, it had been years since last she visited her friend. Many of the Highland castles looked the same to her in any case. They all had a hint of mystery about them that led one to expect something magical.

Chalking it up to the mist along with the ordeal she had just experienced, she lifted the hem of her skirts and picked her way through mud, walking toward the iron gates that were visible in the distance.

The fog swirled around her, creating cloud-like patterns as she went. A chill was beginning to move through her bones as she gripped the edge of her cloak and tightened the wet fabric around her shoulders. The sound of an animal in the distance made her jump as she hurried along.

It wasn't until she was right on top of the gates that she realized a guard was staring at her with an intent look in his eyes. He was wearing a bright red kilt with black squares and a sword at his side. The thought crossed her mind that she had perhaps come at a very inopportune time. There were often wars between the clans that required extra security.

"Excuse me," she said politely. "I am here to see..." Her words were cut short when a man suddenly seized her from behind, gripping her upper arms with a vice-like grip.

“What do you think you are doing?” she yelled at him in panic and fought with all of her might. It wasn’t the warm welcome she’d been expecting all along.

“Stop yer fightin’!” the guard she had been approaching yelled. “Take her to the dungeons at once,” he barked at his friend.

“Wait!” she tried to plead with him. “I am a guest of the castle!”

“An’ I’m the laird!” he laughed maliciously at her as she was dragged backward through the gate, her feet kicking in the air as she yelled. It was quickly becoming evident to her that no one was going to explain what the dickens was going on.

“I’m telling you to let me go!” she yelled at the man dragging her. “I know the laird and his wife!”

“I’m sure ye do,” the burly red-headed man said in a sarcastic tone. “We’d all like a private audience with the laird, but I’m afraid ye will have to try better next time,” he laughed in a tone that matched his friend’s. “That’s if ye make it out alive.”

“Let go of me, you barbarians!” Joan screamed as she kicked and fought, trying her best to free herself from the men who had escorted her into the castle by force. She’d tried her best to call for Avery and Darragh, yet no one had come to her aid. She didn’t even know what had happened to the coachman, whether he had escaped or been taken captive as well.

The guards were dragging her through a section of the castle she’d never seen before, but then again, there would have been little to no reason for her to visit the dungeons in the past, she realized as they pulled her over the damp and filthy floor.

“The laird will hear of this!” she threatened as one of the guards gripped her braid when she tried to escape. A searing pain shot through her scalp as he yanked her back onto her feet.

“Aye, that he will,” the burly red-headed man who had taken her into captivity replied. His face was rugged and in desperate need of a shave as his double chin wobbled beneath his jaw.

It wasn't long before they stopped in front of a cell that seemed to be separate from the rest, hidden in a small alcove at the end of the long stone corridor.

Joan was suddenly thrown into the dungeon as a second guard shut the door with a deafening clank of iron. Using her hands, she broke her fall on the pile of hay in the corner. "Wait!" she yelled when she realized that the guards had begun to retreat. "This is no way to treat a lady! I don't belong in here!"

The large man suddenly stopped in his tracks as the rest of the men took their leave. Turning around, he looked at her with a wolfish grin that made her stomach churn; she far preferred it when he didn't smile at all.

Joan noticed for the first time that the guard was an overly chubby man with a round belly that wobbled when he moved. He seemed much less threatening than the rest of the guards. His eyes were a piercing blue, and his thick mop of curly, red hair was very unkempt. "Let me guess, ye're a lady that was on her way to visit a friend in Scotland?" he said in a sarcastic tone that baffled her. Why he would find her story amusing or worthy of ridicule was beyond her.

"That... that is exactly what happened," she said in confusion as she picked herself up and dusted off the hem of her skirt. The dungeon they had thrown her in was less than accommodating for a woman of her class. A thick layer of grime and dust seemed to coat everything in there, including the floor and pile of hay she assumed would be used as a bed.

"Aye," The man nodded in agreement as he drew nearer. "An' this is all just a big misunderstanding. The laird ye were looking for has a castle that looks a lot like this one?"

“Yes,” she breathed hopefully as she gripped the bars. “I’m so glad you understand what I mean. Now if you will just go and tell the laird that I am here, we can all clear up this little misunderstanding and get on with our lives.” She stopped when she suddenly realized that the man was alluding to the castle belonging to someone other than Darragh. “Whose castle is this then?”

The man tilted his head back and let out a laugh that echoed down the long hall. “Thank ye, lass, I needed a laugh. Yer story isnae original, but it did make me laugh,” he glossed over her question and plucked at a tear in his eye. “It’s nae often that our prisoners stick to their stories as hard as ye are sticking to yers.”

“My story?” she asked taken aback. “It’s not a story; it’s the truth. Listen,” she tried again as she cleared her throat and composed herself. She was certain that everything was just a big misunderstanding that would soon be resolved if she could just talk to Avery or Darragh.

“Aye?” the guard said with one bushy eyebrow raised.

“I am a lady from London; I’m not sure what kind of misunderstanding has taken place here, but if you can just go and get the laird or his wife, I am certain they will clear things up.” She cocked her head to the side and glared at the man. “You don’t want to get on the bad side of the laird when he hears how deplorably you have been treating me,” she said defiantly.

Shaking his head, the man came closer and beckoned her toward the bars with a chubby finger when she took a step back. “I’ll give ye a piece of

advice lass, I may find yer behavior amusing, but ye better behave when the laird gets here. He willnae take kindly to yer little outbursts. So, keep yer mouth shut if ye want to keep yer pretty little head on yer shoulders.”

“Barbarians,” Joan said in shock as she glared at the man. “I can assure you that I am in no kind of danger. The laird would never lay a hand on me.”

“Suit yerself then!” the man called to her over his shoulder as he turned on his heel and walked away, his giant belly wobbling out on the sides as he went.

“Or am I?” she whispered to herself as he left her alone. Her situation was only getting stranger the longer the night dragged on.



Joan looked at the bars of her cell as a single torch flickered in its sconce from across the hall. She was beginning to think that Darragh and Avery were away. There weren't any reasonable explanations as to why they would leave her in the dungeons unless everything had been part of an elaborate joke. It was entirely possible that she had been mistaken for someone else, and nobody even knew that she was there.

Sighing heavily, she sat up straight on the pile of hay and hugged her legs to her chest. She'd gotten so bored in the past few hours that she'd taken to cleaning her cell, using a bushel of hay she'd tied together with ribbon from her cloak in an attempt to sweep the floor.

She was hungry, thirsty, cold, and just about fed up with everything that had

happened to her. She wanted answers, and she wanted them now.

Pushing herself up, she removed a few strands of hay from her hair and walked over to the bars. “Excuse me! Mr. Guard?” she called out to the empty hall.

Her voice echoed down the dark hall, leaving in its wake a deafening silence that wrung in her ears. “I know you must be there,” she tried again. “I don’t think you would throw me in a cell and leave me unattended with no one to ensure that I’d not escape.” She waited a few seconds before taking a deep breath and readying a scream.

The guard’s voice suddenly called to her just as she cocked her head back. “What in the name of all the Gods are ye yelling about?” The same red-headed man from earlier came around the corner with a tired expression on his face. “Nobody can get any sleep with yer yelling.” He rubbed his eyes with chubby fists that resembled hams.

“Oh, thank goodness,” she said in relief when he neared the bars. “I thought you would never come.” She never thought she’d ever like anyone that dragged her into a cell, yet even the sight of the ornery guard was a welcome relief after her hours of isolation.

“What is it?” he snapped at her before massaging his forehead with his index finger and thumb.

“Do you remember when you mentioned earlier that the laird would be paying me a visit?” she asked him defiantly, ignoring the grumpy looks he

was giving her through her fingers.

“Aye?” he answered with a heavy note of sarcasm in his voice. “I have nae bumped me head. I remember just fine.”

“Great,” she laid her enthusiasm on thick. “When will that meeting be?” She scrunched her shoulders up with a giddy look on her face as if she were a child waiting to hear what treat she would receive. Her mother had often told her that her penchant for sarcasm and humor would someday get her into trouble. Bravery was not a trait that sat with her either.

“I dinnae ken,” he said irritably. “So, why dae ye nae just be quiet an’ wait like a good little lass?” He seemed sincere in his request.

“What do you mean you do not know? I thought you were a guard at this castle. Should you not know details such as that?”

“Obviously I am a guard at this castle.” His tone became even more irritable as he shook the ring of keys on his belt.

“Then how do you not know when my meeting with the laird will be?” She looked him in the eyes as she spoke, trying her best to draw him into a conversation where he’d give her more information.

“Because the laird doesnae schedule meetings according to his prisoner’s whims,” he countered. “Ye will be seen to when the time is right, an’ not a minute earlier.”

“Fine,” she said as her hopes were once again dashed. “Could you at least bring me a mug of water and something to eat? I am practically starving in here.” She licked over her dry lips that were beginning to crack. “I’m parched.”

The guard looked at her with an exasperated sigh. “Fine, I’ll bring ye something to eat an’ drink.”

“Thank you, that’s very kind,” Joan replied earnestly, trying her best to bite back the sarcastic replies that came to mind. She didn’t want the man to change his mind now that he was willing to help her.

“But that better be the end of yer yelling an’ complaining,” he huffed, turning on his heels and glaring at her with one eye shut. “I have been far too lenient with ye since ye got here. That ends now.”

“Whatever you say.” She rolled her eyes with an exasperated sigh that matched his.

Pausing with a frown on his face, he gave her a strange look. “Did ye…” His words trailed off as he looked over her shoulder and into the dungeon. “Did ye clean up in there?” He seemed shocked that anyone would take the time to neaten the cell when they were being held captive.

She looked over her shoulder at the neat floor and pile of hay that had been stacked in a perfect rectangle. Her makeshift broom leaned against the wall in the corner with a heap of dust and grim at the bottom of the bristles. Even the

walls seemed cleaner once she had run the bristles over the stones.

“Well, you left me in here for hours with nothing else to do,” she snapped at him, feeling slightly sheepish at having cleaned a cell. There was just nothing else she could think of to pass the time. “You could have at least given me a book to read or something.”

“Never mind.” He shook his head in disbelief and turned to leave.

“By the way,” she called after him. “Will you be bringing my belongings down here, or are they waiting for me upstairs in my room?”

“What?” he turned around with a completely defeated look on his face. It was clear to her that her behavior was puzzling him in a way that left him at a loss.

Good. She thought it was never a good idea to show anyone that you were scared. You always had the upper hand in situations if people thought that you were not scared, a motto that had served her well in the past.

“My belongings. I had a trunk full of clothes with me on my carriage,” she stated as a matter of fact.

“Dae ye nae grasp the fact that yer a prisoner?” he asked her with his head cocked to the side. “Ye dinnae seem to understand the seriousness of the situation ye are in.” He looked at her for a second. “Ye are having me on, aren’t ye?”

“I am most certainly not,” she said seriously. “A lady needs her things.”

“The coachman drove away with all of yer things when we took ye captive,” he explained. “Ye have nae more things; I dinnae eve ken if the laird will keep ye alive.” He muttered under his breath about annoying English women before turning the corner and leaving her all alone once again.

Heaving a sigh, she leaned her forehead against the cool steel of the bars. Nothing was making any sense to her at present. Why would the coachman leave her behind, taking all of her belongings with him? And where on earth were Avery and Darragh? Surely, they knew she was coming. She had posted the letter before leaving London.

Feeling her anger grow, she shut her eyes and raised her voice, “Is anyone else there?”

“Aye, I am, sweetheart. I heard that ye were looking for me,” A deep and ominous voice called to her from the shadows, sending a wave of chills down her spine.

Joan’s eyes shot open as she stared at a neat pair of black leather boots.

Jasper watched as the woman's bright blue eyes shoot open in shock. She had clearly not been expecting him to be standing there. He was pleasantly surprised to see how beautiful she was. The blue of her irises was flecked with green, and her golden hair was braided down her back. Even in her dishevelled state, he could see that she was stunning.

Her porcelain skin resembled the skin of a peach. The sculpted features were angelic, to say the least, with a fine nose and cherubic lips. Jasper's eyes moved down her slender form as he noticed the way her damp dress clung to her curvy hips, displaying the hourglass figure that made his breath catch in his chest. She was quite shorter than he was while still being tall for a woman.

"You are not Darragh," she said in confusion as she took a step back and looked him up and down, tilting her small chin in the air.

Right, an English lass, he thought to himself when he caught her accent.

“Aye, my name isnae Darragh,” he agreed with her as she looked him up and down as if appraising a piece of jewellery. He didn’t know who Darragh was, but he suddenly took an instant dislike to the man. He was an incredibly lucky bastard if he was allowed to touch this lass, whoever he was.

“Are you the laird of this castle?” she asked fearlessly as she looked him in the eyes, making him respect her for not backing down. The woman was feisty, to say the least.

“Aye, ye are correct again, lass,” he replied, thoroughly amused by the situation at hand. It had been ten years since anyone had been caught roaming his land. Even longer since anyone dared to look him in the eye. He’d almost thought the guards were lying to him when they said that a woman had been taken captive. He wasn’t sure what he had been expecting, but a feisty English woman with a flair for danger wasn’t it.

“Great, if you are the laird, we can finally discuss the situation at hand.” She walked closer and laced her hands through the bars, displaying her delicate fingers.

Jasper immediately noticed the lack of rings.

“The situation at hand?” he asked with one eyebrow raised as he crossed his arms over his chest. He found the way she held his gaze utterly fascinating. It was hard to find anyone that would look him in the eye without focusing on his eyepatch and the scar that ran over his eyebrow. The way she squared up to him without any fear felt like a breath of fresh air. He would have thought her a formidable foe if she had been a man.

“Yes, the situation at hand,” she complained. “Your brutish guards have manhandled me without giving me a chance to explain. I am a lady from London; I should not be treated in this manner.” She looked around her surprisingly neat cell in disgust. “Or kept in a place like this.”

He briefly wondered if one of the guards had taken pity on her and cleaned the floor, an unlikely scenario that he’d take up with them at a later stage.

“Oh, did they nae make ye feel welcome, me lady?” he asked as he held back his mirth. There was something highly amusing about the fierce English woman challenging him even though he could probably carry her over his shoulder with ease.

“I can see that you are mocking me,” she said irritably. “It’s clear that you do not have any manners yourself. So, if you would just let me out, I will be on my way, and you will never have to see me ever again. My coachman took a wrong turn, and we ended up...” Her words were cut short as he smirked at her.

“Who said that I wish to nae see ye again?” He could see that he had taken her off guard with his words.

“I assumed you didn’t want me on your lands,” she explained, “given the fact that you’ve locked me in your dungeon, or is this how you treat all of your guests that you wish to see again in the future?”

He noticed the gentle curve of her mouth as she stood up to him, matching his snide remarks with witty banter and unbridled sarcasm.

“So ye called me down here to say that ye wished to be set free?” He bit back a small, mocking smile. She seemed so fragile and small behind bars, yet she presented herself as if she was the biggest man on Earth. The fire in her eyes seemed to rival the passion of half of the men in Scotland. He’d win all of the clan wars if he had a woman like her leading his troops.

“Yes,” she said. “I would like to continue my journey. My friends will be waiting for me. So, if you would kindly just let me out...”

“Oh, ye willnae be going anywhere, me lady,” he shot her a wolfish grin. “Ye will be staying right here.”



“I beg your pardon,” Joan said, shocked by the audacity of the handsome man who held her captive. She was finding his mocking mannerism hard to stand as he teased her with every sentence.

The laird was far more handsome than any Scottish man she had ever seen before in her life — or any other man, for that matter. His wavy black hair hung on his muscular shoulders as if the wind had blown the waves into the strands. He was far taller than she was with a toned body and broad shoulders. His cheeks were stubbled, and his visible eye was green.

She liked the length of his nose and the way his lips seemed to express his thoughts before his eye even did.

Shaking her head, she tried to focus on his words instead of the muscular

shape of his body which made her skin tingle in an alarming manner. The effect his presence was having on her was unnerving, to say the least.

“Ye heard me,” he said, displaying a charming smile with perfect teeth though the underlying threat wasn’t lost on her as she met his gaze. “Ye are nae going anywhere until ye tell me who sent ye.”

“Nobody sent me,” she said defiantly. “I was traveling by coach through the highlands when my carriage was attacked by a group of highwaymen,” she did her best to explain. “I was on my way to visit a friend at her castle. My coachman took a wrong turn and then...”

“I dinnae see how an English lass can have friends in the highlands of Scotland,” he challenged her words. “I find that to be very unbelievable.”

“Well, I do,” she retorted. “Stranger things have happened on heaven and earth other than an English woman marrying a laird. Or do you really have no idea of things that happen in the world beyond the walls of your castle?”

“Is that the story then?” he challenged her even further as he held her gaze. His eyes fell to her chest and travelled down her body as she spoke.

“Yes, that is the story, my laird. I was going to visit my friend, Ave...” Her words were once again cut short in an utterly annoying fashion as he spoke over her again. She was beginning to lose her cool with the way he kept on interrupting her.

“My friend married a laird; she even has children with him. She’s a respected member of the Scottish community. Her sister even married his friend who is also a laird,” he mocked.

She took a moment to look him over once again, forming an opinion of him that wasn’t as pleasant as the attraction she felt to his outward appearance.

“Exactly right — not that I see the allure in marrying Scottish men, judging from what I have seen so far. We’d all be better off sticking to men of the crown.” She felt a strange fluttering in the pit of her stomach when he looked at her with a strange darkness in his eye that was mirrored by the teasing smile on his lips.

The man oozed passion from every pore of his body. She briefly wondered how it would feel if he pushed her against the bars and kissed her lips.

“Aye, then ye better tell yerself that ye dinnae like what ye see,” he smirked. “The way ye are staring at me will have me sending for the guards soon enough. There’s nae telling what ye would try if ye were nae locked in a cage.”

“I was not staring,” she snapped and averted her gaze, knowing full well that she had been looking him up and down. The man was one of the most handsome and roguish beings she had ever seen. His physique reminded her of the sculptures her father had made of the Greek Gods from Athens. What was worse than that was the fact he seemed to be able to read her thoughts.

“Suit yourself,” he said with a shrug of his shoulders. “Why is it then that an

English lass was traveling by herself in the highlands? Where was yer guardian if yer story is true? I ken that the English never let their women out of sight even for a second.”

“I’ll have you know that I do not need a chaperone or even a guardian as you put it. I am more than capable of looking after myself, thank you very much.” She cocked her head to the side defiantly as she glared at him, feeling a strange heat accumulating in her core. Her body seemed to respond in strange ways the more time she spent with the man.

He was utterly infuriating with the way he baited her, yet she was drawn to the strange and dangerous laird with his forward ways and handsome features. Joan knew that she should be afraid of her captor, yet she couldn’t help but feel a strong pull toward the danger he exuded.

“Aye, that’s why ye are currently being held captive in me prison. Ye are very capable of looking after yerself.” The mocking in his voice made her anger flare up.

“I am currently being held captive in your prison because your guards are some of the most incompetent men that I have ever had the misfortune of encountering. Not a single one of them gave me the chance to explain what I was doing on your doorstep.”

“Ye should be careful, me lady; speaking to men like that in the highlands is a sure way of getting hurt.” He looked her up and down, taking in the curves of her body through her sodden dress. “Or worse, killed,” he said in a husky voice as his eye grew darker.

Joan shuffled on her feet, feeling hot under the collar from the way he was looking at her. The hungry look on his face reminded her of a wolf on the hunt.

“Are ye ready to tell me why ye were traveling alone? The highlands are nae place for a lady, even one that claims to be capable of looking after herself.”

“Quite frankly, I don’t think that is any of your business,” she said. His cool demeanor was having a strange effect on her that she didn’t know how to handle. “And I can look after meself,” she mocked his Scottish accent while making a face.

“Well, me lady,” his voice dropped to a dangerous tone as he took a step forward and stared at her through the bars, “until it does become me business, ye will be enjoying a stay here in me dungeons.”

Joan swallowed hard as he glared at her. She wondered if her mother had been right, and her smart mouth had finally proven to be her downfall.

“**Y**ou can’t keep me locked up in here forever!” she yelled at his back as he turned to leave. His sudden dismissal of her was leaving her flustered and angry. She wanted to get out of the dungeon as soon as she could.

Halting his departure, the laird froze and turned to her, taking a few steps forward with his calf muscles bulging as he walked. He stopped a few inches away from the bars with a dangerous glint in his eyes. His knee-length kilt left her wondering what lay beneath the layers of fabric.

Joan felt her mouth going dry as she examined the hungry look in his eye. The brilliant green reminded her of a cat on the hunt or the drawings of majestic tigers her father had shown her from India. He was fiercely attractive with an ominous air of authority. Danger oozed from every inch of his manly physique.

“I didnae think ye are in any position to demand what happens to ye.” He looked at the bars with a satisfied sneer. “I shall be the one who decides if ye stay in here forever or nae.”

“Just send word to Laird MacKinnon!” She felt her anger bubbling up to the surface once again as he stared at her with an arrogant look in his eyes. “He and his wife, Avery, will be here within an hour or so if you just let them know I am here.”

“I dinnae ken a Laird Mackinnon or his wife...” He glared at her.

She wondered if he believed her or if he thought that she was making the whole story up — to what end, she did not know. It was clear that the man had trouble trusting anyone, especially a young woman that had wandered onto his lands.

“That doesn’t surprise me at all,” she said sarcastically. “You don’t seem like the social type that would mingle with others. I’d love to see you reeling at a ball.” Her eyes challenged him as she spoke, igniting a fire in his eye that hadn’t been there before.

“You haven’t even told me your name; I demand you tell me at once!” She hesitated for a second. “I should at least know the name of the man holding me captive,” she explained.

“Ye are very liberal with yer demands, lass,” he said in a low voice.

Approaching the bars, he towered above her like a mighty mountain, gazing into her eyes with a menacing look as he gripped the bars above her head. “Ye will nae tell me what to do, lass; I am laird of this castle.”

Standing her ground, Joan allowed herself to examine his masculine face and the strong lines of his jaw. Her insides fluttered like a swarm of butterflies, but she chalked it up to her thirst and the fact that she hadn't eaten in hours, and she pushed the thoughts of his muscular arms to the back of her mind. Fatigue was beginning to set in and cloud her judgment, it seemed.

"Well," she whispered with a glance at his lips before looking up once again, "you won't be telling me what to do either." She wondered what had happened to his one eye as she looked at the flecks of brown in the hauntingly green one that wasn't covered with a leather patch, but she quickly shook off the thoughts when he brought his face closer to hers.

His hand was suddenly on her wrist in a flash, holding her steady with a firm yet surprisingly gentle touch that she couldn't resist. Her body felt frozen with something other than fear as she waited to see what he would do next. His woody scent held her captive to his whims as her feet moved of their own accord, responding to his guidance as she drew closer to the bars.

Pulling her forward slightly until her body was once again pressed against the bars, he whispered in her ear, sending a ripple of bumps over her skin, "I wouldnae say anymore if I were ye."

Her breathing quickened as she felt the sculpted muscles of his body that were pressing into hers through the hard steel. Her legs suddenly seemed weak at the close proximity of his body to hers.

"Or what?" she asked in a soft voice, completely distracted by the feel of his thumb running over the tender flesh of her wrist. "What would you do to me, my laird?" she asked as she looked into his face, her chest rising and falling with every quickening breath.



“I...” Jasper felt his breath catching in his throat as he looked at her beautiful features. He couldn’t help but wonder how her lips would taste against his or how the curve of her hips would feel in his hands. The intoxicating scent of her rose perfume filled his senses, driving his face closer to her as if he were under some kind of spell.

Every ounce of his being wanted to kiss the woman, even if it was just to shut her up. Yet he would never allow himself to trust another person, let alone an English woman who could very well be a spy sent by one of the rival clans.

He wouldn’t allow himself to bed a woman that would more than likely hold a knife to his throat while he slept. They were still face to face — hers turned upwards to look at him in the eye, and when she spoke, he could feel the heat of her breath on his skin.

“Yes? my laird? What will you do?” she asked him again in a husky tone that made his blood run hot with desire as he focused on her lips. There was something utterly beguiling about the blonde-haired temptress.

Jasper suddenly realized that he was dangerously close to kissing her when he mustered all of his strength and willpower to let go of her wrist and take a step back. Shutting his eyes, he took a minute to compose himself and rid his mind of the not-so-unwelcome thoughts of her body. He couldn’t allow himself to be fooled by a prisoner in his dungeons.

“Or else, there will be nae dinner for ye today.” He managed to get the erratic beating of his heart under control. “I will return in an hour with a tray of

food; perhaps by then ye will be hungry enough to tell me who sent ye.” He examined the shock in her eyes before turning around and leaving her to her own thoughts. He knew deep down that his sudden departure was more to protect himself than it was to protect her.

“I keep telling you that nobody has sent me!” she yelled after him. “I ended up here by accident. You are keeping an innocent woman captive, my laird!” Her angry pleas fell on deaf ears as he made his way down the hall. “You haven’t even asked me my name!” her voice trailed off as he left the passage and took a corner.

Stopping to take a breath, he leaned his head against the cold stones of his dungeon walls as images of his past flashed across his mind. His mother’s scream pierced his head as a sharp pain shot over his eye. The memories of betrayal never seemed to leave him be, no matter how hard he tried to outrun them.

Straightening, he rolled his neck on his shoulders until the pain began to subside. There was no time to think of the past or the beguiling witch he held captive.

Peace had reigned on his land for many years. He’d worked far too hard to achieve the fear he’d struck into the hearts of the neighboring lairds; he wasn’t about to let an English spy ruin his hard work — no matter how delectable she may be.

Joan lay on her back in the tiny room on her pile of hay, staring at the ceiling with her arms splayed out on either side of her body as if she had been making an angel in the snow.

She couldn't believe she had run all the way from London in the hopes of escaping a cruel fate only to end up captive in the castle of a dangerous, albeit handsome laird.

A handsome laird that I wanted to kiss... NO! she scolded herself as the memory from earlier came flooding back. Their faces had been so close. Had he wanted to kiss her as much as she had wanted to kiss him? The passion in his eye had made her believe he did.

You can't think like this, Joan, she reminded herself when she recalled the words of the red-headed guard. The laird was a dangerous man who wouldn't hesitate to take her life if she gave him half the chance. She wondered if he really would behead her if she said something he didn't like. She'd never met anyone in her life as threatening as he was, yet there was something else in his eyes, a hungry look that tugged at her heart. It was almost as if there were another side to him that he never showed, besides his vicious exterior.

Joan quickly jumped to her feet when she heard steps coming from down the hall. Fixing her dress and attempting to pull the loose pieces of straw from her braid, she stood at the back of the cell with her hands behind her back. A delectable fragrance filled her nostrils as the smell of cooked meat wafted through the air, making her stomach growl with a hungry pang.

The first person to appear was someone that Joan had not been expecting at all. A lady who looked to be in her late forties or early fifties came up to the bars with a worried look on her face. Her small hands were clasped in front of her black dress. “My poor child,” she said in a sweet voice, “you must be so scared.” She clucked her tongue in disapproval as she looked at the sparse dungeon. “Not to mention hungry and tired.” She quickly rounded on the laird as he joined her at her side.

Joan noticed with great disappointment that the appetizing fragrance was still a distance away.

Perhaps this is a form of torture he wishes to implement, she thought bitterly as her stomach growled.

“How could you keep a young lady captive in a place like this?” The lady thrust her slender finger in his face as she scolded him. “This is no way to treat a woman, Jasper!”

Joan stifled a giggle and looked away as she tried her best not to laugh. The pained expression on the man’s face was more than enough payment for Joan after the treatment she had received.

Turning back to Joan with her kind green eyes, the woman gave her another smile. “I apologize for the treatment ye have had to endure while here at the castle. I hope ye willnae hold it against us.” Her black hair, which was peppered with grey, was pulled in a tight bun behind her head, giving her face an open look of warmth.

The laird seemed like a giant beside the small-statured woman as he shifted uncomfortably on his feet after her scolding. He somehow seemed far less threatening with her at his side.

“Open the door and let the poor woman have a meal,” she commanded the laird.

Nodding once, he retrieved a key from his belt and unlocked the door while keeping an eye on Joan. The look in his eyes conveyed the fact that he still thought she was up to no good. “Stand back an’ allow the guard to bring in the food, Maither; there is nae telling what she might do.”

The woman gave him a strange look of confusion. “An’ what exactly dae ye think she will dae to me? Braid me hair? She’s a wee lass, for Heaven’s sake, Jasper. Ye could probably lift her up with one hand.”

A small giggle escaped Joan’s lips as the laird glared at her. The woman seemed very entertaining as she made fun of the man with ease.

He can’t be that bad if this woman isn’t scared of him.

“Dinnae be silly,” she said to him and stepped into the cell just as the same red-headed guard from before carrying a tray of delicious food followed suit. “Here ye are, lass; ye must be starving,” the woman said as she took the tray and waited for the red-headed guard to place a table and chair in the room for her to use.

Joan hurriedly sat on the chair and tucked into a bowl of venison stew with vegetables that was accompanied by a plate of freshly baked bannocks. She gulped a mouthful of ale before tucking right back into her food.

The salty and rich taste of the meat went well with the bannocks that she continued to wash down with the flat Scottish biscuits. It may very well have been the hunger talking, but Joan swore blind that she’d never tasted anything as good as that stew in her life.

“I’m sorry ye were left alone in here for so long,” the woman apologized. “My name is Martha Ainsley, an’ this is me son,” she gestured to the laird, “Jasper Ainsley or Laird MacShaw to those who didnae push his mule-sized head into the world.”

Joan warmed up to the older woman; she liked the kind lines around her eyes and the lilt in her voice when she spoke. She especially liked the way his mother put the laird in his place. There was at least one person in his life that could boss him around. Looking from one to the other, she realized that she could see the family resemblance. Jasper had the same color as his mother’s eyes and hair as well as the long aristocratic nose.

“My name is Joan Moore,” she said after wiping a dribble of stew from her chin. She had been so hungry that she’d forgotten all about etiquette and decorum, devouring her food like a hungry dog that hadn’t been fed in a

week.

“Well, Miss Moore, I hear ye have quite the tale to tell,” Martha encouraged her to speak and explain how she had come to the castle.

“Oh, dear,” she said when Joan was finally done explaining about the incident with the coachman and how she had come to be taken captive. “Well, that’s quite an ordeal ye have been through, child. I can only apologize again an’ say that I will try me best to rectify the situation. I’ll have the maids draw a hot bath at once, an’ ye can move upstairs to the guest room,” she offered kindly with her hands clasped in front of her once again.

“Maither,” Jasper stepped in and used an authoritative voice that seemed to have little to no effect on his mother whatsoever. “She isnae a guest in this castle; she is a prisoner. I cannae have her traipsing about the castle an’ gathering information for whichever laird has sent her here.” His voice became almost angry as he spoke.

“Very well,” his mother said dismissively, “she can be yer prisoner an’ me guest. Either way, she is moving upstairs into a proper room; I willnae hear more on the topic. Gregg can look after her an’ ensure she doesnae braid yer hair while ye sleep.” She gestured to the red-headed guard who seemed taken aback as if looking after her was the last thing he wanted to do.

Joan resisted the urge to give him a look that said ‘I told you so’; he had been even less willing than the laird to listen to her on the score that she was in fact a lady that belonged upstairs.

“Maither, I must protest,” Jasper complained as he stepped in once again. “She is English for goodness’s sake. Ye cannae think that treating her like a guest is a good idea.”

“An’ what is wrong with being English?” she asked him in exasperation before turning back to Joan who had finished her last drops of ale after wolfing down her food. “I think her accent is lovely; it will surely liven up the place.”

“Thank you, Lady Ainsley,” Joan said kindly as she wiped her hands on her already ruined dress.

“Please, my dear, call me Martha,” she smiled warmly, making the corners of her mouth and eyes wrinkle.

“Very well, please call me Joan in that case,” she responded in kind, ignoring the displeasure that was oozing from the laird.

Jasper groaned as he rolled his eyes and shook his head, muttering something under his breath. “I hate to interrupt yer tea party, ladies, but this is nae the time nor the place for exchanging such pleasantries.”

“Then naebody will be pleasant to ye, dear.” Martha dismissed him again with a wave of her hand.

Joan watched as the red-headed guard named Gregg suppressed a laugh but quickly cleared his throat when the Laird glared at him.

“Then the second thing I shall be doing for ye, Joan, is sending a letter to yer friends. I’m sure that Laird MacKinnon an’ his wife will be relieved to hear that ye are safe. I’m afraid that the letter may take a while as ye find yerself in one of the most remote parts of Scotland, but ye will have a comfortable bed until they come for ye.”

“Maither,” Jasper said more strictly as he brought himself up to his full height.

Joan found herself staring at him again. The man’s presence was utterly intoxicating despite his arrogant mannerisms and penchant for needing things his way. “I forbid ye to send any letters to this Laird MacKinnon; what if Joan is indeed a spy, and they are waiting for us to say that she is here a’fore they declare war on us? He probably sent her ahead.” He flung accusations at her with a sneer.

“He did not,” Joan suddenly jumped to her feet in defence of her friends. “Darragh is probably just as shocked as you are that I’m even in Scotland at all.” She suddenly froze and bit her lips when she realized that she’d said too much. It would be an absolute disaster if anyone discovered the real reason she was in Scotland and sent her back to London.

She wouldn’t put it past the ‘beastly’ laird to send her packing if he knew she was on the run. The name seemed to fit the way he acted toward her. He may even cast her out with nothing at all if he thought her to be too much of a hassle.

“Why would he be shocked to learn that ye are in Scotland?” he asked her as

he folded his arms across his chest with a triumphant look in his eyes. The look on his face seemed to convey that he knew he'd been right about her all along.

Joan began to panic as she shifted from foot to foot and looked around the dungeon, fidgeting with her dress.

How do I get out of this now? I can't tell him the truth!

“Dinnae press the lass if she disnae wish to say anything more,” Martha said to her son before turning back to Joan. “I will go an’ prepare yer room as well as yer bath; Jasper or one of the guards can show ye the way when ye are ready, dear,” she said kindly and excused herself.

Jasper motioned for the guards to leave the room before advancing on Joan.

Feeling a sudden burst of fear that he would send her back — or worse — in the pit of her stomach, Joan stood her ground, angling her shoulders up and stepping back while he stepped forward until she was nearly against the wall. Her breathing quickened when she realized that she was all but trapped in the dungeon with the Beastly Laird.

Placing his finger beneath her chin, he tilted her face up until she was looking at him.

Joan felt her heart racing again at his presence. She wondered this time if he truly was going to kiss her or worse, behead her for treason since he was

sticking to the narrative that she was a spy. Then again, she would rather lose her head than be sent back to England.

“What secrets are ye keepin’?” he asked her with a dark look in his eyes that made her heart leap in her throat.

She suddenly realized with shocking clarity that she had once again backed herself into a corner that would be difficult to navigate.

Jasper’s lips spread into a wolfish grin as she swallowed hard.

“**T**hat’s for me to know,” Joan said defiantly as she titled her chin in his hand, the wolfish grin on his face making her insides flutter.

“And for me to find out?” His breathing deepened as he lowered his hand. “That’s fine, I can accept a challenge, me lady.” His voice was almost mocking as he hesitated for a second with the back of his fingers near her cheek before lowering his hand entirely and backing away.

Was he about to stroke my cheek?

Excitement rushed through her veins at the thought of his fingers against her skin.

Clearing his throat, he looked to the side. “Gregg will show ye to yer room,” he said. “But ye are nae to leave without permission. Dae ye understand?”

Joan rolled her eyes at the stubborn way he was sticking to his ideas and control. His mother believed her story to be true, so why couldn't he?

"I said," he took a step forward again and cupped her chin in his hand, gently guiding her face toward his when she failed to respond, "dae ye understand?"

"Yes," she said irritably, holding his gaze and matching his energy with every ounce of courage she could muster, "I understand, my laird."

"Good lass," he smirked at her as his face drew nearer.

Joan's heart galloped at a fierce pace as the heat from his breath tickled her skin.

Leaning in close, he placed his lips inches away from her ear. "Ye dinnae want to get on me bad side, lass." He drew away from her again and examined her face as if he were trying to see her reaction.

"Do you have a good side then, my laird?" she asked defiantly. "I shudder to think what your bad side is if you've been displaying your pleasant side up until now."

Joan swore he was trying to suppress a smile as he looked her in the eyes, but he quickly cleared his throat and turned his head to the side.

