



THE
SECRET
OF CLAN
DUNCRAIG
HIGHLAND LOVERS / A DUET

CECELIA
MECCA

THE SECRET OF CLAN
DUNCRAIG
HIGHLAND LOVERS
BOOK TWO

CECELIA MECCA

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OF CLAN
DUNCRAIG

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I

CHAPTER

The Red Stag Inn, Scottish Highlands, 13th Century

“Fergus, if you drop another mug of ale I’ll do more than box your ears, lad.”

Maisie used the voice her staff feared, not to scare the boy, but to avoid him being backhanded by one of the few men she actually was afraid of. If Fergus dropped even a bit of ale on Duncan MacBrannigan, the chieftain would likely give her poor new servant his first bruise. In turn, Maisie would be forced to expel the man from her inn, and though she’d done it twice before, she had no wish to do it again.

It was those two incidents that had made MacBrannigan her fiercest adversary.

“Aye, my lady,” Fergus said, carrying an ale in each hand toward the table in the window.

If it were any other man likely to cause trouble, she’d serve him herself. But if Maisie could avoid MacBrannigan, she’d do it. The man’s threat still lingered in her ears.

“When I return, and I *will* return, you will regret this decision,” he’d said.

Knowing she could not turn a man his size away on her own, Maisie had enlisted the aid of a trio of men likely to take her side, enemies to Clan MacBrannigan who would have relished any reason to challenge the fiefdom

chieftain. He was a man known for his cruelty and disregard for others, especially women. It was that last fact that raised Maisie's ire most.

"A new dress, is it?" a customer said to Maisie as she passed his table. The man lived only a short distance from the inn and certainly did not need to rent a room. But instead of frequenting his town's tavern, instead he came here more often than she'd like.

Each and every time, she turned down his advances.

A blacksmith by trade, he was skilled with a sword, and Maisie needed sword arms as much as she needed the Red Stag to continue to earn coin. He was also regarded by the other girls as handsome, though Maisie thought he was only passing fair. Either way, she had little interest in a dalliance or, worse, a marriage.

She'd done the latter once and would not recommend it to any woman.

"Aye," Maisie said reluctantly. "Another venison pie?" she asked, smoothing out her kirtle, one she already regretted. Normally she wore one as nondescript as possible, but she'd acquired the new fabric when a merchant had traded it for a room. Too beautiful to waste, the deep green in stark contrast to her light brown hair, the gown had immediately become her new favorite even as Maisie knew it would draw too much attention.

"If yer getting it for me."

Sighing, she moved away, slapping the man's hand as he reached for her hip. The sound resonated too far. Looking up, dismayed to see others looking at them, Maisie hurried away with MacBrannigan's eyes on her back. She'd seen him looking at them. He had likely been watching the entire time. Just waiting to take his revenge.

Walking straight to a table of the most unlikely defenders, a group of three English knights, Maisie did not hide her purpose.

"Sir Reynard?" she asked the same man who had pleaded for her hand in marriage many times. "Will you take up your sword if it becomes necessary?"

Sir Reynard's sister had married a highlander, and he'd come through here often in the last year since her husband died. Each time he said the same thing. "'Tis not safe for you, running this inn alone. Let me aid you, Lady Maisie."

She reminded him gently each time that she never planned to marry again. And still, he continued to press his suit, though in a very different way than most men. He did not leer but simply asked her each and every time, reminding her that while he frequented her inn, Sir Reynard's sword arm was hers. Thankfully, he traveled with two others today as MacBrannigan did the same.

"You need not ask, my lady."

"Many thanks," she said. "I shall fetch more ale for all three of you."

His kindly smile was most welcome, and left Maisie fearing the gesture was the best thing that would come out of this day. Two years as an innkeeper—one alongside her wretched husband, courtesy of Maisie's father, who had been all too eager to accept her late husband's coin—and she simply knew. Today would be one of *those* days. The kind where she questioned her judgment at running the Red Stag alone.

Of course I can. And have. Will continue to, as well.

But for now, Maisie simply had to get through the day unscathed.

2

CHAPTER

Kieran could not turn away.

Since the moment he'd walked into the inn, her presence had intrigued him. Though she had not once looked his way, Kieran preferring to sit unnoticed in a corner with patrons filling the hall between him and the woman, he had not taken his eyes from her.

He'd thought nothing could possibly bring his mind away from the events of the last two days, his entire life having been upended, but Kieran watched as she navigated what appeared to be an uncomfortable situation.

As if he needed a reason to challenge Duncan MacBrannigan.

"Who is she?" he asked the serving girl, who had been giving Kieran not-so-subtle hints of her interest in him since he'd arrived.

Frowning, the young woman all but crossed her arms at his question. So she was jealous, and with good reason. None could deny the other woman's appeal. The confident way she walked through the hall. The flip of her hair or sway of incredibly luscious hips.

"The innkeeper." Kieran's serving girl refilled his ale, the answer he sought coming reluctantly.

He would have asked the innkeeper's name, but the girl scurried away, seemingly annoyed by his disinterest.

Intriguing.

He'd met alewives before, but never a woman who ran an establishment such as this. And even more interesting was the way she kept returning her gaze to MacBrannigan. Clearly the innkeeper was leery of him, and with good reason. He was an enemy to Kieran's own clan.

Nay, not his clan.

Kieran had always thought he was the son of Duncraig's clan chief.

Adopted son. But still, a son.

No longer.

Shaking his head to clear away such thoughts, ones that made both fists clench in a display of anger befitting his brother, he refused to dwell on the fact that Niall was not, in fact, his brother.

Instead, he watched as Duncan tracked the innkeeper. He seemed decidedly annoyed, which made little sense. What could the beautiful innkeeper have possibly done to elicit such a response?

Kieran followed Duncan's gaze toward a group of English knights she spoke to. Ahh, so the men were her sword arms? But why? What was her relationship?

"Best stay away from it."

The serving girl was back with his meal.

"Tell me," he said in the tone his father—nay, the chief of Clan Duncraig—used often. One that got her to speak, and quickly, because something was indeed about to happen.

"The chieftain," the girl muttered. "He has twice been removed by my lady. He harbors a deep resentment for it and comes only to try her."

"Try her?" Kieran asked. Such could be taken many ways.

"Her patience. And whatever else he might take," the girl said, shrugging.

Kieran cared little for the girl's apathy as she spoke of her mistress's rape. Did the innkeeper know she kept such a disloyal servant?

"You care so little for your mistress?"

The girl seemed genuinely surprised. "Why do you say so?"

Kieran watched Duncan, who did not yet move. “You speak of an assault on her as if it means naught?”

The girl laughed. “He willnae assault my lady. Many have tried, none succeed.”

“How is that possible?”

The girl waved her arm toward the hall. “You are not from Elmswood then?”

“Indeed. I am not.”

“Nor have you traveled through here before?”

There was a good reason why he had not; this region was one Kieran had been to only once in his lifetime. That he knew of.

“Nay, I have not.”

“If you had,” the girl said as Kieran continued to watch Duncan, “you would know well my mistress’s reputation for venison pie and an intolerance of men who think to claim her, in any way.”

He was about to ask how a woman who would likely only reach his chin managed such a thing when Duncan MacBrannigan’s hand shot out to grab a serving girl, one even younger than the woman Kieran spoke to now. She’d managed to move out of his way, but he was not to be dissuaded. MacBrannigan reached again for the girl’s arm and pulled her onto his lap.

He’d come only for a room, a haven from the family he’d left behind. A place to stay as he considered what to do and where to go. Instead, it seemed, Kieran found an outlet for the anger that had been brewing for days. Part of him had wished for a fight.

Now, it seemed, he had found one.

3

CHAPTER

When she finished with MacBrannigan, she would murder Alice next. She'd been told to stay away from the man, but instead, the girl sashayed right past him. Not bothering to even elicit Sir Reynard's aid, Maisie practically ran to the table where her girl was currently being fondled, an act MacBrannigan certainly knew would bring Maisie running.

"Unhand her at once," she said.

The chieftain laughed. "And if I refuse?"

The hall had become quiet as everyone watched.

Maisie removed her trusted knife from her belt. "You will lose an eye before you or your men can stop me."

"Ahh, but we will stop you," he snarled. "And I willnae lose an eye."

Maisie had built a reputation since her husband's passing for two things: her cooking, and her ability and willingness to wield the weapon in her hand. Of course, these men could overpower her. The chieftain alone could overpower her. But if she did not protect those who worked for her, did not protect herself, she might as well close the doors to the inn and return home to the parents who put her in this situation.

"Unhand her and step outside, MacBrannigan."

Maisie spun on her heels. The voice did not sound like Sir Reynard's, who she'd assumed would come to her aid. Indeed, Sir Reynard was even

now making his way toward them. So who said that?

MacBrannigan looked confused as well.

Until the man stepped forward.

Maisie's arm dropped to her side as she watched him move toward MacBrannigan. Everything about him was dark. His hair, his eyes. She could see them clearly as the man moved past her. Locked onto hers, they offered both sympathy and something else. Admiration, perhaps? Maisie stared at him, unable to take her eyes from the man's face. It was perfectly formed, as was the rest of him, which she could discern easily enough even though he wore a belted plaid.

"Who are you?" she asked, unsurprised when he did not answer.

Instead, rather than waiting for MacBrannigan to respond, the newcomer grabbed Alice by the wrist so quickly that she stood and stumbled into him. Pushing her toward Maisie, he then towered over MacBrannigan, who had no room to stand.

But his clansmen did. They surrounded the man, though he seemed unconcerned.

"You would start a war," the man said calmly, "by attacking me when I've already challenged your chieftain?"

So he knew MacBrannigan, then?

"Move aside," MacBrannigan said roughly. The man did and both of them, to a roar of cheers, made their way toward the door.

Maisie glanced briefly at Sir Reynard, who appeared as surprised as she, and then hurried to follow. By the time she reached the sunlight, a cool, almost winter's breeze greeting her, there was a circle around the men. Did this stranger really mean to fight MacBrannigan on her behalf? It seemed so.

But why?

Swords drawn, the men circled each other. MacBrannigan raised his sword, a massive claymore, high above his head, ready to strike. The stranger, quick and nimble, moved swiftly, circling around his opponent,

assessing the best angle of attack. MacBrannigan lunged forward with a powerful overhead strike, aiming to bring his sword crashing down on the stranger, who expertly parried the blow with his own blade, redirecting the force to the side. He countered with a swift thrust aimed at MacBrannigan's chest, forcing him to step back and defend.

The clash of steel filled the air as the two warriors engaged in a flurry of strikes, blocks, and counters. The stranger's strength was evident as he delivered heavy blows, seeking to overpower his opponent. With each exchange, the crowd gasped and cheered, fully engrossed in the intense duel unfolding before them.