"Gregg!" he yelled down the empty corridor in a booming voice that filled

the air, sending a wave of bumps over her arms.

The sound wasn't all too unpleasant to her, she realized as she listened to the deep timber in his voice that was ever present, even when he yelled.

As if he had been taking a nap, Gregg came running down the hall at breakneck speed with his belly wobbling in front of him. His thick red hair was matted at the back and sticking out on the sides, suggesting that he had been leaning his head against a hard object such as a wall. "Aye, me laird!" he huffed as he struggled to catch his breath at the cell door. His puffy cheeks were flushed red from his efforts.

"Show the lady to her chambers, stand guard by her door day and night, and dinnae allow her to leave unless ye are with her or I have given me permission," he barked orders at the man who took things in his stride.

"Aye, me laird!" he shouted louder than was necessary and saluted with his hand raised to his brow.

"We shall talk again, me lady." Jasper narrowed his eyes at her with a dark look. "Remember me rules; dinnae leave yer room on yer own. The consequences of ye rejecting instructions could be...very dire for ye..." His voice trailed off in an ominous tone.

"Yes, my laird, you are in charge." She rolled her eyes and shook her head. The man got under her skin and worked on her nerves in a very annoying manner. It was safe to say that a lasting friendship wasn't in the works.

Gregg seemed shocked at the way she spoke to his laird as he looked at her with a wide-eyed expression before remembering his place and looking at the wall once again as he attempted a perfectly straight posture which was hard given the fact that he built like a pregnant ox.

The silence rang in her ears as Joan waited for the laird's response. It was in moments like these that she was sure she should have followed her mother's advice. Now, she wished she had been less sarcastic and more obedient. She wasn't sure if the slight tilt of his mouth meant that he was amused or if he wanted to teach her a lesson.

"See the lady to her room and stand guard," Jasper barked at Gregg again as he left the cell, making his way down the hall before disappearing around a corner.

I guess I'll find out later...

She watched the laird retreat before turning back to the guard. "Shall we get going then?" she asked the guard while clasping her hands in front of her chest. "What was your name again? Gregg, was it not? I'm given to understand that there's a hot bath awaiting me upstairs. We wouldn't want the water to get cold, not after Martha has taken the time and effort to ensure my comfort." She laid it on thick as she watched a vein pop in his jaw.

"Martha?" he asked her almost angrily as if she had the audacity to use the woman's given name.

"Yes, Martha," she said cheerfully. "The laird's mother insisted that I call

her by name.”

The man seemed as if he wanted to say something to her, but he quickly cleared his throat after spluttering on his words. “Aye, I will show ye to yer chambers,” he said reluctantly and began to leave.

“My lady,” she added for him.

“Sorry?” he turned to glare at her over his pudgy nose.

“You heard your laird referring to me as my lady; do you not think you should be doing the same?” She pursed her lips and cocked her head to the side as she waited for his response. Vengeance was indeed sweet after the way they had treated her earlier.

“Aye, right this way, me lady,” he said reluctantly with a mock bow.

“That’s better,” Joan nodded as she followed the man.

They walked out of the cold corridor and up a flight of stone stairs that led to the main castle.

Joan was pleasantly surprised by the lavish décor and polished wood that met her gaze. The interior of the castle was warm and welcoming with portraits of Jasper and his mother along with landscapes and clay vases. She wondered if Martha had a hand in the decorating or if the stone-hearted laird did interior

decorating in his spare time.

The thought of Jasper Ainsley arranging flowers in a vase brought an amused smile to her lips as they made their way toward the gallery.

“Ye should nae speak to the laird the way that ye do,” Gregg reprimanded as he glanced at her over his shoulder.

“I beg your pardon?” She drew her gaze away from the portraits hanging on the wall and looked at his mop of curls as they climbed the stairs.

“The laird is a dangerous man; none of the other lairds in Scotland dare challenge him on any grounds. We keep to ourselves; that’s how it has been for many years, an’ it has served us well. Ye’d do better to remember how powerful he is.”

It suddenly made sense to Joan why the laird didn’t know about Darragh or his clan. If it was true that the MacShaw clan kept to themselves, they wouldn’t care to know about anyone else.

“He once killed a man for trying to make a joke with him,” Gregg said proudly with his chest thrust in the air as they reached the top of the landing. The way he told the story made it seem as if a more honorable act could not have been committed even if a man were to try.

“That... seems very irrational,” Joan responded honestly as she shook her head. She wondered if the story wasn’t but a rumor that had developed

because of his behavior. He'd seemed dangerous to her at first, but there was something about him that made her believe he was more than just "the Beastly Laird." She was sure he would kill a man if the people he loved were threatened, but she wasn't sure he would kill a man for telling a joke. That, even for someone as threatening as the laird, seemed a little far-fetched.

"Here we are," Gregg said as they stopped in front of a door at the end of the landing. "This is the guest chambers." He placed his hand on the silver knob and pushed the door open, allowing her to walk past. "Just remember," he said as he fetched a chair from the room across the hall, "I will be right out here the entire time. Daenae get any funny ideas."

He placed the chair with the back against the opposite wall and took a seat, making himself comfortable with his arms over his chest and his head leaning on the back support.

Joan realized why the man's hair had been mussed from earlier; he was a serial napper. It wouldn't be hard to get past him if she wanted to escape. Yet where would she go even if she wanted to escape? From what she had seen on her carriage ride over, the castle was surrounded by very steep cliffs.

Gregg shut his eyes and nestled himself in the chair, lifting a chubby leg and placing it over the other to form a square on his lap. His kilt suddenly slipped up, revealing a very hairy thigh that was speckled with fat.

Joan panicked as she quickly stepped into the room and shut the door behind her. There were many frightening things she was willing to see in her life, but the contents of Gregg's kilt were not one of them.



“Ye wanted to see me, maither?” Jasper grumbled after stepping into the kitchen. The steam from cooking filled the air as his mother chopped a pile of herbs on a wooden board with expert precision.

“Ye may leave us, Maudie,” she said the maid who handed her a copper pot.

“Aye, me lady,” the mousy-haired girl bowed politely before taking her leave.

Jasper leaned against the jam of the door with his shoulder as he looked around the spacious kitchen, waiting for his mother to give him the lecture he knew was coming.

Various dried herbs hung from the ceiling rafters in thick bunches giving the room a distinctly appetizing aroma that made his stomach growl. The castle employed a very good cook, an elderly woman who had been serving them for many years. Yet Martha frequently sent her to rest. Whenever she became restless, she needed to prepare a meal or two, which was more often than not.

“I ken that ye dinnae agree with me about the lass,” she said as she continued to chop the herbs. “I thought it best to intervene; ye cannae treat a young woman like ye have done with the other spies,” she insisted as she glanced up at him through the strands of hair that hung in her face.

“I was nae planning on killing her, maither,” he replied grumpily, bored by the line of scolding even after his mother had gotten her way. Plus, he wasn’t

sure he could, even if he wanted to. He was more likely to kill anyone else for trying to hurt her. He wouldn't say that to his mother, of course. Not when he didn't even know what it meant.

“Nae,” she said sarcastically as she used the knife against the palm of her hand to scoop the herbs into the pot that had been left by the maid, “ye were just about to starve the poor lass until she told ye who sent her.” She pursed her lips and shook her head. “Which, by the way, I dinnae think anyone has. The poor girl's story seems true to me.”

“An' how would ye ken that her story is true?” he asked with his eyebrows raised. “Did ye suddenly gain a wealth of knowledge on spies that I am nae aware of?”

Martha cocked her head to the side and gave him a look as if to say he was not in his right mind. “The lass with the beautiful braid, perfumed hair, fine dress, and expensive scent. Ye are asking me why I dinnae think she is a spy?”

“There isnae need to be sarcastic, maither,” he said irritably as he pushed himself off the door and stood up straight. He had to admit to himself that his mother had a point; the chances of anyone sending a beautiful young woman into enemy territory was very unlikely — especially given the reputation he had. Although it may have been a ploy to play on his sympathies, but it was still very unlikely that they'd risk her life.

“I've prepared a bath for her,” Martha continued, ignoring his obvious displeasure in the way Joan was being treated as a guest. “I'll take her up a tray with soup and bread once she's settled in.” Using all of her might, she hoisted the copper pot off the table and walked it over to the hearth where an

empty hook was waiting for her over the crackling fire.

“Very well,” he gave himself over to the situation at hand. Jasper knew very well that there was no arguing with his mother once she had set her mind to something. “Ye can give her a bath an’ fill her stomach, give her some clothes if ye must,” he agreed as he recalled the damp dress that had clung to her very alluring figure, “but I dinnae want the lass wandering about the castle; she should stay in the guest chambers until her friends have come to fetch her.”

“An’ why is that?” his mother gave him a tired look as she wiped her hands on her already dirtied apron.

‘Just because she isnae a spy, disnae mean that she isnae trouble,’ he said gruffly. It certainly troubled him how she looked him in the eye and challenged every word he said. His reputation of being fearsome or — what did people call him? *Beastly* — hadn’t reached England yet, it seemed.

“What if she disrupts the running of the castle, or worse, what if she learns the goings on an’ says something innocently at the next ball she attends?” he grumbled. “She seems like the type of woman that would attend every ball an’ talk more than what is good for her.” He recalled the way she had spoken back to him every chance that she got.

“An’ how would ye ken what kind of lass she is?” Martha placed her hand on her hip and narrowed her eyes. “How long have I been tellin’ ye to at least consider talkin’ to a lass. Ye would nae ken what a good lass was if one ran up an’ bit ye on the...”

“That’s enough, maither...” Jasper shook his head in frustration as he pinched the bridge of his nose between his finger and thumb. “I said the lass can stay in the guest chambers until her friends come for her. I daenae want to hear anything more on the matter.”

“Suit yerself,” Martha said with a sigh as she added the rest of the ingredients to a pot and stirred. “I’d prefer it if ye apologized to her, but I’ll settle for ye nae placing splinters of wood under her nails.” She muttered something under her breath about men and the way they handled things.

Jasper rolled his eyes with a heavy sigh as he turned to leave the kitchen.

“Oh, an’ Jasper,” his mother’s voice made him pause in the doorway. “I’m nae saying that ye should marry the bonnie English lass, but ye should really consider talkin’ to a woman once in a while. Ye are nae gettin’ any younger, and someone has to carry on yer line.”

Taking a deep breath, Jasper left the room without another word. The argument of his succession and love had long been a topic of tension between him and his mother, yet he wasn’t about to compromise the safety of his clan and family, no matter how bonnie any lass may be. He knew from his past that trusting anyone fully was a huge mistake.

Joan removed her sodden clothes as she kicked them to the side and slipped one of the clean night dresses over her head. She didn't care how she looked as long as she could feel something dry against her chilly skin.

“Just a moment,” she called and hurriedly reached for a dressing gown when a knock sounded at the door. The first person who came to mind was the laird, and he definitely couldn't see her in an ill-fitting night dress.

Hurrying over to the dresser, she quickly checked to see if her braid was still intact. “Come in,” she called again when a second more impatient knock came.

She turned to see Martha accompanied by a maid carrying a tray of food. “Oh,” she said before she could stop herself when she realized that it hadn't been the laird.

Why was I expecting it to be him?

“Ye seem disappointed,” Martha smiled with a cheeky grin.

“I...I thought it might be my friend, Avery,” Joan quickly lied to cover her tracks.

“Oh, no dear,” Marth said kindly as she came into the room with the maid. “I did mention earlier that any letter we write may take a week or more to reach yer friends,” she stopped and frowned. “Have ye written a letter already then?”

“Uhm, no.” She felt sheepish as she sought for an adequate excuse that would explain her behavior. “I think I’m just exhausted from the whole day.” She placed the back of her hand against her forehead.

“Of course, dear,” Martha said kindlier as she gestured for the maid to leave. “I brought ye some soup an’ bread with ale; that will fill ye up nicely before yer bath. The maids are just heatin’ up the water.”

“That would be wonderful.” Joan breathed a sigh of relief as she made her way over to the writing desk where the maid had set the tray. She chalked her own enthusiasm to see the laird up to the fact that she hadn’t slept in a while. There couldn’t possibly be any other reason she had taken a sudden interest in the Beastly Laird.

“I just wanted to see that ye had everything ye need,” Martha broke into her thoughts. “I’m afraid that night dresses may not fit ye that well.” She glanced down at Joan’s ankles that were sticking out beneath the fabric of the gown

and dress. “But I’m sure we can find ye some dresses that will fit ye just fine. Ye may be here for a day or two, an’ we want ye to be comfortable.”

Joan stopped reaching for a piece of bread and looked at the woman as she spoke. It seemed highly unlikely to her that the laird wanted her to be comfortable in his castle.

“Never mind what anyone else says,” Martha shook her head. “I want ye to be comfortable an’ that’s what matters. Nobody will bother ye as long as I am around.” She smiled encouragingly as she nodded toward the tray.

Swallowing hard, Joan wondered what would happen if Martha had not been there to save the day. She was all but certain that she would still be in the dungeons with no food. She desperately wanted to ask the woman about her son but knew that she needed to gain her trust a little more before she probed any further.

“Now,” Martha said as she pulled out the chair from the dresser and turned to Joan, “why is it that a lovely young lady such as yerself was all alone in the highlands? Ye dinnae have to tell me if ye are nae comfortable,” she added quickly when she saw the way that Joan was hesitating.

“I was just wondering why ye said yer friends would be surprised to see ye, that’s all.” Martha smiled kindly as the corners of her eyes and mouth wrinkled. “Call it an old woman’s curiosity.”

Licking a drop of soup from her lower lip, Joan thought of her predicament back home and how easy it would be for anyone to track her down if they

caught even a hint of where she was. “I came to surprise them,” she decided to bend the truth a little. “I haven’t been able to see Avery or her sister Melissa since they got married.”

“I see,” Martha nodded, “an’ yer maither dinnae mind that ye traveled alone?”

Joan began to panic when it seemed as if the woman was growing more suspicious of her story. Clearing her throat, she quickly thought of a way out of the corner she had backed herself into. “The coachman was a trusted servant of our family.” She felt a wave of relief at having thought of an adequate excuse. “He was often entrusted with accompanying me on my journeys.”

“The coachman that ran away when ye were taken captive?” Martha seemed as if she were trying her best not to laugh.

“I... I can only think that he probably went for help. I think I would have done the same thing if I were in his shoes and saw that I was outnumbered by guards in kilts,” she took her best shot.

“Aye, I may have done the same; kilts are frightful pieces of garments at the best of times,” Martha said and stood. “I have thoroughly enjoyed our conversation lass. I hope ye willnae leave us too soon; I would very much like to have more conversations with ye. It can get awfully lonely up here on the cliffs with the same faces to talk to, day after day,” she commented as she took a few steps toward Joan and tucked a strand of hair behind her ear.

Joan felt sorry for the woman who was so obviously desperate for company.

“I always wanted a daughter, but God saw fit to bless me with a son instead. Daenae get me wrong, I love me son, dearly, but he’s nae much of a conversationalist, not since...” Her eyes seemed sad as her voice trailed off. “Look at me blatherin’.” She covered her sadness with a smile. “I’ll leave ye to it, an’ let ye eat. The maids will be up with yer bath in a bit.”

Joan watched her leave the room and shut the door behind her back. There was something in the woman’s eyes that made her wonder about the Beastly Laird and why he acted the way he did.

Was there something terrible in his past that he was trying to outrun just as she was?



Joan sat in her hot tub of water as the steam drifted into the air. It felt good to ease her sore muscles after such a lengthy ordeal. Martha had brought her a second tray of food consisting of soup and ale to slake her hunger and thirst. The food had done her good as she now felt sated and well.

She liked the older lady and her humorous ways. She seemed far too young to Joan to have such an unpleasant son like Jasper, not that his unpleasantness had anything to do with his mother’s age. He could have had an ancient mother and probably turned out just as grumpy and unpleasant as he was now.

An owl hooted outside her bedroom window, drawing her attention to the full

moon and beautiful view. The back of the castle overlooked a beautiful pond with stunning lilies that floated on the surface.

She wondered if she would be allowed to explore at any point before Avery and Darragh came to her rescue or if she would be kept inside the room for days on end.

The violent sound of someone chopping a piece of wood startled her as she jerked in the tub, making ripples on the surface of the scented water. A smile spread over her lips when she realized that Gregg was sound asleep outside her bedroom door. She was sure that his wife never got any sleep if he had a wife. The man seemed solely devoted to the laird and his castle.

Deciding that she was clean and fully relaxed, Joan pushed herself up and stood in the tub, reaching for a towel that had been placed beside her on a chair. She dried her body with the soft cotton and pulled on her undergarments. The thought of having to sleep wasn't appealing to her at present; she looked at the door and waited to hear if Gregg was still sound asleep in his chair before reaching for one of the dresses Martha had provided her with.

Tiptoeing across the room once her shoes were on, she suddenly remembered the compromising position her guards' legs had been in earlier. Not wanting to see the family jewels, she grabbed a dry towel and gently opened the door, holding the towel up in front of her face and carefully walking forward so that his decency, or lack thereof, would be hidden.

Triumphantly placing the towel over his legs, she backed away and turned down the hall once she was certain that he hadn't awoken. The snoring commenced as if nothing had changed.

Joan let out a breath as she leaned against the banister at the head of the landing.

“Out for an evening stroll?” someone suddenly asked.

She jumped and clutched at her chest when she realized that Martha had snuck up behind her.

“Daenae fuss, lass; ye are nae committing any crimes,” the woman said cheerfully. “I daenae blame ye for nae wanting to stay in yer room. ’Tis a lovely evening with a warm breeze.” She took a deep breath as if she could smell the flowers in the air. “’Tis my favorite time of year when the lilies are blooming.”

“I didn’t think I could sleep yet,” Joan explained when her heart returned to normal; she was sure that Jasper had crept up behind her. “There was a lovely view from my window, so I thought I could explore a bit.”

“Ye daenae have to explain yerself; ye’re nae a prisoner here,” Martha said with a shake of her head.

“But...” Joan began to explain that her son had said she was indeed a prisoner.

“I daenae care what he says; sixteen hours of labor has given me certain

rights in life, an' I will be sticking to them," she said with a wink. "Go out the front door an' take a left; ye will find the beautiful view ye saw from yer bedchamber."

"Thank you," Joan mouthed. "There's one other thing," she said when Martha began to leave.

"Aye?" the older woman shot her a questioning glance.

"I left my guard asleep outside my bedroom door," she admitted sheepishly.

Martha frowned as she took a step back and glanced down the hall. Shaking her head in slow motion with her eyes shut, she sighed. "The walls of this castle can come down around that man, an' he'll still be asleep. Was it ye that covered him with a towel?"

"Yes, he was... uh... indecent..." She sought for the words to describe her predicament in a ladylike manner.

"Ye mean his eggs an' bannock were on display for all the world to see?" Her direct words made Joan choke. "Well, each to his own, I guess," Martha said with a shrug of her shoulders. "I'll have to have a word with Jasper about providing adequate undergarments for his men," she decided. "We cannae have their swords swinging about as they charge into battle. Can ye imagine if it were to get caught..."

"I think I'll be taking that walk now," Joan interrupted quickly as she

attempted to end the conversation. The state of the men's 'swords' was not something she relished discussing, no matter how cheerful she found the woman to be.

"Suit yerself dear," Martha said happily as she walked back up the hall, leaving Joan to escape and go on her way.

Hurrying down the stairs, Joan made her way out of the castle and quickly stepped into the fresh night air. The air was indeed warm as she made her way around the high walls and into the garden she had seen from her window.

Her breath caught in her throat as she caught sight of the gorgeous pond reflecting the silver light of the moon. The water was surrounded by thin birch trees with white bark and shrubs of heather.

The heavy scent of pine filled her senses as she caught sight of the fir trees in the distance.

Things were shaping up to be a great evening now that Martha was on her side. She would be saved by Avery before she knew it, and they would hopefully be able to come up with a plan to get away from that hideous baron.

The baron... Joan's heart suddenly sank when she recalled the reason she had left London in the first place.

Hunkering down, she looked at the lilies floating across the surface of the dark water and ran her fingers over an ivory petal.

“I thought I told ye to nae leave yer chambers,” an ominous voice suddenly spoke up from behind.

“Well, I guess I don’t like following rules,” Joan laughed as she placed her hands on her knees and pushed herself up, dusting off the hem of her dress that had dragged in the sand.

“I can see ye daenae like following rules,” the Beastly Laird gave her a cautious glance.

Joan wondered if he would send her back to her chambers or lock her in the dungeon now that she had disobeyed a direct order from him. “Will you be locking me up again, my laird?” she asked him with one eyebrow raised. “If so, do you mind if I finish my walk first?”

The laird gave her a charming, lopsided grin as he looked at her. “Nae, there is nae use in locking ye up again; me maither will just fetch ye an’ scold me in the process. I’ve had enough telling off for one day.”

Her heart warmed at the glint in his eyes when he spoke of his mother; it was clear to anyone that listened to him speak that they were very close to one

another.

“Care if I join ye?” he asked, catching her off guard. “I mean, ye were about to walk around the pond were ye nae?”

“I... I was,” she replied, feeling all flustered and hot. The man had suddenly become far more human to her. He still oozed the danger and arrogance that she’d found so alluring at first, but now, he seemed like someone she could relate to.

He continued to look at her until she finally realized that she hadn’t given him an answer. “Of course, it’s your estate, my laird; feel free to walk alongside me wherever you wish.”

“Thank ye,” he said and began to walk while she fell into step at his side. “I want to apologize for the way the guards treated ye when ye arrived,” he explained as he placed his hands behind his back and strolled at her side at a leisurely pace. “There are certain precautions that we have to take around here.”

“Just the guards?” She couldn’t help but get another jab in at him; there was something utterly satisfying about gaining the upper hand whenever they were together.

“Aye,” he rolled his eyes and smirked, “an’ the way that I treated ye; I’ve come to realize that ye are nae a spy.” He suppressed another smile as he stole a glance at her direction. “Just a lady with a terrible sense of direction... an’ humor.”

“I’ll have you know that it was the coachman who had the terrible sense of direction,” she retorted in a light-hearted manner. The conversation seemed easy between them now that he had let go of his suspicions. “And my sense of humor is impeccable.”

His deep chuckle made her look at him in a different light; there was indeed a different, if not softer side to the man who had threatened to hold her captive.

“What is it that made you change your mind?” she asked him when he’d finished laughing at her joke.

“Well, I realized that sending a helpless lass onto me lands may nae be the best way to gain information. That,” he conceded with a shrug of his shoulders, “an’ I daenae think ye would be a very good choice for a spy.”

“And why not?” She cocked her head to the side in a challenge and looked at him, slightly offended by the way he viewed her. “I think I would make a very good spy. I’ve gotten you out here on your own, have I not.” She gestured to the empty garden as they made their way around the lake.

The moon was high in the sky as frogs began to sing their evening chorus along with the crickets chirping in the distance as their backup.

“For one,” Jasper seemed to relax even further as he smiled, “yer sarcasm and smart mouth would get ye killed on the first day. I would never choose ye to be a spy if ye were in me army.”

“I...” Joan raised a finger to protest but stopped when she realized that he’d made a fair point.

“Aye,” he smirked at her. “Go on.”

“I concede that you are right,” she finally admitted with a laugh. “I don’t think I would make a very good spy. I would stand up to my captor and get myself killed within a few seconds of imprisonment.”

“It takes a great man to admit that he is wrong,” The laird sounded impressed as he glanced at her.

“Or a very plucky woman,” she added.

“Or that.” The smile around his lips seemed genuine as they walked.

Their conversations petered off to a comfortable silence as they walked to the other end of the gardens where a weeping willow hid a wooden bench. The evening air kissed the nape of her neck and chest where her skin was exposed. She thoroughly enjoyed the feel of the soft earth beneath her feet. There was always something mystical about Scotland for her as if one could expect a mystery at every turn.

“Would ye care to take a seat, me lady?” he asked her politely, gesturing to the seat with one arm.

Joan shot him a curious look as she considered the way he was acting. She didn't know how to feel about his sudden change in behavior. Was he being genuine, or was he merely trying to lower her guard? She decided to proceed with caution, given the fact that she needed his help to carry on with her journey.

"I think that would be nice," she accepted his offer and walked ahead, pulling the leaves of the tree aside like a curtain so she could enter. The evening dew on the low-hanging branches glistened in the moonlight like diamonds embroidered onto a dress.

A sudden noise startled her as she jumped back, stifling a scream. A strong pair of arms suddenly came around her waist, suspending her in mid-air as she hung above the ground. Flapping wings passed her face in a blur as something large flew over their heads.

"Ye need to be more careful," Jasper said in a husky voice as he looked down at her in his arms. "There's an old owl that likes to nest in this willow." The intense look in his eye took her completely by surprise as she glanced at his lips for a second.

Her heart was beating a fierce rhythm in her chest as she felt his arms around her waist in a protective manner. He'd reacted so quickly that she barely had time to catch her breath.

Joan looked into the starry sky to see the massive bird flying away. The span of his wings was longer than the length of both her arms combined. She felt completely mystified by the strength of the magnificent bird.

“I didn’t know,” she said breathlessly as she looked back at him. “It’s beautiful.”

Time seemed to stand still as they gazed at one another, completely lost in the mystery of the moment. They were complete strangers, yet something in the look he was giving her made it feel as if she had known him all of her life.

“Aye, it is.” The laird was staring at her face with an intense look she couldn’t read. Images of his lips close to hers flashed through her mind as they stared at one another in silence. The only audible sounds were the chorus of creatures that lived in the night and the thumping of her heart in her chest.

She suddenly became very aware of his hands on her hips as he lifted her up, placing her firmly on her feet in front of him. The moment seemed to last forever as her breathing deepened, matching the pace of her heart. She realized just how handsome his sculpted features were as the light from the moon lit up the contours of his face. The sudden urge to drag her finger over the line of his jaw nearly overtook her.

Jasper’s face drew closer to hers as he reached up with one hand and placed a strand of her hair behind her ear. “I just thought of another reason why ye wouldnae make a good spy,” he said in a husky tone.

Joan began to panic as she thought of all of the things he could possibly say in the moment.

Is he going to say how beautiful I am? What if he says he wouldn’t be able to

kiss me if I were a spy? What should I do?

Her heart raced through her chest as she thought of all the possibly romantic things he could say in a moment like this. She'd never realized that she wanted a man to tell her how beautiful and desirable she was beneath the light of a full moon. Her long lashes drifted shut as she prepared herself for the inevitable kiss that would slake the desire she had felt toward the man since the moment they had met.

"Ye jump at loud noises," he finally said and cleared his throat, breaking the moment that had formed in her head.

"What?" Joan asked as her eyes shot open. She hadn't even realized that she'd closed her eyes while he was staring at her.

"Ye cannae hope to be a good spy if ye jump at sudden sounds," he repeated his statement with a shrug of his shoulders. "Spies have to be quick on their feet and adapt to their surroundings at all times."

She stared at him in disbelief for a second before bursting out laughing.

"Why are ye laughin'?" He looked at her with his head tilted to the side.

"It's nothing," she said and wiped the tears from her eyes. The truth was that she had genuinely thought he was about to kiss her, and what was worse, she had wanted him to. "Go on then, who would you choose as a spy? Gregg?" she asked to divert the intention from the moment they had shared.

“Gregg?” he looked up at the castle before looking back at her. “Gregg would more than likely fall asleep while important information was being exchanged. He probably fell asleep an’ let ye slip right by him, did he nae?”

“You know your men very well.” She tucked strands of her hair behind her ear as the wind began to pick up. “Why do you have him as a guard if you know he falls asleep?”

“Maither forced me to make him a guard,” he explained with a pained expression on his face. “He’s a distant cousin with nae right to his own title. I take pity on him and give him the jobs that are nae too serious.”

Joan suddenly realized that he had tasked Gregg to ensure she didn’t escape. Did that mean he doubted her abilities to escape, or that he had wanted someone he knew would be gentle to look after her? Out of all the guards, she couldn’t see Gregg being violent with her or pulling her hair.

“To answer yer question, I would make me maither a spy,” he said confidently as they began to walk again.

“Your mother?” she asked in shock. “Why on earth would you make your mother a spy?”

“That woman can draw information out of the most hardened criminals on the face of the earth.” He raised his eyebrows with a serious expression on his face. “She may seem sweet and gentle, but she’s formidable when she sets her mind to something she wants.”

“Wait... is that why you took so long to come back down to the dungeons?” She bit on her lips to keep herself from laughing.

“Gregg only went an’ told her that a young English lass had been taken captive,” he said in annoyance. “She came an’ convinced me to take her to ye.”

“I’m sorry,” she said as she suppressed a laugh. “That must be so difficult for you. I rather like your mother.”

“Ye would since she took ye out of the dungeons.” He rolled his eyes.

“Someone had to do the sensible thing.” She liked the sound of his voice when he wasn’t barking orders at everyone around him.

“Aye, aye,” he half-smiled at her. “I have a question for ye.”

“That sounds ominous.” She suddenly felt concerned, remembering that she had a secret of her own to keep.

“While I dinnae think ye are a spy, I would like to ken why ye were travelin’ alone through Scotland. Are ye runnin’ from anyone?” He looked at her face before looking ahead of them once again. “Are ye safe?”

Joan swallowed hard as she felt a pang of panic in the pit of her stomach; she had been dreading the question she knew he'd eventually ask. She wasn't ready to tell anyone her story, let alone know if she could trust *him* or not. The question of her fate still relied on whether or not she could hide her presence from the baron. She needed to at least tell Avery and Darragh before she told a stranger she had just met.

“I don't know, my laird. Your men told me that you'd remove my head if I didn't hold my tongue. Apparently, you once killed a man for making a joke. So, you tell me, am I safe?”

The smile suddenly disappeared from his face as a veil fell over his eyes. “Tell me what you are runnin' from,” he commanded her as he stopped walking.

Joan stopped and glared at him with her fists balled at her sides. “Tell me, my laird, is it not enough that you know I am not a spy? Why is it so important to you that I tell you everything about my life?”

“Have I nae given ye shelter an' made sure that ye are looked after?” he asked her angrily, clearly provoked by her cheeky response once again.

“After locking me in a dungeon,” she retorted angrily as she took a step forward. The situation between the two of them was beginning to escalate at an alarming rate as their tempers grew.

“Ye would have done the same if ye had a clan to look after.” He raised his voice as he pointed at the castle. “Ye have nae idea what I have had to endure

to ensure the safety of me family!”

“Why don’t you tell me about it then!” She raised her voice to match his.

“That’s beside the point; who or what are ye runnin’ from?!” he asked in anger as his face drew closer to hers.

Her chest rose and fell in quick succession as she realized the close proximity of his lips to hers. “You…” she sought for words.

“I what?!” he asked as he narrowed his eyes, glancing down at her lips just as she had been looking at his.

It was evident to her that the same thoughts of attraction were running through his mind. “You drive me crazy!” she suddenly yelled and took a step back in an attempt to break the tension between them. The last thing she needed now was to kiss the man who had been holding her captive, no matter how much she may have wanted to.

“Then why dae ye nae just answer me question?!” he asked furiously.

Joan felt her anger bubbling to the surface as she fought with him. The man had the infuriating habit of raising her irritation with just a few words. “I’m running from men like you that would have me locked up for the rest of my life like some kind of prized possession!” she yelled in his face as they both stepped forward, their noses nearly touching.

“Gods...” he said blowing out a breath, sending a strange fluttering through her chest, “I didnae ken...”

“Never mind!” she snapped as she stepped back, unable to stand the intense atmosphere that had formed between them. Looking him in the eyes, she saw the sense of pity and worry that he’d suddenly gained for her. “I’m going to bed!” she suddenly yelled at him.

The thought of any man taking pity on her was more than she could bare at present. Turning on her heels, she began to march toward the castle with her fists still balled at her sides.

“My laird!” Gregg suddenly yelled in the distance as he came running toward them. “The prisoner has escaped; we must go an’ find her at once!”

“I’m here!” she snapped at him as well in passing as he stopped in his tracks, nearly toppling over into the water. “And I’m going back to my chambers; you can follow me if you like!”

Jasper kept his eye on the doors as he sipped his morning ale; he was beginning to wonder if Joan was going to make an appearance at breakfast at all. He specifically told the maids and his mother not to take Joan a tray so that she would have to show her face.

Perhaps there was a better chance of them talking things over if she was forced to come down. He'd even gone as far as dismissing Gregg from his post after he had learned that she was possibly on the run from a man that threatened to hold her captive. He felt bad about how he had treated her, given the situation she had left behind, whatever it may be. Years of fighting to keep his loved ones safe had made him harsh and quick to assume the worst in any given situation.

The ale burned on the way down his throat as he looked at the ceiling of the dining hall. The long table that seated twenty was decked to the nines with bannocks, fruits, nuts, and eggs, but he hadn't touched a thing. If he had to be honest with himself, he felt bad about the night before and the way things had ended with her. He never meant to force her into a situation where she felt cornered when she was so clearly hiding something uncomfortable in her past.

He had hated the fear and anguish on her face when she'd yelled at him about running away from men just like him.

Does she really think me such a monster?

He'd never cared before what anyone thought of him, but he suddenly wanted to ensure that the feisty English woman who had come trapesing into his life knew that he wasn't all bad. He lived in caution for a very good reason, but it shouldn't be the sum of his being. He absentmindedly brought his hand to his eye patch and gave a bitter smile. An English lady most likely had never even seen a scar in her life, let alone... Perhaps he really was a beast to her, just like he was to everyone else. For some reason, this was the first time the thought bothered him.

The doors creaking open drew his attention back to the present as he stood to welcome Joan to the table. "Good mornin'," he greeted her in a tone that he presumed to be more than friendly in an attempt to show her how welcoming he was.

Joan shot him a cautious look before hesitating with her hand on the door.

"Please," he said when it seemed as if she were about to leave, "join me for breakfast?" he held his hand out to the seat beside him at the table.

Her eyes darted from the seat to the food and back to his face.

"I had some food laid out so that we could share a meal together," he tried

again in the hopes that she'd accept. They needed to clear the air before she continued on to her friends.

"I guess..." she said, gingerly taking a few steps forward before making her way to the table. It was evident by the way she eyed the food that she was ready to eat.

Jasper quickly made his way around the table and pulled out the chair beside his, ensuring that she was settled before returning to his own seat. "Would ye care for some ale?" he asked and reached for her goblet.

"I would, thank you." She seemed cool and distant as she answered all of his questions with automated responses, keeping her eyes on her plate with pursed lips as she chewed the inside of her cheek.

The breakfast continued for a few minutes in silence with Joan only speaking when she needed him to pass her anything on the table.

"How are ye finding yer chambers?" he attempted to push through her barriers and break the ice with 'safer' topics of discussion.

Joan stopped sipping her ale and looked at him with a deliberate look on her face. "Just fine; they're at the end of the hall. Why would I not find them?" Her voice dripped with sarcasm.

The utter look of defiance on her face made him snigger.

“I don’t understand why you are sniggering?” she seemed annoyed as she glared at him. “I was shown to my chambers last night.”

“Aye, ye were lass; I didnae mean to offend ye,” he said as he bit back the amusement he felt at her blatant sarcasm. She was clearly more than just vexed from their argument the night before.

Joan looked down at her plate with a veiled expression in her eyes. It seemed to Jasper as if she were trying her best to hold onto her anger. He didn’t blame her; he’d been too forceful since the minute she’d arrived. There was a lot of work that needed to be done if he were to gain her confidence.

Why am I so concerned with gaining her trust?

He found himself wondering where he had changed; the woman had been in his castle for less than a day, and already he had begun to pander to her needs, wanting her approval and good opinion. The realization was concerning to him to say the least.

“Have you written to Laird MacKinnon yet?” she broke through his thoughts as she reached for another bannock.

“Nae,” he said as he shook his head and focussed on the conversation at hand. “I thought it may be better if ye write to them yerself. I’m sure they will believe ye more than a stranger they have never met. It may send the wrong impression if the letter comes directly from me.”

“That makes sense,” she conceded, taking a bite of her bannock. “Darragh may think I am in danger if you were to write to him.”

“Are ye implying that even me letters would be too threatening?” he asked her in amusement as the atmosphere between them relaxed. It was easier to talk to her now.

“I don’t know, my laird, I can’t say that I’ve ever read a letter from you.” She gave him a cheeky smile. “If you use words like must, prisoner, smart mouth, and pain in your neck, he might just find you to be slightly threatening.”