Suddenly, with a burst of energy, the stranger maneuvered behind MacBrannigan's back and delivered a decisive blow. MacBrannigan's sword fell from his grasp as he collapsed to his knees, signaling his defeat.

The crowd erupted into applause.

"I would aid you in standing," the stranger said. "But you do not deserve such respect."

The crowd began to disperse.

"Right bastard, like your father," MacBrannigan muttered.

Maisie watched as the stranger's jaw clenched. But he said nothing. MacBrannigan stood, he and his men glaring at the stranger. He then turned his gaze to her.

"They will not always be by your side." MacBrannigan nodded to the stranger and Sir Reynard, who stood next to him.

"You are wrong," she spat, grateful for the stranger's defense but angry at the truth of his words. "Most respect the Red Stag as a haven for weary travelers and would hasten to defend it from those who wish to see the peace here shattered. Go. And do not return."

MacBrannigan's laugh echoed behind him, the blatant disregard for her words evident. She began to follow him, to tell him her thoughts on his laughter, but a hand stayed her.

Maisie looked down at the hand. Large. Strong. Fingers wrapped gently around her forearm. When she glanced up, he was watching her.

“Let him go.”

His voice was so different than when he’d spoken to MacBrannigan. Still deep, but the hard edge was gone.

He was right, of course.

When his hand dropped, the loss of its heat immediate, Maisie had the odd notion of wanting him to grasp her arm again.

“Many thanks,” she said as most of the crowd left, with the exception of Sir Reynard and his companions.

She smiled at the English knight now, knowing he would have defended her. Sir Reynard bowed as the stranger watched their exchange. And then the Englishmen moved off, back into the inn.

“For coming to my aid,” she finished to the stranger.

“You’d do well to avoid such a man. He wreaks havoc everywhere he goes.”

“I wish that I could. He comes here for such a purpose.” Maisie swallowed, cold but not wanting to go inside if it meant an end to their conversation. He was such a pleasing man to look at, much more than most. Or any, truth be told.

“I am surprised,” he said. “MacBrannigan land is close enough to here that he should not need to frequent your inn.”

Your inn. “How did you know I was the innkeeper?”

“Because I asked one of the serving girls about you.”

“Did you?” Maisie’s heart raced. “What did you learn, precisely?”

“Naught but that you are the owner of the Red Stag. I know not even your name.”

“Maisie,” she said. “And yours?”

“Kieran of Clan Duncraig,” he said, his voice changing as he said “Clan Duncraig.”

“I’ve heard of your clan but know not from where you hail.”

“Northeast of here,” he said. “Two, mayhap three days ride.”

“You’ve not been to the Red Stag before?”

“Nay. I’ve not.”

“Welcome,” she said with a shiver. Perhaps it was time to move indoors.

“Can I offer you a meal and a room for your service to me?”

“I will accept both,” he said.

Yet Maisie did not move. Kieran of Clan Duncraig did not move either.

“You are cold.” Removing his cloak, he placed it around her arms. She accepted it, her hands grasping the top portion around her neck.

“First your sword arm. And then your cloak. What would you give me next?” she teased, realizing only after the words left her mouth that they very well could hold a double meaning.

“Likely whatever you asked for, my lady.” His answer was quickly offered.

Maisie did not flirt. She could not afford such a thing, in her position. Any indication of her interest in a man meant she could not expect protection from him, and it was all Maisie wanted of men since her husband’s passing.

Protection.

For herself. For her staff.

And yet, rather than move inside or ignore his statement, Maisie thought to respond. “I would know not what to ask for except your protection. ‘Tis all that matters to me,” she said, her honesty easily given. The man’s eyes, warm now, unlike when he had challenged MacBrannigan, made her wish to continue speaking with him.

“That I can offer as long as I am here. Would that I never see a woman mistreated the way Duncan MacBrannigan has done again, but sadly, I witness such a thing too often.”

“You would very much like Sir Reynard,” she said, the English knight having said much the same to her. It was when she realized she could trust

him, despite his gender.

“The English knight?”

Surprised he’d noticed him, Maisie nodded and said, “Aye.”

“He cares for you.”

That was the last thing Maisie would have expected him to say. “I . . .” She was prepared to deny it, but could not. “Aye,” she said instead. “I believe he does.”

“How do you come to own the Red Stag—” He stopped, as if wanting to say more.

“Alone?” She’d heard the question often enough. Expected it.

“Aye.”

“My husband passed last summer. ‘Twas his when we married.”

“I am sorry, my lady, to hear of it.”

“Do not be,” she said. “He was a terrible man.”

That surprised him. “If I may be so bold as to ask why you married a terrible man?”

Maisie would have put her hands on her hips if she could, but her frozen fingers still gripped the cloak at her neck. “Can you not think of one reason a woman of my status would do such a thing?”

Kieran cocked his head to the side, seemingly puzzled. “You do not seem the sort of woman to marry for coin.”

“Indeed? What sort of woman does such a thing? One in desperate need of it, perhaps?” she asked, answering her own question.

“I dinnae mean offense, my lady.”

“Then I will choose not to take offense.” Realizing she had assumed the worst of him, as Maisie often did with men since her husband, she softened her tone. “Another reason could be that said woman had no choice but to do so. The desire for coin was not my own.”

“Apologies, my lady. It seems I’ve defended your honor only to besmirch it myself. Truly, I meant no offense.”

She believed him.

“Shall I fetch you that meal?” Maisie asked, part of her wanting to step away. She liked little the feeling in her gut while in his presence. It was as if her chest no longer easily filled with air, but instead, she was forced to find it with each breath. Her tongue was too easily loosened by him; it would do well for them to part.

“Indeed,” he said, stepping aside to allow Maisie to pass. When she did, removing the cloak, she handed it up to him, not meaning to look so directly into his eyes. Surely the brush of his fingers on hers as he accepted his cloak was not accidental, a fact solidified as he allowed them to linger.

Aye, she was right to step away. It was the smart thing to do.

Then why, Maisie wondered as he opened the door for her a moment later, did she wish she'd not done so and instead was still in the courtyard with Kieran of Duncraig?

4

CHAPTER

“Might I join you?”

Kieran had watched the English knight approach. Having finished his meal but reluctant to find his room with Maisie still about the hall, Kieran responded to the Englishman.

“Please,” he said, indicating the seat across from him. It was a wee table that would fit no more than two.

“Sir Reynard de Wycliffe,” the knight said, extending his hand.

“Kieran of Clan Duncraig.” Kieran shook Sir Reynard’s hand, both men’s grips firm.

“That was quite a display of skill,” the Englishman said, sitting. He took a sip of the ale that he had brought with him.

“My father”—he nearly choked on the title—“taught me well.”

“As did mine, and yet yours, with the sword, was extraordinary.”

Kieran had been told that many times. “I trained hard. And often.”

He could have said, *I trained hard and often to prove my worth to my adopted family*. And would have said as much, as Kieran had never before been embarrassed to have been the foster son to the chief of Clan Duncraig.

Until now.

“Even so.” The Englishman sat back. “She is vulnerable,” he said, perhaps noticing Kieran’s gaze had wandered to the innkeeper. She spoke

with a serving girl, the one that MacBrannigan had pulled onto his lap.

“Indeed,” he agreed. “A woman, alone, running an establishment such as this. I’ve not heard of such a thing before.”

“Her husband became ill and passed last summer. Many have offered for her since, but she declines. I fear the man left her with an opinion of husbands that she may never be dissuaded from.”

“You’ve offered for her.”

It was a statement, not a question, but the Englishman answered anyway. “Many times.”

“I can easily ken why,” Kieran said. “She is quite capable. And beautiful.”

“Very much so. Maisie’s reputation precedes her. Protects her. But I fear one day she will be left without protection when a man such as MacBrannigan presses his suit without regard for her wishes.”

Kieran peeled his eyes away from her and settled on Sir Reynard. “How does an Englishman come to travel these parts so often to know the innkeeper as well as you do?”

“My sister is married to a MacKenzie. We are quite close. Twins, in fact.”

“MacKenzie. They are allies to my clan.”

“And an enemy to MacBrannigan. I’d gladly have challenged him today.”

“Most are enemies to Clan MacBrannigan. Their chief knows little how to retain allies.”

“It seems at least one of their chieftains follows suit.”

“More than one,” Kieran said.

Maisie looked their way, tucking a lock of hair behind her ear. Turning from them then, she hurried to the other side of the hall to speak with a group of men so fearsome looking that most ladies would have run in the opposite direction.

But not Maisie.

“She’s not looked at me that way,” the Englishman said, “in all the times

I've been here."

Kieran had no inclination to dally with the innkeeper, despite her beauty. He was here for one purpose only, and it did not include being distracted by a woman. Not even one as fair as she.

"It matters not," he said, grabbing his tankard of ale.

"Nay?"

"Nay."

"An expert swordsman. And honorable man. I am glad to know you, Kieran of Duncraig."

Kieran quite liked the knight, despite the fact that he was English. He had been prepared to defend Maisie even though she'd rebuffed him, more than once it seemed. "And I you, Sir Reynard."

"Reynard," he said, giving Kieran leave to use his given name, sans titles.

"And I, simply Kieran."

Reynard nodded in acknowledgment of the exchange. "How long do you lodge here?"

"It depends," Kieran said. "I've business with Clan MacKinlay."

"Less than a half day's ride from here."

"Aye."

Thankfully, the knight did not ask what sort of business, as he would be reluctant to speak of it with a stranger. Even one who seemed, on the surface, an honorable man.

"Tales of the recent cattle incident and a renewed war between MacKinlay and Duncraig have reached MacKenzie. I've come from there on my way back south."

That did not surprise him. "What sort of tales?" Kieran asked, wondering how much truth, or otherwise, had traveled among these parts.

"That MacKinlay cattle was found grazing on Duncraig land. Even an Englishman like me knows of the Battle of Black Friars."

At the mention of it, Kieran's fists clenched. For one not easily incited to

anger, it seemed he'd formed an exception these past days. To think, all these years, he'd misjudged the enemy in that battle.

"That was many years ago," he managed.

"It was," Reynard agreed. "And when Duncraig's warriors killed all thirty of MacKinlay's men, at the behest of the king who wished to end their feud, the battle served its purpose."

And when Duncraig's warriors killed all thirty of MacKinlay's men.

"Until?" he prompted, not wanting to extend the silence to give life to his thoughts.

"Until MacKinlay cattle were found grazing on Duncraig land. 'Tis said the chief's son stormed MacKinlay's keep demanding answers to avoid renewing the feud."

He sighed. 'Twould be difficult to avoid revealing himself now. "Sons," he said. Although the word was a lie, Kieran had not known it. "Duncraig's sons, though they dinnae storm the keep. They simply gained entry and inquired as to the roving cattle."

"You recall it with the authority of a man present at such a meeting."

Kieran stole a glance at Maisie. She'd moved on from the men, a good thing, and was now speaking to an older woman, one of very few in the hall.

"I am the son of the chief of Duncraig." Except, he wasn't. Kieran had only thought as much for his entire adult life, since he was nine, in fact. But that he kept to himself. "The second son," he said, giving his brother his due even if Niall did not deserve it. And that, of all the revelations he'd learned these past days, was the most difficult to ken.

Reynard sat back, smiling. "Ahh, so your training. The swordsmanship. You are the son of a clan chief with much to prove."

"Of sorts," he said. The Englishman clearly did not realize how accurate his words truly were. Again, he glanced at Maisie. She seemed to sense his gaze and looked back at him just then. Reluctant to turn away, he did not. Reynard noticed.

“It seems her admiration is matched.” Reynard tossed up his hands. “Defeated by a chief’s son. I will no longer press my suit in regards to the fair Maisie.”

Kieran turned from her, smiling. “Do not give up on my account. As I said, I’ve much to accomplish and courting a woman is not in my near future.”

“Not even one as comely—and capable, as you say—as she?”

“Nay,” Kieran insisted. But he did raise his tankard into their air. “Though I will toast to a new friend, even one as English as you.”

Reynard laughed good-naturedly. “As often as I travel this far north, I’d not turn away an ally such as you. Am glad for it, in fact.”

“As am I,” Kieran said truthfully. He would need all the allies he could gather, not knowing which were truly his friends or foes for the first time in his life.

5

CHAPTER

The hall was nearly empty.

But for two of her regular customers, and him, all had either left or gone to bed. The kitchens were cleaned, her staff also abed. And with all completed for the eve, there was no way to avoid him.

Instinctively, Maisie knew she *should* avoid him. Whether it was simply his visage, or the way he carried himself, or his defense of her, she did not know. But one thing was clear to her.

This man was dangerous, in a very different way than MacBrannigan.

He was the kind of man to make Maisie question the vow she made to herself the day she buried her husband. That she would never, ever allow herself to be controlled by another man again. First, her father. Then, her husband.

Never.

Again.

“More ale?” she asked, approaching him for the first time since they’d come back inside.

“Nay,” he said. Indeed, Kieran of Duncraig’s tankard was empty.

“You’ve the key to your room, do you not?”

“I do.”

She let the next question linger, unasked.

“I will retire when you do, my lady.”

“I am no lady,” she said. “But to my staff.”

“You may not be nobly born, but you are indeed a lady.” He smiled cheekily. “My lady.”

Maisie could not help but return the smile. “Tell me, why do you wait for me to retire?”

Again, she had not meant for a double meaning, but that too hung between them.

“Two men remain in your hall. I would ensure your safety before I can seek my bed.”

Of all the answers he could have given, that was the least expected. “Last eve, you were not here to see to my safety. Nor will you be on the morrow.”

“But I am here now.”

The fluttering inside her stomach at his words was as unexpected as his answer. “They leave,” she said as the two remaining patrons stood to leave. As there was no tavern in the village, the men oft came here when the alewife closed for the eve. As such, neither required rooms. And both were harmless.

“Then I shall see to my room,” he said standing.

If he left before dawn, she’d not see him again. Perhaps that was the reason she found herself reluctant to leave his presence. So instead of showing him abovestairs, she took the pitcher in her hand and poured him more ale.

“Or share an ale with me?” she asked, fetching a mug of her own without waiting for his answer. By the time she returned, he’d sat back down. Filling her own mug, Maisie took a deep sip.

“You began work before dawn?” he asked.

“Aye.”

“And are the last abed each eve?”

“Aye,” she said again. “Such is the life of an innkeeper.”

“Tell me how you came to it.”

He was so very handsome. Maisie blinked and attempted to form a thought. It was his jaw. Nay, his eyes. Nay, It was the way he looked at her. Though mayhap not, as many men had come through the Red Stag with appreciation in their gaze, but never had she forgotten a question as she'd done just then.

“How I came to it,” she remembered suddenly. “My husband frequented my father’s woodmaker’s shop in Ainsley Moor. He saw me and immediately offered for my hand in marriage. Knowing already the man was quite wealthy, this inn having flourished for many years, my father agreed. Not knowing the man’s character. Not caring he was nearly the same age as my father and widowed twice already. Sadly, my mother did not come to my defense even as I begged not to marry such a man. And thus, I became the third wife of Baldwin of Blackwood. We were married less than a year when he took ill and died. Never will I be let into the gates of heaven for being glad of it.”

“Did he hurt you?”

It should be odd, that she'd shared so much with him. And that he would ask so personal a question. But it was not.

“In some ways, aye. But he dinnae strike me, if you are asking that question.”

She thought of the times he had coupled with her. Aye, he hurt her. But not in the way Kieran asked about.

“I am sorry,” he said. “No young woman should be subjected to such a man.”

“And yet they are. Every day.”

He did not disagree. “There was a girl in my village, not even ten and six, who was betrothed to a man more than twice her age. One who was known to have struck women in the past. My father attempted to intervene, but the girl insisted she wanted the marriage.”

Maisie made a sound of disagreement, even though she did not know the

girl.

“Aye, it was as you are thinking. She’d been told to accept the marriage, and ‘twas her father’s decision. Not hers.”

“What happened?” Maisie asked, taking another sip of ale.

“My father discovered he had been lied to. On the day of the wedding, he demanded to speak to the bride’s father. Demanded he halt the union.”

Maisie’s eyes widened. A father could do with his daughter as he wished. It was extraordinary that the chief should involve himself in such affairs.

“Why did he do such a thing?”

“Because my father—” He stopped suddenly. Something was amiss.

“Your father?” she prompted.

The easy smile her companion had worn since she approached him faded now. He was silent for a moment, looking down into his ale. When he did look back up to her, his expression was one of sorrow. “My father is not like other men. He stopped the wedding because it was right, and just, to do so.”

“Why does it seem as if it pains you to say so? Surely that is an admirable trait in your father.”

“Aye,” he said with a deep breath. As quickly as the melancholy mood had come over him, it seemed to pass. Kieran smiled again, but this time his eyes did not crinkle at the sides. “I tell you this story to let you know, were I able to do as my father had done, and stop your wedding, I’d have done so gladly. ‘Tis true women often have no say in the course of their lives, but that does not mean all men agree with such a sentiment.”

It was perhaps the most extraordinary thing anyone had ever said to her. “You are different from most men,” Maisie said, before thinking her words through.

“Hmmm,” he murmured, taking a deep sip. “Perhaps not all. My brother—” Again he stopped. “Sir Reynard would have done the same.”

“Indeed,” she agreed. “There are, it seems, some honorable men in this world.”

“And women too,” he said.

Maisie laughed. “And women too. I hope I am one of them.”

“Hope? You control your own character, do you not?”

“Aye. But I’ve not had the opportunity to prove it. I’ll never be asked to go to battle or give my life for my clan, or defend an innkeeper, to prove as much.”

Kieran leaned forward, as if he were to tell her a secret. “You do not have to risk your life to prove you are honorable, Maisie.”

It was the first time he said her name. She rather liked it.

“Nay?”

“Nay,” he said. “Honor is simply doing what is right, even when ‘tis difficult.”

She thought about that for a moment. “Something easily said but not always easily done.”

“Well spoken, my lady.” He lifted his mug. “To honor.”

“To honor,” she said, lifting her own. “And to new friends.”

“A worthy toast.”

She quite agreed.

6

CHAPTER

He didn't expect to see her in the hall so early.

After finding his bed last eve, Kieran had used the fresh water and cloth left for him and promptly fell asleep after a long day. He woke up thinking of her, as he'd been dreaming of pulling Maisie onto his lap, his hand moving slowly up her thigh as he kissed first her neck and then her lips. In his dream she was soft, welcoming. His hand inched higher and higher toward his ultimate goal . . .

Dammit.

It was nothing more than a dream. One he'd do well to forget. Trouble was, even after dressing and remembering why he woke in a wee bed at the Red Stag Inn and not his own back home, Kieran still had difficulty putting her from his mind. Which was the exact reason he should not walk up to her and say the one thing likely to deepen a relationship that could prove problematic.

Kieran was no fool.

He'd been with women. Knew his mind. And also knew . . . there was something special about this one. Maisie made him feel things he had no inclination to feel given the events of these past days. Given the position, or lack of one, he found himself in.

“Good morn to you, my lady.”

Or perhaps he was a fool after all.

There were just three others in the hall—one patron, Maisie, and the girl who'd served him the day before.

Maisie spun around to face him. "Good morn . . ." She paused.

"Kieran," he offered.

"Aye, I know your name."

She wore a simple kirtle this morn, but even so could not possibly appear any lovelier.

"It occurs to me I know not your station nor title within your clan."

As the serving girl listened to him, Kieran moved aside, not wishing to be overheard, and, thankfully, Maisie followed.

"I am the second son of the chief," he said. "And simply Kieran, if it pleases you."

"It pleases me," she said.

"It pleases me to see you again this morn." Quickly, as he likely should not have said that, Kieran added, "I trust you slept well, if not long. The sun has not yet risen."

"As we spoke of last eve, the life of an innkeeper is not an idle one."

"I can see that clearly."

"Would you care to break your fast before you leave?" she asked. He'd have thought the lady attempting to end their conversation if not for the subtle movements of her body. Tucking her hair behind her ear. Shifting from one foot to the other. Barely discernible movements, but ones Kieran noticed easily.

'Tis what your opponents do, and not what they say, that matters.

His father. Or rather, the chief of Duncraig. Wise words, he'd often thought. Not that Maisie was his opponent. Or not precisely his opponent . . .

This was madness.

And yet, not.

Surely he could find an inn closer to his intended destination. But Kieran

fully expected he'd not find the answers he sought too quickly. Though it could take days, likely 'twould be much longer. The ride was not so long to Aberdale that he could not stay here.

"Aye," he said, decided. "Though I will keep my key if the room is available still?"

He watched her eyes widen. Watched her lips part, ever so slightly. What a beautiful, enticing woman.

"You will stay another night?"

Did her tone sound hopeful? Kieran should not wish it so. "More, if you'll have me."

Her brows drew together as the hall began to slowly fill around them. Kieran nodded to an even more private corner of the well-kept hall, and Maisie followed.

"I've business in Aberdale that may take some days."

"Surely there is an inn there at which you might stay. Not," she added quickly, "that I do not have room at the Red Stag. But why ride from here if you need not do so?"