“I never said ye are a pain in me neck,” he defended himself.

“But you did think it,” Joan accused him and laughed. “It’s been written on your face since the moment I arrived.”

“Aye, that is true,” he reached for his ale and smiled at her over the brim of his goblet.



Joan returned his smile as she stared at him from across the table. The hungry way he was looking at her reminded her of the night before and their almost kiss. She ran her tongue over her bottom lip as she thought over their interactions.

Is he attempting to make peace with me?

She had felt the need to apologize to him after storming away from him the previous night but had let her stubbornness get the better of her. It hadn't been his fault; he merely wanted to know if she were on the run which she was. Things may have gone smoother if he had phrased his question better, but she knew she had overreacted in the moment.

She was glad that the misunderstanding had cleared the air. It made things easier for them to reach a middle ground with each other. She had also noticed that Gregg had been removed from her door.

Another peace offering perhaps?

The doors suddenly opened, drawing both of their attention away from each other.

“I apologize for interrupting yer breakfast, me laird.” A tall man with a bald head and grey beard came walking into the hall with a stack of parchment rolls beneath his arm. “The problem cannae wait for later.” He wore a red kilt that Joan had come to realize was the color of Jasper's clan.

His knobby knees stuck out like a sore thumb above his gangly legs, drawing attention to the fact that his legs had absolutely no fat on them at all.

“Let's have a look then,” Jasper returned to his strict demeanor and stood as he wiped his hands together. “Please excuse me for a minute, me lady,” he addressed Joan as he made his way around the table.

The man came forward and placed the rolls of paper on an empty section of the table where he lifted one in particular and spread it out beneath his hands. Looking up he suddenly realized that Joan was present. “Me lady,” he greeted her with a nod before turning to Jasper. “Should we take this discussion to the study, me laird?”

“Nae,” Jasper responded. “Joan is a trusted friend; she willnae divulge anything that’s said in this room.” He joined the man at his side and looked at the open piece of parchment across the table with his hands resting on the edges.

Joan felt a wave of pride at the way he had vouched for her. They had come a long way in just a few hours. Yesterday, she had been a prisoner presumed to be a spy, and now, she was a trusted friend in front of whom he could speak freely on important matters. No greater honor could be given by Jasper in her opinion.

She wondered what it was that had made him change his mind about her. There must have been something that made him want to trust her more and see her in a different light. The thought of him possibly liking her made her stomach flutter with nerves. She quickly pushed the thoughts aside and reached for the fruit.

“What seems to be the matter?” his voice broke through her thoughts as he addressed the lanky man.

“Here,” the man pointed to a section on what Joan could surmise was a map. The large green section was dotted with various pins and twine holding them together. She’d seen a map like that once in her father’s study when he’d been trying to track a clan war that was happening in Scotland.

“The scouts have spotted men walking on our Southern borders. Now, this could just be men looking for good farming land,” he explained, “or it could be a future attack. We dinnae ken what their intentions are at present.”

The man’s heavy Gaelic accent was somewhat hard for Joan to understand. He seemed much older than Jasper and even his mother. His papery skin was dotted with large age spots, and his back was slightly hunched. He gave off a formidable air that had Joan wondering if he was a general or the man at arms.

“We take them into captivity,” Jasper said with a determined look in his eyes. “Strike while they daenae ken that we saw them there.”

“I think that’s a mistake,” Joan said as she examined the bunch of grapes in her hand, picking them off one at a time before popping them into her mouth in a leisurely fashion.

“I beg yer pardon?” Jasper asked as both men looked at her in surprise.

“If these men are indeed spies,” she began confidently, “capturing them will only lead them where they want to be in the first place. Right inside your castle. If they are farmers looking for more land or vagrants that need a place to live, you will be causing them harm while wasting your own time.”

The men exchanged glances before Jasper turned back to her. “What would ye do with them then?”

“If it was me,” she placed her bunch of grapes back on her plate, “I would have one or two men following them at a distance, keep an eye on them, and make sure that they are up to no good before jumping to any conclusions. If they are harmless, you let them go on their way. If they are indeed spies, you can lock them up.” She chewed on her bottom lip for a second. “If I were you, I would have specially trained guards in the prisons to watch over them. People who know they shouldn’t talk.”

Jasper looked at the bald man who seemed to be agreeing with what she was saying as he nodded along.

“You have Gregg watching the prisoners. I knew everything that was going on in your castle in the space of one conversation.”

Jasper took a deep breath as he considered her words, looking into her eyes as he mulled the information over in his mind.

Her heart skipped a beat at the way he was looking at her; the intensity in his eyes was taking her breath away.

Is he about to scold me for interfering? He did ask my opinion.

“It doesnae matter,” he waved the idea away with a wave of his hand. “The captives never survive long enough to tell anyone.”

Joan’s mouth opened slightly in shock as she stared at him.

“But ye are me maither’s guest,” he hurriedly tried to rectify the situation. “Ye dinnae have to worry about any of that.” He cleared his throat and turned back to the man. “Send two of our best riders to tail the men and have one of them report back every hour while the other keeps watch. The men must nae be left alone until we are certain they are nae spies,” he gave his commands to the man without looking away from Joan’s face.

“Aye, me laird,” the man replied as he gathered the parchment rolls again. “Will there be anything else?”

“I dinnae,” Jasper turned to her. “Will there be anything else, me lady?” He gave her a teasing smile as the corner of his mouth lifted ever so slightly.

“No, I think that will be all,” she said sheepishly as she reached for her ale and took a sip. She wasn’t quite sure what to make of his change in behavior toward her.

“Ye may go,” he dismissed the man with a wave of his hand as he took his seat at her side once again. “Ye are just full of surprises,” he teased as he took a handful of cherries.

“Good surprises, I hope,” she fell back into their easy banter.

“Aye, very good.” His smile was disarming as he chewed on a cherry. “How is it that war tactics come so easily to ye? Are ye actually a general for the British army?”

“I was just going off how you and your guards handled the situation with me yesterday. We would have been here at the table a lot sooner if you hadn’t acted so harshly to begin with,” she told the truth in a teasing manner.

“Aye, ye have me there,” he searched her face. “Would ye like to use me study after breakfast to write to yer friends? I’m sure ye are eager to get back to yer journey.” He seemed to tense at that, and Joan couldn’t let herself hope that it was because she was leaving. He more than likely still didn’t trust Darragh.

“That...that would be lovely, thank you,” she accepted his offer eventually and watched as he reached for a plate of nuts.

The truth was that Joan had become so comfortable over breakfast, that she had forgotten all about Avery and Darragh. The question plaguing her mind at present was simple to which she had no answer.

Will I miss this castle and its strange occupants once I leave?

D earest Avery,

I hope this letter finds you well. I'm sure by now, you and Darragh are worried sick about what happened to me. The truth is that my coachman took a wrong turn on the way to your castle in an attempt to escape the highwaymen that were pursuing us.

I am unharmed but without my belongings. I had the good fortune of being taken in by a laird and his kind mother. They have treated me well and ensured that I come to no harm. I will be at Castle MacShaw until I have heard from you.

Yours,

Joan Moore

Joan returned the quill to the pot of ink as she gently blew on the letter. She had decided to leave out the part about being taken captive until she could explain things to her friend in better detail. The last thing she wanted was for Darragh to come charging in and create unnecessary problems — not now that things had reached a more comfortable place with her and the laird.

Feeling as if she were being watched, she looked up to see Jasper watching her with an intense gaze from across the room.

“I’m just finished,” she said with a smile and folded the letter in half. “Thank you for allowing me to use your study.”

“Aye, ye can leave it on the desk. The housekeeper usually comes every evening to collect the mail. Yer letter may take a few days to a week to reach yer friends at Castle MacKinnon, depending how far in the Highlands it is seated, but it will get there.”

“I have no doubt that it will,” she said confidently and stood. The study they were in was warm and comfortable with brown leather chairs, a large mahogany desk, and several shelves of books that ran along the walls. Joan felt right at home as she looked at the large hearth with its stone finishings.

Even the portraits in the room were welcoming and friendly, and she noticed one in particular with a young Martha holding Jasper on her knee. It seemed as if both of his eyes were perfect when he was a child, making her wonder once again what had happened to him. She didn’t dare ask. Her eyes fell back on the rows of books, not wanting him to realize that she had been staring at a portrait of him.

“Ye are more than welcome to have a look around,” Jasper said to her as he came closer and followed her gaze to the books. “I am nae much of a reader. Me maither is the one that has collected the books over the years, but ye are more than welcome to have a look. I ken that she wouldnae mind if ye wanted to read a few.”

“I think I will take a look at them, thank you very much,” she appreciated the hospitality he was trying to show her.

Perhaps he wasn’t so beastly after all. Perhaps these glimpses were his true self, and the beast was his mask. Or perhaps she was just seeing what she wanted to see because now that he was closer to her, those darn butterflies were back, fluttering in her stomach as if they were about to take flight.

She walked along the row of books with her finger trailing the leather spines as she read their names, to distract herself from the direction her thoughts were taking.

Martha had managed to gather quite an extensive collection over the years, from poetry, to plays, and full-length novels as well as instructional manuals on various topics.

“Does your mother enjoy reading books on cooking?” she asked as she suddenly stopped and felt a heavy force bumping into her back.

She hadn’t realized that Jasper had been following so close behind her. “I’m sorry,” she hurriedly apologized as she felt his strong hands gripping her shoulders in an attempt to keep her from stumbling.

“Doesnae matter,” he said quietly with his hands still on her shoulders. “To answer yer question, maither likes to cook. We do have a cook, but she likes to go to the kitchens an’ make food herself. She came from a very poor family a’fore she married me faither; her mother taught her how to cook when she was a wee lassie. She made the stew that ye ate in the cell.”

“That’s why it tasted so good,” she remarked, remembering the rich flavors of the stew and the hearty smell.

“Maither always says that ye can taste the effort someone puts into their cooking.”

“I think I’m inclined to agree with her.” She cleared her throat and continued walking along the length of the shelf when she noticed that his hands were still resting on her shoulders. The feel of his skin through the fabric of her dress made her mind wander in directions that were far too dangerous at present.

Jasper followed along behind her again, and even though he seemed to take a great interest in the titles of the books, she was sure he had seen them a hundred times at least.

The atmosphere between them had suddenly thickened again, leaving in its wake the fluttering sensation in the pit of her stomach that seemed to have started the day before. His presence affected her body in ways that she was reluctant to admit.

Reaching for a book that seemed particularly interesting, she stood on her toes and froze when Jasper's hand suddenly engulfed hers, enclosing her fingers in a warm grasp. The feel of his rough skin against hers made her arm jolt as if she had been struck by lightning.

Jasper quickly withdrew and cleared his throat as he looked away, but it was obvious to her that their interaction had been just as surprising to him as it was to her.

"I wanted to ask ye a question," he quickly started a new subject as they both left the book where it had been. "I hope ye willnae be offended."

Her mind suddenly raced with all the possibilities as her heart galloped at ten miles per hour. "Go ahead," she hesitated at first but accepted his request. "It's the least I can do after everything you have done for me."

Is he going to ask me to stay at the castle for a little while longer? Her breathing deepened with panic.

"I wanted to ask if ye would be comfortable telling me why ye are runnin' away." He quickly looked into her eyes. "Ye dinnae have to if ye dinnae want to. I've just been concerned about yer safety."

Joan took a deep breath as she looked at him. "Well, all of London already knows what happened, even more so now that I've run away. I may as well let Scotland know as well."

“I willnae tell anyone what ye tell me.” He looked at her earnestly. “Anything ye say in here is safe with me.”

“I’m betrothed to a baron who tricked me into a marriage of convenience with him by means of a scandal.”

“Go on,” he said with a frown as he crossed his arms over his chest and leaned against the shelf with his shoulder.

“He had been following me for quite some time in London. The man showed up to every ball and social event I attended. I had thought him harmless at first, but he soon became persistent with his advances and would never accept no for an answer.”

Jasper seemed completely enthralled by her story as he hung on to every word, listening intently to everything she had to say with a dark look in his eye.

“A week ago, he came to a ball that was being hosted by a prominent family of the ton. The night was dragging on, and I was getting tired of deflecting his advances. I went onto the empty balcony for a breath of fresh air, and he ended up following me.”

Joan could see a muscle jumping in his jaw as she told her story.

“I made polite conversation with him for a few moments in the hopes that I could slip away, but some of the gossips had already noticed that we were

alone and decided to come and investigate.” She looked down as she thought of the events of the evening. “Looking back now, I’m sure that he had planned it all along.”

“I dinnae ken the man, an’ I wasnae there, but I’m sure the scoundrel planned it,” he said bitterly, visibly angered by what she was saying.

“To make a long story short. He attempted to kiss me just as some women came walking into the balcony. I tried to push him away, but it was far too late; the damage had already been done. My reputation was compromised, and he went ahead and made a very public declaration to marry me.”

“Surely yer faither didnae agree to that?” Jasper asked as he took a step forward and placed his finger under chin, lifting her face toward his when she continued to examine his shoes. The whole ordeal had left her feeling embarrassed; telling the story was difficult enough without looking someone in the eyes.

“They understood that I had been placed in a very difficult situation that was beyond my control, but a scandal is a scandal, and the damage needed to be controlled. My parents agreed to the marriage and helped the baron obtain a special licence that would allow us to wed in a week.”

“Ye ran away from home because ye didnae wish to marry the bastard,” he stated rather than asked as he lowered his hand, finishing her story for her.

“A cowardly thing to do, I know, but I felt as if I had no other choice if I wasn’t to spend the rest of my life trapped in a loveless marriage.” She

looked to the side to avoid his gaze. “I don’t think I could ever love a man like him, not one that would compromise a woman like that.”

“I dinnae think ye are a coward,” he said to her great surprise. “It takes a strong person to ken when it’s time to fight an’ when it’s time to retreat. Ye knew that there were nae any other options available to ye. I can respect a decision like that.”

“Thank you.” She suddenly felt shy at having received such praise from him.

“Do ye think the baron will follow ye if he kens where ye are?”

“I think he might,” she admitted honestly. “He was so adamant in his pursuits that I doubt he’d give up the chase so easily.”

“Ye can stay here with me.” He looked her in the eyes. “Ye can stay here in the castle, an’ I will keep ye safe. Naebody besides yer friends have to ken where ye are.” He looked down at her with the piercing gaze that affected the rhythm of her heart in an unnerving manner.

“I...I... don’t know what to say,” she stammered though her quickening breaths as her chest rose and fell. “Everything has happened so suddenly. I’m not sure what to do anymore.”

“Ye can leave if ye wish; just know that I will always keep ye safe, Joan...” he whispered her name in a way that swept her off her feet in a matter of seconds.

His lips were on hers in a flash as he kissed the final remnants of doubt from her mind.

She responded in kind by placing her arms around his neck and pulling him in closer, allowing her body to take the lead as he deepened the kiss, parting her lips with his tongue before searching the depths of her mouth.

Joan couldn't help but moan when he used the palms of his strong hands to caress her sides, rubbing his way up her ribs where he paused beneath her breasts, massaging her skin through the fabric of her dress with his thumbs.

Things began to heat up quickly as Jasper suddenly shifted her body, placing her back against the shelf of books and hungrily kissing a path over her jaw and neck until he reached the lobe of her ear.

Her body moved as if it possessed a mind of its own, allowing his hand to guide her thigh up the side of his leg until his body was fully pressed into hers.

"Jasper..." she moaned his name for the very first time as her fingers laced themselves through his hair, holding his head to her neck where he kissed and nibbled a path full of passion.

All of the pent-up desire they had felt toward one another came out in the kiss as his hands sought the curves of her body, gently caressing her breasts as he too gasped for breath against her neck. They moved in a rhythm together against the shelf until the books began to shift, nearly falling to the ground

form the motion.

Needing to feel his lips on hers once again, she lifted his head, pressing her lips into his and opening her mouth to signal her willingness for his tongue. The taste of his mouth felt like heaven to her as he breathed in her air while catching his breath before deepening the kiss once again.

Joan was beginning to feel as if a pressure were building in her core. Parts of her body ached for him that had never ached before. She wanted him to touch her body, continuing with his exploration of her skin until the building tension burst.

Jasper suddenly drew back from her, leaving a cool void where his body had been as he took a few steps back.

“Why?” she whispered as she struggled to regain her breath.

“Shhh,” he raised a finger to her lips before placing it against hers.

Joan bit on her lips as she held her breath, confused and frustrated by his sudden withdrawal.

“We are nae alone,” he breathed in a husky tone before guiding her away from the shelf and ensuring that her dress and hair was in place.

It wasn't long before the study door burst open, revealing Martha in a black

dress and apron. “There ye are,” she scolded them both. “I’ve only been looking for the two of ye until I was blue in the face.”

“We were just writing Miss Moore’s letter to her friends,” Jasper quickly stepped in.

“Oh, I hope ye found everything ye need?” Martha looked past her son to Joan.

“I did, thank you, Ja... I mean, my laird has been very helpful,” she flustered on her words when she realized that they hadn’t used their given names beyond the moments they had shared in private.

Martha looked from one to the other as she narrowed her eyes in suspicion. “Glad to hear it,” she shook her head. “The lunch is getting cold; I gave cook the afternoon off and made us some rabbit stew. Have ye ever had rabbit stew?” she asked Joan.

“I can’t say that I have.”

“Well then, ye better hurry along; ye’ve been missing out,” she beckoned for them to follow her as she made her way out of the room.

Joan halted as Jasper reached for her hand, holding her back as he whispered in her ear.

“We will talk about the matter when we are alone again.” His hot breath sent shivers of pleasure down her skin.

Joan wasn't sure if he meant the kiss they had shared or if he was referring to his offer for her to stay at the castle. Either way, she knew that things had just gotten a lot more complicated for them all.

Martha paused outside the study door as she bit on her lower lip; the state that they had both been in gave her hope that something beyond her wildest dreams was in the works. Noticing that Jasper and Joan were about to leave the study, she quickly stepped into an adjacent doorway and hid herself from view.

Their awkward silence and stiff behavior suggested that she may have been right in thinking that something had happened between the two. They walked side by side without saying a word.

Waiting until they had turned a corner, Martha quickly slipped back into the study and made her way toward the desk.

There, as clear as day atop the pile of other letters that needed to be sent out, was the letter that Joan had addressed to the laird and his wife at Castle MacKinnon. Joan's delicate handwriting slopped across the envelope in an elegant fashion.

Without skipping a beat, Martha quickly retrieved the letter and placed it in the pocket of her apron, hoping to delay Joan's departure just a little longer. After all, Joan had gone from being a prisoner in the dungeon to a stranger confined to her quarters to a welcome quest. Who knew what she could become, given a few more days.

Martha smiled gleefully to herself as she patted her pocket before making her way out the study. There were many times when a mother had to intervene on behalf of her children when they didn't know what was best for them. It just so happened that she thought the present to be a time that needed her intervention.



Joan cleared her throat at the table as she reached for another bannock. The atmosphere had been awkward since Martha had joined them. Not that it had been pleasant on their way from the study. Jasper had kept his eyes in front of him without saying a single word to her. It seemed to her as if he were contemplating the consequences of his actions.

The women occupied the chairs on either side of the laird, giving each other glances as they ate and only talking when someone needed something from across the table.

It was clear to Joan that Martha suspected them of doing something, but what that something was, Joan wasn't sure. They had shared a kiss, an earthshattering intimate kiss that had left her wanting more, but that was all. She wondered if Martha didn't wonder if they had gone further. Or was the woman simply fascinated by the fact that her son had kissed a woman? He didn't seem like the type that got out much or even spoke to people that weren't part of his clan.

Jasper avoided making eye contact with her as they ate, an infuriating fact that drove her insane. He'd merely grunted an inaudible reply when his mother had asked if the stew was to his liking.

Does he regret kissing me that much? She wondered angrily as the heat of the moment came back to her in flashes. She was almost sure that he had enjoyed their interaction as much as she had, but then why was he acting as if they had committed a crime? Was he not the one who had initiated the kiss?

"I was wondering if ye would care to join me in the garden after lunch?" Martha suddenly spoke up, making Joan stop eating mid bite as Jasper glared at them both.

"I beg your pardon?" Joan asked as she lowered her half-eaten bannock to her plate. She'd been so caught up in her own thoughts that she hadn't been expecting anyone to speak to her.

"I was just wondering," Martha explained, "if ye would care to join me in the gardens after lunch. I was going to gather some more herbs that are needed in the kitchen, an' I thought ye may care to take a walk." She glanced suspiciously at her son who sipped his goblet. "That is if Jasper wouldn't mind me stealin' ye for a while."

Joan almost choked on thin air as the laird glared at his mother. It was clear to everyone present that she did indeed suspect them of something in the study.

"Joan is yer guest an' may do as she pleases," he said coldly as he placed his

goblet back on the table and continued to eat.

“Very well then,” Martha said and kept her eyes on his face before turning back to Joan. “I would love the company if ye daenae mind?”

“Not all,” Joan’s eyes darted from one to the other as she tried her best to assess the situation at hand. “I think I may enjoy a nice stroll around the property since I don’t know how long I will be here before Avery answers my letter,” she added to try and judge his response.

Jasper stiffened noticeably, making Joan wonder what was going through his mind. Was he angry that she wanted to leave, or merely uncomfortable that she would still be there for an undetermined amount of time?

“Wonderful,” Martha said after taking another bite of her stew. “It’s so hard to come by good conversation these days. I may just occupy every minute of yer day while ye are here.” She glanced at her son’s face as she spoke. “Who knows? Ye could even come back and visit me here at the castle once yer situation with yer friends is settled.”

Jasper kept a veil pulled over his eyes as he focussed on his plate. The man’s behavior was beginning to drive her crazy. He was hot and passionate one minute and frigid the next. She all but threw a bannock at his head as the way he was ignoring them infuriated her.

“I think that would be a good idea,” she said a bit too hotly as she reached for her goblet and took a sip, allowing a few drops to splash over the side in her haste.

Frowning at her, Jasper took a bite of stew. “Aye, I agree, it may be best if ye have something to do with yer time instead of roaming around the castle aimlessly while ye are here,” he said as he completely glossed over the fact that his mother had invited her to stay.

“I don’t think there has once been a time where I wandered around the castle aimlessly,” she answered quickly and narrowed her eyes at him over the rim of her goblet. “There has always been a definite aim every time I have set foot outside the chambers you have confined me to, my laird.” The tone on her voice was sharp as she spoke.

“An’ what reasons were they?” He sat back in his chair and glared at her as he rolled a piece of cloth between his finger and thumb.

“Well,” she sat back in her chair to match his body language, “the first time was to get a breath of fresh air after my confinement in the dungeon, and the second time was to have breakfast. It was you that invited me up to the study after that to write a letter, my laird.” She continued to glare at him as her eyes sent him a very clear message.

You were the one who kissed me first.

“I was only trying to ensure that you got what ye needed,” he raised an eyebrow in response to her challenge. “I dinnae wish ye to have to beg for something that ye so clearly wanted...” His voice trailed off as he held her gaze, intensifying the heat that filled the space between them.

Her breath caught in her chest as Joan suddenly felt flustered; she hadn't expected him to answer her back like that in front of his mother. Her pulse suddenly began to race as he held her gaze. The dark passion from earlier was suddenly back, creating an intense and uncomfortable atmosphere that wasn't entirely appropriate with his mother sitting across from her at the table.

“Goodness me,” Martha suddenly broke the tension between them as she wiped her hands and stood. “I completely forgot that there was something I needed to do,” she explained as she pushed in her chair. “Please excuse me. I promised the cook that I'd relieve her before lunch was over. She needs to go an' see the healer about her feet.”

Noticing a way of escape, Joan began to stand.

“Daenae hurry dear.” Martha quickly gestured for her to sit back down. “Ye can ask someone to show ye the way to the gardens when yer done. I daenae wish to rush ye. There are a few matters that I need to see to first.”

Joan reluctantly sat back down and took a deep breath as Martha hurried from the room. Her anger was bubbling right at the surface as she thought of the way that Jasper had attempted to challenge her in front of his mother. The audacity of the man made her irrationally angry and frustrated.

He sat silently eating his stew with a smug look on his face that only served to anger her even further. She wanted nothing more than to use the cloth in his hand to wipe his face and change his expression.

“I hope you don't mind if I spend the afternoon with your mother, my laird,”

she said bitterly as she glared at him, unable to keep her silence any longer.

“Ye are nae a prisoner,” he replied and continued to eat without even looking in her direction.

“Good, I’m glad we have established that then,” she said pointedly as she sat by, watching him eat. She’d lost her appetite entirely at the way he was treating her.

“I already said that ye were nae a prisoner,” he said coolly over his bowl. “If ye recall, I apologized for the way ye were treated.”

“I’m sorry, my laird; I’m not sure how to perceive anything you say. You seem to change your behavior faster than the weather in Scotland,” she snapped. “There are also quite a few things I recall from that conversation in particular, so you will have to excuse me if I forgot one or two details.”

Tossing his fork in the bowl, he sat back in his chair with a scowl of displeasure on his face. “What does that mean?”

“I’m not sure, my laird.” She used her knees to push herself up. “Maybe it means that I don’t know what to expect from you from one minute to the next.” She gave him a final glare before pushing past the table. “Or perhaps it doesn’t mean anything at all.”

Joan hadn’t even noticed him move as his hand shot out and gripped her wrist, keeping her from leaving the room.

Pushing back his chair, Jasper stood and towered above her as his eye darkened.

Her heart began to race as her breaths came in quick succession, making her chest rise and fall beneath the confines of her dress while she wondered what would happen next.

“Ye want to be careful, lass,” he growled in a low voice as his face came closer.

“Or what?” Her eyes fell to his lips again as the heat between them grew.

“Or I’ll have to remind ye who is in charge around here,” he whispered in a dangerously low tone that sent shivers of pleasure down her spine.

Turning away from him, she removed her wrist from his grip, attempting to leave before anything happened that they’d both regret once again.

His movements were much faster than hers as he placed his strong hands on her hips and guided her body back to his. Bringing himself up to his full height, he continued to tower above her with an ominous look that made her tremble with desire despite the small amount of animosity she felt toward the man.

“Was there something that you still needed, my laird?” she asked in a husky

tone that surprised even her as she stood on her toes in an attempt to look him in the eye.

“Aye, I need ye to stop challenging me an’ obey what I say,” he repeated his order from earlier.

“I’m not afraid of you, my laird,” she breathed as she allowed her glance to fall to his lips and slowly move back to his eye. “I know you want me to be, but I am not.”

A wolfish grin spread across his lips as he pulled her even closer to him. “I said we would talk later.” He came so close to her face that she could hardly breathe without thinking about his lips on hers. “An’ we shall, but ye better remember yer place an’ stay out of trouble until we do.”

“I’ll try my best, my laird, but I can’t help it if I say what’s on my mind.” She placed the palms of her hands on his chest in an attempt to push him away.

Her actions only proved to spur him on as he gripped her hips even tighter and placed his lips against hers, teasing her mouth with his own while abstaining from the kiss. She suddenly felt his hands moving from her hips to her back where he held her tenderly in a warm embrace.

“I knew ye were trouble when I laid me eye on ye,” he breathed. “I can see that I’ll have to keep a very close watch over ye.”

“That you will, my laird.”

Joan was about to give in and kiss him when Jasper suddenly drew back, leaving her to fall back on her feet as she felt the confusion setting in.

“Ye will find the gardens through the kitchen doors,” he said in his normal tone of voice before turning and leaving her all alone beside the table.

Joan watched him go as she placed her fingers over her lips where his had been. The skin still tingled in a very pleasant manner as she struggled to regain control of her breathing. Jasper Ainsley was more than just an enigma to her; he was a threat to her heart and being.

She realized with shocking clarity that the man held a dangerous allure to her that would haunt her dreams if she didn't find a way to leave and soon.

Joan watched as Martha plunged her trowel into the rich earth and brought it back before casting the soil aside. Her rhythmically repeated actions felt quite hypnotic to Joan as she sat on a patch of grass, silently taking in the wonder that was Martha and everything she did.

“Ye have to have a firm hand when it comes to gardening,” she explained as she gripped a weed by the stem and yanked it up, roots and all, before tossing it aside on the pile of discarded plants. “Nasty things can fester an’ take over if ye dinnae remove every last root,” Martha explained. “In many ways, gardening is like our hearts; things can grow an’ overtake all that is good if we dinnae do regular maintenance.”

Matha placed her trowel beside herself on the grass and continued to make little holes in the soil with her hands. “I like to come out here as often as I can; it does me heart good to have some time to think. We can keep too many things to ourselves, I find.”

Getting the distinct impression that Martha was headed somewhere very specific with the conversation, Joan decided to ask a few questions of her own in an attempt to change the subject. It wasn’t that she didn’t trust

Martha; she just felt that the fewer people who knew of her situation at present the better her chances were of staying hidden.

Shifting her position on the ground and straightening the skirts of her dress, she redirected the conversation. “Is that why the laird is so strict and distant?” she asked one of the questions that had been plaguing her since their moment in the study. “Is it because he doesn’t readily share his feelings?”

Martha smiled to herself as she hunkered down in the dirt. It seemed as if she had been expecting Joan to ask about Jasper sooner or later. “The laird can be hard to understand,” she said carefully. “He wasnae this way as a child, but life taught him a few hard lessons along the way.” She sat back on her haunches and sighed. “Daenae mind his harsh manners; his bark is worse than his bite.” She seemed to consider her own words for a second. “As long as he can trust ye,” she added with a frown.

Joan swallowed hard. She didn’t envy the person who got on his bad side; he seemed as if he could be a formidable foe if things happened that he didn’t like. “If you don’t mind me asking, what happened to him that made him so closed off to the rest of the world?”

Martha heaved a heavy sigh as she paused for a second with her trowel in hand once again. “Hand me that jar of seeds at yer side, please dear,” she asked without looking up. “The one with light green seeds.”

Looking to the side, she reached for the jar in question and handed it to Martha, who seemed to be lost in a world of her own. Her eyes were far away, very possibly reflecting the memories she dwelt on at the back of her mind.

“These are meadowsweet seeds,” Martha said distractedly as she tipped the jar into the palm of her hand before placing the seeds in the ground and covering them up. “The flowers can be used to heal many things.” The woman seemed to find solace in talking about the plants. “Does wonders for joint pain and the ill effects of too much food. The little white flowers have a heavenly scent.”

“I’m sorry if my question was too impertinent,” Joan apologized, feeling bad at having made Martha sad. The last thing she had wanted to do was bring up bad memories for the woman who had treated her with nothing but kindness since she arrived.

“Ye were nae impertinent,” Martha said as a sad smile tugged at the corner of her lips. “We all have things in our past that we’d like to outrun, but nae matter how fast or far ye run, things have a way of popping again. They rear their ugly heads like weeds after rain.”

Joan swallowed the lump that had begun to form in her throat; there was obviously something terrible that happened to the family in the past that still caused them all a great amount of pain. She wasn’t sure exactly what it was, but it was obvious to her now that it had hardened Jasper’s heart.

“Me late husband wasnae a good man.” Martha finally looked Joan in the eyes. “He would beat me whenever things dinnae go his way.” She looked to the side as tears threatened to spill over her cheeks. “Ye can imagine what kind of scars that left on a young lad that loved his maither.”

“I can,” Joan conceded with a heavy heart. “I didn’t grow up with an abusive parent, but I can imagine that it leaves indelible marks on a person’s soul.”

“That is does.” Martha gave her a sad smile as she nodded.

“How did your late husband pass?” Joan sought for an angle to ask about Jasper and how the abuse had affected him. She didn’t want to seem to forward in her line of questioning, but parts of her needed to know more about the man who was harder to read than a closed book.

“I think that is a question that is better posed to Jasper.” Martha seemed even sadder as she sniffed back a few tears.

“I’m sorry, I won’t ask any more questions.” Joan felt terrible about having started the conversation in the first place when it was causing more pain than good.

“Never be sorry for asking questions,” the woman replied encouragingly. “I may not be able to answer them for ye because it’s nae me story to tell, but questions are always good. It’s how we learn. Now,” she said more cheerfully as she clapped her hands together, “we can continue with the gardening before the sun sets on us. We’ve allowed time to slip past us.”

“Just tell me what to do, and I will help,” she answered, wanting a distraction from the pain she had brought up with her silly line of questioning. “Shall I start by removing those weeds over there?” she pointed to the side of the garden where a patch of tall weeds grew.

Martha followed her hand and looked at the patch of thistles. The purple flowers swayed back and forth on their stems as a gentle breeze blew through the garden. “Oh, no, dear,” Martha said most emphatically with a wave of her

hand. “Those are milk thistles; they may look like weeds, but they are very useful in treating ailments as well. The sharp thorns are very prickly, but the healing properties far outweigh their nuisances.”

“Oh, dear, I’m afraid that I’m a bit useless when it comes to gardening.” Joan felt slightly sheepish at her lack of knowledge yet relished in all of the new information she was learning. She liked the simple life in Scotland in contrast to the bustle of London. There were no tiresome balls and unjust standards presented by the ton. She could really see herself settling down in a life like this.

When did I start seeing myself settling down in Scotland?

Her own thoughts startled her as she thought of how nice it would be to live in the Highlands and start a family. She’d only been there for a day, and she had already begun to leave the life she knew before far behind her.

“That’s all right,” Martha laughed. “We were nae all born to the same stations in life. An’ just think how boring it would be if we were? Ye an’ I wouldnae be having these very enlightening conversations at present.” She nodded toward the patch of thistles again. “We can learn so much from nature on how to thrive. The thistles may seem like a nuisance, but they can be a very helpful plant if dealt with in the correct manner.”

Joan felt awestruck by the amount of wisdom she saw in the older woman’s eyes. Their conversations suddenly made her miss her own mother and the relationship that they had back in London. She hoped that her mother would understand and had not been too hurt when she had realized that Joan had run away.

Her parents had been very understanding about what happened. They knew that it wasn't her fault, but a scandal is a scandal, and the only conceivable way out of her situation was for them to agree to the marriage.

"Things may happen in life that we feel we must uproot and get rid of," Martha continued to share her wisdom. "But those things can make us stronger people if we cultivate them in the right manner," she said with a warm smile. "Bad situations can lead to bigger blessings if we only shine the right kind of light on them." She winked at Joan.

"I've heard that what doesn't kill you will only make you stronger," Joan replied, but she couldn't muster the courage to see a bright light in her own dark situation. No matter how she sliced the cake, she was still betrothed to a fortune seeking baron.

"To a certain extent," Martha said and laughed. "There are certain poisons that will only leave ye weaker, but that's an entirely different conversation." She shook her head as if she were trying to get back on track. "What I actually wanted to say was that ye need to be patient where Jasper is concerned. He disnae ken any other way to keep his family safe, I'm afraid. I ken that it may seem like maithers interfere too much, but sometimes tough decisions need to be made. Ye will understand when ye have bairns of yer own."

"I know it can't be easy." Joan's mind wandered back to her own parents and the decision they made when the baron had offered to marry her.

"Being a maither was quite an eyeopener," Martha sighed. "But then again, I was only a lass when I had Jasper. Seventeen is too young to take on the responsibilities of maitherhood if ye ask me. I barely knew how to be a wife,

let alone a maither.”

“Seventeen — that must have been quite an adjustment for you,” Joan said in shock as she once again examined the woman’s youthful appearance. It was no wonder that the woman still looked so young. It wasn’t unheard of for girls to marry as young as sixteen, but the ideal age for marriage, by London’s standards at least, was twenty-one. Joan couldn’t imagine how difficult it must have been to marry when you were still finding your feet in the world.

“Aye, I dinnae wish to marry, but me maither an’ faither arranged the marriage to a wealthy laird that would ensure their safety.” She seemed thoughtful for a moment as she chewed on her bottom lip. “It’s nae that I wish Jasper to marry when he’s nae ready, but I would like to see him happy with someone ‘afore me time comes,” she laughed. “An’ of course, I wish to see me grandbairns.”

Joan felt herself blushing despite her best efforts; it wasn’t as if Martha has asked her to marry her son or even hinted at the possibility, yet her mind had automatically gone in that direction.

What if he finds someone else to marry?

A sudden inexplicable pang of jealousy overtook her emotions. The thought of Jasper kissing anyone else the way that he had kissed her made her more uncomfortable than she cared to admit.

Why do I feel this way about him?