Why indeed?

"I enjoyed . . . staying here." Kieran left it at that.

"Business," she mused. "On MacKinlay land. An enemy to Duncraig, are they not?"

"You are well-informed, my lady."

"I've lived in this region my whole life. There are none who haven't heard of the Battle of Black Friars. I am sorry to have mentioned it," she said immediately.

If his expression had changed, it was only because of the information he'd learned recently. To think, all his life, he thought MacKinlay was the enemy, only to learn the true enemy was the very family that took him in.

"It was many years ago," he said, attempting to dismiss it. "But aye, the two clans are enemies. There has been some recent trouble that I plan to

investigate.”

He planned to use the cattle incident as a reason for his presence on MacKinlay land.

“Trouble?”

“Aye. MacKinlay cattle were found grazing on Duncraig land. We attempted to discover the source, as the cattle could not have found their way so far from home without being led there—”

“Across Tannochbrae land, aye?”

“Aye,” he agreed. “We spoke with many and determined a man did, indeed, lead the cattle across Tannochbrae land to Duncraig’s border.”

“And left the cattle there?”

“Aye.”

“Someone wished to incite a renewed feud between the clans?”

“Aye,” he agreed. “Though we were unable to discern who. Or why.”

“So that is what you plan to learn.”

Among other things. “I do. My brother”—he used the term loosely—“and I met already with the MacKinlay clan chief. We found nothing, but I will take up the cause once again.”

“Alice,” Maisie called to one of the serving girls. “Will you see to them please,” she asked, indicating two newcomers. Older gentlemen, thankfully. Though it was early for any traveler not staying at the inn, and clearly these two were not, since they entered through the front door.

She does not need your protection. Maisie has been running this inn successfully without you. And yet

“I will leave you to your morning duties,” he said. “I ride to Aberdale.”

“Without breaking your fast?”

He’d planned to do so, but being with Maisie affected him more than it should. He wanted to remain. To learn what the two gentlemen were about. To ensure MacBrannigan did not return. But It was not his place.

“I will take a bit of bread with me,” he said. “If you have it.”

Maisie smiled. “Freshly baked. I’ve the finest baker in all of Scotland,” she said.

“Indeed?” He returned her smile. “Here at the Red Stag?”

“Do not mock me, sir. Taste it first.”

“I will happily do so.”

Thankfully, she did not pick up the double meaning.

With that, Maisie turned from him. Caught by the serving girl, Alice, watching Maisie retreat toward the kitchens, he looked away. Or attempted to, at least, but was distracted by the sway of her hips and a backside that was only hinted at through the kirtle.

Nay, It was not a good idea to return here this eve, but he would do so anyway.

7

CHAPTER

“I can finish here, my lady,” Cook said.

Maisie’s pigeon pies were one of the reasons the Red Stag Inn had thrived these past months despite her missteps.

“You are certain?” she asked the woman, who’d been cooking at the inn for many years and had finally convinced her to give over the duty of making these particular pies.

“Aye, I am,” she said, shooing away one of the kitchen girls who had come too close to her. Cook was excellent at her job, but very particular about her space.

“Very well,” Maisie said, wiping her hands on the apron before pulling it off. “I would ensure the rooms are clean for this eve anyway.”

Unfortunately, the morning had been taken by an unexpected problem in the stables. The door had come off its hinges somehow and Maisie had been forced to travel into the village to see the blacksmith herself. She really needed a new runner; the boy who been working for her since last summer had decided he no longer cared for the duty.

When she was his age, Maisie had not been able to choose her duties. The boy’s parents, certainly more indulgent than her own, had agreed to allow him to quit the inn and she’d not yet found a replacement.

“Pardon, my lady,” Alice stopped her. The girl had lost both parents to a

fire that had spread through the village, taking more lives than any cared to recall. It had been before Maisie came to the inn, but the “great fire” was a tragedy she’d heard of often. Living with her aunt, and now at the inn, the girl did not listen easily but Maisie still felt an affinity toward her, knowing of her turbulent past. Not yet ten and six, nearly ten summers younger than she, Alice was like a little sister to Maisie. Her own sister was long married, so Maisie had never quite known what a close sibling bond was like.

As her parents told Maisie often, she was not supposed to have been born. Both her brother and sister were married before she reached ten years, and they were as much strangers to her as the man who had stunned her this morn with his revelation.

He was staying.

Throughout the day, whenever Maisie thought of it, she was forced to attempt to slow her overly rapid beating heart at his proclamation. He was staying, though she knew not for how long.

“Is all well, Alice?”

The girl appeared concerned. “Of sorts. You asked that I speak with Harold about his debt.”

Ahh, Harold.

“And?”

“I did, my lady. He claims not to owe the inn any debt.”

“Of course he does.” She sighed. “I will speak to him. Is there aught else?”

“The new serving girl is still abed. She claims to be ill, but ‘tis the second illness”—Alice said the word as if she did not believe it—“in as many weeks. I believe she avoids the hall as night approaches.”

What an odd thing to say. “Night? I do not ken.”

Alice sighed. “As the men begin to . . .” Her eyes raised to the ceiling, as if Alice struggled to find the word.

But there was no need.

“I will speak to her as well.” And then, so that Alice did not judge the girl too harshly, “If you will remember when you began, how difficult it was with some of the men.”

“Was.” Alice laughed. “Is. There are some I still cannae control.”

“Ahh,” she said. “And therein is the problem. To think you can control a man deep in his cups. ‘Tis not possible, Alice. We can simply use the tools at our disposal to avoid them. And one of those is to listen when your mistress tells you not to walk past MacBrannigan.”

“I am sorry for that, my lady. I forgot he sat there for a moment, and hurried to refill a pitcher of ale at the table next to them.”

“Aye, but there are some men you must be more vigilant with than others. And he is one of them.”

Alice smiled. “But the one who defended you. What a man, indeed.”

The maid was not too young to appreciate Kieran’s fine qualities. And though Maisie silently agreed, she did not dare speak it aloud. “I was fortunate he came to my aid. I do fear we’ve not seen the last of MacBrannigan, though.” Then, realizing what she said, Maisie quickly covered her words. “But ’tis not for you to fret over. Simply avoid the man if he comes to the Red Stag again.”

“Aye, my lady.”

“Is there anything else to report?” she asked.

“Nay, my lady.” With a bob of her head, Alice scurried away.

Maisie went about finishing her duties. She spoke to Harold and the new serving girl. She ensured all was prepared for the evening, in the kitchen and the hall, and then stepped outside for a moment. Taking a deep breath, she closed her eyes and tilted her face upwards. The sun had set, the chill in the air remaining. Maisie should have grabbed a cloak first before heading out of doors.

“You shiver.”

Her eyes popped open, as the deep voice, so close to her, was already a

familiar one. Kieran had returned.

As he'd done the day before, he removed his cloak and wrapped it around her shoulders.

"I had not planned to remain out of doors long," she said, accepting his offer. "'Twas a busy day, and I simply wished for a bit of respite."

"Then a respite you shall have. Will you walk with me?"

She peered up at him. The man nearly always smiled, and it was difficult not to return it. Maisie shivered again, but this time it had naught to do with the cold.

"I should return to the hall, but . . ."

"You will, soon enough." He began to walk the path that led to their stables. She followed.

"Was your trip to Aberdale a successful one?"

As they circumnavigated the stables, she and Kieran continued on a path that eventually led to the village, though they would not walk so far as that.

"It was not as successful as I'd hoped. I spoke to many but learned little."

"You said before that the wayward cattle had been investigated before? Do you truly believe to learn more than you have already?"

Kieran slowed to a stop. Looked down at her with such intensity, Maisie considered looking away. But she did not. Instead, she held his gaze, something passing between them that was unexplainable.

He wanted to tell her something.

"I would not break your trust," she found herself saying.

"I do not believe you would, though there is little cause for such a thought. I know you not at all—"

"You know some."

"But not enough to share my true purpose today. And yet, I will do so anyway."

Of course she wished to know what he would tell her, but Maisie was also curious why he'd do such a thing. And so, she asked.

“Why?”

“I do not know. Perhaps because you have agreed to lodge me for the duration of my stay. Perhaps because . . . I wish to tell someone.”

“Tell me,” she said, so softly Maisie was not certain if he’d even heard her.

The woods behind the Red Stag Inn stables were so quiet, Maisie could hear her own heartbeat as she waited for him to continue.

“My oldest memory as a child is as the son of the chief of Duncraig. When I’d just seen ten and two summers, my mother told me what others knew already. I was not their natural-born son but adopted as such three years prior.”

“How could you not have known this already?”

“As the story goes, I was found on a riverbank, near death, and taken in by the chief’s wife. When I finally did awake, I knew not my name nor from where I hailed. I was told, by my mother, that she and my father had sought my identity far and wide, to no avail.”

“You say, ‘I was told,’ as if you do not believe it?”

It was odd to see such a man as Kieran, fearless and brave, obviously very strong, with an expression almost soft.

“Because I no longer do. My brother, when we traveled to Castle MacKinlay to inquire about the cattle, fell in love with the chief’s sister. Married her.”

“Your brother married a MacKinlay? I’d not heard that before,” she said, shocked.

“It was only a fortnight or more since it occurred. Our father was incensed, refusing to accept her into our family. There was a time, as he would take her to wife anyway, my brother Niall believed he might no longer be the clan’s second and spoke of Father naming me as such. Though our father—or Niall’s father, rather—eventually did welcome Lady Avelina into the family, my brother continued to tout my merits as second. Apparently,

our mother—his mother—paid Niall a visit to tell him why he should cease such talk. That I could never be the Duncraig’s second.”

Even knowing something big, something disturbing, was coming, Maisie was unsure if she was properly prepared.

“Why,” she asked hesitantly, “can you never be the Duncraig’s second?”

Kieran’s jaw clenched. Yet she did not press him. Instead, Maisie waited.

“Because,” he said finally, “apparently my parents knew more of my origins than they’d told me. It seems . . . I am a MacKinlay.”

That, she was not prepared for.

Maisie’s mouth opened. She stared at him, waiting for any indication he might be jesting. But of course, he was not.

“A . . . MacKinlay? Your brother told you this?”

If possible, Kieran’s expression darkened even more. “Nay, he dinnae. I discovered it only by inadvertently overhearing a conversation between Niall and his wife.”

“He dinnae tell you?”

“Nay.”

“And yet, you are close with your brother.”

“Was close. Aye. Niall is . . . was . . . my world. Him. My parents. My clan.” Kieran shrugged but was not successful in making Maisie believe he did not care. It was the opposite, in fact.

He cared very, very much.

“Perhaps he planned to?” she offered.

“Or perhaps not. I left without speaking to him, or to anyone.”