It wasn't as if there was a possibility that they could be together.

And why can't we be together?

She found herself struggling with her own internal dialogue. The man had not only thrown her in his dungeon upon their first meeting, but he had also commented on the fact that she was English as if that somehow reflected badly on her character. Yet there had been that kiss; she could still feel her lips tingling as if had happened only moments prior. The kiss had moved the earth beneath her feet and had left her wanting more. More of his kisses and more of him.

“Is everything all right, dear?”

Joan shook her head as Martha's voice drew her back to the present and their conversation.

“Ye seemed to drift off there in yer own thoughts. Is something troubling ye?” she gently probed. Her voice was filled with concern as she tilted her head to the side.

“No,” Joan smiled. “I just got a bit lost in thought thinking of my own mother.” She bent the truth slightly to hide the fact that she had been thinking of Jasper.

“Ye must miss her terribly,” Martha said sympathetically.

“I do, but I think I’m also just a bit tired,” she tried to divert the conversation again to keep the woman from asking too many questions that she didn’t want to answer.

“I guess we have been out here for a while,” Martha remarked kindly as she wiped her hands together in an attempt to remove the dirt. “We should go inside an’ have a cup of tea. It’s been a long afternoon, an’ tomorrow is another day.”

Joan stood and helped Martha gather all of the things they had used to clean the garden. Her mind was full of thoughts that she didn’t quite know how to process. The most troubling part of all was the fact that her heart was just as confused. There was something about the thought of Jasper marrying someone else that unsettled her greatly, but did that mean she wanted to be with him?

And what exactly had happened in the past that left him feeling as if he had to protect himself as well his family from the outside world?

She looked around at the high walls of the castle that kept the rest of the world at bay with the inhabitants safely inside. Much like the laird, Castle MacShaw had developed a self-sustaining way of life that kept outsiders from looking in.

Joan decided to push the matter aside and focus on things that were a possibility. Avery and Darragh would hopefully be coming for her in just a few days’ time, and she could then leave all of this madness and confusion behind as she focused on what to do next.

Edwin Grandison stepped from the carriage, his neat black boots squelching in the mud as he turned up his nose in disgust. He second-guessed his own decision of coming himself and not sending a man in his place. It had taken him long enough to finally discover that Joan had friends in Scotland, and he hadn't wanted to waste any more time.

Her parents had denied that they knew where she had gone, but he knew better than to trust anyone of a higher rank. The ton often despised those who weren't as wealthy as the upper classes, but he had a plan to fix all of that. Once he married Joan, nobody would ever have the right to look down on him ever again.

He'd make sure of that once her dowry was paid in full. He held with the teaching that nobody needed a happy marriage when money was involved. Joan Moore would provide him with plenty of that whether she liked it or not. He'd come too far to simply allow her to slip through his fingers now.

"An' who are ye?" A tall man wearing a kilt and cotton shirt came forward. The Scotsman was tall and formidable with his long black hair and blue eyes. His bulky frame and many scars spoke of the battles he had fought and

undoubtedly won.

“I am looking for Laird MacKinnon,” Edwin said as he removed his top hat and smoothed the strands of his ash blonde hair. He was at least a head shorter than the fierce warrior with a lanky frame and blue eyes, and he hoped that would speak of his innocence. He had a story to sell, and he wasn’t beyond lying to make them believe it.

“Aye, an’ who exactly are ye?” the man asked gruffly as he stood his ground and folded his arms across his chest in a formidable stance.

“Of course, how rude of me,” Edwin stepped forward and offered his hand. “My name is Edwin Grandison; I am a friend of Joan Moore’s. I believe she is here in Scotland visiting your wife.”

The man looked down at his hand as if it were offensive, and then back up at his face. “I am Laird MacKinnon; I think ye better come with me,” he said gruffly and turned to leave, gesturing for Edwin to follow suit.



Avery paced back and forth in the sitting room of the castle as she waited for Darragh to return with news of Joan. They had been waiting patiently for her since her letter had arrived three days prior, yet there hadn’t been any sign of her. She should have been at the castle already, even if she had decided to spend a few nights at an inn. The delay had both Avery and Darragh worried sick as they waited for news.

Catching a glimpse of herself in the window, Avery could see just how tired

she looked. Her long blonde hair was disheveled, and the bags beneath her brown eyes were quickly turning blue. It would be hard for Joan to recognise her like this, but then again, not even she would have recognised herself since she had gotten married. Her once slender frame was much curvier after carrying and giving birth to more than one child.

“There is someone here that says he kens Joan.” Her husband’s voice broke into her thoughts as she turned to see Darragh standing at the door with a rather lanky looking gentleman at his side.

“Please tell me that she is unharmed?” she asked in a panic without introducing herself as she rushed forward.

“I was hoping that you would be able to answer that exact question,” the man replied, returning her frown and looking around the room as if he were appraising everything that he saw.

Avery took an instant dislike to the man although she couldn’t quite explain why. His soft-spoken mannerisms were polite enough, yet there was something else behind his eyes — a kind of greed and hunger that didn’t sit well with her. “Please come in.” She gestured to one of the couches in the sitting room. “How is it that you know Joan?” She decided to take a chance and hear what the man had to say. He was, after all, the only hope of finding Joan at present.

“My name is Edwin Grandison; I am a friend of Joan’s from London. I heard that she would be paying you a visit and thought I might pop in and surprise her. I was already in Scotland on business, you see,” he explained cheerfully.

Avery exchanged a concerned look with Darragh before sitting opposite the man on a separate coach. "I'm afraid that Joan isn't here; her letter arrived a few days ago, but she has not," she cut to the chase.

"We were hoping that ye would be able to shed some light on the matter," Darragh said and glared at the man.

It was evident to Avery that her husband had gotten the same impression from the man that she had and trusted him even less.

"I don't understand." He looked from one to the other with a shocked look in his eyes. "She should have been here by now." He fidgeted with his hands between his knees. "Her journey shouldn't take this long."

"That's what we thought," Avery spoke up again. "She alluded to being in some kind of trouble in her letter, but she didn't say what that trouble was." She looked him straight in the eyes to try and see if he was holding anything back.

"I can't say that I know of any trouble." He looked at his boots before looking at them once again. "She was in fine fettle last time I saw her. I can't for the life of me think of any kind of trouble that she was in."

"An' when was that?" Darragh asked as he continued to stand beside the door, glaring at the man in a very intimidating manner.

"Well, it must have been a week ago at a ball," he answered cheerfully. "We

had met and had a lovely conversation after engaging in a few dances. Joan was the belle of the ball as she always is.” The corners of his eyes wrinkled as he smiled.

Avery quickly did the calculations in her head and realized that Joan must have sent the letter on the day of the ball or the one there after if the man was telling the truth. Thinking on her feet, she quickly leaned over the seat and reached for a note that lay on the table beside the couch. “Here, you can read her words for yourself,” she said and handed him the note that had arrived a few days prior.

Edwin accepted the note with long, bony fingers and read before chuckling to himself and placing his forehead in his hand. “I see that I must confess in the midst of all the panic that has been created.”

Avery felt her anger growing as she waited for the man to explain. He seemed smug and overly confident as he folded the letter in half and handed it back to her.

“I’m afraid that I haven’t been honest with you; you see, I am not Joan’s friend.” His demeanor changed a little as he puffed out his chest with pride.

Avery saw the way Darragh’s muscles tensed from the corner of her eye and hoped to God that the man was not about to confess something terrible. Darragh never took kindly to lies, especially not when friends of family were involved. The ordeal with her own father had left him with a lack of trust for anyone that he didn’t love.

“I am her betrothed.” A wolfish grin spread over his lips, revealing a sharp row of teeth that made Avery’s stomach churn.

“Surely Joan would have written to say if she had a betrothed,” she argued, utterly shocked at the news. “I can’t see why she would have kept it a secret from me.”

“I don’t think there was time,” he countered as a matter of fact. “I had only just asked her parents for her hand in marriage when she up and left London.”

“An’ why would a lass on the brink of happiness just leave London without sayin’ anything?” Darragh came forward and stopped at his wife’s side.

“I’m afraid that I know the answer to that as well,” he said in a light tone. “The Marquess and his wife found out that Joan and I had kissed at the ball. They weren’t too pleased that we hadn’t considered what a scandal that would cause. I’m afraid that she was rather embarrassed that everyone knew. Yet what can one do when a person is in love? The heart wants what it wants.”

“She would have been; Joan never took kindly to being embarrassed.” Avery looked up at Darragh with a worried frown. There was definitely something amiss with the peculiar man and his story. The Joan that Avery knew was fierce and strong; there was no way that she would have run away just because of a kiss. Joan would have stayed and stood her ground if she were truly in love.

The fact that he said that Joan was in love was another element of the story

that bothered her. She couldn't see her friend falling in love with the lanky man that sat across from her. She'd always pictured Joan with a feisty man such as her own husband who would keep her on her toes and challenge her smart mouth. It was hard to imagine her with Edwin no matter how hard she tried.

“Why did ye nae say who ye were when ye introduced yerself?” Darragh asked as he sized the man up, walking around the couch and standing behind his wife.

Avery could tell that Darragh was growing increasingly impatient with the man as he exuded an air of danger that Edwin seemed to ignore.

“I didn't want to ruin the surprise if Joan hadn't told you yet,” he explained with a shrug. “I know how women can be with their little secrets.”

Taking a deep breath, Avery stood and smiled down at the man. She'd heard more than enough to convince herself that Joan needed their help. The man had provided her all the information she needed, and it was time for him to leave. “I thank you, Mr. Grandison, for telling us what happened with Joan. We will send out people to look for her at once. We wish you well on your journey.”

Darragh placed his hands on his wife's shoulders in support of what she was saying.

Edwin frowned as he stood. Evidently the man had been expecting a warmer welcome than the one he had received. “I can always help look for her,” he

suggested as he looked at the ground. “The search will go much faster if we pool all of our resources in one pot.”

“We couldnae ask ye to do that,” Darragh said as he left his wife and began ushering the man towards the door.

“I wouldn’t mind,” Edwin protested, clearly displeased at the way they were treating him. “I’m just as concerned with her well-being as I am sure that you both are.”

“Oh, no no,” Avery added to what her husband was saying. “We would never dream of delaying your journey. Like you said, Joan was probably just embarrassed. She will need some time to decompress and gather her thoughts. You can leave your forwarding address with us, and I’ll be sure to give it to her.”

“Oh... thank you,” he said as he placed his hat on his head, ensuring that it was on straight.

The prissy way he cared about his appearance was another aspect that made Avery’s stomach churn with disgust. There was absolutely no way that Joan would have fallen for a man as self-centred as Edwin Grandison.

“Ye are most welcome,” Darragh said as they stepped into the hall and made their way to the castle entrance with haste as the man continued to protest and complain.

“I could really stay and help look for her, it won’t be any trouble at all,” he tried one last time as Darragh opened the carriage door and helped him in.

“I think that our men are more than capable of finding Joan; thank you, Mr. Grandison,” Avery said as she stood beside her husband with her arms folded over her chest and fierce look of protectiveness in her eyes.

“It’s Baron Fernsby,” Edwin said coolly through the open window of the carriage after Darragh had slammed the door shut.

“Well, we are still full of surprises, aren’t we, my lord?” Avery glared at him as she realized that they had made the right decision in turning the man away. It had only taken a simple no for him to show his true colors.

“Walk on,” the baron called to the coachman as he turned his nose up in the air, looking away from Avery and her husband.

Avery watched the carriage rattle down the road before turning to her husband in panic. “What are we going to do?” She searched his face hoping that he would have an answer. “Joan could be out there scared and alone. We have to find her before that horrid man does. I don’t know what it is about him, but I don’t trust him at all.” Her words fell over each other as her pulse began to race. A million scenarios were flowing through her mind, and none of them were good.

“Calm yourself, me love,” Darragh said as he took her into his arms and stroked her hair in a protective manner. “I will send the men out at once and have the baron’s carriage followed, if he is indeed a baron.”

“Oh, Darragh, thank you so much.” Her heart raced with fear as she held onto her husband. “I hope nothing bad has happened to her.”

Both Darragh and Avery turned in shock as a second carriage came crashing around a bend in the road at breakneck speed.

“What the hell?” Darragh yelled as he stepped in front of his wife and held her back.

The carriage came to a screeching halt in front of them as the horses reared up and neighed.

“He’s going to kill her!” the coachman yelled as he fell from his seat and landed at Darragh’s feet. “He’s going to kill her!”

“Who is?” Darragh dragged the man up by his shoulders and held him in front of his face.

Avery noticed the dishevelled and dirty appearance of the man; he looked as if he had been on the road for several days without taking a break. His white, powdered wig was dirty and askew while his clothes were torn and caked with mud and dust.

“Who is going to be killed?” Darragh asked as Avery’s anxiety grew.

“Joan Moore!” the man yelled. “He’s taken her captive.” He began to sob.

Darragh and Avery looked down the road at the carriage in the distance that was no bigger than a spec on the horizon. It couldn’t be the baron when he was making a hasty retreat in the opposite direction.

Jasper looked out over the evening fog that was beginning to set in around the castle. He'd always felt at peace amidst the dreary weather conditions on the mountain; it made him feel safe and secure as if he were hidden from the world at large in a thick blanket of mist. The way the castle was situated on a peak was less convenient for others, but the solitude suited him just fine.

Taking a deep breath, he wandered over the yard with the gravel crunching beneath his boots until he came to the softer grass that led to the gardens. He needed a moment to clear his thoughts. His mind had been occupied by Joan since the second she had stumbled onto his lands.

What was it about the beautiful English lass that had him dreaming of her at night and calling her name first thing in the morning? He needed to watch himself where she was concerned; they'd already kissed once and almost kissed again at lunch. There was danger in losing oneself in another person. Any little gap in his concentration could lead to his enemies gaining the upper hand on him.

His eye suddenly ached as he brought his hand up to the patch and gently

applied pressure. It had always been like this when he was stressed; the old wound would act up and hurt, bringing back the dreadful memories of the night he'd lost his eye.

Suddenly realizing that he wasn't alone, Jasper lowered his hand and stepped behind a tree, hiding the bulk of his figure behind the massive trunk.

There, just a few steps away, was Joan as if his thoughts had summoned her into being. She was standing on the tips of her boots in an attempt to reach a bunch of low-hanging cherries.

What is she doing out here?

Taking a minute to watch her, he took in the curves of her hips and the thick braid that hung down her back. He wondered how long her hair actually was; it seemed to him as if she had done some kind of intricate braid in an attempt to either hide the length or make it more manageable. Either way, he wondered what it would be like to run his fingers through the long strands. Without realizing what he was doing, he took a step forward, leaving the safety of the tree.

He began to panic when Joan turned to see him standing there in the open. He hadn't intended to talk to her as part of his plan to not place himself in difficult situations anymore.

"I'm sorry, I didn't see you there," she said and tucked a strand of her hair behind her ear. "Did you need me for anything?" she asked and looked him in the eye.

The woman had the annoying habit of not reacting to the patch over his eye like everyone else did.

Jasper wanted nothing more than to grip that hand and kiss her wrist, but he fought the urges as she stepped out from behind the tree. “Nay,” he cleared his throat and tried to make his voice as level and distant as he could, “I was just taking a walk.”

“I was just gathering some cherries for Martha,” she said in an awkward yet friendly manner and gestured up to the cherries on the tree. “I was just struggling to get those last ones up there.”

Jasper looked at the nearly full basket of fruit at her feet and back to her face as she looked away. Was she trying to avoid him?

“Do ye need any help?” he asked with one eyebrow raised. It seemed to him as if she may have gotten the same idea that he had and wanted to stay away.

“Oh no, not at all,” she answered a little too quickly, confirming his suspicions that she was avoiding him as well. “I think I can manage.”

Knowing full well that he should walk away and leave her be, Jasper took a few steps forward, suddenly feeling as if her avoidance was a challenge to him. If anyone was going to be avoiding, he would be the one to decide when it was happening.

Joan gulped as she took a few steps back, grabbing the basket and holding it in front of her body as if it were a shield.

“Are ye sure?” he asked with a smug grin. Her sudden change in behavior was giving his ego a boost; perhaps it was possible that she felt the same way he did. There could be no other explanation as to why she didn’t want to get too close.

“Very sure,” she said and wrung the handle of the basket with both hands. “I like to complete a task once I’ve set my mind to it; I wouldn’t feel right asking anyone for help.”

“It’s nae trouble,” he said and reached up for the bunch of cherries after walking past her.

“No, really, please don’t,” she began to protest as she took a step forward. “I want to do it on my own.”

“It will go faster if I help,” he answered stubbornly and continued to reach for the cherries.

“But then I wouldn’t have accomplished my goal.” She placed the basket back on the ground and came to his side, reaching for the fruit and trying to get past his hand.

“What does it matter if I help ye?” His irritation began to grow at how stubborn she was. “Nobody has to ken that I helped ye; ye can tell everyone

that ye did it. I daenae care, just let me help ye.”

“But I will know that I had help!” Her voice suddenly became desperate as she jumped and snatched at the fruit, bumping her shoulder against his in her attempt.

“Are ye always this stubborn?” he growled angrily as he stood his ground and gripped the branch of fruit, holding it just out of reach.

“No more than you are!” she retorted, becoming increasingly more desperate and annoyed as he lifted the cherries even higher. “Put them back where they were! You...are...interfering!” she yelled between each breath.

“Interfering?” he asked her angrily. “’Tis me garden an’ me castle therefore they are me cherries! Ye are the one who is interfering here!”

“I am not! Your mother told me to pick these cherries, so technically, you are interfering with your mother’s orders!” She gripped his arm and attempted to pull it down so that she could reach the cherries.

“Me maither doesnae run the castle; I am the only person who can give orders around here, an’ will ye stop jumping like that?! Ye will get hurt soon enough!” he ordered her as she hung on his arm like a child trying to climb a tree.

“I’ll get hurt if you don’t leave me be...” her voice suddenly trailed off as her eyes widened in shock.

Jasper could see the fear and confusion as she toppled to the side. Reacting as quickly as he could, he reached out and gripped her waist, but it wasn't fast enough. He realized too late that her foot had gotten caught on the handle of the basket, causing them both to lose their balance and topple into the mist. Large swirls floated away from them as their bodies hit the earth with her on top of him.

"Are ye hurt?" Jasper asked her as he placed his hands on her shoulders and looked into her eyes, trying his best not to groan from the impact of his back against the earth.

"I...I'm not sure what happened," she stuttered as she looked back to see her boot caught in the handle of the basket. The cherries lay scattered around their bodies like little red stones.

Jasper watched as color filled her face for the first time since they had met. He hadn't thought of her as a woman who blushed very often, yet a definite blush was spreading across her cheeks as her eyes travelled up from her boot and up the length of his body. In all of the confusion, he had used his own body to break her fall, resulting in her laying on his chest with one knee between his thighs.

"I must have slipped," she said after swallowing hard and tucking a few strands of hair behind her ear. The look in her eyes was one of confusion and passion as she bit on her lower lip.

The blanket of fog that had cleared in the fall began to slowly creep back in as Jasper reached up and repeated her gesture, tucking the remaining hair

behind her other ear.

“Doesnae matter,” he assured her gently as his breathing began to quicken. The weight of her body pressing into his was beginning to cloud his mind as blood flowed to other parts of his body. “Were ye hurt?”

“I don’t think so,” she said, still stumbling over her words; it was clear that the situation had taken her by surprise as much as it had startled him.

“That’s good,” he breathed in a husky voice as his hands gripped her shoulders in a tender embrace, pulling her slightly down without even thinking about what he was doing.

“I’m sorry if I hurt you.” Her voice was barely above a whisper as she glanced down at his lips, parting her own slightly as her breath quickened. “I didn’t mean to be so clumsy.” The mist swirled around their bodies, covering them in a blanket of cool dampness.

“I wasnae hurt,” he answered as he tilted his head to the side, shifting his body ever so slightly beneath hers so that her hips were positioned against his. The heat of the moment was once again clouding his judgment, making him react to her in dangerous ways.

“Thank goodness,” she whispered as her eyes fluttered shut, causing naturally long lashes to sweep over her cheeks.

Fighting the urge to press his lips against hers with every fiber of his being,

he took a deep breath and focussed his mind on something else as his hands continued to gently massage her shoulders.

“I’m glad ye daenae get hurt; next time ye should listen to me...” The urge to kiss her suddenly grew stronger as he lifted his hand, placing it on her neck and drawing her closer. The allure of her body so close to his was more than he could take.

“I beg your pardon?” Her voice suddenly broke through the moment with a very notable sharpness.

Jasper opened his eyes to see a very irate Joan staring down at him with murderous intent in her eyes.

“I just said that this wouldnae have happened if ye listened to me in the first place,” he repeated his statement as the atmosphere between them suddenly lifted.

“And perhaps!” she suddenly huffed as she pushed herself off his body and stood. “Perhaps I wouldn’t have fallen if you had just listened to me in the first place and allowed me to do things on my own!” She raised her voice and balled her fists at her side.

“Why are ye so stubborn!” he yelled back as he jumped to his feet in one smooth motion. “I risked me own neck so that ye wouldnae get hurt, an’ here ye are yellin’ at me about nae getting’ yer way!” He raised his voice in response to match hers.

The nerve of the woman in talking back to him made his blood boil with anger and frustration. There was a limit to how much he was willing to put up with.

“Now isn’t that the pot calling the kettle black!” she snapped sarcastically.

“I daenae ken what that means, but I daenae agree with it!” he retorted as her face grew even more irate. “Ye are far too free with yer words, lass! Ye will get into a lot of trouble one of these days!”

“Well... well, humph!” she growled at him in frustration and stomped her foot, making the mist swirl once again.

“That is nae a word, lass! Speak English instead of spouting nonsense!” The argument grew increasingly more bizarre as they found fault in each other’s behaviors.

“Well, you have issues!” she snapped as she yanked up her basket and angrily began gathering the cherries that had scattered over the damp earth. “I’m not the one who locks strangers up in dungeons just because I can’t trust anyone!”

“Why are ye bringing up the past when I’ve apologized to ye time an’ time again?” he asked angrily as she stooped to gather the cherries. “Do ye need me help?” he asked her angrily as he was about to storm off.

“No, thank you!” she continued to yell while tossing dirty cherries into the

basket that hung from her arm.

“Very well!” he said angrily as he turned to leave, but he stopped when he noticed the low-hanging cherries still swaying gently on their branch. Stomping over, he ripped them off the tree, branch and all, before holding them out to her. “Here,” he huffed and thrust them forward.

“What was that for?” She seemed angry and confused all at the same time.

“I cannae have ye getting hurt ’afore yer friends come to get ye; it could mean war for our clan!” he yelled a final time before turning to leave, taking lengthy strides across the yard.

“You know you damaged half the tree!” her voice called out to him through the mist.

“I am the laird; it doesnae matter!” He picked up the pace before she could yell anything back.

Muttering under his breath, he stormed back into the castle.

So much for me calming walk! He thought angrily as he made his way down the hall. That woman was going to be the death of him if she didn’t leave soon, that or he would lose control and end up doing things with her that would only further complicate matters. He decided to keep as far away from her as he could in the future.



Joan glared at his retreating figure before searching for the rest of the cherries on the ground. The man was insufferably stubborn.

Why couldn't he just let me do it on my own?

She threw the last few cherries into the basket before taking a deep breath and trying to regain control over her breathing. She'd been trying to avoid him when he suddenly appeared behind the tree; it was entirely his fault that they had ended up on the ground. Things wouldn't have gone that far if he'd only minded his own business.

Was he going to kiss me again?

She wondered as her anger subsided, making way for the intimate moment they had shared. Shaking her head, she decided to talk to him about the tension between them next time they had a chance. Things couldn't go on like this if she was going to still be living at the castle for the next few days. They needed to discuss the kiss and set a few ground rules.

Joan glanced at the hall doors in frustration as she sat at the table eating breakfast with Martha. It was the following day after the cherry-picking incident, and Jasper had very evidently been avoiding her, a fact that caused her a great amount of irritation.

She had wanted to talk to him and smooth things over so that they could part as friends, yet that was never going to happen if he decided that she was synonymous to the plague, i.e., something that needed to be kept away from at all costs. The steam was practically flowing from her ears as she shoved a piece of cheese into her mouth and glared at the door.

“Jasper is in his study with his man at arms,” Martha offered with her eyes on her plate of food, trying her best yet failing to hide a smirk.

“Oh, I wasn’t...” Joan tried to recover a sliver of her dignity, feeling sheepish at the irritable way she had been acting because of Jasper.

She hadn’t made much conversation with Martha; her thoughts had

completely been occupied by the laird. She suddenly realized that she hadn't been very good company at all.

"He said he wouldnae be joining us for lunch either," Martha continued, ignoring Joan's protests as she sipped her ale and continued eating. "Apparently, there are very important clan matters that cannae wait."

"I see..." Joan said sulkily as she gripped a piece of bannock.

"I just wanted to save ye the trouble of strainin' yer neck." Martha held back a chuckle as she spoke.

"I wasn't..." Joan began but realized that she'd only make matters worse if she attempted to deny anything. Taking a deep breath, she decided to give herself over to the situation at hand. "Has the letter to castle MacKinnon gone out yet?" she changed the subject after reaching for the plate of fruit. She knew she was eating out of frustration more than anything else but couldn't care less about manners or etiquette at present.

"Oh," Martha seemed slightly taken aback by the question. "I think it has." She shifted uncomfortably in her chair as she rubbed the back of her neck and looked to the side. "It should have gone out if ye left it on the pile of letters in the study. It may still take a few days. Ye ken how far away from everyone else we are," she added in a cheerful tone.

"Of course," Joan relaxed a little as she realized that her distracted behavior may have been making the woman uncomfortable. She didn't want to make her only ally feel as if she had done anything wrong. "It doesn't matter how

long it takes as long as it was sent.” She popped a few cherries into her mouth as she spoke. “Would you mind terribly if I wrote a letter to my sister as well?” She made an effort at conversation that wouldn’t evolve around the laird. She’d apply his tactics for now and avoid rather than deal.

“Not at all. Do ye have more than one sibling?” Martha seemed to settle down as well as she reached across the table and poured herself a cup of tea.

“Just the one younger sister,” Joan said with a warm smile. She hadn’t really thought of her family much since coming to the castle. “Her name is Eleonora; we call her Nora within the family. I guess we all still regard her as the baby she was, even though she’s on her second season already.”

“That’s a lovely name.” Martha smiled from across the table as she held her steaming cup of tea between her hands. “I always liked the name Eilidh if I ever had a girl, but God saw fit to bless me with a son instead,” she said with a hint of sadness in her voice. “Are ye an’ yer sister close?”

“A little too close,” Joan laughed. “My mother always said that some time apart would do us good.” Her heart suddenly grew sad as she realized that her mother’s words had come true, albeit not in the way that she had hoped. “She said that the separation of marriage would come as less of a shock if we stopped relying on each other so much.”

“Och, I dinnae think that sisters can be too close.” Martha’s laughter matched hers as they fell into a comfortable conversation. “It’s such a blessing when one has another woman she can talk to.” She shook her head and laughed. “I can talk to Jasper, but he doesnae care to talk about flowers just like I dinnae care to talk about battles an’ grumpiness.”

Joan laughed despite the anger she felt toward Jasper, Martha was a lovely woman, one that was very quickly crawling her way into her heart. She had to admit that she would miss their little conversations when she eventually left.

“Has yer sister nae found a man she wants to marry yet?” Martha continued the conversation. “Nae that I think she should get married yet — a lass should be fully mature ’afore she ties herself to any man.”

“I guess we all spoilt her a bit; there isn’t anything we wouldn’t do for her,” Joan bit on her lower lip as she thought of Nora; as completely spoilt as she was, she was still the only one in their family that Joan would entrust with her whereabouts.

Nora would go to the ends of the earth to protect her sister and the connection they shared. “Our mother has allowed her to be picky with the men that have asked for her hand in marriage.”

“There’s nothing wrong with a little spoiling when it comes to the ones we love,” Martha winked at her. “Family that loves each other is a blessing.”

“I beg yer pardon, me lady,” a fair-haired maid with freckles stepped forward.

Joan surveyed the shy looking girl with mop of curls that had been stuffed beneath the cap she was wearing. The girl was short and naturally pretty with symmetrical features and a wispish nose.

Joan couldn't help but wonder if Jasper hadn't noticed how pretty she was as well. The familiar feeling of inexplicable jealousy reared its ugly head again as the anger seeped back in.

"We are done, Isla," Martha spoke kindly to the girl who seemed very shy and demure. "Ye can tell the cook that the breakfast was scrumptious." She dabbed at the corners of her mouth with a napkin before pushing her chair back and standing.

"There was one other thing, me lady," Isla said as she began to remove the empty plates and trays. "Me laird has said that he will nae be joining for supper."

Joan felt herself bristling at the mention of Jasper.

Of course, the girl speaks to him; she is his maid!

She found herself admonishing herself for the ridiculous direction her thoughts were going in.

"An' where exactly did the laird say he would be getting' his supper?" Martha asked sharply, placing her hands on her hips as she narrowed her eyes. "First, he stays away from breakfast, an' says that he willnae be joinin' us for lunch, an' now, it's supper too. Does the laird wish to remain a hermit for the rest of his days?" The sarcasm practically dripped from her voice as she asked the rhetorical question.

Fire filled the girl's cheeks as a bright red blush crept over her face, enhancing the spray of freckles over her nose. "He dinnae say, me lady."

"Never mind, I wasnae mad at ye, Isla; carry on with yer work," Martha sighed and shook her head.

Joan felt her anger boiling to the surface again. The absolute nerve of the man if he thought he could avoid her after kissing her once and nearly kissing her two more times after that.

Does the great lummox think he can just avoid me for the remainder of my stay?

She waited for Martha to leave before storming from the room with a plan in mind. The Beastly Laird was about to see just how difficult it was to avoid Joan Moore.



Jasper sat back in his chair as his man-at-arms discussed what had happened with the men they had been following at the border of their lands. His mind was filled with thoughts of Joan and what had taken place the evening before in the mist. The woman had cast a spell over him that made him react in a way that defied his common sense.

Why do I want to kiss her so badly?

He clenched his jaw as thoughts of her warm body against his drew him away

from the conversation at hand. He'd definitely made the right decision to avoid her; there was no telling what would happen if they were left alone once again. His thoughts soured as he thought of his father and the way he'd treated his mother in their marriage. What was stopping him from beating Joan when things weren't going his way? He was his father's son after all.

No.

He pushed the thoughts aside; there was no chance that Joan would want to marry a man like him in any case, so there was no use in dwelling on fictitious scenarios.

"So, her advice worked." Hamish's sudden referral to Joan brought him back to the study.

"How did it work?" He sat up straight and ran his hand over his chin thoughtfully, suddenly intrigued by the conversation.

"The men we were following turned out to be Laird MacAdair's soldiers; they were lost after fighting a battle against a rival clan. The laird has looked favorably on our decision to nae engage negatively with them an' has sent word that he would like to discuss a peace treaty."

Jasper couldn't help but smile to himself knowing that something Joan had suggested had worked. She was far sharper and more resilient than any woman he had ever met before.

“Do ye think that it’s something ye would consider? Me laird?” Hamish asked him after a few moments of silence.

“What is that?” Jasper shook his head and tried to push thoughts of Joan aside. He’d completely glossed over the rest of what the man was saying once he’d heard Joan’s suggestion had worked.

“The treaty with Laird MacAdair?” his man at arms repeated with one eyebrow raised. “I think a peace treaty could open many avenues of trade for us. Nae to mention that we could pass through his lands unharmed, if need be, there wouldnae have to be anymore takin’ the long route. We could lessen the guards on his borders an’ focus on other aspects where the men are sorely needed.”

“We’ve been just fine all of these years without any trades,” Jasper said more seriously. “There is nae need for the treaty; let the man be pleased with us, and we can leave it there.”

“With all due respect, me laird,” Hamish cleared his throat. “I think the treaty is something that ye should seriously consider. Even if ye dinnae wish to trade, having a declaration of peace with someone as powerful as Lairs MacAdair could mean more stable footing with the rest of the clans.”

“Have we nae been keepin’ the clans at bay without any signed treaties?” Jasper gripped the armrest of his chair with his fingers until his knuckles turned white. “There hasn’t been a single attack on our lands for more than five years. Signin’ a piece of parchment will only send a message to the other lairds that we are weak; we have fought too long an’ too hard to give in now.”

“A treaty is nae a sign of weakness but rather one of good faith in yer fellow man,” Hamish said emphatically. “There are also the times when we run short on crops an’ have to go an entire season without a grain,” Hamish stated his case with a sweep of his hand. “Things like that could be avoided if we had a treaty with a man like MacAdair.”

“Me fellow men?” Jasper closed his fist as he glared. “Ye dinnae have to tell me about me fellow men. I ken better than anyone what me fellow men can do, especially those closest to ye,” his voice darkened as he narrowed his eye. “Those fellow men sought revenge on this clan the second me faither was laid to rest, so I daenae need to hear about any fellow men.”

Hamish quickly averted his eyes from the patch to the desk as he cleared his throat. “I ken that ye have always put the wellbeing of the clan before yer own, me laird, but there may come a time when we need more than what we have built here under our own steam. We may nae have gone hungry, but that doesnae mean that it willnae happen in the future.”

“An’ ye have been granted the very special ability of being able to see into the future?” Jasper held his anger at bay as he lowered his voice; out of all of his men, Hamish was the only one that was willing to challenge him. Courage like that deserved respect, but even Jasper had his limits when it came to someone questioning his command.

Both men looked to the side when the doors to the study burst open revealing Joan with a flushed face as if she had run all the way up the stairs. Her chest rose and fell with her labored breathing.

Jasper frowned at her odd and sudden appearance. The woman was an enigma at the best of times.

“I’m sorry,” she muttered. “I didn’t think anyone was in here.”

“That’s quite all right; the laird an’ I were just finished,” Hamish said as he gathered his papers from the desk and stood. “All I’m saying is that it’s something to consider, me laird.” He neatened the rolls of parchment before placing the entire bundle under his arm and making his way to the door where Joan was standing with a guilty look on her face.

“We can discuss the matter another time,” Jasper said gruffly as he clenched his jaw in anger. He didn’t take kindly to anyone second-guessing his command, especially not those he relied upon to run his troops.

The clan had done well enough on their own without anyone interfering for long enough; he wasn’t about to change anything because they had gotten lucky once.

Hamish merely nodded over his shoulder in response, taking his queue to let the matter rest for now.

“Ye did good, lass,” he winked at Joan and left, closing the doors to the study behind him.

Joan returned his smile with a look on confusion on her face. “What did I do?” she looked to Jasper.

“Nothin’,” he grumbled under his breath and sat back down. He didn’t have time for anything that was going on at present.

Joan glanced over her shoulder at the shut doors and back at Jasper who looked like a bear that had been stung by a bee. The displeasure he felt was written across his face as he clenched his jaw and averted his eyes.

Good, Joan thought as she lifted her chin defiantly; he had no other choice than to talk to her if they were closed in a room together.

“What was he talking about?” she asked as she walked toward the desk, leaning on the edge beside his chair so that he had no other option but to look at her.

“The advice that ye gave regarding the men seen near our borders,” he replied as he reluctantly looked at her, starting at her feet and slowly dragging his eyes up her body until he was looking her in the eyes.

She felt a small wave of triumph at having backed him into a corner, yet her breath still caught in her chest as she looked into his eye. The mutual attraction between them was undeniable as the atmosphere changed, bringing

with it the irresistible scent of lust. Her mouth tilted into a seductive smile as he glanced at her backside that rested against the edge of his desk.

He can't avoid me if I'm right in front of his eyes.

“The men were lost after fightin’ in a battle; their laird has looked favorably on us for lettin’ them go.” The corner of his mouth tilted into a grin that matched hers. “Things worked out because ye gave good advice.”

“Well, I guess you should listen to me more often in that case.” She leaned in closer with her hands behind her back, resting on the desk until her breasts were nearly escaping the fabric confines of her bodice.

Clearing his throat, Jasper quickly stood and walked over to the shelf of books. “Was there something ye needed?” he asked through a clenched jaw, acting as if he were looking for a book. “I’m quite busy; there’s a few clan matters that I need to tend to.”

Joan felt her irritation growing again as she groaned inwardly and rolled her eyes behind his back. The man was holding to his naïve assumptions that he could avoid talking to her. Deciding that she couldn’t back down no matter what he said, she took a deep breath and pushed on.

“I just wanted to ask about the letter and if it has gone out with the others?” she asked as she readjusted her position and folded her arms in front of her chest. “I need to know how long I will have to stay here before my friends come for me.”

“Aye, the letters have gone out; it could take anything from a few days to a week or two.” He turned to look at her with an intense gaze. “Are ye in a hurry to leave?” His tongue passed over his lips in an enticing manner as he narrowed his eyes, signalling that the game of cat and mouse had only just begun. It was now up to Joan if she was going to back down or take the bait.

Her heart began to race as she took in a deep breath, biting her bottom lip as she stared at him. Every fiber of her being seemed to tingle when he looked into her eyes. The power he held over her was more than enough to leave her breathless. “That depends,” she said as she unfolded her arms and swallowed hard, preparing herself for battle.

“On what?” he spoke softly as he took a few steps forward and held her chin between his finger and thumb. The distance he seemed to want to keep between them had suddenly evaporated into thin air, lowering the wall of etiquette that had been erected between them.

“Whether you want me around any longer or not?” she answered in a husky voice with her eyes on his lips. Her chest was beginning to rise and fall with every breath, making her breasts swell above the swoop of her beaded bodice.

“I’m nae keepin’ ye here; ye can leave whenever ye choose.” He placed his hands on either side of her body, entrapping her in his arms as she leaned slightly back, exposing her chest and neck in a manner that she knew he’d find hard to resist. She wanted him to kiss her, despite knowing that there couldn’t be anything more between them.

“Perhaps I want you to keep me entrapped,” she managed to say above the thudding of her own heart. “It might just be for my own good if you lock me

back up in the dungeon.” Her breaths came in quick succession.

Jasper suddenly gripped her hips, and he kissed her full on the lips, taking her by surprise as he used his tongue to search her mouth for the passion that they had shared before.

She felt all her inhibitions leaving her body as he deepened the kiss with a hungry sigh of pleasure. Placing her hands behind his neck, she pulled him closer, nibbling on his lower lip as he kissed her back with force. Her body slid back on the desk, knocking an ornament over as the seams of her dress were stretched to bursting from the way he had her bent over the surface.

Gasping in shock from the sudden onslaught of pleasure, Joan turned her face to the side to watch as Jasper used his arm to sweep the contents of the desk to the floor, sending papers and books along with a full pot of ink into the air. She was taken by surprise again when Jasper hoisted her up by the hips and placed her buttocks on the desk, kissing her neck as he parted her knees with his own.

His sudden display of pleasure was making her hotter than she had ever been before. Her body was responding to him in ways that she never even thought were possible. A wave of bumps shot up her legs as he grasped her ankles and massaged the flesh with the tips of his fingers.

Things got heated really quickly when Joan placed her hands behind her back, supporting her weight on her own arms as she allowed Jasper to kiss over the tender flesh of her neck and down her chest. The hungry way he lifted her legs slightly at an angle made her want to devour him in the same way that he was devouring her.

Placing his hand under her dress, he moved her skirts toward her waist as he massaged her thighs, taking his time to knead her flesh with just the right amount of pressure that her scooting forward on the desk.

His lips moved down her chest and over her breasts with tiny strokes of his tongue, inching ever closer to the rosy buds that remained concealed by her dress.

“Jasper...” she breathed hungrily as she placed her hands on his shoulders in an attempt to slow him down. Her common sense was beginning to return as she looked at the books on the shelf where they had had their last steamy encounter.

“Aye?” he growled against her throat just as the tips of his fingers reached the hem of her undergarments, sending a wave of pleasure coursing through her body. He kissed his way back up her neck and stopped at the line of her jaw as he used his other hand to tilt her face to the side.

His hot breath against her skin sent a wave of pleasure rippling through her body as she subtly moved against his waist. “We have to slow down.” Her body moulded to his when he placed the palm of his hand on the small of her back and drew her closer, making her gasp even louder than before from the sensation of his thighs against hers.

“Why, when it feels so good?” He continued to press kisses against her skin as a small moan escaped his lips, driving her wild. “I have nae even started,” he growled in a deep voice.

“It does.” She reluctantly pushed him back and bit on her lower lip as she thought of what would happen if they went any further. “Coming here... was not thought through; I might still have to...” Her voice trailed off painfully as she recalled the baron and the very precarious situation that she found herself in. “Thinking things through doesn’t seem to be my strong suit of late,” she said as she struggled to regain control of her breathing.

The growing space between them was more than enough to cool her loins and remind her of the risks at play.



Jasper found his anger rising as he looked at the delectable way her dress exposed the flesh of her thigh. He wanted nothing more than to kiss a path to her core and continue what they had started, but the thought of another man touching her was more than he could bare. He tried his best to keep his distance and respect the fact that she had said they needed to stop, despite the alluring way the fullness of her pink lips was drawing him in.

He knew she had been alluding to the fact that she was engaged to be married. He’d wring the life from the scoundrel’s neck if they ever had the misfortune of crossing paths.

Sliding off the desk, Joan fixed her dress and straightened her braid. “There is something that I would like to do before I leave here,” she said as she glanced at him. “I feel as if I can trust you with this,” she stated honestly as she straightened the bodice of her dress.

“Aye?” He felt his heart sinking at the thought of her having to leave but knew that she was right. She couldn’t stay here when she had a situation with a man that she needed to sort out; there was nothing he could do to help her

with that even if he wanted to.

“You might laugh at me,” she said shyly.

“Go on.” He felt intrigued by the suddenly gentle manner in which she was asking for his help.

“I have always wanted to drink whiskey in a meadow,” she confessed as she bit her lips and glanced to the side.

“Why?” he couldn’t help but chuckle.

“I knew you would laugh,” she said as the tension between them began to subside, replaced by an air of mutual respect. “I’ve always wanted to try whiskey; everyone in London has always warned me off of the stuff.” She held his gaze once more.

“An’ yer friend, have ye nae tried whiskey at her castle?” He extended the conversation as a way of keeping his mind off of kissing her as the feel of her body against his still lingered enticingly against his hips. It would take every ounce of his being to keep away from her, but he knew it was for the best.

“Avery was just as protective of me as everyone else,” she replied as she turned her body slightly to the left, running the tips of her fingers over the varnished wood of the desk. “I’ve never truly been allowed to experiment with anything before. Decisions have always been made for me, including who I will marry now,” she said bitterly.

Jasper admired the delicate features of her profile as she looked to the side. He wanted to take her in his arms and say that she had a choice. She could stay at his castle with him and never have to marry anyone that she didn't want to. Yet what would that mean for them? He still couldn't do the honorable thing and make her his wife. There was far too much holding him back.

“An' the meadow?” he asked, looking at her with one eyebrow raised. It was better to keep the conversation on lighter matters than to discuss the solid wall that prevented them from taking things any further.

“Where else would you drink whiskey in Scotland?” she teased him with a mischievous glint in her eyes. “It seems like a fitting place, and besides, isn't that what true Scotsmen do? Sip whiskey from flasks in the countryside? Heck, add in some archery and a clan war, and I will feel more Scottish than you.”

“Is that what ye think we do?” he laughed genuinely at the innocent look in her eyes. He felt for the first time in his life as if he could be himself without holding anything back. There was something in the way she had opened up to him about her situation that made him want to do the same.

“Don't you?” she gave him an uncertain smile that melted his heart.

If making her dream come true was the only thing he could do, then he would do it and do it well, he decided as they continued to look at one another. There was also the very real possibility that he would never see her ever again once she left his castle.

Walking over to the desk, he removed a bottle of whiskey from the bottom drawer and gave her a wolfish grin as he held it in one hand and gently ran the back of his fingers over her skin. “Come with me,” he said in a low voice.

“Are you ordering me around again, my laird?” She lowered her voice again to the seductive purr that sent shivers of pleasure down his spine.

“If ye like,” he teased her as he brought his lips closer to hers before drawing back and making his way to the door. “Ye can come with if ye like,” he called over his shoulder.

“What about the mess we created?” she called to him as he continued to leave.

“There are more maids in this castle than there are thistles in the moors,” he called back. “Are ye comin’ or nae? This whiskey willnae drink itself in the meadow.”

Jasper smiled to himself when he heard her footsteps following close behind. The doors to the study shut as Joan came running to keep up.

The orange sun hung low in the sky as Joan accepted the bottle of whiskey and took another small sip. The gold liquid was sharper than what she had imagined it would be, burning her throat on the way down. Yet she liked the way it made her feel, heating her body and warding off the chill that hung in the afternoon air. She wondered why people had warned her off the liquid for most of her life; it was almost as enticing as the country she found herself in.

Scotland was colder than she thought it would be but far more beautiful than the crowded streets of London. They sat on a damp piece of grass atop a secluded cliff overlooking a meadow as they passed the bottle of whiskey between them in peaceful silence, sitting side by side with their bodies barely touching while providing enough heat against the breeze.

“I’m sorry it’s nae a meadow,” Jasper spoke up as he accepted the bottle back. “We’d have to travel by horse to reach the meadow down there.” He gestured to the valley far below after taking a massive swig.

Joan followed his gaze to the open patch of grass in the distance where the clouds were casting shadows over the greenery. “It’s perfect up here,” she

said quietly. "I wouldn't want to go down there when I could stay up here forever..." her voice trailed off when a light breeze blew a few strands of her hair across her face. "In fact, I wouldn't want to be anywhere else."

She felt completely safe, nestled between the giant oak trees in the tiny alcove that seemed as if it were hidden from the rest of the world. She'd never return to London if she had a tiny house of her own on that cliff. She'd hide away, growing her own food and living off the mountain. She sighed and leaned back with her hands on the grass as the unwanted thought of leaving took hold.

"Ye dinnae have to leave if ye dinnae wish to," he said softly as he placed the bottle between them on the grass, wiping his lips with the back of his hand. "I could keep ye captive in the dungeon forever if ye like." He teased her with a glint in his eye that made her hope for a second that he wasn't just teasing.

Joan loved the open side of him that he was currently showing her; it was almost as if he were showing his true self that she'd only seen glimpses of before.

"Only if you will allow me to command you from time to time." She bumped his shoulder with her own in a playful manner, lingering for a second as the warmth of his body crept into hers.

"Very well," he said as he stretched his legs out in front of him on the grass and turned to her with a cheeky grin. "Command me then, me lady," he said sarcastically with a wink.

“It’s Joan to you,” she whispered as she leaned in closer to his lips, placing her one hand on his chest while using the other to support her weight. “And my command is that you should kiss me,” she demanded in a husky voice. She wasn’t sure if it was the few sips of whiskey that she had or the secluded atmosphere of the scenery, but she wanted him more than ever, the consequences be damned.

“Aye, Joan...” he breathed her name as he leaned in close and tenderly kissed her lips, drawing back after a few moments of bliss where their lips merely brushed against each other. “Was there anything else ye wished to command me, Joan?” His voice was barely above a whisper, softer than she had ever heard it before.

“Yes,” she said breathlessly as the final crumbs of sense left her body. Swinging her leg over his, she straddled his hips between her thighs, fanning her skirts over them both. “I want you to kiss me so deeply and so passionately that the rest of the world will cease to exist.” She reached down and gripped his shirt in her fists as she leaned in closer. “I command it,” she stated slowly in a harsh tone that she was sure would make him mad.

Jasper took her by surprise as he suddenly gripped her hips and sat up with her in his lap, holding her against him as he settled her form into his. “As ye wish,” he whispered against her lips as he drew her in for a second kiss that was just as tender and soft as the first.

Joan felt her breathing quicken as he explored the shape of her body with his hands, deepening the kiss as he started massage her slender waist, working his way up to the swell of her breasts and lingering over her ribs.

“Tell me to stop, an’ I will,” he said gruffly after biting her lip and cupping

her breasts in his hands with a fierceness that drove her wild. She suddenly found herself wanting him to take complete command of her body, mind, and soul.

“Don’t...” she demanded forcefully, looking into his eye with all the passion and heat she felt toward him at present. “In fact, I command you to carry on.” She placed her forehead against his and shut her eyes as the rest of the word faded into nothing but background noise.

The moment lingered between them as Joan caught a glimpse in his eye that she couldn’t explain; it took her breath away and made her feel as if she were looking into his soul. The things she saw in there made her body ache with longing for his touch, sending a wave of fire to her core that couldn’t be tamed.

Taking her by the waist, Jasper suddenly flipped her onto her back in the grass, looking down at her with a wild look of hunger. “Don’t...” he commanded her sharply just as she was about to cover her bare legs with her skirts. Taking his finger, he started at her neck, drawing a line down her chest, between her breasts, and down to her naval.

Allowing her hands to fall limply on either side of her head, she focused on her breathing and allowed him to take control. “Take command then, my laird,” she breathed as the gentle breeze kissed the skin of her thighs, barely taming the heat she was emanating from her core.

Leaning in close with a dangerous glint in his eye, Jasper whispered in her ear as he cupped her full breast in the palm of his hand. “Jasper... Say me name.” He began to move over her breast in a circular motion with the fabric of her dress in his palm. “Call me by me name,” he commanded more

fiercely.

“Jasper...” she breathed heavily as a warm sensation of pleasure spread through her breast, making her nipple hard against the fabric of her corset. She looked him in the eye and brought one leg up at his side, teasing him as she rubbed her inner thigh against his hip.

Kissing her with force, he pulled the neckline of her dress down until the peak of her breasts popped over the corset from the force of his movements. The breeze suddenly reached her breasts, and her nipples hardened against the cold.

Joan moaned in pleasure as he kissed his way down her neck and took one of her nipples into his mouth, gently nibbling the rosy bud. He used his free hand to feel her leg, dragging his palm over the smooth skin until he reached her inner thigh. Lingering there for a moment, he shifted his focus onto her other nipple as he repeated his actions and played with his tongue.

“I want to make ye feel good.” He suddenly moved up with his mouth and breathed in her ear as the tips of his fingers played with the lace of her undergarments before he used his hand to gently push open her thighs.

“I want that too,” she gasped as he placed his index finger beneath the sheer fabric of her chemise and pulled it aside, allowing the breeze to kiss more than just her thighs.

Allowing his gaze to fall to his hand, Jasper’s breathing quickened as he felt his way over her skin. “I’m going to touch ye now,” he whispered tenderly in

her ear as he lowered his torso onto hers and kissed her neck. “Yer body will show me what ye like...”

Joan’s eyes suddenly shot open as he touched her core in the most scintillating manner that had her gasping for air. His fingers worked over her folds in a rhythmic fashion that made her want to scream his name. Her body writhed with pleasure beneath his touch as he held her still. Tiny beads of sweat formed on her skin as he worked his magic, making her beg for him not to stop.

Jasper shifted his mouth to hers as he parted her lips with his tongue and kissed her deeply, making the world around them disappear as she had commanded. His kiss stifled her moans of pleasure as the moment dragged on into eternity, allowing her pleasure to build with every moment that passed.

Feeling as if she would burst if she didn’t feel his body against hers, Joan placed her hand against his face and held him steady as she leaned her head back in pure ecstasy. Allowing a moan to escape her lips, she rode the waves of pleasure he was creating in her being.

“Shhh,” he whispered gently, placing his free hand over her lips just as she was about to scream. “Daenae scream, lass; someone may think yer being hurt.” He chuckled softly in her ear as her eyes rolled back in her head. He picked up the pace as he focussed on the bud between her thighs that gave her the most pleasure.

“Jasper...” she gasped against his hand in a stifled moan, biting down on his fingers when she couldn’t take it any longer.

Feeling a wave of heat in her core that swept her away on a gust of pleasure, Joan suddenly tensed as every muscle in her body responded to his touch, leaving her breathless as wave after wave of pleasure made her body shudder and spasm until she lost control over all of her senses.

Jasper kept his hand between her thighs as he whispered to her in Gaelic, gently kissing the side of her face and neck until all of the waves had subsided. It wasn't until she lay completely still that he fixed her dress and drew her against his chest, rolling her onto her side until they were facing one another.

The deep sound of his voice drew her into another world as she listened to a language she didn't understand yet felt as if she could feel with her soul.

She breathed in his woody, masculine scent for a while before looking up with a smile. "Does it always feel like that with a man and a woman?" she asked hesitantly, still coming down from the things he'd made her feel. She lifted her hand and drew a line across his jaw with the back of her finger.

Jasper remained quiet for a moment before stroking her hair and hugging her body closer to his. "I heard it can be like that if the connection between a man and a woman is real." He pressed a tendered kiss against her forehead that made her stomach flutter before burying his face in her hair.

"Yer hair smells wonderful," he said in a husky tone as he let out a breath that tickled her skin.

"It's lavender," she replied with a warm smile on her lips. "The maids that

help me with my bath showed me how to weave it into my braid,” she explained before kissing the tip of his chin.

“Yer just full of secrets,” he teased and held her closer, breathing in the scent of her hair.

“Jasper,” she said as she suddenly straightened her body against his and popped herself up on her elbow. There was an aspect of their intimate moment that had been slightly lacking for her. She’d heard from some of her friends that men could feel just as much pleasure from a woman as she had just felt.

“Aye?” he asked as he ran his fingertips over the parts of her chest that were still exposed, creating a warm tingling sensation in her chest.

“Would you show me how to make you feel the same way?” she asked and bit her lips. “I don’t want you to feel left out.”

“I daenae ken if that’s a good idea, lass,” he whispered and gently touched the tip of her nose before smiling.

“Why not?” she pouted slightly before coming in closer and pressing her lips against his, stifling his protests.

Jasper’s eyes remained shut for a second before he looked at her again. “Ye will have far too much power over me then,” he winked at her.

“I command it,” she said in a breathy tone, placing her hand flat against his abs and feeling the muscles through his shirt before making her way to the hard bulge between his legs. Her pulse suddenly quickened as she felt his reaction through his breeches. She’d heard that a man could get hard when he was attracted to a woman, yet the power she felt beneath her fingers was almost more than she was expecting.

Taking in a sharp breath, Jasper cursed and placed his hand over hers and guided her into his breeches, showing her how to give him pleasure in the same way that he had done for her as his eyelids drifted shut.

Joan’s breath began to quicken along with his as she wrapped her fingers in the way that he showed her and began to move. It wasn’t long before Jasper with grunting with pleasure.



“Was it good?” she asked as he collapsed his head against her chest, slowing his breathing and holding her close.

She stroked the hair from his face and kissed his forehead, expecting his answer. She needed to know that she’d brought him just as much pleasure as he had given her.

“Aye, it was.” He smiled up at her and kissed her chest before shifting his position and pulling her onto his chest in a tight embrace. The warmth of his body chased away the breeze as they lay in each other’s arms.

The sun was just beginning to set as Joan watched the clouds floating across

an amber sky. The mountain above them changed colors as the wind painted pictures, manipulating the trees and their shadows.

Running his fingers over the bare skin of her shoulders where her dress had slipped, Jasper continued to hold her close. The moment between them stretched into what seemed like an eternity.

Laying in his arms, Joan reached up and stroked his cheek; she'd never felt more at peace than she did in that moment. She felt as if she could open up and have the discussions that needed to be had.

"Can I ask you something?" she whispered with her cheek against his chest.

"Aye?" His body seemed fully at rest as he lay in the grass, gently stroking her arm with the tips of his fingers as his breaths came in an even flow.

"What happened to your eye?" Joan immediately regretted her decision when she felt his body tensing beneath her touch.

Gently moving her aside, Jasper sat up and clenched his jaw with his back to her, looking out over the meadow that was barely visibly now that evening was creeping in.

"I didn't mean to offend you," Joan sat up and fixed her dress, giving him a

few moments of silence; her question had obviously angered him. His sudden distance was evidence of the fact that he'd rather not talk about whatever had happened.

"It was a long time ago," he spoke with his back still turned to her.

Joan stopped pulling the pieces of grass from her braid and stared at his broad shoulders. She felt as if she were watching a deer — any slight movement could chase him away.

"Me faither was a very cruel man," he sighed heavily and shook his head. "I daenae like talking about what happened..." his voice trailed off again as if he were fighting an internal battle that caused him a great deal of pain.

Feeling a wave of empathy toward him, Joan crept forward and came to his side, looking out over the evening sky as she waited patiently. Giving him the space he needed to process his feelings, she drew her legs up to her chest and hugged them tightly.

"He used to wage wars against the nearby clans for wealth more than anything else." Jasper looked down as he spoke, recalling the memories that he'd pushed to the back of his mind. "There was never really any due cause for the wars other than me faither wantin' more land an' coins."

Joan thought of how difficult it must have been to live in constant unrest with a father who sought nothing but wealth and war. Her mind briefly wandered to the baron and his reasons for trying to entrap her. There was a rumor that he just wanted a wife with a large dowry, yet none of that had ever been

confirmed.

“Everyone sought revenge after he died; it was up to me to ensure the safety of the clan.” The corner of his mouth twitched nervously as he opened up, continuing with his story. “There were quite a few lairds that made as if they wanted peace, but they only wanted to get close enough to enact their plans.”

Placing her hand on his arm, she offered him the comfort she hoped would encourage him to trust her and finish his story. “That’s why you keep to yourself.” It suddenly made sense to her why the castle was so isolated from the rest of the world. Keeping everyone away was his only form of defence.

“Aye, I was only seventeen when I became laird. I had to learn a lot of the lessons the hard way. It may seem as if everything I do is unreasonable, but it’s the only way that works. I cannae tell ye how many battles I had to win.” He shook his head in disgust. “The innocent blood that I had to spill to make the rest of the lairds respect me.”

“Did you lose your eye in battle?” She felt completely lost in the story he was telling as she hung on his every word.

Shaking his head, he took a deep breath. “Nae, I told ye ‘afore that me faither was nae a good man. He used to hit me maither an’ I whenever he pleased. We were the constant outlet for his anger. It happened on the day I turned seventeen...” he spat in disgust as his words trailed off.

Joan recalled his words from earlier and realized that he must have lost his eye and his father on the day he became laird.

“I had already gone to bed when I heard me maither screaming in her chambers.” He shifted a little on the grass as he clenched his fists. “It wasnae unusual for him to lift his hands to her after a battle, but this time was different. I heard him yell that he’d kill both of us before the sun came up. Panicking, I ran to their chambers an’ threw open the door.”

Joan shifted a little closer on the grass as the cool evening air crept in, making her shiver from the harshness of the wind as well as Jaspers’ story. She couldn’t imagine how terrifying it must have been to hear your own father threatening to kill you and your mother.

“I saw me maither laying on the floor at his feet with a bloody gash across her cheek.” He suddenly became visibly angry as he clenched his jaw. “Something finally snapped in me as she lay there cowering. I wasn’t going to allow him to treat us that way anymore. I reached for the dirk in me boot an’ lunged at him in the white-hot range that I felt coursing through me veins. He was stronger than me an’ managed to throw off the attack.” His eyes clouded over from emotion as a muscle jumped in his jaw.

Joan felt the tears welling in her eyes as she swallowed the lump in her throat that threatened to choke her breaths. There was a kinder side to Jasper that had been through far more than she could ever have imagined.

“He threw me clean across the room an’ into a wall. There wasn’t enough time to react ’fore he was on me with his dagger. I managed to plunge me dirk between his ribs, but it was too late. Me hand slipped, allowing his dagger to plunge deep into me eye.” He reached up and ran his thumb over the leather patch. “I can still feel the pain searing through me skull at times.”

“I’ve heard some of the men coming back from battle saying that they can still feel a limb twitching long after it has been removed.” Joan sought for common ground to let him know that she felt for him and everything he had gone through. “The one soldier even said he felt his leg itching at night while he tried to sleep. I know I’ve never been through anything like that, but I can just imagine how difficult it has been for you all of these years.”

“Aye,” he let out a breath as he relaxed a little. “I’ve gotten used to it by now, but sometimes, I swear I can still see a glimmer of light when I look at a sunset even though I ken very well that the eye is nae there.”

“I think it’s part of human nature to hope even if we don’t realize that we are hoping at the time.” She took a deep breath as she thought of everything he’d said.

Swallowing hard, Jasper looked at his hands as if he could still see his father’s blood on his skin. “I dinnae mean to kill him; I just wanted to protect me maither. I had hoped that we could still save him an’ that he would change, but it was too late by the time the healer got to him. He’d lost too much blood, an’ there was nothing that anyone could do.”

“I don’t think you should blame yourself.” Joan slipped her arm through his and placed her head on his shoulder. “You were trying to protect your mother; anyone in your position would have done the same thing.”

“Can I ask ye something now?” he asked in a gentle voice.

“Yes.” She lifted his head and looked him in the eye, searching his soul.

“Why is it that ye are the only person that has never been repulsed or afraid of me?” He seemed vulnerable as he searched her face in the fading light. “Men are usually either intimidated or scared of me, an’ women seem repulsed. Why is it that ye never once shied away or avoided looking me in the eye?” His eye was bright with emotion and expectation as he waited for her response.

The small amount of fear that swam in his eye tugged at her heart as she felt herself feeling as if she wanted to protect him from any woman that shied away from him. “Well, we need to look at the facts here.” She shivered slightly as her hands became cold. “These other women that have been repulsed by you in the past. Did you throw them in a dungeon before trying to court them?”

Jasper leaned back and laughed from the pit of his stomach so freely and openly that Joan couldn’t help but admire him.

“I mean, I have to admit, although I have never been repulsed by you, throwing a lady in a dungeon isn’t exactly an attractive quality in a man.”

Shaking his head, Jasper smiled at her. “Yer something else, lass; has anyone ever told ye that yer mouth might get ye into trouble someday?”

“Many times,” she said seriously as she recalled all of the times that her mother had warned her of that very thing. “But on a serious note, I’m not sure why I’ve never been scared of you. I felt uneasy at first.” She smiled at him. “You did throw me in a dungeon and threaten me.”

He returned her smile with a glint in his eyes.

“There was just something about you that fascinated me; the patch over your eye intrigued me more than anything else. I wanted to know what happened. Call it an unhealthy curiosity with things that don’t concern me.”

“I’m glad ye have those qualities,” he said tenderly as he reached up and tucked a loose strand of hair behind her ear. “Daenae let anyone change ye for anything.”

Joan felt herself swooning as she looked into his eye; the intensity of the green with blue flecks took her to a place where she wanted to spend the rest of her life. “May I?” she hesitated as she raised her hand.

Searching her face for a moment, Jasper nodded and lifted the patch from his eye to reveal a smooth scar that covered the socket.

She felt her breath catch in her throat as she saw his face properly for the very first time. The patch made him harder somehow; his face was open and handsome without the obscuring effect of the leather that made him seem unapproachable.

“I ken it isnae much to look at.” He glanced to the side and began lifting the patch back to his face.

“No,” she said firmly and placed her hand over his, lowering it back down. “Don’t hide from me; it’s everything to look at you.” She placed her hands on

either side of his face and gently kissed the scar before drawing back with her forehead against his. “The world can be a cruel place, so hide your scar from them if you must, but don’t hide from me.”

“Ye daenae have to leave if ye daenae wish to,” he whispered back with his eye shut. “I cannae promise ye marriage, but ye will be safe behind the castle walls.”

Her heart clenched at his words.

Why can't he marry me even after the intimacy we shared?

Was it that he felt he would do the same thing to her that his father did to his mother? Or did he simply not love her back?

Her body suddenly froze as Joan realized with startling clarity that she loved him. She loved who he was, rough manners and all. The way he protected his family, the way he touched her body, mind, and soul, and even the eyepatch that only she had been privileged enough to see beneath. Even after all of that, there was the distinct possibility that he didn’t feel that way about her.

“Is something the matter?” he asked as she shivered and drew away.

“Not at all,” she lied and placed her arms around her knees as she drew them closer to her chest. “It’s just getting a little chilly out here.”

“Aye, we should be headed back soon; it will take us a while to get back, but first,” he said as he glanced over his shoulder, “there is something I would like to give ye. Wait here,” he commanded excitedly and jumped to his feet before disappearing into the thicket of trees beside the cliff face.

Sighing heavily, Joan placed her chin on her knees and lamented over her life. She was engaged to a man she did not want to marry, yet she was in love with a man that did not wish to marry her. All things considered, it may have been better if she threw herself off the cliff and had done with it all.

You are not a quitter, Joan Moore.

She gave herself a pep-talk and lifted her chin in the air. So, what if the man she loved didn't love her back? She would pick herself up and face her problems instead of hiding behind the walls of a castle. It may work for Jasper to hide away from the world, but she would solve her problems on her own terms without becoming a recluse.

“Excuse me, me lady,” a man's voice suddenly startled her as she glanced to the side.

The tall man with a muscular build was standing beside the giant oak trees that grew beside the cliff. His sandy-blond hair was accompanied by a matching mustache. What stood out the most for Joan was his bright blue eyes that sparkled with passion and concern as he addressed her.

“Are ye in need of any assistance, me lady? Are ye a guest of Laird MacShaw?” he asked in a thick Scottish accent and glanced at the cliff where

Jasper had disappeared.

Joan looked over her shoulder with a sad smile. “I’m all right, thank you.” She looked back at the stranger. “I guess I’m a captive now.” She let out a heavy sigh, giving herself over to the idea that her heart would forever be held captive by the Beastly Laird.

Their attention was drawn to the side as Jasper came clambering through the underbrush and heather at the foot of the trees.

Frowning, Joan noticed that the man had vanished in the blink of an eye.

Had he even been there?

She began to question her own sanity but pushed the thought to the back of her mind when Jasper came forward holding a bunch of tiny white flowers that boasted bright-yellow centers. “What are those?” she almost gasped with surprise when he held them out to her.

“Mountain avens,” he replied with a huge smile and handed them to her. “They remind me of ye. They persevere under the harshest of conditions but always manage to shine.”

A gentle breeze picked up as Joan accepted the flowers, sending a shiver down her spine.

Why does he have to be so sweet?

Her heart clenched at the sweet gesture, especially now that he had made it clear that she could never be his wife.

“I’m afraid we have to go now,” Jasper said as he looked at the sun disappearing behind the hill in the distance.

“Yes,” she said as she stood and dusted off her dress. “I think we should,” her words held more meaning than she had intended. Her chest tightened with conflicting emotions. She’d have to leave now that his intentions were so clear.

Jasper gripped her hand even tighter as he pulled her through the trees that surrounded his castle. Distant sounds of a battle made his heart race as he picked up the pace. They had only been gone for a few hours, yet something terrible seemed to have happened at the castle in his absence. The foreboding light of the full moon lit their path through the forest as they hurried along.

Pieces of underbrush and foliage with hindering their path and snagging at their clothes, but Jasper knew they needed to reach the castle as soon as possible if he was to protect his family.

“Why are you in such a hurry?” Joan complained breathlessly as she lifted her dress and tried to keep up. He could feel her lagging behind slightly as he pulled her hand.

“Do ye nae hear that?” He suddenly stopped and turned before holding his finger to her lips. “Listen carefully.” He gestured in the direction of the castle over his shoulder.

Joan held her breath as she strained to listen, squinting in her efforts and looking to the side. “Is that...fighting?” Her eyes filled with the fear and shock of uncertainty as she looked him in the eye again.

The distant sounds of metal against metal filled the night air, accompanied by cries of angry men that were certainly moving about. Joan shivered as the screams grew louder.

“Aye, I daenae ken who or why, but we have to hurry; the men will ken what to do, but I have to be there,” he explained as quickly as he could before pulling her along once again.

“I thought the castle hasn’t been under attack in years,” she almost yelled as they ran through the trees.

“It hasn’t; the only thing I can think of is that Laird MacAdair dinnae take as kindly to us as Hamish thought he did,” he explained over his shoulder as they drew closer to the castle. “It must have been a front as I thought so that we would lower our guard an’ allow them in without resistance.”

Jasper knew in his heart that he’d made the right decision in refusing talks of peace, MacAdair may not have been one of the lairds who took advantage of his father’s death, but he knew how the world worked. The highlands were a cutthroat place where everyone looked out for their own best interests.

They came to a sudden stop as the trees opened up, revealing a fiery battle in front of the castle. Hundreds of torches had been lit on the castle walls, casting light on the men below who raged against their enemies in confusion.

Jasper's men held their own as the assailing Scotsmen fell back, only to come forward again as soon as they regrouped.

Taking a deep breath, Jasper tugged on her hand in an attempt to lead her around the castle where he could take her to safety. He needed to make sure that Joan and his mother were out of harm's way before he joined his men.

"Wait, I've seen that man before," Joan said as she gripped his arm and held him back. She pointed to a small group of men who were standing by the opposite line of trees giving orders to the soldiers.

"Which one," he asked with a frown as he tried to make out which man she was pointing at. The group of men in question all looked alike in their green kilts and brown leather boots with light chainmail across their chests. The obscuring shadows of the nearby trees did little to help his vision. It was clear to Jasper that at least one of them must have been the leader by the way the men made sure to keep the fighting away from the line of trees at their backs.

Joan frowned in their direction. "The one with the mustache; he appeared earlier on the cliff before you came back with the flowers," she explained as she clung to his side.

Jasper gripped her hand and swiftly pulled her behind a tree before placing his hands on her shoulders and searching her face. "Did he say anything while he was there?" he asked as a million scenarios shot through his mind. It couldn't have been a coincidence that the man has seen them earlier and was now attacking the castle.

“Just asked if I needed assistance,” she frowned as she looked back to the battle.

“He dinnae ask who I was or if I would be long?” he tried his best to piece everything together. “Ye have to think Joan; it’s very important that ye remember what he said.”

“Not that I recall,” she answered honestly. “He was gone the second you came back. He only asked if I needed any assistance.”

“That’s all I need to ken,” he said as he drew her into his arms, hugging her tightly against his body and kissing her forehead. “I need ye to stay hidden here in the trees until I come back,” he explained after gently pushing her away. “The chances of ye being hurt out there are far too great, even if I try an’ sneak around the back. I dinnae ken how many men are surrounding the castle. Besides,” he tilted her chin up slightly and searched her face. “I willnae be able to focus if ye are by my side.”

Joan’s eyes filled with panic as she searched his face. “Please don’t leave me; I’ve never been in a situation like this before. I wouldn’t know what to do if anyone found me here.”

“Ye scream, lass, scream louder than ye’ve ever screamed before an’ I’ll be at yer side. I have to go an’ confront that laird; it’s more than likely that he followed us onto the cliff an’ saw his chance to attack while I was away.” He guided her into the center of a bush and made sure that she was covered by the leaves.

“I’m scared, Jasper,” she said breathlessly as she shut her eyes and held onto his hands.

“I ken,” he bent down and kissed her forehead again. “I’ll be back as soon as I can, but I need ye to hide here for a while.”

“All right,” she eventually breathed and hunkered down even further in the underbrush until she was barely visible.

Nodding at her, Jasper hurried away in pursuit of the man with a mustache. He looked over his shoulder to ensure that Joan was hidden from sight before skirting his way along the line of trees. It wasn’t long before he was directly behind the men and could hear what they were saying.

“But where is the laird?” One of the men in kilts asked the man with a mustache.

“I dinnae ken, but he has to come out; he cannae still be on the cliff,” the mustached man answered and placed his hands on his hips. The way he carried himself spoke of authority and confidence.

“Why are ye lookin’ for me?” Jasper asked as he stepped into view.

The men lifted their swords and stood their ground as Jasper summed them up. They were all smaller than him and far less intimidating, but he could see that they meant business as they glared at him.

“Are ye Laird MacShaw?” the tall man with the mustache stepped forward. He seemed uncertain as he spoke, looking Jasper over with a suspicious glint of hostility in his eyes.

“Aye, I am Laird MacShaw, who is askin’?” He clenched his jaw as he stared at the men. It was blatantly obvious to him now that they had come with a purpose; it wasn’t every day that men attacked the castle for no good reason and demanded to see the laird. They either wanted his lands or something far more valuable.

“I am Laird MacAdair.” The man stood tall and lifted his head with pride as the battle raged on behind his back.

Battle cries rang out as men engaged in combat, pushing forward as others held them back. Their bodies moved and danced like a nest of ants that had happened upon a piece of food on the ground.

“Yer men were unharmed,” Jasper said angrily. “Why are ye attacking the castle?”

“I thank ye for nae harmin’ me men,” MacAdair replied, “but I am here for the lass that is being held captive in yer castle. I cannae stand by when an innocent lass is being held against her will.” His eyes darkened with anger as he balled his fists at his side.