“You . . . left?”

“I did.”

“Where did you go?”

He gestured to her inn up the hill. “To the Red Stag.”

Oh dear. “This occurred just before you came here?”

“Aye.”

She wanted to hug him. To comfort him, somehow. And yet, she sensed he'd not told her for that reason. Kieran did not seem like a man to need comforting, but did not everyone? Still, she held back, as embracing him felt both too forward for their relationship and not advisable, given she had vowed never to be with a man again.

He began to walk.

"Why do you tell me this?" she asked.

He sighed. "I will inquire about the cattle while I am there, but would not continue to lie to you about my true purpose for being here."

"You plan to learn more of your identity?"

"I do. Shall we turn around here?"

"Are you cold?" she teased him. "Without a cloak?"

Kieran's smile was as genuine as they came. "Not so cold that I cannae continue to walk if my lady wills it. But I know you've many duties back at the inn."

"Let us walk some more," Maisie said. "I've duties, aye, but none so pressing that I cannae allow myself a brief respite."

"You've few of them, I assume?"

"Very few. My husband was not a good man, or a kind man, but he was capable. Had run the Red Stag from a young age, alongside his own father. I am fortunate to have learned enough that when he died, I knew most tasks. I care least for the accounting but would not spend money to hire someone when the hall needs new furnishings desperately."

"Would you tell me of him? Of your marriage?"

Usually, she would decline to do so. Maisie did not speak of him. Not to the girls who worked for her, and they'd asked often, especially the newer ones who did not know him. Not to her parents, who she'd seen but once since the wedding.

Not even to herself, in her own mind. It was easier to forget.

And yet, Kieran had told her something of himself no others knew. So she

made an exception.

“I was furious when my father betrothed me to him. None could look at Baldwin and believe him to be suitable for me. Twice my age, he took better care of the inn than himself. Worse, he was not a nice man. Cared for coin, and naught else.”

“Had he married before you?”

“Aye. He was widowed twice, and Baldwin was desperate for a son. I should amend, he cared for coin, but also his legacy. Shall we turn here?”

Kieran did not answer but he did make the turn with her. His look was a questioning one, and so she told him the truth.

“I will say simply,” she said, “his will and ability to beget a son dinnae align well.” She added, “Thankfully.”

Kieran stopped. Maisie followed.

“I am sorry for it,” he said, his expression sincere.

“I am not,” Maisie said bluntly.

Kieran smiled. “You would be, if you knew a man properly.”

His meaning was clear.

No. No. No. Do not gaze at me that way.

Her mind and body did not seem to be of the same accord. Maisie wanted to end the conversation. To continue walking. To do anything but what her traitor feet did next.

They stepped toward him. A wee step. But a step, nonetheless.

And he noticed.

8

CHAPTER

He'd not lured the woman out here to ravage her.

In fact, anything but. He wished to be honest with Maisie about the reason for his stay at her inn. And there was a part of him that wished to share his story as well, if he were being honest. And yet, thinking of her marrying a man such as her husband, Maisie clearly having been turned away from being with a man because of it . . .

He wanted to show her it need not be that way.

“Have you been with another man besides your husband?” A cheeky question, to be certain. But with that one step toward him, Maisie had confirmed her attraction to him. One he'd matched with his own since the moment they had met.

“Nay,” she said, her chin rising.

“Surely you've been kissed before him though, aye?”

She shook her head.

“No stolen kisses at all? A stable boy? None bold enough to express his interest in you? Surely this cannae be so. You are a very beautiful woman, Maisie. As I'm certain you've been told many, many times.”

She hardly moved at all now, but Maisie did continue to look up at him without breaking her gaze. “My father was very careful not to leave me alone with any boy. Or man. He worried, because of my visage . . .” She trailed off.

“He worried for good reason, I am certain.”

No man had kissed her. None besides a horrid husband, at least.

Kieran stirred at the thought of it. At being the first to give a woman such as Maisie her first real kiss. But the very desirable thought had little to do with whether or not it was a good idea. In fact, there was little to recommend the thought besides the pleasure he, or both of them, would get from it.

If he kissed her, he'd wish to do it again. Of that, Kieran was certain. And kissing Maisie each time he came back to the Red Stag would lead down a path neither of them wished for.

“I have been told that many times,” she said, addressing his earlier thought. “But this is the first time the words have affected me in such a way.”

Dammit.

He'd been just about to begin walking. Had been about to congratulate himself on mustering the discipline to walk away. Until she said that.

“In what way?” he found himself asking, already knowing the answer.

“In such a way,” she said, “that makes me forget my vow.”

Though he suspected it already, Kieran asked, “What vow?”

Her answer was immediate. “To never be with another man again. To never give myself over to someone who might control me the way my husband did.”

Dammit, again.

His desire to show Maisie not all men were like her husband was too strong to ignore. Surely one quick kiss would not bring either of them too far down a path they did not desire to travel.

He took a step toward her.

Maisie held steady.

“I say the words because they are true.”

Maisie tilted her head up even farther. Her eyes told him all that Kieran needed to know. She wanted this. Perhaps as badly as he.

Another step.

“I’m going to kiss you, Maisie.”

She blinked. “I know.”

With one final step, he reached out with his thumb and forefinger and lifted her chin. She was so close, their chests touched. Kieran stared at her lips. So lush and full. Lips he’d wanted to taste from the first moment he saw them.

Saw her.

He would be gentle. Much more so than his body demanded. As his head lowered, so much of him wanted to descend on her. Capture her mouth. Devour her.

Make love to her.

Of course, he would not do that. She was as much a virgin as a woman who’d not yet known a man. Being with one such as her husband was worse than the unknown.

Kieran could feel her breath, their mouths were so close now. He pulled her by the chin toward his lips, and their first touch was better than he could have imagined.

So soft.

He pressed, wanting to run his tongue along the crease of her lips to open them wide, but also, not wanting to startle her. So instead, he simply touched his lips to hers, moaning when she made a soft sound of pleasure deep in her throat.

Kieran’s good intentions fled when Maisie’s arms wrapped around him, pulling their bodies together. He did allow his tongue to wander then, and though Maisie seemed unsure how to react at first, she opened for him.

And Kieran did not hesitate from there. His mouth widened, head slanted, and his tongue sought entry, attempting to show her what he wanted. When Maisie finally did ken, the first touch of her own tongue hesitant, she knew not what to do, confirming her earlier words.

She may have had a husband, but this was, in many ways, the woman’s

first kiss.

Kieran meant to take it slow, but as their tongues touched, he wanted more. Needed more.

Took more.

Swirling tongues, their mouths now well-matched, in very little time Maisie fully learned. Kieran's hands dropped from her chin as he pulled her by the shoulders even closer. Their bodies pressed tightly together, the kiss continued.

He took, and received. Maisie did the same.

Another of those sounds, and Kieran was undone. Soon he'd be stripping the woman bare in an effort to see more. Feel more. The desire to be inside her grew too strong.

He pulled away. Though not completely, as the pair remained in each other's arms.

"That was a proper kiss," Maisie said, her lips wet and swollen.

He smiled at the sight. "Did you enjoy it?"

"Very much. Though I am uncertain if 'tis kissing I like or . . . kissing you."

Honesty would not keep the distance between them that Kieran knew instinctively was necessary, but he gave it to her anyway.

"It was an extraordinary kiss," he admitted. "You are an extraordinary woman." He could feel her shiver between them. "You're cold. Let us return to the inn."

Reluctantly, he let her go.

"I do not believe the cold is what made me shiver," she admitted as they began to walk.

"Nay?" he teased. "What do you believe caused it then?"

"Sir," she teased back. "You would force me to say such a thing aloud?"

"I would," he said, laughing.

"Hmm. Well, I willnae."

“Nay?”

“Nay.”

“Ahh, then I shall say it for you. ‘Tis desire, Maisie.”

“Desire,” she murmured. “There was a boy, a farmer’s son, I thought was most handsome. Fancied myself in love with him.”

Kieran attempted to concentrate on her words, but each time he glanced at the woman walking beside him, he thought of the kiss they’d just shared. How responsive she’d been. How much he enjoyed kissing her.

Desire. Aye, powerful indeed. Too much so.

“How many summers had you seen?”

“Nearly twenty. There had been boys, of course, who had proclaimed their love to me.”

He laughed. “Of course. I would imagine many had done so.”

“But this particular boy . . .” She sighed. “It matters not. My father would not have me take a farmer’s son as a husband. He said, ‘Your beauty will bring this family coin yet.’ And it did.”

Kieran hoped he never met Maisie’s father.

For his sake.

“I thought him handsome. But I cannae say I ever felt . . . *that* before.”

“Perhaps if you’d kissed him?” Kieran ventured, none too pleased to imagine Maisie kissing another man.

“Perhaps.” She looked up at him. “And perhaps not.”

They slowed their pace. “Maisie,” he said, needing to be sure she understood. “I would very much like to kiss you again. Right this moment, in fact. But . . .” He paused.

“But you will be gone from the Red Stag soon enough,” she finished.

“Aye.”

“And have much else to consider besides an entanglement with an innkeeper.”

Even though her words were true, hearing her say so did not please him.

He was about to tell her so when she finished.

“And I have a vow to keep.”

Her vow.

“Our kiss dinnae dissuade you from it?”

Her bitter laugh, so at odds with the woman he had begun to know, unsettled him.

“I will never take another husband,” she said emphatically. “Never.”

Kieran would point out marriage vows were not needed to share a kiss, but he chose to remain silent. He’d been with widows before, but Kieran had never bedded a virgin nor ever intended to, besides his future wife. But Maisie was different.

Very different.

She was not the sort of woman to bed and leave.

“No more kisses,” he said, knowing it was a good plan.

“No more kisses,” she agreed as the inn came into view. With a final glance up at him through her thick lashes, Maisie smiled one final time. But this was a different sort of smile. A sad one, as if knowing was almost worse than not knowing.

It mattered little.

What was done, was done. And he’d not will it back even if he could. Even if knowing Maisie’s lips beneath his own were not going to make his stay at the Red Stag any easier.

In fact, quite the opposite.

9

CHAPTER

For three days, his routine was the same.

Up and out of the inn before dawn, returning at sundown and remaining in the hall until the last patron was gone. As promised, there were no more kisses. In fact, Maisie had not spoken to Kieran except for a “Good Morn” or “Good Den” and a few other words. She asked if he’d made any progress, and Kieran said he had not. Otherwise, she treated him as any other patron.

Except, he was not any other patron.

He watched her. Protected her. When one regular became unruly two nights before, it was Kieran who stepped in to calm the man. The girls began to notice his presence, calling him “scíath,” and each of them had, at one time or another, commented on his pleasing looks and protective ways.