“I am nae holding anyone captive in me castle.” Jasper hoped that Joan had been able to remain hidden. “Everyone here is here of their own free will, including the lass.” He looked the men over before addressing the Laird once

again. “How is it that ye are aware of her presence here? It cannae be that ye were simply takin’ a stroll on the cliff.”

“That’s nae what she said to me on the cliff,” MacAdair said sternly as he glanced at his men that were being driven to their limits. “The girl said that she was yer captive.” He looked Jasper up and down. “How I ken that she would be there is none of yer business.”

Jasper felt a pang of confusion in his heart as he looked at the man. There was no way that Joan would have said that she was being held against her will, not after the moment they had shared. Even before their connection on the cliff, he had made it clear to her that she was free to leave and even stay at any point. Confusion clouded his thoughts as he sought the truth. It wasn’t possible that anyone else knew she had briefly been taken captive upon her arrival.

Did I nae make her feel safe?

“The lass is safe with me,” Jasper repeated through clenched teeth. “Call off yer men, an’ we can clear up the misunderstandin’.”

“That’s nae what I heard; release her to me an’ the attack will stop,” he said sternly as he squared his shoulders, standing up to Jasper. “All we want is the lass; ye can go back to livin’ yer secluded life once she is safe with me.”

“She is safe!” he growled angrily and lunged forward as he drew his sword from his hip.

MacAdair countered his attack with his own sword as Jasper place his full weight behind the blade, bearing down with all the anger he felt in his chest. “She will never be safe with a beast like ye!”

Losing his temper, Jasper lifted his sword in the air and swung with all the fury he felt growing in his core. He’d come too far in the past few days to allow Joan to be taken away from him by an insolent man who simply assumed that a woman like her could be nothing other than a captive in his castle.

The men fought one another with angry cries until Jasper finally got the upper hand, throwing the man to the ground as his men rushed forward to help him back up.

A sudden blood-curdling scream drew their attention to the opposite line of trees as a sudden wave of ice ran through Jasper’s veins.

Joan...

“We have the lass!” one of MacAdair’s men screamed over the heads of the fighting men, causing most of the soldiers to stop fighting and look in his direction.

Jasper did his best to try and keep the Laird where he was, but it was no use as his men turned on their heels and held him at bay with their swords. “Leave her alone!” he yelled as two of the men gripped each arm and held him back from behind.

MacAdair suddenly set off at a run, making his way toward Joan as more men gripped her by the waist and hoisted her onto the back of a horse.

Feeling his body being overtaken by an unstoppable anger and rage, Jasper began to fight back, first throwing one man to the side before freeing his arm and connecting the other square on the chin with an uppercut that sent him flying into a tree.

He rounded on the men with swords next and made quick work of them before pushing forward through the throng of men who had returned to their battle.

Feeling as if his heart was about to beat from his chest, Jasper ran forward, knocking anyone out of his way that dared stand in his path. He was halfway across the battlefield when he saw the MacAdair reach the horse where Joan was being held down by two very large men with swords.

“Leave me alone!” she managed to kick one in the face as she struggled to break free.

MacAdair gripped her arms just as she slid from the horse, holding her back before she was able to make a run for it.

Picking up the pace, Jasper tried his best to push through the throng of bodies that warred with blades and daggers. It wasn't until he had made up most of the distance that he realized the opposing men were beginning to retreat in full. His own men were pushing them closer to the line of trees as they defended the castle.

“Jasper! Help me!” Joan’s scream filled his ears as he looked up again to see a sight that filled his heart with dread.

Joan had been bound and gagged this time before she was thrown over the back of the Laird’s horse. Spurring the beast on with a blood-curdling cry, MacAdair raced off into the trees with Joan staring at Jasper with a look of panic on her face.

The world suddenly seemed to stop spinning as Jasper froze, feeling his body go numb from shock. The woman he loved had suddenly and very unceremoniously been ripped from his arms. How could it be when he hadn’t even had the chance to tell her that he loved her with every fiber of his being?

I love her.

The words sliced through his heart with searing pain. He’d never thought that his happiness would ever depend on another person, let alone an English woman he had only just met a few days prior, but at that moment, Jasper knew that any future happiness he may have hoped to have depended on Joan being returned to his arms.

Turning his face to the sky, he let out a fierce battle cry that made the men around him stop and run for cover. There was no turning back now that he knew what needed to be done. The consequences be damned.

I will get her back if it’s the last thing I do.

Jasper gripped his hair as he fell to his knees in the mud; he needed a moment to think before simply running after Joan. MacAdair didn't seem as if he wanted to hurt her; he seemed to be operating under some kind of false assumption of chivalry. That in itself would give him time to get a horse and give chase.

The men of the opposing clan had already begun to disperse when Jasper pushed himself up and made his way toward the gates of his castle, ignoring the men who fled from his presence. There was no use in spilling more blood when killing even one of them wouldn't help get her back. Wealth and land didn't seem to be the factors at play. They had come for Joan and nothing else.

He was nearly at the gates when a carriage came racing up to the castle at breakneck speed, causing the men to scatter in all manner of directions. Several soldiers dove into the bushes in an attempt to avoid being crushed by the wheels. Frowning, he looked back to see the castle gates opening and his mother come running out with her dress pulled up over her boots.

“Jasper!” Tears were streaming down her cheeks as she ran toward him. “I

cannae find Joan anywhere; ye have to help me find her!” she cried out in a panic before even reaching his side. “She’s nae in the castle; something terrible has happened.”

Holding out his arm, Jasper held her back as the carriage came to a sudden and abrupt halt a few feet away. The doors burst open, revealing a large man with striking black hair. The scowl on his face let Jasper know that he meant business.

“Where is Joan Moore?” he yelled angrily as he stepped from the carriage and advanced, allowing a blonde woman to follow suit. She was far smaller in stature, yet her eyes held the same fierceness as his.

“Who is asking?” Jasper barked angrily as he ignored the confused way his mother was looking from the newcomers to him. Everything had happened so quickly that there was no time to explain what was going on at present. Even if he could, which wasn’t the case, he was just as confused as his mother. The whole of Scotland seemed to be looking for Joan Moore.

“Laird MacKinnon,” the man called back as the woman came to his side, protectively looping her arm through his. “I demand that ye release the English lass that ye have taken captive. I dinnae wish to fight, but I will if I have to.”

“We only wish to get her back safely,” the woman spoke in an English accent that was very similar to Joan’s. “She’s a friend of ours.”

Martha raised her hands to her mouth in shock as she suddenly realized who

they were. Hurrying past her son despite his protests and attempts to hold her back, she addressed both of them. “Ye must be Avery and Darragh; Joan has said so much about ye,” she looked from one to the other. “Please forgive us for nae realizing this sooner; we have just had an unexpected attack on the castle.”

Darragh and Avery exchanged confused glances as they looked at Martha and Jasper. The air seemed to be filled with confusion on either side of the situation.

The man atop the carriage suddenly scurried from his seat and pointed an accusing finger at Jasper. “Don’t try and deny it; it was your men that took her captive when we took a wrong turn! You have her!” he cried in a croaky voice that was all but gone. The man looked as if he hadn’t slept in days.

Deciding that things were escalating far too quickly for his liking, Jasper came forward and introduced himself. “I am Laird MacShaw; it is true that Joan was here, but she isnae here anymore,” he cut to the chase in an attempt to save time. He needed to pursue Joan’s captors as soon as he could, and the only way he was going to be able to achieve that was if everyone agreed not to fight.

“He’s lying!” the dishevelled and red-faced coachman cried out, nearly falling to his knees from exhaustion before gripping Darragh’s arm and hanging on for dear life. “He’s keeping the young Miss!”

“Why don’t you go and sit in the carriage while we handle things from here,” Avery said kindly as she led the man away by his arm. He muttered incoherently through his sobs as he allowed himself to be led away.

“Did her letter nae arrive?” Jasper asked with a frown; he couldn’t understand why things had gotten so out of hands when she’d written to them, unless their castle was clean on the other side of Scotland which he doubted very much.

“What letter?” Darragh clenched his jaw as he narrowed his eyes. The man didn’t seem to trust very easily, not that Jasper blamed him for that; it was better not to trust anyone than to end up in positions that would only cause harm.

“We only received one letter from Joan,” Avery said as she shut the carriage door and hurried back to the conversation. “She said she was coming to the castle, but she never arrived. She didn’t mention anything else about stopping along the way or why she was running.”

Things were becoming increasingly more confusing as no-one could understand what the other party was saying.

“We waited and waited for her, but she never came; it wasn’t until a few hours ago that her betrothed showed up looking for her,” Avery said with a frown.

“Aye,” Darragh confirmed what his wife was saying. “He just left when her coachman came to say that she had been taken captive by yer men.”

Jasper clenched his jaw at the mention of betrothed. The scoundrel had obviously taken advantage of everyone’s ignorance and showed up at the castle in an attempt to take Joan away with him.

“It’s true that she had been mistakenly taken as a prisoner.” He decided he had to be upfront if they were going to get anywhere. “She wasn’t in the dungeon for very long until we cleared the matter. She wrote ye a letter to explain; it must have gotten lost in the mail. As for her betrothed, she doesnae have one. The man is a liar that tried to trap her into marriage.”

“Oh no,” Avery raised her hand to her throat. “We were right not to trust him.” She looked at Darragh. “I knew there was something strange about the man; Joan would never have agreed to marry him.” She looked at the ground as she tried to think. “I wonder if he didn’t perhaps intercept the letter so that we wouldn’t know that’s she was here.”

“It isnae likely,” Darragh added. “He would have had to ken that Joan would be here, an’ by the coachman’s account, they had taken a wrong turn. She didnae even ken that she would end up here.”

“I’m afraid that I am at fault here,” Martha suddenly spoke up with a sigh and stepped forward. She had been standing silently by while everyone spoke, her eyes downcast and her hand in the pocket of her apron.

“Maither?” Jasper turned to her and folded his arms over his chest before cocking his head to the side.

“I took the letter from the study a’fore it could be posted,” she admitted sheepishly as she shook her head. “I can see now that I caused far more trouble than was necessary with me actions.” She removed the letter from her apron pocket and handed it to Avery. “I’ve been keepin’ it on me person until I was ready to send it off.”

“Why on earth would ye do that?” Jasper felt exasperated at her sudden admission of guilt. He knew his mother sometimes did things that made no sense to him, but this was beyond even his understanding.

“Ye were gettin’ along so well with the beautiful lass.” She lifted her eyes and spoke with conviction. “I wanted to give ye a chance to get to ken her before she went on to her friends. I thought perhaps...” her voice trailed off as they all looked at her.

“Perhaps what?” Jasper asked her, and she shut her eyes and sighed.

“That ye would fall in love an’ realize that ye are more than just yer scar,” she said honestly as she looked into his eye. “Joan is a beautiful soul; I would love to have her around on a permanent basis. Ye smiled for the first time in years on the day she came, even if it was just a small one.”

Jasper shuffled uncomfortably on his feet as he suddenly became aware of their guests once again.

Darragh and Avery exchanged a strange look before looking at him. It was true that he had fallen in love with Joan from the very moment he had laid eyes on her; she’d shifted his world in more than one way.

Avery looked down at the letter in her hand and opened it quickly. Her eyes darted across the piece of parchment before she held it out to her husband. “Everything they said was true; it’s her handwriting.”

Darragh accepted the letter and read it quickly. “This disnae prove anything,” he said, unconvinced by the letter. “They could have forced her to write the letter or even gotten a good sample. A good forger is a dime a dozen in any tavern. I have three workin’ in me castle alone.” He narrowed his eyes at Jasper as he spoke.

“Never mind that now,” Avery said as she took a step forward. “Where is Joan? You said she was no longer here; did she leave for our castle?” she asked hopefully. “Surely, you can tell us where she has gone if your story is true.”

“Ye better come inside,” Jasper said after seeing the panic that filled her face when he hesitated to answer her question.



Joan’s ribs ached as the horse raced over the uneven forest floor; she was trying her best to remove the gag from her mouth but failed as the pain in her side intensified every time the horse leaped over a stone or log. Her ribs were pressing against the saddle making it nearly impossible to breath. The worst part was that the rope around her wrist had been tied so tight that her skin was turning red as if chafed from all the bouncing.

Jasper...

She shut her eyes as her heart called out to him; she had seen the way he’d tried to reach her side. He’d placed his own safety in question more than once as he raced through the sea of fighting men. There had been a few times where her heart had stood still when a soldier’s sword had missed him by inches. He clearly cared for her safety, even if he didn’t love her back the way that she wanted.

Why did I poke my head out of the bush to see if he was okay? Joan asked herself with a heavy sigh. The men who had taken her captive would never have seen she was there if she'd only remained hidden. Everything was her fault. Had she not said to the man on the cliff that she was Jasper's captive? Her eyes suddenly shot open as the horse came to a stop in the middle of a clearing.

Her captor dismounted before gripping her waist and lowering her to the ground.

Kicking and fighting, Joan did her best to try and gain the upper hand over him, yet he was adamant to calm her down as he reached for her wrists.

"Ye can stop fightin' lass," the man said kindly as he undid the rope that had been tying her wrists together. "I willnae hurt ye," he tried to reassure her. "Yer safe now."

"Why are you doing this?!" she yelled at him when she finally managed to remove the cloth from her mouth. The rage she'd been harboring in her chest finally reached a boiling point.

He seemed quite taken aback as he looked at her. "Me lady, I can understand how ye would think that all Scottish men are bad, but I am trying to save ye. Ye must believe me that I only have yer best intentions at heart."

Taking a deep breath, Joan stopped trying to escape and looked him over

with pity. "I know I said to you on the cliff that I was his captive, but it isn't what I meant." She shook her head and massaged her temples with her fingers. "It's hard to explain from the beginning, but he was only keeping me there until my friends came to fetch me. I could leave any time I wanted to."

"Ye are clearly exhausted from yer ordeal, me lady. I think ye should come back to me castle an' rest for a while." He came forward again and waved her words away with his hands as if everything she was saying was nonsense.

"I won't be going on anywhere with you; you aren't listening to me!" She lost her cool as she snapped at the man. "I was not a captive!"

"I daenae understand; I'm savin' ye from MacShaw..." His voice became increasingly more uncertain as he spoke. "He took ye captive on yer journey." His eyes darted over her face as she fought to reason with her.

"I want to be with him, you idiot! It is you that is taking me against my will." She stomped her foot as she balled her fists at her side and glared at him. "Who exactly are you in any case? There must be some reason you feel the need to intervene. Do you fancy yourself some kind of God when it comes to rescuing damsels??"

"I am Laird MacAdair," he said, shaking his head as if he wasn't able to make sense from anything they were discussing. "I daenae understand what is happenin' anymore."

"So, you saw me on the cliff and decided to attack in full force because of a misunderstanding?" She lowered her voice when she realized that the poor

man may have been acting under a false sense of chivalry without knowing any of the facts.

“It wasnae that,” he shook his head. “I knew very well from his reputation that MacShaw is a cold man. I acted on the assumption that yer life was in danger.”

“I also don’t understand.” Joan became uncertain along with him now. “He let your men go when they were on his land. Why would you still think of him as being a cruel man? Did he not prove to you that he could be compassionate?”

“He took ye away from yer betrothed for goodness’s sake,” he explained irritably as if she were working on his nerves by deliberately being delusional.

“Who?” Her mind clouded over with confusion. “I don’t have a betrothed.”

MacAdair frowned at her as they both turned to see a man emerging from the bushes.

“He’s talking about me, my love.”

“That’s when MacAdair attacked the castle and took Joan,” Jasper finished explaining to the group what had happened up until Avery and Darragh had arrived. “We were taken completely by surprise.”

“I ken MacAdair,” Darragh said with a frown. “I daenae think he would have attacked without provocation. An’ the fact that he did so after ye let his men go free doesnae make any sense either. There must be another reason that none of us are seein’.”

Martha poured them each a mug of ale as they sat around the table in the dining hall. She’d remained quiet after admitting she’d had a hand in not sending the letter to Darragh and Avery. Jasper knew he’d need to reassure her that the events were not her fault, but he needed to focus on finding Joan first. There would be plenty of time for formalities once she was safely back at his castle.

“How did he know that Joan was even here?” Avery asked as she placed her mug of ale between her hands, moving it slowly back and forth without taking a sip. She seemed just as tired and stunned as Martha did.

“That’s what I don’t understand either,” Martha spoke up for the very first time. “The lass never even left the castle while she was here. He couldn’t have known that she was here unless someone told him,” she frowned and shook her head as she sat beside Avery with the Jug of ale in her hands. The bags under her eyes were evidence of the toll the situation was taking on her. Anyone could see that she’d grown attached to the girl in the short time that Joan had been at the castle.

“I took her to the cliff overlooking the meadow,” Jasper spoke up when everyone remained quiet. “MacAdair found her there on the cliff, but I daenae think that was the only reason. He must have had another reason for being there in the first place.”

“What on earth were ye doin’ on the cliff?” Martha tilted her head to the side as she looked up and studied her son’s face.

Sighing, Jasper ran his hand through his hair and leaned back in his chair. “She said that she wanted to drink whiskey in a meadow like a real Scotsman. It was her last wish a’fore Avery an’ Darragh came to fetch her.”

“Oh my God,” Avery lifted her hands to her mouth in shock as she gasped.

“What’s the matter?” Darragh shifted closer to her, his brow creasing with a concerned frown.

“They are telling the truth, Darragh,” she eventually said after lowering her hands down to her lap. “That was a conversation that Joan and I had back in

London,” she said almost tearfully. “I told her to stay away from whiskey; it was nasty stuff that Scotsmen drank in meadows,” she paused and looked at the people sitting around the table before looking at her husband. “No offense meant; this was a conversation we had before I fell in love with you,” she hurriedly explained.

Darragh shook his head with his eyes shut as the faintest of smiles tugged at the corner of his lips. It was clear to Jasper that the mountain of a laird loved his wife more than words could say. His heart ached for Joan and all the things that he’d been wanting to say to her over the past few days but never quite got the chance to utter.

“None taken dear,” Martha shook her head and waved the idea away with her hand. “Whisky is nasty stuff; I cannae stand the stuff meself. I’m always tellin’ the lads that ale is better for yer bones.”

Giving her a grateful smile, Avery looked back down at her hands that lay limply in her lap. “She had said that if she ever met a Scottish man she could trust, she would ask him to drink whisky in a meadow with her.” She raised her head and looked Jasper in the eye with an intense gaze. “The fact that she asked you to do that with her means a lot.”

Jasper held her gaze as a million thoughts ran through his mind.

Perhaps Joan feels the same way about me as I do about her.

It warmed his heart to know that she trusted him enough to fulfil a dream of hers. He made a vow to always take her to the meadow with whisky for the

rest of his life.

“We have to come up with a plan to get her back,” Darragh’s voice broke into his thoughts. “MacAdair willnae harm her; ye can be reassured of that. He is a good man; perhaps the whole misunderstanding can be cleared up if I go an’ talk to him. He’s negotiated peace talks with me in the past, an’ it always went well.”

“I can have the horses saddled an’ ready in less than an hour,” Jasper said as he placed his hands on the table and stood, using his knees to push his chair back. The wood scraped across the stone floor, filling the already tense air.

“I think it may be best if we allow things to cool down a bit a’fore we go chargin’ in,” Darragh advised. “We should sit here an’ come up with a plan that will allow us to approach the situation with utmost caution. The last thin’ ye want is a war on yer hands; ye will want to avoid that at all costs.”

“I think he’s right,” Martha stood and placed her hand on his arm. “If Darragh kens the laird, he will know how best to handle the situation. I think we should take his advice.” she held his gaze for a moment. “For Joan’s sake, it’s best to get her back without makin’ the situation worse than it already is. Ye’ve kept the best interests of the clan all these years, I trust ye will do the same now.”

Jasper pursed his lips as he fought against the urge to do things the way he had always done them before. Yet there was something different now; things had changed. The situation couldn’t be handled with force, not when Joan’s life was at stake. He needed to ensure that he acted in a manner that would keep her safe.

“What did ye have in mind?” he asked and sat back down.

There was a time to act and a time to listen. If listening was what would get Joan back in the safest and fastest manner, listening is what he would do.



“What are you doing here?” Joan asked with her mouth hanging open as she turned to see Edwin Grandison at the other end of the clearing. He was wearing a powder blue suit with a top hat and cane. She always hated the way he tried to stand out. He looked ridiculous to her at balls when he dressed in a manner that suggested he wanted to outshine the rest of the men.

“I have come for you, my sweet,” he explained as he took a few steps forward, straightening his cufflinks with an arrogant smirk. “I enlisted the help of the kind laird here when your friends proved to be just as barbaric as the rest of Scotland.” He wrinkled his nose in disgust as he spoke.

Joan felt as if he had slapped her through the face with his sudden appearance. She couldn’t believe the audacity of the man to invade her privacy like this. “You went to Darragh and Avery?”

“Oh, yes,” he conceded as he placed his hands behind his back with a cheerful smile that made her sick to her stomach. “It was all too easy to track down your friends after you left London.” He thrust his nose in the air while chuckling.

MacAdair frowned. Joan could tell that he was having second thoughts about helping Edwin, but then again, the baron did come across as charming the

first time that she had met him. It wasn't until a few weeks later that she realized how arrogant and forceful he was. He seemed to be able to fool people into thinking he was genuine, a skill that had evidently been worked on MacAdair.

“I thank you for your assistance,” Edwin said to the laird with a wolfish grin. “You may leave now that the young lady has been returned safely.”

“Please don't leave me with him!” Joan rushed forward and gripped the Laird's arm, realizing that he was her only escape from the Baron's delusional clutches. “I will go with you to your castle where we can discuss things,” she tried to explain frantically. “Just don't leave me with him. I'm begging you.” She felt her eyes filling with tears as desperation set in.

“Poor girl doesn't know what she's talking about,” Edwin tutted as he shook his head. “She's been through such an ordeal as I mentioned to you before.” He completely ignored her protests and spoke to MacAdair. “She probably has no idea what the truth is anymore. Her parents agreed to the marriage. I've seen this before in London; women can become delirious when they are suddenly thrust into new and strange situations. They are such fragile creatures after all.”

She felt disgust bubbling up in her chest at the way he spoke about women; it was almost as if they were nothing more than animals or objects to him — bartering possessions that could be used to further his means.

“Is this true, lass?” he looked down at Joan who was still hanging on his arm.

“Yes but...” her words were cut short as Edwin once again spoke over her.

“You see, she admitted it herself,” he said triumphantly and gripped her arm before she had a chance to pull away. “She is my betrothed; she’s just delirious from her ordeal. Who knows what cruelties she’s had to endure here in Scotland.”

“Perhaps the lass should come back to me castle an’ rest,” MacAdair attempted to step in. “Ye can come with an’ rest a’fore ye set off again.” He shot Joan a worried glance.

“That won’t be necessary,” Edwin pulled Joan forward, nearly causing her to stumble. “I’m afraid that our wedding plans have already been delayed long enough; both of our families are waiting for us back in London.” He continued to pull her along despite her trying to get away. “Come my sweet, there is a very puffy tulle dress with your name on it waiting.”

The laird watched them with a frown as they exited the clearing.

“I promise you that I will get her the help and rest that she needs as soon as we get back to London,” he called over his shoulder. “You have been most helpful in returning my betrothed to me!”

Joan watched as the laird disappeared into the trees, leaving her alone with the man that she despised. “Why are you doing this?!” she yelled at Edwin’s back as she fought to free her wrist from his grip. She was doing all that she could to escape, despite being dragged through a thicket of trees.

“You are my betrothed.” He suddenly stopped and whipped around. “Your parents agreed to the marriage arrangements.” His bright blue eyes shone with malice as he glowered down at her. “There is nothing you can do about any of this; the sooner you accept that, the easier things will be for you.”

“It wasn’t even a proper proposal,” she protested in anger. “You tricked me in front of the ton! My parents had no other choice but to agree.”

“Yes, well,” he shrugged. “I had to do something; you weren’t being receptive to any of my other advances. In all fairness, I did try and win your affections at first. If you think about it, this is all your own doing. We wouldn’t be here now if you had just fallen into my arms willingly.”

Joan’s mouth fell open in shock. “I can’t believe you; are you genuinely proud of the way you trapped me into a loveless marriage?”

“To answer your question, yes,” he nodded vigorously as if she were the one who wasn’t seeing how brilliant his plan had been. “I wasn’t able to procure a marriage by any other means; what other options were there? A lot of forethought and planning went into tricking you like that.”

“You could have tried wooing a woman who actually found you interesting,” she snapped back.

“I am interesting,” he said darkly as he pulled himself up to his full height. “You will come to find in time that I am the most interesting man you will ever meet.”

Joan regretted her words instantly when she saw how offended he had been; his true nature seemed to come through when a veil of anger fell over his face.

“There is no such thing as love in a marriage; unions are built on mutual understating between a husband and a wife. You will come to see this in time.” He gipped her wrist even tighter and began to drag her through the trees once again.

“Love does exist!” she yelled at his back.

“Oh,” he chuckled. “And how would you know? I think you’ve been reading far too many novels if you ask me.”

“I know because I love Jasper!”

Edwin paused for a second. “Do you mean that horrid man with an eyepatch?” He sounded almost disgusted. “I never laid eyes on him, if you will excuse the pun, but doesn’t he have a reputation for being a beast?” He shuddered. “That’s beside the point. I’m doing you a favor by taking you away from him.”

“He’s my Beastly Laird!” she raised her voice and stood her ground. “I love him; he’s twice the man that you will ever be!”

Edwin moved quicker than she thought him capable as he spun around and slapped her clean across the cheek. “Don’t you ever dare speak to me like

that again! I have earned the title of baron, I may not be as rich as your dear old papa, but I have earned the respect of the ton! I refuse to be disrespected by a wench that has more than likely been spoiled by a beast.” His breaths came in quick succession as his nostrils flared.

Lifting her hand to her cheek in shock, Joan stared at him. It was obvious to her that he'd been fighting all of his life to gain more wealth amongst the ton. “You want me for my dowry,” she eventually breathed as the stinging sensation in her cheek spread to her ear.

“And don't you ever forget your place,” he snarled at her through his teeth. “I only need you for that; I will do worse than slap you if you ever dare speak back to me ever again...”

The malice in his voice was enough to stun her into silence as he yanked on her wrist and pulled her through the forest.

Jasper tightened the girth on the stallion's saddle as he clenched his jaw and thought of Joan. The beast neighed and shook its head as Jasper smoothed his hand over the horse's magnificent flanks. Darragh had said that it was better to wait until morning when things had cooled down, but he couldn't just leave Joan out there, not when he needed to tell her how much he loved her.

I should never have left her alone.

The thought ran through his mind like a hot knife slicing through butter as the guilt ate away at his heart. He'd never be able to forgive himself if something happened to her. While he could see the logic in Darragh's plan, it did little to give him peace. Even if Darragh knew the man as a friend, Jasper couldn't possibly wait until morning for talks of peace. Something was telling him that he needed to act swiftly to get Joan back.

Taking a final deep breath, he looked around the barn to see if anyone had followed him before placing his foot in the stirrup and steadying his frame.

“I dinnae think ye would wait,” Darragh said as he stepped from the shadows. “The look in yer eyes while we spoke told me that ye wouldnae wait to get her back.”

Jasper paused just as he was about to pull himself into the saddle. “I cannae just leave her,” he spoke with his back to Darragh. “I ken that ye say MacAdair willnae harm her, but she belongs here with me. I’ll go mad if I have to wait until mornin’. There’s also somethin’ that doesnae sit well with me about the whole story. I feel as if I should act now.”

“Aye,” Darragh came forward and placed his hand on the horse’s muzzle. He seemed thoughtful at first as he smoothed the palm of his hand over the horse’s chestnut mane and neck. “I’ve been here a’fore,” he said with a faint smile around his lips. “An’ I agree, somethin’ doesnae sit well with me either. MacAdair wouldnae have felt prompted to save her without a good reason.”

“Did ye have to go through something similar with Avery?” Jasper asked as he wondered how the English lass had come to marry a laird in the highlands. He felt relieved that the man was not trying to stop him from leaving.

Darragh chuckled softly before shaking his head. “Avery an’ I have our own story; it’s a good one, but I was referrin’ to her sister Melissa. She married a friend of mine; they had a very shaky start where they denied their feelings for one another, but it came to a point where Daniel had to go an’ rescue her as well. I told him to wait, but he charged off in the middle of the night.” His lips curled into a genuine smile. “I always seem to give good advice, but people seldom follow it.”

“Did he get her back?” Jasper asked hopefully, feeling as if he could trust the

man, at least for now if not fully.

“This wouldnae be a very good talk of he didn’t.” He raised his eyebrows and smirked before shaking his head. “Aye, he got her back. They are married now with many bairns. Just like me an’ Avery, they may have taken the long road, but they got there in the end.”

“That gives us all hope for a better future.” Jasper began to warm up to the cold laird with his bulky build and long black hair. He seemed formidable with his height, yet there was a softness to him when he spoke of love and especially his wife.

“These English lasses have a way of fightin’ their way into yer heart,” he said light-heartedly. “Ye have nae defense against them, an’ a’fore ye ken what’s happenin’, ye find yerself wantin’ to burn the world just to make sure they are safe.”

“Aye, I would have fought ye now if ye stood in me way,” Jasper smirked.

“Ye wouldnae have won, but I respect that.” Darragh returned Jasper’s gaze with a humorous glint in his eyes. “I ken that ye are set in yer ways.” He seemed slightly uncomfortable as he spoke. “I also ken yer reputation an’ how ye became laird, I dinnae blame ye for nae trustin’ anyone, but I wanted to say that ye daenae have to keep yer gates shut. After I’ve seen the way ye are willin’ to protect Joan an’ do anythin’ to get her back, I think ye are an honorable man. Just ken that ye will always have an ally in clan MacKinnon.”

Jasper searched his face for any trace of irony or even a hint of an indication that he was trying to fool him. Instead of the usual arrogance and secrecy that he saw in men's eyes, he was met with nothing but understanding, and he felt a glimmer of hope that not all men were out to see him fall. While he was not ready to sign any kind of parchment that bound him to another clan, he was willing to concede that a friendship may not be such a bad idea. There were times in life when you needed other people to rely on.

“Aye, I will keep that in mind; thank ye,” he said honestly and turned back to his saddle with the intention of leaving as soon as he could. Enough time had already been wasted on talking while Joan could be in even worse danger.

“Now go, an' get the woman ye love.” Darragh held out his hand in a gesture of friendship and trust. “I will look after the women here at the castle an' stop them from burnin' the world to the ground in yer absence.”

Jasper hesitated for a second before grasping the other man's hand and accepting the offer of peace. “Thank ye, Darragh; truly, I mean that. I've never been able to trust another man in me life, but with ye I can see that I found an ally”

The men exchanged a warm smile of understanding before Jasper hoisted himself into the saddle, shifting his position until he was comfortable. “Good luck with the women; if me maither gets restless, just have yer wife take her into the kitchen an' cook,” he managed to joke before reachin' for the reins.

“Wait!” a voice from beyond the doors of the stable called out, making them both turn to face the entrance. “I have something ye need to hear!” MacAdair suddenly appeared in the doorway as he bent over double with his hands on his knees, panting for breath.

Jasper saw red as he jumped from the horse in one swift motion and ran at the man with lightning speed. His hands were on the man's throat before anyone could react.

MacAdair fell back as Jasper pinned him to the ground with his knees on either side of his body.

"Where is she?!" he yelled in the man's face as he tightened his grip. "Ye willnae live to see the light of day if anythin' has happened to her!" he growled angrily. It took every ounce his strength not to kill the man who had taken Joan away from him.

The man gasped for air as his face began to turn red, his lips gasping as if he were a fish that had been taken out of the water. He tried his best to grip Jasper's arms and loosen his grip, but the hold that Jasper had on his neck was just too great.

"Let the man speak," Darragh said as he placed his hand on Jasper's shoulder and applied a small amount of pressure that brought Jasper back to his senses. "He cannae tell us where Joan is or what happened if ye take his life," he reasoned.

Shaking his head as if he had been in a daze, Jasper released his grip and stood up, allowing the man to breath as he took a step back and watched him. The only time he'd ever been that angry in his life is when his father had slapped his mother on that final night.

“Good man,” Darragh patted Jasper on the shoulder in a reassuring manner. “Ye did the right thing.”

MacAdair gasped as he gulped the cool evening air in large breaths. “She was nae harmed when I left her.” His voice was hoarse from the pressure that Jasper had applied. “But I dinnae ken if he will do anything to her, so ye have to listen to me.” He rubbed his throat as he spoke, shutting his eyes against the pain.

Taking a step forward, Darragh held out his hand and helped the man to his feet. “I think ye better tell us what happened,” he said before removing a flask from his hip and handing it to the man. “Drink this; it will sooth some of the pain...”

MacAdair brought the flask to his lips and swigged while wincing. Bright red marks were visible around his neck as his Adam’s apple bobbed up and down.

Marvelling at the level of trust between the men, Jasper waited for him to hand the flask back to Darragh and speak. He’d never in his life dream of accepting a flask from another man without at least checking the contents first. Their seemed to be a kinship between the men that surpassed even his understanding.

“I thought Joan was bein’ held captive by the MacShaw clan,” he said in a raspy voice that had only slightly been improved by the contents of the flask. He still struggled to speak.

“Did ye gather that from seein’ her on the cliff?” Jasper asked irritably as he fought the urge to knock the man to the ground once again. He’d still been the cause of the separation even if he thought he was acting with noble cause.

“Nay,” he shook his head. “That confirmed it for me when the lass said that she was yer captive.” He looked to the side with a frown. “Now, I can see that she may have meant seomthin’ else; she was nae scared when she said that, but it was her betrothed that came to me for help.”

Both Jasper and Darragh tensed at the same time as they exchanged a worried glance.

“What did the man look like?” Darragh asked as a muscle jumped in his jaw. Jasper could tell that Darragh was just as on edge as he was with the whole situation.

“Gangly English man with blonde hair an’ blue eyes. He said that his betrothed had been travelin’ here in Scotland when she was befallen by the MacShaw clan. He begged me to help him get her back,” MacAdair explained. “I agreed, and since he was English, it made sense when I found the lass with an English accent.”

“That’s the same man that came to me an’ Avery,” Darragh said to Jasper. “He must have left us in pursuit of another option when we sent him away. I dinnae trust him or anythin’ he said.”

“Aye, he said that we were the closest clan that could help him in a hurry,” MacAdair confirmed his story. “He said that he had been turned away by her

friends because they dinnae approve of the match. It wasn't until I took her to him that I realized somethin' was wrong. The lass reacted to him in a very strange way. She begged me to nae let him take her, but he said that she was just tired an' delusional from her ordeal. I knew then that I needed to come an' tell ye what had happened. I'm glad to see that ye are here as well, Darragh," he nodded to the other laird.

Jasper felt the white-hot rage filling his body once again as he balled his fists at his sides. The more he heard of the man who had tricked her into a betrothal, the more Jasper wanted to end his life. "Can ye take me to the place where ye handed her over?" he asked through clenched teeth.

"Aye," MacAdair nodded. "Me horse is ready an' waitin' outside. I dinnae think they will still be there, but I will be able to track his carriage for ye. He said that they would be headed straight to England where their weddin' will be happenin'; he also mentioned somethin' about their families waitin'."

"There's nae time to lose then," Jasper said as he ran to his horse and flung his leg over the saddle in one swift motion. "Will ye go an' tell the women what has happened?" he asked Darragh before turnin' his stallion toward the open door. "We must leave at once."

"Aye, I will keep them calm," he nodded. "We will be waitin' for ye here when ye return, I ken ye won't be long." He strode over to Jasper's horse and clapped the beast on the rump. "Bring her back to us."

"Thank ye," Jasper used a word for the first time in his life that he never thought he would ever use. "Yer welcome to stay here at the castle for as long as ye like. Stay until ye an' Avery have rested, even after Joan has come back."

“So, she won’t be coming back with me an’ Avery?” He raised one eyebrow with a smirk. “I dinnae think she would anymore after hearin’ yer maither speak.”

“Aye, I think I’ll be keepin’ this fiery English lass in particular while ye take yers back home,” Jasper said with a confident smile.

Darragh nodded as Jasper lifted the reins in his hands and urged the horse forward and out the doors where they trotted into the cool evening air.

MacAdair was waiting for him on his own white stallion just outside the stable, confidently guiding his horse forward. “Are ye ready?” he asked with a serious expression. “We will have to ride hard if they’ve already set out to England.” His voice seemed more restored as he spoke.