Aye, he was handsome. Very much so. Their kiss had kept her awake each eve much past the time when she should have closed her eyes. Maisie knew well the consequences of lack of sleep. Those evenings when circumstances prevented it, she had difficulty the next day. And yet, when she tried to close her eyes, to let sleep find her, it was his face she could see. His lips she could almost feel.

Being in his arms had felt good.

Safe.

Tonight, something was different. He came into the hall, and instead of

immediately taking the same seat in the corner of the room, he spoke with one of her girls and disappeared. Curious, she approached Margaret, the miller's daughter who had come to them just before Baldwin took ill. A meek girl of ten and five, she was one of the best workers at the inn. When Maisie had told her parents so, they'd been so pleased that the compliment had nearly gone awry. Perhaps, her father had said, she should return to the village to work for him.

Maisie had been forced to increase the amount of coin she paid the girl, though she did not mind as Margaret worked harder than most.

"The Scíath," she asked. "You spoke to him."

"Aye, my lady. He asked for a bath to be brought to him. I've told Alan and James."

"James is there," she said, spying the boy heading into the kitchens with buckets in his hand. It did seem that he, indeed, was bringing hot water to Kieran. "Thank you, Margaret."

As the hall blessedly filled, Maisie grateful for it since an empty hall meant empty coffers, she attempted to push thoughts of a nude Kieran in his tub from her mind. Unsuccessful, Maisie busied herself with preparations for the evening meal, alternating her time between the hall and the kitchen.

And then, she saw him.

His hair still damp, he looked as she might expect of a man freshly cleaned, his clothing new as well. She would offer to launder the others.

"I will take it to him," Maisie said of the ale Alice held in her hand, her destination clear.

"Aye, my lady."

As she thought when he entered the hall, something was different this eve. He seemed ill at ease. Placing the ale in front of him, too curious not to ask, Maisie did so.

"Is all well?"

The way he looked at her told Maisie it was not. He glanced at the seat

opposite him, and she took his hint to sit.

“After days of inquiries, my presence in the village has been noticed.”

“That is bad?”

“Not necessarily. There are some within the castle walls who know me, the chief among them. I would do well for them not to learn I am within their village, but ‘tis not a concern otherwise.”

“But something is amiss.”

He smiled for the first time that evening. “You know me not at all, and yet quite well.”

She returned his smile. “‘Tis my job to know my patrons. Doing so keeps me and the others safe. It keeps the Red Stag open, the only thing important to me.”

“The only thing?”

Her answer was immediate. “Aye.”

Kieran leaned forward. “There is naught else of importance to you, Maisie?”

His gaze did not waver, Kieran’s eyes peering into hers as if they knew her well too. “Nay,” she lied, her heart beginning to pound.

“Have you thought of our kiss these past days?” he asked without warning.

She had no experience flirting, so it did not occur to Maisie to employ cunning in her answer. “Of course,” she said. “Have you not?”

He laughed. “Of course I have.”

“Why do you ask such a question?”

Kieran shrugged, leaning back into his seat. “If your life is filled only with work, and no pleasure, I fear it willnae be as fulfilling as it can be.”

“I’ve not the luxury of pleasure,” she said. “A woman in my position . . .” She trailed off.

“A woman in your position, in every position, deserves both security and pleasure.”

“Perhaps,” she mused. “But that does not answer my initial question to you.”

“Will you repeat it?” he asked. Then added, “I confess your beauty, and thoughts of our kiss, have left me unable to remember of what we spoke.”

“And this is why I’ve avoided you these past days.”

“I’ve noticed.”

“Have you?”

“Aye, Maisie. I’ve noticed little else while in your hall. Except, perhaps, how capable of an innkeeper you are, though that I’d already suspected as much.”

He was twisting her thoughts. Maisie was hardly able to remember the question herself now that she knew he watched her. Thought of her.

Remembered their kiss.

Surely a man such as Kieran had kissed many women, her own innocent kiss just another of many for him.

His expression, just now, told her otherwise.

“The question,” she said, eager to change topics, “is why did you appear as if something was amiss earlier?”

Kieran sighed. “I learned something today that may see some of my questions answered on the morrow.”

Her eyes widened. Maisie waited to learn more. But he did not elaborate.

“Of course you owe me nothing of the tale,” she said finally. “I was but curious.”

“The village healer,” he said. “She was occupied with a birth, but some believe the old woman would know more of a boy gone missing around the time of the Battle of Black Friars. ‘Tis said she’s assisted every MacKinlay birth for nearly thirty years.”

“‘Tis good news, aye?”

“Aye,” he agreed.

“Yet you worry,” she surmised, “what you will learn on the morrow.”

Kieran did not respond, which was answer enough.

“I will accompany you on the morrow.”

Kieran’s brows drew together in confusion.

“To Aberdale?”

“Aye.”

“Why?”

A worthy question.

Since her husband died, Maisie had not spent one day away from the inn. Her mind quickly made, she made an offer. One that, given the circumstances, she should not. Her attraction to him did not bode well, and yet, she’d not felt so alive since . . . well, ever . . . in his presence.

“To support you. To give myself a much-needed break from the inn. Because . . .” This was the most difficult reason to admit. “Because I wish to.”

Would he refuse her?

Perhaps he should. The idea had been a silly one. Maisie was prepared to withdraw her offer when he said, “I will gladly accept your company on the morrow.”

“You will?”

“Aye.”

The thought of being with Kieran all day . . . chastising herself for the offer would not do now. She’d made it and would not take it back.

Nor would she wish for another kiss on the journey.

She was not so innocent that Maisie did not ken where another kiss like that one might lead. And she still had no wish for another husband, nor a babe with or without said husband by her side.

‘Tis just a kiss. And likely willl nae happen again.

Except . . .

Kieran’s slow smile as Maisie rose from her seat told her otherwise.

IO

CHAPTER

The day, though cool, was not overly so. Thankfully the path to Aberdale was mostly along a well-worn old Roman road with only one easy stream crossing. As they were avoiding any climbs—the trail was also mostly flat, though the mountains surrounded them—he was confident of an easy trip, which was one of the reasons he'd had no hesitation in accepting her offer to accompany him. If the short journey was perilous in any way, he'd not have done so.

Though still unsure why she'd decided to join him, Kieran would admit his companion was lovely to look at. To talk to. They'd not been riding for long when Maisie told him a story about a patron that had him laughing so hard his mount danced beneath him, likely startled by such a sound. There had been no cause for him to laugh of late, and it was a welcome respite from thoughts of his family's betrayal.

"You must have stories aplenty?" he asked as Maisie rode beside him on her palfrey.

"Of all sorts," she said. "Would you care to hear another?"

"Indeed." He could listen to Maisie talk all day. Her voice, at the same time lilting as it was commanding, a sound to which he could become accustomed. She told him of a couple that had come to the Red Stag to marry, only to learn the priest in the village had taken ill. So they'd resorted to

handfasting, Maisie and her staff overseeing the ceremony.

“They were in love,” she concluded. “But their parents dinnae condone the union.”

He did not wish to pry, but Maisie spoke little of her own family. “Tell me of them. Your parents.”

“As you know,” she began, somewhat surprising him, “they are from Ainsley Moor. My father, a farmer. By the time I’d formed anything but childhood memories, some good and others not as much, though naught as distressing as my marriage, both my brother and sister were married themselves. Neither remained in Ainsley Moor, so having siblings of the same age as myself was something I’d always wished for.”

“I’d always considered myself lucky to have Niall,” Kieran said, and stopped. For a moment, he’d almost forgotten.

“Tell me of your brother.”

“Of Niall,” he amended.

“Nay, of your brother. He dinnae become less so simply because you learned something of your past.”

“Aye, he did just that.”

“If he had told you, would you feel the same? That he was less of your brother just because your parents held back information about your past?”

It was a question he’d asked himself often. “I may not,” Kieran admitted.

“Had he the opportunity to tell you?”

“Aye,” Kieran said. “He spoke of it to his wife, though not me.” He offered her some honesty. “’Tis Niall’s betrayal that pains me most.”

“Perhaps you should have spoken to him before you left.”

“Or,” he offered an alternative, “perhaps not.”

Maisie shook her head. “Perhaps we should speak not of our families but our futures instead. When you learn the information you’ve come here for, where will you go?”

“I know not,” he admitted. “Perhaps I will hire out my sword arm.”

“You would become a mercenary?”

“I’ve considered it, aye.”

“You do not plan to return home?”

He smiled. “I thought we were not to speak of our families.”

“‘Tis not so easily done, it seems.”

“Nay,” Kieran admitted. “‘Tis not.” He pointed ahead of them. “Aberdale Village. Just on the other side of that ridge. Have you been there before?”

“Just once,” Maisie said. “When my husband brought me to the Red Stag.”

The way she said “my husband” roiled his insides. It was another topic they did not discuss, nor did Kieran wish to. If they were memories Maisie wished to forget, he would allow her that. Kieran understood well the need to forget.

He tried, and failed, each day to do so.

“Come,” he said, spurring his mount forward. Maisie, a competent rider, followed. Indeed, they met no travelers on their journey and entered the village without incident. Situated along the river and surrounded by lush farmland, Aberdale was a fairly small village. Thatched-roof timber buildings were interspersed by blacksmith and weaver’s shops with a large well serving as the center of the village.

Chickens and children abounded in equal measure, but it was the alehouse he sought. Apparently, the healer kept a room on its second floor. Both he and Maisie dismounted in front of a building with a tankard of ale, and naught else, on the wooden sign hanging above it.

“I was told she would be here,” Kieran said by way of explanation as he tied both horses to the posts. By the time he fetched them water and escorted Maisie inside, he was ready to meet the woman who might have the answers he sought.

“A fine establishment,” Maisie said, glancing around what looked like a cross between the hall of her inn and a large house. Exposed wooden beams

and barrels for seats, only a few of which were occupied this time of day, gave the alehouse a very functional feel.

“Aye,” he agreed, approaching a counter, behind which the alehouse keeper wiped off the wooden slab in front of her. The white-haired woman’s eyes narrowed as they approached.

“You’re lookin’ for the healer,” she said with a quick, distrustful glance at Maisie.

“I am,” Kieran confirmed, having spoken to the alewife the day before.

“Two ales,” she said, pouring without asking whether either he or Maisie wanted them. By way of explanation, she added as she pushed the ales toward them, “She’ll be back. Blacksmith’s son was burned.”

“I could go to the blacksmith’s shop,” he mused aloud, but the alewife cut him off.

“Sit. Drink. She will be back. Fiona willnae speak to you if she’s treatin’ the boy.”

After hesitating for a moment, he finally did as she bid, taking both ales in hand. Making their way to a table in the front window which consisted of a wooden slab over one barrel and two others for seats, he and Maisie sat.