“Aye, let’s nae waste any more time.” Jasper dug the heels of his boots into his horse’s flanks and set out at a trot before breaking the beast into a gallop with MacAdair riding at his side.

The crispness of the cool evening air refreshed his body and cleared his mind like an invigorating tonic. His pulse began to race as he thought of Joan and what she may be going through in his absence.

Wait for me, Joan. I will be there a’fore ye ken.

His heart called out to her as the men set off into the night with the full moon guiding their way.

Joan stumbled as Edwin shoved her forward, causing her to fall on her hands and knees in front of his carriage. The mud squelched, and she winced in pain, taking in a sharp breath as she stopped herself from sinking in any further.

The driver sitting atop the coach glanced down at her before straightening his body again and looking ahead as if he had seen nothing at all. It was clear that Edwin had thought ahead and only enlisted the help of men who would turn a blind eye to what he was doing.

Digging her fingers into the sodden earth, Joan tried her best to think of a way that she could escape. A million possibilities passed through her mind as the rich scent of the earth filled her senses.

I could take the mud and fling it in his face. The thought crossed her mind as the mud squelched between her fingers. Running into the forest and getting lost was preferable to marrying Edwin Grandison.

“Stop laying around.” Edwin’s voice grated on her ears as a searing pain shot through her scalp. He tangled his fingers through her hair, yanking her back with force until she cried in pain. “There is an entire wedding waiting for us back in London, my sweet.” He spat beside her as she tried to grip his fingers through her hair and release some of the pressure.

Sharply sucking the air through her teeth, Joan allowed her body to be guided up as he pulled on her hair, forcing her to drop the fistfuls of mud and relent to his command.

“Get in the carriage,” he hissed in her ear with sour breath before shoving her forward once again with slightly less force than before.

Biting back the angry words that came to her mind, she quickly placed her hands on either side of the open door in an attempt to stop him from forcing her inside. There was still hope while they were in Scotland; she’d buy every second of time that she could if it meant that Jasper and his men would find her. “I shall not go with you!” she snapped at him. “I love Jasper, and there is nothing you can do about it!”

“I thought you might say something like that, being the strong-willed filly that you are,” he said smugly with a bitter note in his voice.

Feeling a sharp tip digging into her skin just below her ribs on her back, Joan froze as he chuckled. Her heart began to beat faster as she shut her eyes against the pain, too afraid to move.

“I thought that might change your mind.” He gripped her hair once again,

yanking her back as he laughed in her ear. “Don’t think that I will hesitate to use it, my sweet. I may have chosen you, but it won’t cost me anything to replace you. Now get inside before I get angry and change my mind about making you my wife.”

Gritting her teeth, Joan fought against the fiery pain in her neck that shot down her spine as he pulled her head back and then shoved her forward. The force caused her to stumble again as she hit her knee on the sharp edge of the step. She could feel the hot blood seeping through her dress.

“I can easily say that I went after you, but unfortunately, I was too late. It would be all too easy to convince everyone that you fell prey to your Beastly Laird, given his reputation. No one will think twice about my story — not when I dump your body beside his castle and alert some poor sap like MacAdair.” He used his boot on the back of her leg to coax her into the carriage.

“There’s a special place in hell for people like you.” She turned and glared at him as she climbed into the carriage and took a seat. “You won’t get away with this; somehow somewhere, you will pay — in the next life if not this one.” Thinking on her feet, she dove for the handle of the opposite door and yanked on the metal in the hopes that it would provide her with a means for escape.

Laughing, Edwin watched as she struggled with the handle. “I wouldn’t bother if I were you, my love. I’ve thought of all the possible ways you could escape; believe me when I say that there is no way out,” he declared triumphantly with his nose in the air.

“Hell is too good for you,” she said bitterly as she let go of the handle and

glared at him. Her body filled with hatred for the vile way he was treating her. It was one thing to capture a lady but an entirely separate matter to torture her.

“Be careful, my sweet,” he sniffed haughtily as he fixed his coat, taking the seat opposite hers. “That kind of talk won’t fly once we are married; bedtimes, soon you will be joined to me in holy matrimony, and your soul might very well follow mine once we are dead.” He gave her a wolfish grin before sticking his head out the window and barking orders at the driver. “Walk on!”

Joan felt the resentment bubbling up in the pit of her stomach as the carriage rattled into motion, making her sway in her seat. “How can you live with yourself? Have you no pride or honor?” she asked darkly as she clutched the soiled fabric of her dress above her knees. “Is there no humanity within you?”

“Don’t you talk to me of pride and honor,” he snarled at her with an intense look in his eyes. Her words seemed to have struck a chord within him as an angry look marred his features. “I know more of pride and honor than you could ever hope to learn.” He turned his head to look out the carriage window as the trees gave way to open marsh on either side of the road. “You’ve lived in nothing but luxury and good standing with the ton for all of your life; I wouldn’t expect you to understand my motives,” he spat bitterly.

“Why don’t you try me.” She clenched her jaw in anger. “You might just have a chance of gaining my sympathies before we start with this farce of a marriage,” she added sarcastically. There was no situation or reason on the face of the earth that would make her forgive him for destroying her chances of a love filled marriage, but at least she could buy some time to think of a plan if she kept him talking.

“My father spent his life chasing wealth and notoriety amongst the ton.” He stared off into the distance at the passing scenery. “When the family’s coffers were finally emptied by his excessive spending and extravagant lifestyle, he turned to gambling at some of London’s less sophisticated establishments.” A single vein bulged in his temple as he spoke.

Joan could hear the pain in his voice as he spoke of his father and the life they had lived before his death. She knew from the gossip mills that the late baron had lost his life in a tragic accident that had been rumored to be more than just an accident. She’d felt desperately sorry for them at the time, yet she hadn’t realized who Edwin was until he recalled the memories at present.

“Debtors pounded on our door from morning until night, causing my mother to fall ill and lose her life before my father lost his.” He clenched his jaw in anger. “The ruined reputation of the family was more than she could bear in her final hours. He left me mountains of debt after his death — debts that I now have to pay if the family’s honor is ever to be restored to its former glory.” His eyes focussed on something in the distance as if he could already see what life would be like once he succeeded.

A wave of nausea swept over her body; even after hearing how difficult his life had been, she couldn’t bring herself to feel sorry for him. “That doesn’t mean you can just upend my life,” she retorted. “Your actions are inexcusable; it doesn’t matter what you went through in the past. You can’t just destroy other people’s lives to redeem your own. Selfishness won’t lead you anywhere in the end.”

“Tell me,” he said after examining her face for a moment and leaning forward. “You have a little sister, do you not?” he asked her with his hands on his knees.

Joan felt a wave of shock run through her body; the depths that this man would go to never ceased to surprise her. “I swear to any man that cares to listen that I’ll cut your throat if you ever even so much as look in her direction.” Her blood boiled as she thought of her little sister and the bright future that lay ahead of her. “I won’t even hesitate to end you.”

“Calm yourself,” he said tiredly as he rolled his eyes and sat back in his seat, straightening his body as the carriage bounced over rough earth. “There’s really no need for your theatrics. I may be a monster in your eyes, but I’m not heartless. I would never consider marrying anyone as young and hopeful as your sister. No, I only meant that I love my younger sister as much as you love yours,” he seemed sincere as he spoke.

Joan felt taken aback as he opened up to her; although she would never want to marry him under any circumstances, there was still a small part of her that felt sorry for his plight. He wasn’t entirely evil, just misguided in his attempts to look after the remnants of his crumbling family.

“Securing my marriage to a family as powerful as yours will open the doors for a suitable and prominent marriage of her own. So, you see, my sweet. You may not understand my motives, but they aren’t entirely selfish,” he said with his nose in the air as he turned his head to look at the cliffs as the carriage made its way through a mountain pass. “You may want to learn what drives people before you judge them so harshly.”

Joan heaved a sigh as she turned her head in the opposite direction. She felt a small amount of sympathy for the man, yet she couldn’t help but think of her love for Jasper. No other man would ever fill her heart in the way that he had done. She’d love him with every fibre of her being until the day she died.

Nothing and no one would ever change that, no matter what sacrifices she had to make on her end.

Jasper... where are you?

Her heart called out to him as the carriage took her further away from the man that she loved. She'd accept her fate if that was how it had to be, but she would never stop loving the Beastly Laird. There would always be a part of her heart that yearned for Scotland if she didn't manage to escape.



“Here!” MacAdair called over his shoulder as he held his hand up and brought his horse to a stop in the clearing of a forest. “This is where we met with Grandison.”

Jasper reined his horse in and dismounted as he quickly assessed the area. The woods were quiet as an eerie breeze blew through the bushes. It was clear to him that there had been a scuffle, but it wasn't clear where it had ended. The damp earth was crossed with feet and other marks that weren't easily identifiable.

“I think they have moved on already,” MacAdair said as he drew up next to Jasper on his horse. “We shouldn't be far behind though if we follow their tracks.” He pointed to the opposite end of the clearing where some thistles had been flattened. “That's the last place where I saw her.”

Clenching his jaw, Jasper felt his anger growing once again. He'd set his hopes on the fact that Joan would be waiting for him there, either with

Grandison or on her own after managing to escape. The fact that MacAdair had just let him take her away made him even angrier. “Ye sure they were here?” he asked as his suspicions suddenly took over.

“Aye, this is where I left the lass. Edwin took her into the woods in that direction,” he continued to point to the other end of the clearing.

Jasper examined the ground once again before losing his temper. Reaching up, he gripped MacAdair’s shirt and pulled him down until the man was hanging off the side of the horse. “I swear, MacAdair, if I find that ye have been leading me away from Joan instead of toward her, I’ll finish what I started in the stables.”

“I deserve that.” The man met his gaze without a trace of fear in his eyes. “I deserve to lose me life after placin’ the lass in danger. I should have made sure a’fore I acted harshly, but I am tryin’ save her now. I am tryin’ to do the right thing. I ken that ye daenae have any reason to trust me, but believe me when I say that I want nothin’ more than to return her to ye.”

Jasper examined the man’s eyes and noticed the honesty and regret that swam in the blue depths; letting go of his shirt, he allowed the man to straighten himself in the saddle. “Very well,” he nodded. “We will follow the tracks,” he said before walking over to his horse and mounting the stallion again. “But I swear, I’ll end ye if anythin’ happens to her.” He glared at the man who stood his ground.

“I can assure ye, MacShaw, that I will be endin’ me own life if anythin’ happens to the lass,” he said with conviction that had Jasper wondering if MacAdair knew the pain Jasper was feeling before turning his head toward the opposite line of trees. “Let’s track them down and save yer lass a’fore

either of us decide that the time has come for me to leave this world,” he suggested unironically before urging his horse in the direction of the flattened thistles.

Jasper watched the man trot toward the trees before following suite. He admired the determination and lack of fear the man showed despite the high stakes of the situation at hand. Perhaps Darragh was right — MacAdair was an honorable man.

“Over there!” the laird suddenly shouted after they had gone a few feet into the trees. “The carriage went in that direction!” he yelled before forcing his horse in the direction of the tracks.

Finally.

Jasper felt a wave of relief as they set off at a gallop. Soon Joan would be back in his arms where she belonged.

Gaining ground on the carriage, Jasper pulled his horse up beside the driver while MacAdair brought up the flanks. “Stop the horses!” Jasper called to the driver as he stood in the stirrups, pulling himself up to his full height while trying to maintain his balance on his horse.

“Are you mad?” the man called back with an English accent. “We are on the edge of a cliff, man! You are going to kill us all; go and find another carriage to rob!”

Jasper struggled to hear what the man was saying above the deafening sound of the horses’ hooves beating against the hard road that led across the mountain pass. Realizing that he was wasn’t going to convince the driver to stop, he fell back and attempted to peer inside the carriage. His view was partially marred by thick curtains that were bouncing back and forth.

“I’ll circle around an’ try stop the driver!” MacAdair called to him as he reined his horse in and took a detour. “Ye focus on the lass!” His horse reared and neighed in protest before he disappeared behind a large tree that signalled a fork in the road.

Jasper's heart stopped beating as he spotted Joan's face in the carriage through the curtains. She had pressed her nose against the glass and was crying out to him before Edwin's snarling face appeared and pulled her back. Picking up the speed once again, Jasper brought his stallion closer to the carriage and reached for the door. The ground beneath his horse's hooves was moving so fast that everything seemed to pass in a blur.

Noticing what he was trying to do, the driver yanked on the reins, causing the carriage to swerve to the side as Jasper almost lost his grip, seeing the rumbling earth come into focus beneath the horse. Pulling himself up right at the very last second, he avoided a massive rock on the road. Shaking off the near-death experience, he brought his horse closer again and reached for the handle of the door. Making contact this time, he quickly steadied his grip and jumped from his saddle, steadily placing his feet on the bottom step with a single hop.

"Jasper!" he heard Joan gasping in shock as a scuffle ensued inside the carriage. Feeling a burst of motivation brought on by her scream, he gripped the roof of the carriage as he secured his grip on the handle of the door. The carriage rattled over a bump, causing his foot to slip for a second before he regained his footing.

"You people are barking mad!" the driver's voice floated down to him as he suddenly noticed MacAdair in the driver's seat, fighting for control of the horses. It wasn't long before the laird gained the upper hand, shoving the man off the side of carriage.

Jasper looked back to see the driver diving headfirst into a thicket of overgrown heather before popping up again. The speed of the carriage made him appear as nothing more than a dot in the distance as they charged

forward.

“It will be a while a’fore I can slow them down!” MacAdair brought his attention back to the carriage. “I suggest ye go ahead with whatever plan it is that ye have!” His voice was barely audible over the thunderous rumbling of the wheels.

Shaking off the distraction, he made sure of his grip on the roof before yanking on the handle of the door with all his might. A sharp crack let him know that he had been successful in breaking the lock on the door before the wood swung on its hinges, exposing the interior to the cool evening air.

“What the devil!?” Edwin called out in anger as Jasper swung his body into the carriage with the broken door shutting behind him with a deafening thud.

“Jasper!” Joan called out in a tone that was far more relieved than before. “I knew you’d come for me!” She seemed to want to launch herself into his arms before Grandison’s arm shot out, barring her path.

“Don’t think you’ve won!” Edwin snarled as he lunged at Jasper with his dagger in hand, knocking him into the seat with force.

The confines of the carriage made for a tight fit as the men scuffled for control, wrestling each other in a mass of tangled arms and legs.

Jasper could see out of the corner of his eyes that Joan was making herself as small as possible, pressing her body against the carriage wall beside the

opposite door. Wincing from the pain of the man bearing down on him with all his weight, Jasper gripped the man's wrist just as the blade came close to his face. The needle-like point slowed just a few inches from the tip of his nose, barely scraping his skin as the carriage sped on.

"I won't let you take her from me..." Edwin growled through his clenched teeth. "She's mine! You will have to find yourself some other prize to keep locked in your dungeon!" The spittle at the corner of his mouth spoke of the unhinged nature of his mind.

"Joan doesnae belong to anyone!" Jasper yelled back with his eye on the tip of the blade that was getting closer with every bump of the carriage wheels. Gaining leverage with his feet on the opposite seat, Jasper kicked with all his might, sending Edwin barrelling into the opposite door that opened with a sharp crack in the same manner as the previous one. Tiny splinters of wood sprayed the air as the remnants of the lock fell into the void below.

"Oh, my God," Joan gasped and raised her hands to her mouth as Edwin clung to the side of the open door, his body flailing in the wind as the carriage took a sharp turn around a bend that overlooked a very steep cliff.

Hurriedly reaching for Joan, Jasper gripped her hand and pulled her to his side of the carriage where she'd be out of harm's way. He quickly shifted over her and placed her squarely behind his back as Edwin gained a hold on the carriage again with his foot, managing to swing his body back into the compartment.

"I bet you thought you got the best of me," Edwin snarled with a manic look in his eyes as the corners of his mouth tilted into a crazed smile that reflected the madness within. "People always think they've gotten the best of

us, but we always manage to grow stronger and come out on top again!” His deranged laughter filled their ears as Joan clung to Jasper’s arm in panic.

“Who are ye talking about?!” Jasper tried his best to yell over the sound of the carriage wheel scraping against stone. It was evident by the way the carriage was leaning to the side that MacAdair was having a hard time keeping the horses straight.

A very steep fall was visible just beyond the swinging door that was making it hard to hear. It was only by the light of the full moon that Jasper could see just how far the fall was to the bottom of the cliff.

“My family!” Edwin yelled as he stopped laughing and glared at them both. “We always win in the end, no matter whom we have to remove to get there! I always protect the family’s reputation!”

“Jasper, look out!” Joan cried as Edwin lunged forward with a dagger in his hand once again that he had suddenly pulled from his boot.

Having anticipated that his opponent would attack again, Jasper lifted his leg with his hands gripping both seats on either side for support and kicked with all his might against Edwin’s chest.

A sudden look of shock spread over his face as Edwin went flying out of the carriage, his arms flailing in the air as he fought to grip anything that he could. Time seemed to pass in slow motion as he began to fall down, down, down, and down until his body disappeared into the void below, darkness closing around his form like a blanket.



Joan felt her blood turn to ice as she watched the man who had almost forced her into marriage disappear over the edge of a cliff. Her heart seemed to stop as Jasper crawled forward and shut the door in one smooth motion.

The carriage was steadily beginning to slow as he came back and took her into his arms, embracing her tightly as he buried his face in her hair.

“Joan,” he moaned in anguish as if it caused him pain, “I was so worried that I had lost ye forever. I would have killed anyone that stood in me way.”

Feeling the life slowly seep back into her body, Joan placed her arms around him and returned his hug. “I thought I would never see you again.” She felt tears falling down her cheeks as relief flooded her chest. “I was willing to sacrifice my own life and die if it meant I could see you again one last time.” Her voice caught in her throat as she cried, releasing all the tension that had built up in her body.

Drawing back slightly, Jasper placed his hands on either side of her face. “I would never just leave ye, an’ ye never have to sacrifice anythin’ ever again,” he said almost breathlessly. “Ye can be assured of that. I would follow ye over the side of that cliff if it meant I could have ye back.” He used his thumbs to wipe the tears from her cheeks.

Joan could no longer resist the urge to kiss his lips as she flung her body into his and placed her mouth over his, kissing him with all the longing and passion she felt in her soul.

Placing his hands in the small of her back, Jasper parted her lips with his own, kissing her deeply as the carriage slowed even further. The slowing motion did little to temper their passions as they as he searched the inside of her warm mouth with his tongue.

Her breathing quickened as a soft moan escaped her lips at the feel of his hands on her waist. Their bodies moved together along with the carriage as he pulled her onto his lap, placing her legs on either side of his body as she straddled his hips.

The carriage slowed to a stop right before Jasper brought his hands up to chest, cupping her breasts and making their way down to her thighs.

“Wait,” she whispered as she placed her finger against his lips and looked to the side. The carriage curtains had closed in the speed of the chase, barring their view to the outside world. “I think I hear horses,” she said quietly while straining to listen.

“But the horses have stopped,” he looked at her with a confused frown.

“Not the carriage horses, silly.” She shook her head at him. “Other horses.”

Jasper cocked his head to the side as he too strained to listen.

It wasn't long before they felt the carriage jolt as MacAdair lowered himself to the ground with a dull thud.

“How did ye gain on us so fast?” They heard the laird call to someone else in the distance as they sound of hooves came to a stop not too far from the carriage.

Joan looked at Jasper with a shocked smile when she heard Darragh answer him in the distance.

“It wasnae hard to follow yer tracks,” he shouted before their steps drew nearer. “The whole of Scotland heard the commotion ye were makin’ with that carriage. Where did ye learn to ride?”

“Avery and Darragh are here?” she asked Jasper quietly with her hands on his shoulders as she shifted slightly closer and strained to hear.

“Aye, the whole of Scotland is lookin’ for ye,” Jasper whispered back before turning his head to kiss her hand. He didn’t stop there as he took her hand in his and kissed her wrist before moving up to her palm.

“Are they all right?” Joan heard Avery calling out as they neared the carriage.

Unperturbed by what was going on, Jasper continued to kiss his way up her arm, stopping to nibble on the flesh of her neck as she barely stifled a moan.

“I was just about to check,” MacAdair answered as the carriage door suddenly opened. “Oh,” he said in shock and averted his gaze to the side as both Joan and Jasper looked at him from their compromising position on the seat. “They seem just fine to me!” he suddenly exclaimed and shut the door

with a bang.

“What are you waiting for then?” Avery’s voice sounded confused. “Step aside and let me see my friend.”

Joan looked down at Jasper and laughed as they heard the way MacAdair stepped in her path. “I don’t think ye want to be doin’ that, me lady,” he said firmly. “With all due respect, of course.”

“And why not? Joan is my oldest friend. I demand to see her at once,” she said angrily and moved forward.

“Ye can if ye like, but I must warn ye that she is otherwise indisposed right now,” MacAdair explained for lack of a better term.

“What do you mean... Oh, God...” Avery’s voice’ trailed off as she realized what the man was trying to tell her. “I mean, are you sure? In a carriage, right now?” She seemed shocked and taken aback.

Darragh’s laughter filled the evening air as Joan placed her hand over her mouth to keep herself from joining in on their mirth. Jasper buried his face in her chest and chuckled before kissing the soft flesh of her cleavage.

“I think we should give them some privacy and check back in the mornin’,” MacAdair said through his own laughter. “Or a few days,” he added afterwards.

“I’ll see you tomorrow then, Joan!” Avery called to her before their feet began to disappear into the night. “Or next week, it doesn’t matter. I think it’s safe to assume that we will be seeing a lot more of you from here on out!”

Joan shook her head inside the carriage and placed her hands on either side of Jasper’s face. “I think that’s a conversation we can leave for a bit later,” she laughed as she kissed him once again with all the love she felt swelling inside her heart.

“Aye, I agree,” Jasper whispered against her lips before drawing her in closer. “I think the discussions can wait a while. I want to feel yer lips against mine for now.”

“Jasper,” Joan breathed when they eventually drew apart, “I know you said that the talking could wait for later, but there are a few things I need to say to you now...” she paused, “before anything else happens that rips us apart.”

“What is it, lass?” he asked hungrily as he stopped kissing her neck. “I willnae let anythin’ else come between us.”

“I know,” she replied tenderly, “but we seem to have to worst kind of luck.”

“Aye, that we do.” He breathed in her scent as he took a deep breath.

“I’m afraid of what may happen if I go back; I don’t want to lose you again,” she whispered as she placed her forehead against his and held his face between her hands. “I love you far too much to never have said that I love you.” She took a chance and opened her heart to him, damming the consequences of whether or not he would return her affections.

Jasper seemed to freeze before suddenly reaching up and grasping her hands in his.

She feared for a moment that he would repeat his sentiments from earlier and say that she could stay in his castle, but he wouldn't be able to make her his wife. The air seemed to fill with an intensity that felt as if it would burst at any second as she held breath in anticipation of his response.

“Ye daenae have to return to England,” he whispered almost breathlessly with his head still pressed against hers. “Ye can stay me prisoner forever... I love ye Joan,” he said with a teasing glint in his eye. “I want in to remain me captive forever as me wife...” his words trailed off in a husky whisper.

Joan thought she would burst from happiness as her lips spread into a smile that would have been brighter than the sun during the day. She wanted to scream yes from the top of her lungs until the whole world could hear her answer. “I love you so much, Jasper. I thought you would never ask me to be your wife,” she managed to reply in a normal voice without yelling, despite the excitement she felt inside.

He pulled her in close and kissed her again with even more passion than he done before, using his hands to trace the curves of her body.

“Jasper, there is just one more thing.” She drew her lips away from his with force as he nibbled on her lower lip.

“For goodness sakes, lass, what is it now?” he growled before chuckling deep in his throat. “Have yer say, an’ make sure ye say everythin’ that ye want to

say this time. I willnae be so lenient with ye if ye stop me again.”

Laughing, she held his hands in hers and leaned back. “I just wanted to say that I don’t wish to wait any longer. Given everything that we’ve been through in the past few days, anything can happen.”

“What are ye sayin’?” Jasper searched her face in the rapidly fading light inside the carriage. It was getting to the point where all they could see were their silhouettes in the light of the moon that filtered through the curtains.

“I’m saying that I want you here and now, Laird MacShaw. I don’t want to wait any longer.” Her voice was husky as she leaned in close, kissing his neck before nibbling at the nape of his neck. “I can’t wait until we get married.”

“Now that’s a request I can satisfy,” he growled deeply, placing his arms around her body and drawing her in closer.

Joan groaned with pleasure as he pulled her down on his lap, sliding his hands up her thighs as the tips of his fingers kneaded her flesh.

“I’m just going to shift yer position for a moment,” he whispered in her ear before kissing the lobe. “All of these clothes are in the way,” he teased her as his hands moved down the length of her body.

Feeling her heart leap in her chest, Joan allowed him to grip her waist before he turned and lay her beside him on the seat. Her hands automatically gripped

the leather to keep herself from sliding onto the floor.

“I’ll go slow,” he whispered against her neck before kissing a path down her chest and over the fabric of her dress. His hands slid down to her ankles where he removed her boots one at a time before sliding up her thighs under her dress.

Shutting her eyes, Joan allowed the sensation of his palms against her stockings to send a wave of tingling through her body.

Starting at the top of her thighs, he looped his fingers into the hem of her garments and gently pulled them down, taking his time to caress her skin as the fabric shifted in a fluid motion. The cool night air that filled the cabin kissed her skin in a scintillating manner that made her shiver.

Her chest began to rise and fall in rapid succession as he slipped the stockings over her ankles and tossed them aside. The wild look in his eye that was visible from the sliver of moonlight that filtered through the curtains drove her wild. She wanted him more in that moment than she had ever before.

“I want to taste every inch of ye,” he said in a husky voice that made her shiver before bringing her leg up beside his head and kissing her ankle. Working his way down slowly, he licked and nipped at her flesh before pushing her dress all the way up her thighs and dipping his head into her lap.

Joan panicked slightly, uncertain of what he was about to do, and a hot blush spread over her face. She felt a strange kind of excitement mixed with

anticipation that made her tingle.

Feeling her hesitation, Jasper looked up. “Daenae stress, lass; do ye remember how good it felt when I touched ye on the cliff?” He gave her a moment to take in his words.

“Yes,” she breathed through labored breaths.

“Well, this is going to feel a whole lot better.” His voice sounded as if he were smiling as he lowered his head once again. “Trust me,” Jasper whispered against the tender flesh of her thigh before kissing a way to her core.

Gasping, Joan arched her back the second his tongue made contact with her most intimate parts. The hot sensation made her tingle and shudder in a delectable manner that made her place her hands behind his head and push him down. She wanted more of what he was doing, more of the soft sensations and flicking of his tongue. It was almost more than she could bare, yet she cried out for more.

It wasn't long before she was writhing with pleasure beneath his face, and Jasper had to use his hands on her hips to hold her steady. The loudness of her moans filled the carriage as her hips rose to meet the quickening strokes of his tongue.

His moans of reciprocated pleasure sent her over the edge as her legs began to tremble and shake. The same feeling of ecstasy that had built in her core on the cliff rose and erupted in a wave of pleasure that had her thighs

gripping his head between her legs.

Taking his time to gently lick her down from the high, he gently kissed her folds and inner thighs until he felt her falling back on the seat from sheer exhaustion.

“Did ye enjoy that, me love?” he asked her in a breathless voice after he finally came up for air. “Because I enjoyed doin’ that to ye.” He gently stroked the outside of her legs with the tips of his fingers until an even blanket of goosebumps broke out over her flesh.

“That... was amazing,” she breathed with her eyes shut as she reached down and tangled her fingers in his hair. The moment was so perfect that she wanted to touch him in any way that she could.

“Good,” he said in a cheeky tone before nipping her thigh a final time. “That was just the beginnin’, an’ I liked what I tasted,” he chuckled softly as he drew himself up above her body and looked down at her as he rested his weight on his arms.

“Jasper,” she smiled up at him. “Do you remember on the cliff when I asked you to show me how to pleasure you in the same way?” she felt almost shy because of the question she was about to ask him.

“Aye, I remember that very well,” he said softly as he brought his hand up to her cheek and stroked her skin with the back of his fingers. “It felt amazin’.”

“I want you to do the same again now,” she eventually managed to say the words after a moment’s hesitation.

Jasper remained silent for a moment before leaning down and kissing her forehead. “As ye wish, me lady,” he said softly, taking her hand in his and guiding her down to his hips where he lowered his breeches to his knees.

Joan’s heart began to race again as she felt the throbbing girth in her palm. “Not just like that,” she breathed after stroking the length a few times. “I want to please you in the same way that you pleased me now.”

His breathing quickened for a second before he pulled back, shifting back on the seat with his knees. Moving past her, he helped her up by the shoulders before taking the seat opposite her.

She took a moment to compose herself before lowering her head into his lap. Using the tip of her tongue, she gently licked the tip before drawing back sharply. “What’s the matter, did I hurt you?” she asked him in a panic after he drew in a sharp breath.

“Nay, lass, ye dinnae hurt me; it felt good.”

“Oh,” she said in relief as he lifted his hand and stroked her face.

“I want more.” His breaths were deep and even as he spoke.

Taking her cue, Joan repeated the action more slowly this time and ran her tongue over the tip, eliciting a deep moan from his chest. Doing what felt natural to her, she placed her lips over the tip and took the length into her mouth, using her tongue to massage the pulsating flesh in slow even strokes.

“Oh, Joan,” Jasper moaned as he placed his hands on the back of her head, guiding her movements.

She enjoyed the rhythmic motions and sounds he was making before he suddenly moved his hands to her shoulders and stopped her. “Did I do something wrong?” she asked in a daze as she lifted her head.

“Nay, lass, quite the opposite; I just dinnae want to finish a’fore I had a chance to make love to ye,” he said breathlessly, guiding her up.

Joan felt her stomach flutter as he gently pulled her onto his lap, placing her legs on either side of his thighs as he had done earlier when they had kissed.

Lowering her onto his lap, Jasper brought his hands up to her chest, massaging her breasts though the fabric of her dress until she moaned with pleasure.

Reaching back, Joan undid the knot at the bottom of her braid that held it in place, shaking her head while using her hand to loosen the strands.

“I dinnae ken that yer hair was that long,” Jasper breathed in awe as he ran his fingers through her hair. The strands fell down in a silky waterfall of gold.

“I never let anyone see it,” she whispered before grasping his hands and guiding them back to her chest. “I’ve never let anyone see so much of me before.” She reached back, undoing the ribbons that held her dress and corset place.

Moaning hungrily as her breasts came into full view, he used the palms of his hands to cup the silky flesh. Dipping his head, he gently licked over the rosy bud before taking her into his mouth and gently suckling while flicking his tongue.

A shiver of pleasure ran down her spine as he took in turn to kiss and suck on each breast. It wasn’t long before she was moving on his lap, begging him with her body for the sweet release she needed from her loins once again.

Without wasting anymore time, Jasper placed his hands on her hips and gently lifted her up, guiding her into position on his lap.

Joan felt a sharp pain as he gently lowered her down, yet the pain was quickly replaced by pleasure as he moved her back and forth with gentle motions, guiding her hips with his hands.

It wasn’t long before she got the hang of the motion, placing her hands on the seat behind his head, moving her hips up and down and back and forth until his eyes were closed.

Her breathing matched his as their bodies moved together, gently swaying the carriage with the motion of their love as the passion and heat only grew

stronger.

“Joan,” he growled with pleasure as he gripped her hips, leaning forward and taking her breast in his mouth once again.

Allowing herself to be taken away on the waves pleasure, Joan reached up and placed her hands on the ceiling of the carriage as the motions picked up pace. It only took her a few moments to feel the building sensation of pleasure once again.

Jasper’s body suddenly grew taught as he gripped her hips even tighter, shutting his eyes as his face contorted from pleasure.

She felt a sudden rush inside of her as her body clenched around his girth, sending her into a spiral of spasms as he throbbed within her body. It took her a few minutes to come down from the high before she collapsed against his chest.

Bringing his arms around his body, Jasper held her against his chest until her trembling stopped. “How do ye feel?” he breathed in her ear before kissing her hair.

“Wonderful,” she breathed with her eyes shut. The feeling and sound of his heart beating beneath her ear made her feel more at home with him than she ever did before. It was in that moment that Joan suddenly knew she had found the place she hoped to spend the rest of her life.

It didn't matter if it was in a carriage, on a cliff, or even in the middle of the ocean. She would always feel content as long as Jasper was the one who was holding her.

“Aye, I feel the same,” he said after kissing the top of her head. “I feel as if I can finally open the gate to me heart as well as the castle.”

Sighing contentedly, Joan nuzzled herself against his chest. There wasn't even a single reason she could think of as to why she needed to return to England at all. She was more than happy to be his captive for the rest of her days.

EPILOGUE

The bells of the church chimed as a great wave of applause broke out amongst the guests. Jasper lifted Joan up after kissing her passionately in front of the altar. It was an unusually bright day in Scotland as the couple finished sealing their union with a kiss.

Joan's dress was a deep champagne that almost resembled peach with a swooping bodice and straight skirt that fell to her feet.. Her veil hung over her braid that had been decorated with hundreds of white mountain-avens, the same beautiful little flowers that Jasper had presented to her on the cliff.

“Are ye ready to face the troops?” Jasper asked her as the guests filed out the chapel, giving the couple a moment alone to soak in the fact that they had just tied the knot.

“The question is,” Joan countered as he stood on her toes and touched the top of her nose to his, “are you ready to face the troops? I'm not the one who has lived as a recluse for the past one hundred years,” she teased him in a gentle tone.

“It was nae that long,” he answered her after placing a small kiss on her nose. “It was perhaps only fifty years.”

Joan tilted her head back and laughed as Jasper lifted her in his arms and

swung her around in a circle.

The shared a final kiss before making their way from the chapel where a throng of family and friends awaited their presence.

It was Althea Moore who was first to step forward as she kissed her daughter on either cheek. “You look absolutely breathtaking, my dear,” she said happily as she smiled from ear to ear. Her hair was blonde like her daughter’s, but her eyes were a light brown that shone in the sun like amber stones. “Thank you for saving our daughter from that horrible man,” she said to the groom as she turned to Jasper. “I’m not sure where we would be right now if it wasn’t for you. We agreed to the marriage simply to save our family, I can see now that it wasn’t the right thing.”

“Absolutely, we have a lot to be grateful for.” William Moore stepped forward and offered his hand in a congratulatory shake. His eyes were a bright blue like his daughter’s while his hair was a dark brown peppered with grey from years of experience.

“It is yer daughter that saved me.” Jasper smiled warmly at the man after accepting his heartfelt congratulations.

“That is absolutely true, I was here an’ saw it all. She’s made my son so happy.” Martha was smiling warmly at her daughter-in-law, her eyes shining with happy tears that she wouldn’t let fall.

“She has a habit of doing that,” a timid voice said from behind Joan’s parents. The small group parted to reveal a slim girl of no more than nineteen. Her features bore a strong resemblance to Joan. Her eyes were a bright blue that was tinged with grey just like Joan’s, but it was her hair that drew the most attention. The wavy locks of dark brown hung down her back in a silky waterfall.

“Jasper,” Joan said happily as she gripped his arm. “May I introduce you to the pride and joy of the Moore family? This is Eleonora Moore, my baby sister.” she beamed from ear to ear as Nora blushed.

“I’m not quite a baby anymore, sister.” Nora stepped forward and introduced herself to Jasper in a kind but timid voice that closely resembled a cooing dove. “Thank you for taking such great care of my sister. We will forever be indebted to you.”

“The pleasure is all mine,” Jasper replied before smiling happily at his wife.

“Mother,” Joan said as she peered over her head at the crowd of people, craning her neck to get a better look, “did you get my letter? I was hoping you did before you came.”

“I did,” her mother replied. “I thought it a very strange request considering the events that unfolded, but I did follow through.” Althea turned and pointed to a shy girl that stood by herself beneath a giant oak. Her hair was sandy blonde, tightly fastened at the back of her head in a bun. Her features were sharp and aristocratic while her eyes were a bright blue that bordered on green.

“I can see the family resemblance,” Joan said as she watched the shy way the girl kept to herself.

“We did learn after the baron’s death that there are no other family members to take charge of her or even look after the estate, so naturally, your father has taken it upon himself to ensure that she taken care of,” Althea finished with a fond smile in her husband’s direction.

“Call it my civic duty,” William responded and held his arm out to his wife. “Come now, my dear; there are many other people who wish to give their blessings to the happy couple.”

“Of course, where are my manners?” Althea seemed shocked as she raised a gloved hand to her cheek. “Let’s not hold everyone up any longer. Come, Nora, let’s go and get our new ward; she looks positively terrified on her own.”

Nora gave the couple a final smile before following her parents.

It was Darragh and Avery that stepped forward next with MacAdair following straight behind.

“I am so happy for you, my friend,” Avery threw her arms around Joan’s neck and drew her in for a warm embrace before kissing her cheek. “Now, you can see how lovely it is to be married to a brutish Scotsman,” she teased, making Joan laugh.

Darragh simply nodded at Jasper, returning to his old brooding ways.

“Thank you, MacAdair,” Jasper said as the laird stepped forward and offered his congratulations.

“Please, call me Clyde,” he said kindly now that our clans are on peaceful terms.

“Clyde it is then,” Joan said happily before giving him a hug. “Thank you for the part you played in my rescue.”

Clyde Atholl blushed at the attention he was receiving before stepping aside.

“Keira!” Joan suddenly called in excitement as one of her best friends from London stepped forward. “I’m so glad you made it.”

“Joan, please don’t call so much attention to me,” the girl blushed despite her best efforts.

“Nonsense,” Joan laughed as she turned to her husband. “This is one of my dearest friends, Keira Webster; she helped me escape from London.” She turned back to her friend. “I hope your carriage driver is well after his harrowing ordeal?”

“He will survive.” The girl wrinkled her slightly upturned nose as she

laughed, causing her emerald eyes to sparkle in a pleasant manner. “He’s been sent to the country to recuperate for a while after his heroic deeds.”

“I’m glad to hear it.” Joan laughed before her friend was ushered away by Avery for a chat. “Now, my laird, are you ready to face the rest of the horde?” She turned to Jasper.

“Do I have a choice?” he asked with a teasing smile.

“No, my laird, I am afraid that I have trapped you forever now. You are to do my bidding until the end of time.”

“Sounds fair to me.” They both laughed as they joined hands walking together into their future.

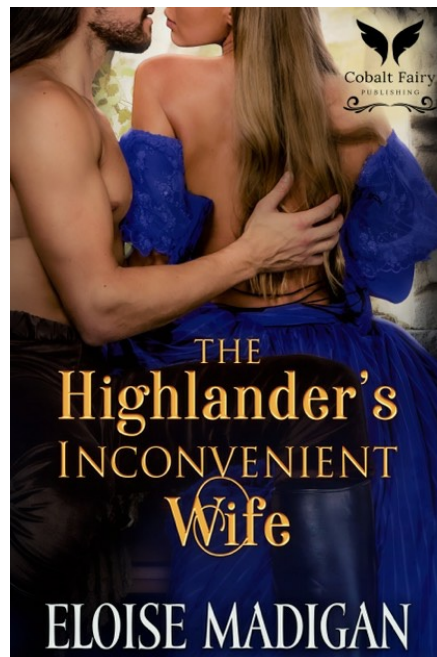
The End?

EXTENDED EPILOGUE

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THE
Highlander's
TEMPORARY
Wife

ELOISE MADIGAN

PREVIEW: THE
HIGHLANDER'S
TEMPORARY WIFE

“**Y**ou look dashin’, my dear,” Daphne Young, the Viscountess of Montgomery, stared at her daughter’s reflection in the looking glass as only a mother should. Or ought to.

The words said one thing, but her face revealed a different message, and a moment later, she continued as her daughter, Avery, tried to avoid her gaze.

“Well, as dashin’ as it is possible,” the Viscountess added nonchalantly, looking down at Avery’s hair, which was the only thing Avery herself had chosen. And fortunately for her, now it was too late to do anything about it, for the Laird was coming any moment.

“It is a simple chignon, Mother,” Avery frowned.

“That is the problem,” her mother shook her head disapprovingly, clicking her lips only once to accentuate that displeasure. “*Simple.*”

“What is wrong with simple things?” Avery wondered, averting her gaze from the hideous dress her mother had surprised her with surprise being exactly the right term for Avery’s sentiment upon seeing it. Then again, this day had been full of unpleasant surprises. One more didn’t make that much of a difference.

“Simple things are... well, simple.” Her mother could not quite put her finger on it, but she was still displeased. As always.

“Once, we were a simple family,” Avery reminded her. She didn’t understand

why simple things were looked down upon, especially in their family.

“Oh, hush now,” her mother squealed loudly. “Lest your father hears you.”

Avery had more to say regarding this, but she managed to bite her tongue in time. Arguing with her mother on this day wouldn't bring any relief from the situation she found herself in. So, she inhaled deeply and dared to look at her gown. Instead of the lovely, elongated silhouette gown she would prefer, Avery was forced to put on this grotesque creation of modernity that made her resemble an overly decorated cake topper.

“Ah, just feel the silk!” her mother gushed, grabbing the side of Avery's gown gently, with the tips of her fingers. Almost as if able to read her daughter's mind, endeavoring to persuade her that this gown was the finest thing available for purchase. Avery somehow didn't doubt that.

“I feel like I've been swallowed in a ball of silk.” Avery frowned again, averting her gaze once more.

“Everything will be perfect,” her mother finally concluded, lifting her hands from her daughter's shoulders.

If you consider bein' forced into a betrothal perfect, then of course, everythin' really will be perfect.

Instead of sharing her sentiments aloud, she wisely bit her tongue and nodded. After all, what else was there to do?

“You are a very fortunate young lady,” her mother added, grinning from ear to ear. “Your father has chosen the best laird in Scotland. The most important one, too.”

“What makes someone the best laird?” Avery wondered.

“Well...” her mother started, but the question caught her off guard. Avery was very amused when this happened. Sometimes, her mother was better at following orders than issuing them. “He is very renowned.”

“For being the best?” she almost chuckled to herself.

Hearing those words, her mother lifted an eyebrow. Avery instantly felt bad. She knew how important it was for both her mother and father to have a good

standing in life, but not only that. As one of the few families that lived on the border, what was crucial to them was creating connections not only with notable lords in England but also with the most important clans in Scotland. While Avery was having a little bit of fun at her mother's expense, she was well aware of the importance that Darragh Ramsey, the Laird of MacKinnon, exuded.

"When you are the best, you are well known," her mother added, slightly awkwardly, and her voice made it clear that this discussion was over. "Now, let me see you."

She grabbed her daughter by the hand and lifted her from her seat. The gown became even puffier around Avery's waist, making it non-existent.

"Yes," her mother nodded. Avery wondered what adjective she would use to describe her. She withdrew *dashing* quickly enough. Not that her mother didn't think her daughter was pretty. She was simply a perfectionist. And a perfectionist always points out what could be improved upon.

Suddenly, the woman sighed, nodding to herself again. "There is no more time for reparations. This will have to do."

Avery's hair was a small victory. The gown was not. Then, she remembered something. She *didn't* want to marry this man. She *didn't* want to look pretty. Basically, her mother was doing her a favor by forcing her to wear this unflattering gown. Perhaps if he didn't like her, he would be the one to refuse marriage to her. It was a comforting thought to believe that there was still something she could do about this undesirable situation.

"Why are you smilin'?" her mother wondered.

"Me?" Avery grinned. "For no reason."

"A lady doesn't smile for no reason. Either remain mysteriously serious or have a reason for smiling," her mother explained gravely, sounding annoyed that there was yet another instance of her daughter's lack of manners.

"All right," Avery nodded.

At that moment, thunder exploded somewhere in the distance, and both women instantly looked in the same direction. Avery's heart skipped a beat.

“Perhaps Laird MacKinnon has changed his mind about traveling,” Avery pointed out, walking over to the window just as large raindrops started to assault the glass. With each passing moment, the drumming on the windows became louder and louder, symbolizing the increasing strength of the oncoming storm. Her hope strengthened as well. Perhaps the man might not come.

“Such a man is not to be deterred by anything, let alone a storm,” her mother pointed out. She walked over to her daughter’s side then, as if doubting the veracity of her own words, took Avery by the hand, and led her away from the window. “Now, my dear, do you remember everything I taught you? You are to be kind and polite, do not speak unless spoken to. Laird MacKinnon belongs to the old manner of doing things, and he wants an old-fashioned lady who knows where her place is.”

At that moment, there was a knock on the door, and before Avery could rush to open it, her mother answered. Instantly, the face of Avery’s younger sister Melissa peered through the slightly opened door.

“Are you ready, Avery?” Melissa inquired sweetly, but the moment her eyes befell the hideous gown her sister was wrapped in, her face could not hide her shock. “Good Lord! Where did you find *that* gown?”

Avery could not resist a silent yet victorious chuckle. “Why, Mother chose it.”

“Indeed, I did,” their mother announced. “And do not be rude, Melissa. Your sister looks pretty.”

“If pretty means the opposite, then she sure is!” Melissa laughed. She, of course, wasn’t calling her sister ugly. That much was obvious to both girls who were having fun. After all, there wasn’t much more Avery could do about it.

“Ugly! Melissa, honestly!” their mother scolded Melissa. “We should be tellin’ your sister how pretty she looks today, even if that were not true, for today she meets her betrothed. She just needs to remember her manners, for I doubt Laird MacKinnon will take kindly to a lady without proper manners.”

Avery did not care what Laird MacKinnon would or would not mind. The

only thing she did care about was the possibility that he would hate her so much in this gown that he would immediately frown and tell them that the betrothal was off. It was a far-fetched hope but a hope, nonetheless.

“I don’t like the gown, but I do like the hair,” Melissa complimented Avery, a comment which almost sent both sisters into another chuckle. And Melissa liked nothing better than to make small arguments and disagreements with their mother.

Just as the old lady was about to give both her daughters a piece of her mind, there was another knock on the door. This time, Avery was allowed to go and open it, and she met with the smilingly apologetic face of their housekeeper.

“I beg your pardon, Miss, but Laird MacKinnon’s carriage has just arrived,” Mrs. Willoughby announced, her eyes traversing the room, stopping on each inhabitant for a moment or two until they returned to focus on Avery once again. “Lord Montgomery has requested you all join him in the main hallway.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Willoughby,” Avery smiled back at the benevolent lady, who possessed most of the motherly qualities Avery wished her mother had. But that was not something she could concentrate on right now. Their guest was here.

She turned to her mother. “I suppose you were right, Mother. The Laird stops at no storm to come and fetch a bride.”

Melissa silently chuckled at these words. Hearing her sister laugh made Avery feel slightly more at ease.

Then, her mother pushed Avery towards the door as she and Melissa followed suit. Within the next two minutes, the three ladies were lined up in front of the main door. In Avery’s mind, it resembled an ambush, only she wasn’t certain who should be the surprised one, she or the Laird.

She made sure not to look in her father’s direction. In fact, she hadn’t spoken to him since that moment, when he and her mother announced that she was to marry a man she had never met or even seen before, and that he was to come that very afternoon to make the betrothal official. It seemed like a nightmare to Avery, but one look in her father’s direction assured her that his word

would be final, and any arguments would be met with rage. Therefore, it was safer to remain quiet and do as she was told as the rules of their household dictated.

Avery inhaled deeply. She already disliked this man, who obviously liked to make others wait for him. It seemed that he was the rude one, not her.

Somewhere in the distance, thunder rumbled louder than before. At that very moment, the door opened, and the butler finally ushered in their guest, who seemed to be followed by nature's most raw, enraged sound of displeasure.

Avery's eyes widened in shock at the sight she beheld. The man's broad shoulders as well as his strong arms were only emphasized by the kilt and the way it fit so perfectly around his powerful body. The pleats of his kilt floated downward, revealing his muscular legs. Her eyes then traversed the distance up to his face where she was met by a chiseled jawline and a well-groomed beard that hid almost half of his face, adding to the mystery that enshrouded him.

At that moment, Melissa leaned closer to her sister, whispering. "At least you're lucky he's handsome, eh?"

Luck wasn't what Avery would call it. Mystery. Displeasure. Curiosity? Those were just some of the words she could think of, looking at the dashing man who had come to make her his bride.

This was the last place in the world where Darragh wanted to be, but at least he provoked the reaction he had been hoping for. He was forced to come here, but he would be the one in control.

George Young, the Viscount of Montgomery, the false one to be exact, for Darragh refused to acknowledge someone who received a title through the death of one's nearest relative, was responsible for all this mess. His hawk-like, brown eyes stood wide in shock at the sight of Darragh.

Good, he thought to himself. Ye daenae ken the mistake ye have made.

“Your Lairdship.”

Darragh suddenly turned to the young woman standing in the midst of them. Her tall, slim figure commanded attention, but the sight of that disastrous gown she was wearing instantly took away from her beauty. However, the sound of her voice drew him to her, and he listened intently.

“We are honored to welcome you to our home,” she continued, blushing slightly. She wasn't smiling and endeavored to keep her voice welcoming although not overly exuberant. She showed control and elegance, just like a proper lady of high society should. But her eyes burned a hole through his skull, and he could see the hatred in her gaze. Good. He hated her, too, for doing this to him. But his traitorous desire gave a little flutter to his heart over the thought that he would be the one to tame this one down.

He ignored her comment, not wanting to even hint at the fact that he might approve of anything taking place right now. He stood facing her, looming over her, deciding her fate in the darkest of tempests.

“Are ye the bride?” he asked gruffly, surprising even himself with the sternness of his voice. He purposely made sure not to call her *his* bride.

Instead of a response, she nodded. Her body language showed slight apprehension, but her eyes gazed at him angrily, clashing with the message her body was sending him. Darragh had to become very good at reading people’s body language to be where he was now. He prided himself on it. Yet, with her, he could not be immediately certain. That thrilled him.

At that moment, as if woken up from some odd reverie, the Viscount snapped back to reality, as well as his wife, taking a step forward and welcoming their guest. Darragh thought it was about time, but he shook the man’s hand, squeezing it as tight as he could, enjoying the look of pain on the man’s face, before he pulled away.

“We are truly honored to have you,” his wife added after proper introductions had been made.

“Thank ye,” Darragh finally managed to muster, deciding not to stir the waters any more than they already were.

He was here because he had to be, and for the time being, he could do nothing about it. Being aggressive towards the man and his family would only make matters worse. So, he swallowed his rage and behaved civilly, as was expected of him.

But truly, he wanted to bash George Young’s head into the wall. The only thing stopping him was that the man could end his life with just one piece of paper he held.

“We have prepared quite a feast for you, Your Lairdship,” the Viscountess continued in a high-pitched voice that pierced Darragh’s ears. He much more preferred the sweet, melodious voice of her daughter. However, he still disliked how the English insisted on referring to him as a *laird*. That was their word. A Scottish word.

He looked at the lass, and a thought blossomed inside his mind. She was not

just any lass.

She was his future wife.

The thought was still as foreign as ever. Then again, he only had a single day to get used to it. He wondered if it were the same for her.

He stole another glance at her, realizing she was watching him intently, her eyes burning into him. The thought of her gaze on him excited him more than he would have thought. Why does she have this kind of power over him?

“I hope you had a pleasant journey despite the storm,” the Viscount spoke as the small group slowly made their way towards the dining room.

They were seated in silence, assuring that Darragh would sit next to his future wife. Quite honestly, he had forgotten the lass’ name before arriving at their home. He was too focused on his anger over the Viscount’s insolence. Fortunately, proper introductions were made, and he remembered it only then.

Avery. That was her name. And *Avery* was now seated next to him, resting her hands in her lap, looking in front of her, somewhere behind her mother. He doubted she was looking at anything in particular. It was merely an effort to look anywhere but at him. Again, the thought vexed him. She and her father were the ones tricking him into marrying her, but *she* was the angry one?

“It was an... uneventful journey,” he informed them as they watched food being served on the table between various items of silver and even a silver gilt plate for the table which served no other purpose but for the mere display of wealth.

Darragh continued to watch the servants lay out an amalgamation of what was supposed to be Scottish and English food, such as mutton and lamb, wild goose and brissill cock, speckit peas, but also haggis, bannocks, and cullen soup. He liked that attention to detail despite the hidden meaning behind it.

“I am glad to hear that,” the Viscount said, waiting for the wine to be poured into his glass then taking the glass into his hand. “Sometimes, the lack of excitement is what a man truly needs.” He raised his glass to Darragh with a smirk on his face. “Is claret to your liking?” the man asked. “We have

malvassy, musticat, and aqua vitae, if you prefer.”

Darragh knew exactly why the Viscount was offering another choice. Several other choices, in fact. It had nothing to do with Darragh’s preferred taste for wine and everything to do with the Viscount’s display of wealth. Darragh hated people who flaunted their wealth in such an uncouth manner, especially wealth they did not earn on their own. Controlling his anger was becoming more and more difficult with each passing moment, but Darragh was still able to do it.

“Claret is fine,” Darragh nodded, lowering his voice and taking the glass.

“In that case, may this be the first of many meals we share together in the future,” the Viscount said.

The ladies followed suit. Darragh swallowed heavily, raising his glass and sipping the wine. It didn’t slide down his throat the way wine usually did. On the contrary, it clawed its way, making Darragh almost cough aloud, but he managed to prevent himself from making any noise.

“Now, let us feast!” the Viscount announced, and all the servants stepped away, allowing the family and their guest to partake in the food.

Darragh had no appetite, but he took the fork into his hand. Just as he hoped that eating would save him from the torture of having to speak, Avery turned to him.

“We ho... feared you might not arrive due to the weather taking a turn for the worse,” she said, obviously in an effort to make small talk.

What Darragh didn’t fail to notice was the mother’s facial expression which served the purpose of a gentle nudge for her daughter to focus her attention on him. So, Avery would not speak to him of her own accord but was rather forced to do it.

“Ye hoped or ye feared?” he couldn’t resist gripping at the initial word she intended to use.

Her cheeks flared up instantly. “I did not mean to say that.”

“Things said by mistake are often more truthful than carefully curated

words,” he teased her, seeing the color deepen in her cheeks and even travel down her neck below that hideous neckline. “But I am here now,” he added.

“Why yes, you are,” she nodded, looking down at her plate and taking a bite of the meat which, even he had to admit, looked inviting. But the rage inside of him was stronger than hunger.

“Although storms arenae under me control, I like to think they daenae prevent me from doin’ what I set me mind on doin’,” he said, strangely seized by the desire to speak to her a little bit more. It was probably due to her melodious voice that caressed his ears at a moment when everything else irked him. Or that he wanted to make her look at him again, even in anger.

“And you have set your mind on marriage?” she asked, turning to him.

Darragh paused for a moment, a little confused at the question. Wasn’t she the one who wanted the wedding? Or at least, her father did, and she might be glad to be getting married. With the corner of his eye, he noticed that the Viscount was explaining something to his wife. Avery’s sister was focused on her food. That meant that, hopefully, no one was paying attention to their conversation.

“It has come to me attention that marriage might be the right path for me,” he tried to sound as vague as possible.

After all, how could he admit that he was sitting in her home because he was being blackmailed into it?

“Ye aren’t *that* old,” she said, eyeing him like a curious little girl.

This time, he couldn’t resist smiling. She said it in such a naïve, sweet manner that he couldn’t believe he heard it right. How can someone so sweet have such an evil plan in her mind? He almost wanted to ruin that image of the perfect young woman, so elegant and so polite.

“I’m nae?” he echoed.

“I meant, you are not that old to be rushing to get married,” she explained.

“To be quite honest, lass, sometimes, I feel ancient,” he admitted with a heavy pang deep down in the recesses of his forgotten heart.

“Sometimes, the events in our life age us prematurely,” she nodded, agreeing. He liked how she spoke so wisely, although he was certain she could not have had many a heartache in her sheltered life.

“As for yerself, lass, I do believe ye arenae that young,” he pointed out mischievously, waiting to see her reaction.

As he thought, her nostrils flared up at the insinuation he had just made. Only, he had a point to make with this comment, and he was patient enough to let her squirm a little.

“I beg your pardon?” she gasped although she still kept herself under control which he, once again, both admired and hated.

Many a lass would jump up from the table shocked at what he had just said. Not her. She stared at him calmly, demanding an explanation. Her reactions were already more amusing than those of many a woman he had met before.

“I merely stated ye arenae *that* young,” he shrugged, leaning back into his chair with a smug look. Only then did he continue his thought, clarifying this confusion. “To allow yer mother to dress ye so that ye look like her reflection in the lookin’ glass.”

She stole a glance down at her gown, then quickly locked eyes with him again, confident not to let him get away with this.

“For your information, my mother has ordered the finest fabrics to be brought to us and have tailored gowns made for both me and me sister,” Avery hit him back with her response.

“Aye, but yer sister doesnae look like a younger version of yer mother,” he pointed out, knowing that Avery had to agree with that. While Melissa wore a dress that accentuated her figure and complexion perfectly, Avery’s dress only hid her natural beauty, making her look ungainly. “Which only makes me believe that, despite yer age, yer sister is the older one in experience and character, while ye allow yer mother to dress ye.”

“Don’t you know that insulting one’s host is considered the pinnacle of rudeness?” she asked, tilting her head a little as she spoke to him as if she were still slightly above him and looked down. He usually didn’t allow people to look at him like that, but he was enjoying the banter this time.

“Who is insultin’ anyone?” he wondered with a half-shrug. “I am merely statin’ the obvious. Is a man to be guilty of that? Just because ye appear to be mother’s little girl?”

This comment was unnecessary. He could tell that much. But he was simply having too much fun with her and couldn’t stop when he ought to have. He also wanted to make her hate him. It would be best for both of them to keep each other at more than arm’s length, and making himself appear rude and pompous would be the easiest way to make the lass hate him.

“You are a brute, Laird MacKinnon,” she said through clenched teeth, her brown eyes flaring up at him, sending daggers. He had pushed her dangerously close to the edge and loved every minute of it.

“Aye, I’m sorry ye have to marry a brute,” he smirked.

“Hmph,” she sighed angrily. “I’m sure you are, My Laird.”

This time, he chuckled aloud. He truly believed she would have a better retort, something to make him swirl in his seat, but instead, she withdrew back into herself. He thought that would instantly make him lose interest in her because he was not keen on wallflowers. He liked women who knew who they were and what they wanted. Avery was not that, yet she was something else, something more. Instead of losing interest in her, he found her somehow... endearing.

He didn’t like that one bit.

Just as he was about to tell her it wasn’t his intention to be mean, the Viscount addressed him.

“My wife was just telling me how the entire household was on its feet regarding your arrival, Laird MacKinnon,” he spoke composedly, with that smug look. “And I told her, I was just in the process of signing a legal agreement regarding the ownership of a parcel of land when I was informed that you have arrived.”

Darragh’s eyebrow lifted. Was the Viscount truly being such a poor sport? Darragh could not believe it. He curled his fingers into fists underneath the table so that no one could see. Still, he remained silent, waiting for the man to continue which he, of course, did immediately.

“I simply had to finish my business,” the Viscount laughed heartily to which his wife joined in although it was obvious that she had no idea what on earth was so funny about a signature.

Darragh, on the other hand, did. Only, he didn’t find it funny. He found it many other things, but funny wasn’t one of them.

“After all, a laird’s signature is a very important matter that should not be taken lightly,” the Viscount agreed, eyeing Darragh, daring him to speak up although he knew Darragh would not. This was not the time, and Darragh knew how to pick his battles in order to win the war. This wasn’t it. “Don’t you agree, Laird MacKinnon?”

Darragh felt a sudden need to jump up from the table and grab this vile man by the throat with both hands then proceed to squeeze until the last breath left this man’s body to show him what happened to men who dared to blackmail Laird MacKinnon. But he did no such thing. Instead, he calmly smiled.

“Aye,” he replied. “The honor of a man is judged by the weight of his word and also, his signature.”

Darragh felt he could kill this man so easily. But he had to keep composure of his actions. That was why he stood up and glanced at everyone around.

“I do beg yer pardon, but I need to excuse meself for a minute,” he said.

No one said anything, but he was certain all eyes were on him as he left the dining room. He had no idea where exactly he needed to go, but he had a goal in mind, and he would not leave this house before he had obtained it.

“I do not like him one bit,” Avery frowned, throwing a gaze of pleading in her sister’s direction.

But it was her father who replied. “You do not even know him. How can you know you do not like him?” She could hear scolding in his voice. Then again, it was his usual manner of speaking.

“I’ve spoken to him enough to know,” Avery sulked.

She could not imagine that this was the man she would marry. What horror!

“You do not have a say in this,” her father reminded her of something she already knew, but it provided some comfort to know that she at least rebelled against him, albeit without much success.

She watched as her father took another sip of his wine then placed it on the table before him.

“I know this is all rather hasty,” he added without any apologetic tone in his voice but rather as if his hands were, just like hers, tied. “But Laird MacKinnon belongs to an old family of lairds, a very well respected one, which is the most important thing. Being united with them will be very beneficial for our family.”

“Why is it always about money?” Melissa suddenly interfered. Usually, she kept quiet until she couldn’t take it any longer, and that was when her comments drew most of the fire to herself.

“How can it not be about money?” the Viscount glared at his younger daughter. “This makes me think you do not appreciate all I’ve done for you. We managed to raise ourselves above the conditions we lived in for most of our lives.”

“You mean, when we were poor?” Melissa asked antagonistically, knowing how much their father hated being reminded of a time when he did not have a title and all this wealth.

“We’ve always been destined for bigger things!” he exclaimed importantly, like an actor on a stage. “Fate merely took its time in dealing us what was rightfully ours.”

“Rightfully ours?” Melissa scoffed. “We would not be here if—”

“Enough!” the Viscount gritted through clenched teeth. No matter how much he wanted to, he couldn’t shout. That was why Melissa considered that she had already won this argument.

“I am merely asking why we need to sacrifice happiness to get wealth?” Melissa inquired again, her voice calm and composed.

Avery knew what she was doing. She had already grown bored of this evening and wanted means to be excused. Seeing that wouldn’t happen if she merely asked for it, she needed to make the situation such that she would be asked to leave instead.

“Wealth is happiness!” the Viscount exclaimed, half shocked, half enraged at what he was hearing. “It provides a roof over your heads; it puts food on your table; it clothes you in gowns made of the finest silks! If that does not make you happy, then you are mad!”

“If we have enough wealth, why is Avery forced to marry that man then?” Melissa dared to ask the same question on Avery’s mind, but her soft-spoken nature would never allow that.

“Because he is a good man,” the Viscount proclaimed, “from a good family, and she will want for nothing with him.”

“Ye mean, we shall want for nothing with him,” Melissa glared at him.

The Viscount did not speak again. That meant that the conversation was over.

“Melissa,” their mother spoke, endeavoring to pacify the situation. “Why don’t you go for a stroll? And come back when you have... cleared your head.”

“Gladly!” Melissa stood up forcefully, pushing her chair against the floorboards, creating a horrific sound. She stormed out of the dining room, slamming the door behind her.

“And that is why your sister will never find a man as good as Laird MacKinnon,” the Viscountess spoke to Avery, shaking her head.

The dinner had barely started, and already two people were missing. The Laird mentioned he was only going to the lavatory. Avery wondered what was taking him so long. He should have been back by now.

The remaining three people continued to eat in silence, and Avery welcomed it. After about ten minutes, when no one seemed to return yet, Avery seized it as a chance to escape herself if only for a few minutes.

“Mother, Father, may I go fetch Melissa?” she inquired.

“No,” her father refused without lifting his gaze from his food. “The Laird may return at any moment. You need to remain here.”

“But he might be offended at the fact that Melissa is gone,” Avery reminded him. “It is not customary for any member of the host’s family to leave the dinner table without an explanation.”

Her father hesitated. His wife leaned over to him and nodded. “Avery is right, my dear. It does not look proper. He might think us lacking in manners.”

Manners. There was that word again which Avery was growing to dislike more and more.

“All right,” the Viscount finally acquiesced. “Go fetch your sister but make haste.”

“I shall,” Avery agreed, getting up even faster than her sister.

She had no intention of fetching Melissa, though. Her sister could find her

way back to the dining room. But she wasn't so certain about their guest.



Darragh thought himself the luckiest damned laird in all of Scotland that evening, for it took him only seven minutes to find the Viscount's study. He slithered inside unseen, closing the door behind him.

He looked around. The Viscount was many things, but he was not stupid. He would not leave such important documents just lying around where anyone could stumble onto them. However, that did not stop him from quickly rummaging through the drawers for a few minutes, all of which were surprisingly unlocked for his perusal.

Once disappointment set in, Darragh slumped into the Viscount's leather chair, looking about. He tried to think of a concealed place where someone might keep a very precious document, but it could honestly be anywhere. And Darragh doubted it would be in the man's study. That was the most obvious choice.

He sighed heavily when the sound of oncoming footsteps interrupted his wallowing. He remained in his seat as the doors flung open, and Avery entered the room. Her eyes flared at him. He almost enjoyed seeing her so flummoxed. He got up slowly from the chair.

"Your Lairdship seems to feel right at home here," she said, surprisingly confident in stark contrast to how they had ended their last conversation mere minutes ago. "Does he not?"

"Indeed, I have been welcomed and made to feel that way, aye," he confirmed, amused beyond description.

"And the question of permission never crossed your mind?" she wondered, slamming the door behind her, yet another surprising action on her part.

He could simply not decipher anything about her. She was coy and submissive one moment then the next, there was a fire inside of her and bravery he had rarely seen in a woman. Then, he noticed that her fingers were trembling as they rested by her side. So, she *was* afraid, but she did not allow

that to deter her. Yet another admirable trait about this lass.

“Permission?” he scoffed. “I have done nothin’ wrong other than enter the wrong room. Does one need permission to make a mistake?”

She obviously expected him to be all bold and confident, but instead he took the other route. He had made a mistake and was now owning up to it. It completely took her off guard, making her blush. He even caught her biting on her lower lip for one brief, tantalizing second.

“You should have noticed immediately that this was not the chamber you have been looking for,” she pointed out, “and you still entered.”

“A blunder on me part,” he grinned, gesturing with his hands that he simply made a mistake. “It is rather dark in here. One cannae make heads or tails of anythin’.”

“Lying doesn’t suit you, My Laird. If it was so dark you couldn’t even see this wasn’t the lavatory, then you wouldn’t have noticed me either,” she dared to reply, taking a step closer to him.

Something inside of him rebelled. He could not remember the last time a banter with a woman had him so invested, so riled up and excited. That was why he wasn’t certain whether marrying this woman would be a blessing or the biggest mistake of his life. He was leaning towards the second still as his entire body yearned to have her in his arms. Fighting this urge was one of the hardest things he had to do.

“I daenae ken how anybody could nae notice ye,” he said, unable to control himself.

“Flattery will get ye nowhere, Laird MacKinnon,” she reminded him coolly.

“Again,” he grinned. “Merely statin’ the facts. I’m nae flattering ye.” He could see her hesitate for a moment then he decided to act yet again. “Have yer parents sent ye to fetch me?”

“Of course not,” she shot her reply. “I have actually come for Melissa. But I stumbled onto you, as it seems.”

“What a good lass ye are,” he teased. “Is that always the case?”

He spoke softly as he took several deliberate steps closer to her so that now, they were standing facing each other, dangerously close.

“Are you always as rude as you have shown on this occasion?” she answered with another question.

“Only when the situation calls for it,” he smirked, lifting his hand and removing a stray strand of hair that fell to the side of her face, gently pushing it behind her ear.

He knew that he should lower his hand, pull it away from her, but he wasn’t able to. She was drawing him in, closer and closer, like a magnet and he couldn’t pull away, even if he tried to.

His thumb gently grazed her soft, plump lips, and the desire to taste them took over him completely. He was one step away from falling into the abyss of desire for this woman. She hadn’t taken a step back or pushed him away; on the contrary, she remained rooted on the spot as if daring him to take her. But her eyes were fearful, darting back and forth from him to the door, probably anxious that someone would find them.

“And this situation calls for us to return to the dining room, where my family, namely my father, the Viscount, is waiting for us,” she reminded him, her voice shaking.

Her words felt like a bolt of lightning. He pulled his hand away from her as if her touch scorched him. Without responding to anything, he walked past her and headed back to the dining room. He could hear her footsteps behind him. There was no need to turn around.

When he reached the door to the dining room, he allowed her to enter first, and they quickly took their seats. His thumb still stung. He wasn’t certain whether it was from her touch or her words.

“Well, now that ye are both back, we may proceed with the marriage arrangements,” the Viscount continued as if there had been no break between their conversation and this one. “I have spent several hours this morning perusing a betrothal contract which should be approved by my solicitor once we have agreed on all accounts.”

Darragh eyed him suspiciously. “I daenae require yer daughter’s dowry,” he

said. “Also, her funds will be hers to do with whatever she pleases. I ask for only one thing which is for her to run my household. She is, of course, allowed her own interests which I wholeheartedly approve of. Now, as for—”

“And the expenses for the nuptials?” the Viscount was quick to add.

Darragh’s teeth squealed under the strain of his upper and lower jaw coming together.

“I shall bear all the expenses, of course,” Darragh heard himself say. “Lady Avery can arrange it as she sees it. Adornments, flowers, the gown, the food, the guests, etcetera. I daenae wish to be bothered with any of that.”

“Naturally,” the Viscount nodded, shooting a knowing glance in Avery’s direction. Darragh pretended not to notice it.

“Now, as for the weddin’ itself,” Darragh started again, this time being allowed to finish, “as per old Scottish customs, which my family honors, the betrothal shall be a year long.”

An entire year ought to be enough for him to find those blasted papers and burn every single piece to oblivion.

He could remember putting his signature on that piece of paper now as if it happened yesterday. It was to affirm his position of participating in a battle against the English. The circumstances quickly changed, and the battle never took place. Darragh himself helped the Scots with both weapons and infantry, but he kept himself personally away from the action on the battlefield for one simple reason. That reason was his business with the English which would suffer greatly had he shown he took sides in this war. Although no one dared to acknowledge it publicly, business with the English brought more money as well as the opportunity to his land. In other words, business with the English benefited Scotland.

He had completely forgotten all about this damned document when the Viscount appeared in his study, giving him a simple ultimatum: marry his daughter or be executed by the King, just like all the other people who signed that specific document. Now, there were several of these documents in existence, reprinted by the Viscount himself for insurance purposes, which hung above him like a noose. While the reprintings did not have their

signatures, they were enough to send him on a wild goose chase until he found the original.

Now, Darragh was here, courting the daughter of the man who was blackmailing him. He could not believe what a cruel joke fate had just played on him.

One look around, and Darragh was instantly brought back to the present moment. He could immediately see that the Viscount did not like the idea of a yearlong betrothal one bit. However, he momentarily had a counterattack.

“That is fine as long as Avery lives in your castle throughout that year, and the betrothal feast takes place three weeks from now,” the Viscount countered.

Darragh wanted freedom to ensure he found every single reprint of that blasted document. He could not very well do that with Avery breathing down his neck. However, he knew that her father would not relent on this. And maybe the idea of having Avery in close reach would not be that awful. He dared not continue down that path in his thoughts.

“All right,” Darragh said gruffly, acquiescing to the terms, hoping to make them work in his favor.

“Then, we are in agreement!” the Viscount raised his glass again, which had been refilled, just like all the other glasses.

Darragh turned to Avery. She was looking at her sister, refusing to acknowledge him. Perhaps that was for the better. They would both lead their lives separately while living under the same roof, and once Darragh was freed from this damned blackmail, he would set her free as well.

Until then, he had to bide his time and play along to the schemes, for George’s ultimatum had been clear.

Marry Avery, or he dies.

Want to know how the story ends? Tap on the link below to read the rest of the story.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Eloise Madigan is a passionate writer who fell in love with Scotland when she was only 5 years old. On a trip to the beautiful Highlands with her family, she was encouraged by the mesmerizing scenery to start weaving intricate stories about handsome Highlanders and beautiful lasses.

Born in the US to a Scottish mother and an American father, she formed a deep bond with her mother's roots. She studied English Literature and Creative Writing, and soon she began working as an editor for a small publishing house. But even though she liked editing, her true love lay in the short romantic stories she could write...This is when she decided to start publishing her own romance novels!

When Eloise isn't writing, she enjoys spending time with family and friends.

Accompany Eloise on the most wonderful trips across the mysterious Highlands, where love and adventure intertwine, and rogue Highlanders are there to save the day! A world full of burning passion and sensational stories, that promise to sweep you away, to the land of pleasure...

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