“At least ‘tis not an inn,” he said, aware that Maisie rarely escaped the Red Stag only to find herself in a similar establishment.

“I do not mind,” she said. “I’ve no patrons to control and none here to do my bidding. Though I do hope all is well without me. If MacBrannigan or someone similar comes to the inn—”

“You’ve a plan for such an occurrence,” he said, knowing Maisie had offered coin to a man from the village whose sword skills were renowned. In fact, they’d been spoken so highly of, Kieran thought to ask the man to train.

Something he and Niall had done almost daily.

“I do, but . . .” She shrugged.

Despite more than a few glances between them as they rode, he and Maisie had avoided talk of kisses and pleasure, but he was certain she could

easily see the desire in his eyes. Kieran could not ever remember wanting a woman more. There was something about Maisie that made him wish to reach across the table between them and kiss her until she begged for him.

“When you look at me that way, it makes me desire another of those kisses we agreed not to discuss.”

Kieran laughed at her candor. “I will confess to have been thinking the same,” he said, despite himself.

“As I suspected.”

“You are an astute woman, my lady.”

“And you—” She stopped. Took a sip of ale.

“And I?” he prompted, very much wanting to hear what she had been about to say.

“You’ve many fine qualities,” she concluded.

“As do you,” he said. “I find I very much enjoy talking with you, Maisie.”

“You seem surprised by such a thing.”

He shrugged. “I spend much of my time with men, training or in battle. My time with women . . .” He stopped. There was no polite way for him to finish.

Maisie did not seem offended. “Is not spent drinking ale and talking of your past? Or future?”

“Or any of my life between the two,” he added, laughing. “You are different than most women, Maisie.”

“I do not know if you offer a compliment or a slight against me?”

“’Tis very much a compliment. In fact—” What he’d been about to say would remain unsaid. Because it would lead them down a path Kieran should not go down and because the healer had returned. From the look of the woman heading toward them now, there was no doubt the woman was very much a healer. He could not place the reason for such a thought, but she had a look about her.

Just as she reached them, a loud crack of thunder in the distance announced the arrival of a storm Kieran worried would threaten their return.

“You wish to speak with me?”

Kieran stood. “Very much, my lady.” He gestured toward his seat. “If you would?”

The healer, a woman even older than the alewife, who herself was quite advanced in years, made her way to Kieran’s seat. Gripping the table, and the arm Kieran offered, she sat with some difficulty. Instead of addressing him, she attended to Maisie.

“You are his wife?”

He and Maisie exchanged a glance. How could they not have anticipated such a question? He’d thought of it earlier that morn on the journey here, but they had not spoken of it, unfortunately. She was a widow, but even so, should not be traveling with a man unescorted. At least, one who was not her husband.

“Aye,” he said. “And I do wish to speak with you.”

Maisie did not dispute his claim.

“Go on then,” the healer said. “The baker’s daughter willnae make it through the night without my assistance.” The woman turned to Maisie. “Her first babe. Do you have children?”

“We do not,” Maisie said. “Yet,” she added with a smile.

Kieran shoved the thought of how that might occur from his mind. Or tried to, the vision of Maisie beneath him one not so easily shaken.

“Hmm.” The healer seemed displeased by that news. Kieran thought to distract her.

“I was told,” he said, “there are none who remember more of Clan MacKinlay’s history than you.”

Her eyes narrowed, suspicious. “I would suspect such is true.”

“Will you tell me then”—he steeled himself for her answer—“if you know of a boy who disappeared around the time of the Great Battle?”

“Perhaps,” she said. “Perhaps not.”

This healer knew something, but she was reluctant to offer her knowledge. Why?

“I would be grateful if you could share any information you might have about the boy,” he tried again.

The healer, mistrustful, frowned at him, the wrinkles around the corner of her mouth more pronounced than ever. But she did not answer.

“We’ve spoken to so many,” Maisie added, “and will gladly accept any information you can offer.”

For a moment Kieran thought the healer might soften.

“The babe is coming,” a man’s voice called from the door.

“Fiona,” Kieran tried again using her given name, “before you leave, will you tell us if you know of the child?”

Though he did not wish for her to go, it was clear the healer meant to and struggled to stand. He aided her, reluctantly, wishing to gain the information he sought first.

“It seems I will be getting wet.”

“Come quickly,” the man at the door said. From the frantic tone in his voice, it seemed that might be the babe’s father. “Here.” He took her arm as the healer approached him, Kieran at her heels. “Let me aid you.”

She slapped away his hand. Apparently, an arm when sitting or standing was welcome, but anything more, was not.

Kieran did not have to beg the woman for information. His expression surely did that, for the healer looked at him with some measure of pity. “Perhaps,” she said. “But I do not speak freely with strangers. Come back on the morrow.”

With that, she turned and left.

Kieran stood at the door and stared after her. It slammed shut, the rain now pouring down. He watched as the man covered her head with a cloth, but it would soon be soaked through. At her age, a chill could be deadly.

He shook his head at the bad luck of finding someone who might aid him but was unwilling to do so. He returned to Maisie.

“Well, wife. It seems I will be returning on the morrow.”

“Or,” she said, “perhaps we stay the eve and you speak to her in the morn. Unless you relish returning to the Red Stag in that.” She nodded toward the wooden shutters, still open, the rain seeming to fall even harder than before.

“I would not keep you all night from the inn,” he said.

“’Tis my choice. All will be well. We can speak with her again in the morn and then be off straightaway.” Maisie added, “She knows something.”

“Aye,” he agreed. “She does.”

“So you’ll be needing a room then?”

Where had the alewife come from?

“Indeed,” he said. “There is an inn at the edge of town, is there not?”

“There is,” the alewife said. “But I’ve a room if you’re needing one.”

“One room?” he asked.

Her eyes narrowed. “Yer man and wife, are ye not?”

The woman had good ears. Though it mattered not. Many already knew his purpose here. It was how he found the healer.

“Aye,” he said, with no other acceptable answer.

“I’ll send fresh linens and clothing up for when ye need them. Now sit, I’ll fetch some stew.”

“Seems alewives are as forthright and capable as innkeepers,” he said.

“In some villages, they are one and the same,” Maisie answered.

“I will sleep on the floor,” he said, quietly.

Maisie said naught to that. “I think,” she said finally, “we will need more ale.”

Kieran very much agreed.

II

CHAPTER

The healer never returned.

The rain never stopped.

As such, they had no other choice than to retire after spending the evening, and two meals, sitting by the window watching dirt puddles form after watching the sky darken and listening to both the storm and the buzz of others' conversations.

Maisie and Kieran avoided talk of kisses and spoke instead about their childhoods, Kieran's situation, Maisie's worries for the inn and all manner of other things. But as each of the patrons left the alehouse, an establishment not unlike her inn though with less rooms, of course, it was time.

Kieran lifted the key. "Shall we see to our room, wife?" he teased.

Maisie pushed away the last remnants of her meal and stood in response. There were only three rooms abovestairs, the alewife had said, theirs being the last in the long hall that seemed eerily quiet as she and Kieran made their way through it. With wall torches lighting the way, she stepped aside and allowed Kieran in front of her to open the door.

"Oh," she exclaimed, not at all prepared for the room to be so spacious and well-appointed. Wandering over to the bed, her hand traced the fine craftsmanship of its frame. A fireplace in the corner of the room had been lit, and along with a lantern beside the bed, there was plenty of light to see that

the room was, indeed, clean. All she'd hoped for.

"I will leave you to undress," Kieran said, looking down at the floor.

She made a quick decision. "The bed seems to be large enough for two people," she said. "I can sleep to your back. If it pleases you."

He let out a breath. Kieran was suddenly more imposing here, in this bedroom, than he seemed in the hall. "It would please me too much," he said. "Thus, the problem."

She tried not to smile at that. "I trust you." Unbelievably, 'twas true. Maisie did, indeed, trust Kieran to be a gentleman, even if they slept in the same bed together.

"Maisie," he began, and then, instead of finishing the words, with another intake of breath, he turned to leave. "I will be just outside the door."

With that, Kieran made good on his promise and left. Maisie, not knowing how long it might be until his return, made quick work of her kirtle. Stripping down to her chemise, she folded her clothes and placed them on a wooden chair, boots underneath it. Then, utilizing the lavender-scented water bowl on a stand beside the bed, she picked up the cloth beside it and cleaned her face and arms, wiping away the day. Maisie then chewed on a piece of mint, discarding it in a wee bowl before heading toward the door.

Opening it just a crack, she whispered, "I am finished preparing for bed."

Kieran pushed the door wider, his eyes moving from her face downward as he stepped back inside the room. She wore naught but a cream chemise, her feet bare and quickly becoming cold. Maisie pretended not to notice his appreciative gaze and headed toward the fire.

"I willnae turn around," she said, "if you wish to do the same."

Kieran chuckled. "I most often sleep in the nude, so . . ."

Her eyes flew to his face. Kieran smiled. "You are jesting with me."

"I am not."

"Surely you willnae do so this eve?"

Chuckling, he began to remove his boots. "Surely not."

With his boots off, Kieran undid his belt. She watched as his plaid fell around him and the belt dropped. “Did you mean that you would not turn around to avoid seeing me or the opposite?” he jested.

Mortified, Maisie spun toward the fire.

“You are a wicked man to tease me so.”

“I never claimed to be otherwise.”

She watched the flames dance, imagining what Kieran was doing behind her. “But I know it to be so.”

“Do you, now?”

“Aye. I do.”

Suddenly she could sense a presence just behind her. His hands landed on both of her arms, just below each shoulder. Warm, comforting. She had no notion to push them away. Just the opposite, in fact. Maisie had wanted him to touch her all day even while denying such a fact to herself.

“I am not a wicked man,” he whispered, his breath so close to her ear Maisie could feel it. “But being with you makes me wish to tempt your vow.”

His left hand moved from her arm to Maisie’s right ear. First, he tucked the loose strands behind it and then pulled the rest of her hair back so it was no longer hanging in front of her. She did not have to guess at his purpose for moving it aside, as a moment later she could feel his breath on her neck.

And then, his lips were there. The gentlest of kisses was followed by Kieran pulling her toward him so that Maisie’s back touched his chest. With nothing but her chemise and presumably a linen shirt between them, his plaid having been discarded, Maisie closed her eyes at the pleasure of being so close to him.

He kissed from her neck toward her shoulder, pulling the fabric of her chemise aside.

“That sound,” he said in her ear, “that you’re making. I would hear it from your lips all eve.”

“I would make it all eve if you were to continue.”

“Should I continue?”

Maisie truly did not know what to think. Or how to answer.

His hand came around the front of her toward her chin. Turning her head backward to look at him, Kieran repeated the question. “Should I continue?”

Maisie blinked. “I want nothing more than for you to continue. To kiss me. To hold me in your arms again. And yet . . .”

“And yet, your vow.”

She looked up, into his eyes. “Aye.”

“To never marry.”

“Aye,” she said again.

“Do you intend never to be with a man, then?”

Maisie could not help but stare at his lips. She wanted so very much to feel him again on hers. “I thought not to do so.”

“But now that you know it can be, and should be, pleasurable?”

She’d thought of little else all day. “I’ve no desire to raise a child without a husband.”

He did not answer at first. Kieran simply looked at her, for so long that Maisie nearly turned away, so intense was his gaze. What was he thinking?

“There are ways to find pleasure without making love, Maisie.”

Her heart raced, thoughts of what he might mean running through her mind. She wanted him to kiss her. To show her pleasure.

Maisie had so little of it these past years.

And yet? Where would such a thing lead? Likely to her wanting more. But Kieran was not long for the Red Stag. Once he discovered his true identity, he would leave, never to return. And she would be left with naught but memories. Already Maisie thought of his kiss too often.

She stepped away.

“And I would discover them with you,” she said, regretfully. “And then lament the loss of such promised pleasure when you are gone.”

It was more honest than she’d prepared to be with him, but so be it. How

dearly she wanted to return to his arms. To kiss him and forget, for just one night, every worry she'd had since the day she'd left home.

Temporary pleasure. A fleeting thing that would not warm her through the winter when she was left with a broken heart. For there was no doubt, already she had begun to feel things for Kieran she hadn't for any man before him.

It seemed as if he would refute her, at first. But he did not. Instead, Kieran—in nothing but a linen shirt that hung low at the neck, revealing too much of his chest beneath for Maisie not to look—turned away.

“I will sleep with my back to you, a pillow between us,” he said flatly.

And with that and no other words, Kieran pulled back the coverlet, got into bed, and positioned one of the two pillows just as he said he would. The other, he left for her head.

Instead of joining him, Maisie returned to the fireplace. Using the poker, she moved one of the charred logs. Adding another, she continued to stare at the flames, Kieran's steady breathing telling her he was already asleep.

For her part, Maisie did not think she could sleep for some time. Had she made the right decision? Why should she not have allowed herself some measure of pleasure?

I know my heart. 'Tis a fragile thing, despite the way I present myself to others.

Too fragile to be meddled with, despite the yearning she might have for his embrace. And Maisie very much yearned for that. For his kisses.

But she would remain strong, as always.

As necessary for a woman alone in the world.

CHAPTER

He would get little sleep this eve.

Should Kieran have touched her? Said those things to her? Nay. But he had, and one thing he'd learned from this father—or the man who raised him—was that regrets were futile.

The bed sagged as Maisie got into it. Resisting a groan, he instead attempted to slow his breathing, slow the rapidly increasing beat of his heart as Kieran imagined himself with her. Rolling over toward her. Maisie welcoming him. Lifting up that chemise that hid too much, though less than her gowns. Just thinking of her as such . . .

She shifted, pulled the coverlet up to her chin. And then, remained still.

He should have slept on the floor, but with no bedroll to speak of, he relished the thought little. Kieran had slept on worse. In times of battle, he'd slept on hard earth with nothing beneath him. But the bed was large enough, surprisingly, for them both. And so it would be a different sort of torture this eve than laying his head on the wooden floor.

Shifting his thoughts from Maisie to the midwife, he thought of the possibility that they might learn something of consequence on the morrow.

They.

He'd begun to think of he and Maisie as a couple, which, of course, they were not.

“Kieran?”

Her voice was so soft Kieran wondered for a moment if he’d conjured it in his mind.

“Aye, lass?”

“I did wish very much for you to kiss me.”

This would not go well. He spun onto his other side, facing her. Kieran propped his head on his hand.

“I would tell you a story,” she said softly, mimicking his position. “Once, when I was a young girl, a kitten wandered into our home. Though my father, a superstitious man, said I could not keep her, I did so anyway. Fed her. Hid the poor thing in my bedchamber, not realizing how trapped the animal must have been. I loved her.”

“What did you name the kitten?”

“Pebbles,” she said. “For the tiny rocks I pulled from her paws.”

“Your parents discovered her presence, I assume?”

“My mother did, aye. Said I could keep her, but ‘twas not long before my father discovered Pebbles as well. He refused to have such an omen under his roof and forced me to set her free.”

“Some believe cats are very bad luck,” he said. “Though I am not one of them.”

“I am glad to hear it. Aye, my father was one who believed as much.” She sighed.

Maisie, in a chemise, in the same bed, close enough that if Kieran reached out he could touch her . . . it was nearly unbearable.

“Maisie—”

She stopped him. “I tell you this story for a reason.”

He assumed so, but could not guess what it might be.

“I cried for more than a sennight. About a kitten. And I’ve similar stories that I could tell you of . . .” Her shoulders rose and fell as Maisie looked straight at him. “Of times my heart was broken too easily. My father called

me fragile. Though I do not agree with such a sentiment. ‘Tis just that I . . . I . . .” She struggled to finished. To find the word that described what Maisie clearly saw as a vulnerability.

He did not agree.

“Loving is not fragile. You are the very opposite, in fact. I’ve not met a more resilient woman in all my days, Maisie.”

Her smile was a sad one. But there was something else in her expression. Something he did not expect as she told him about Pebbles.

Desire.

She is afraid to get too close.

Of course.

“I ken,” he said. How had he thought they could stay in the same bed together? Kieran pushed the coverlet from him and began to get up from them bed. “I’d never wish to hurt you, Maisie. I will sleep on the floor.”

She reached over, her hand splaying on his shoulder. Stopping him.

“Do not.”

Kieran froze.

“I ken,” he repeated. “And perhaps it is best.” He almost added, *for us both.*

“Perhaps. But as I lay here, I cannae help but wonder about . . . the pleasures you mentioned. Despite myself, I want for you to kiss me again, Kieran.”

He grew hard instantly.

Maisie’s hand on his shoulder. The sight of her in this bed. Her words.

“I would gladly kiss you again, Maisie. But are you sure you wish for such a thing? After what you shared?”

Her hand never moved. “Aye. I told you that not to discourage you, but so that you might ken my reasoning.”

Maisie’s thumb began to move, gently caressing his shoulder. It was more than he could endure. Capturing her wrist, he moved to her so quickly she

made a sound of surprise. Taking Maisie's second wrist and pinning both above her head, Kieran was careful not to crush her as he held her beneath him.

And then kissed her very differently than before.

This time, she knew how to respond, and did. The moment his lips touched hers, Maisie opened for him. His tongue found hers, demanding she meet his intensity.

And she did.

Holding on to both wrists, he allowed everything to let go. Every inhibition and doubt. Kieran simply allowed himself to feel her under him. Taste her lips and the sweetness of her tongue gliding along his own with more familiarity now.

"Mmmm," she murmured under him.

He wanted to show her more. Kieran let go of Maisie's wrists so he could use his hands to pull down the fabric of her chemise along the deep collar. As he trailed kisses from her neck downward, he lifted her breast above the fabric. Letting out a groan at the sight of her, Kieran's head descended. He took her deeply into his mouth, suckling. Teasing her nipple with his teeth. Her hands grasped at the back of his head, Maisie's fingers in his hair.

The desire to lift her chemise above her head was strong, but he resisted. Kieran did not want to startle her or move too fast. Instead, he righted her chemise and kissed her neck again, moving back up toward her mouth until he paused to whisper into her ear.

"I'm going to put my hand between your legs," he said. Aware she'd been with a man but discounting her husband as a lover, Kieran would not have her scared.

Her sharp intake of breath was not followed by Maisie telling him to stop, and so as his lips found hers once again, he did exactly as he said he would. Running his hand up her thigh, the feel of Maisie's bare skin on his fingertips only a precursor to what was to come, Kieran continued upward.

Groaning as he reached his goal, Kieran wasted no time slipping first one finger and then a second inside. So wet. So responsive as she moved her hips into him after just a few gentle thrusts. He broke their kiss to look at her.

“Has this ever happened to you before?”

She shook her head.

He suspected that.

“I want so much to kiss you again,” he said, his thumb now rubbing the nub that would give her pleasure, “but I want to see your face when you find release.”

“Release?” she asked, her voice unsteady.

If she’d never experienced it, Kieran would be damned to explain it to her. He’d prefer to show Maisie what his words meant. And so, while his fingers worked her, Kieran used his voice also to coax her pleasure forth.

“Simply feel my fingers, my desire to bring you pleasure.” Her hips circled and pressed as his thumb increased its pressure. “You are a beautiful woman, Maisie. Even more so at this moment, your lips parted, your cheeks flushed. About to find release?”

“What,” she said, the rate of her breathing increasing, “does that mean?”

Dear lord in heaven, this woman.

“Come for me, sweet Maisie,” he said, aware she didn’t ken.

But she would.

“Let it all go. Come for me.”

As if his words coaxed it to happen, she did. Maisie’s eyes squeezed shut as she pulsed around his fingers. She was so incredibly beautiful, her face pure pleasure. He held his fingers inside her, steady, until she stopped.

Removing them, he stood from the bed, rinsed and dried his fingers in the bowl beside their bed, and then pulled Maisie’s chemise down, covering her. Kissing her forehead, he moved to his side of the bed, lay back down, and pulled her onto his chest.

“I dinnae realize . . .”

He closed his eyes, glad Maisie's husband was dead so he did not have to kill the man himself.

"I am sorry for it," he said, unable to see into Maisie's eyes with her head tucked into his chest. "But glad to be the one to show you how a woman should be pleased."

Her fingers played with the hem of his shirt. "I was scared, for a moment, that you would . . ."

Kieran waited but she never finished.

"That I would make love to you," he said finally.

She nodded against his chest.

"I willnae," he promised, "unless you ask it of me."

"I do not wish for a babe."

"Nor do I," he admitted. "Though there are ways to prevent it."

"Also . . ." She picked her head up and looked at him. "I do not wish to become more inclined to you than I am at this moment. After what you just did"—she smiled shyly—"I ken now why some enjoy it."

"Do you?" he teased.

Maisie nodded.

"'Tis a predicament we find ourselves in, is it not?"

"Aye."

He smiled. "Close your eyes, sweet Maisie. We will talk more on the morrow."

"That . . ." She blinked. "That felt very, very good."

"As it should." He kissed her forehead again as Maisie tucked her head back into him. He would have continued talking to her but, not a few moments later, he could hear her steady breathing.

She slept.

Sated. Happy, he hoped. And though he was glad for it, the same thought ran through his mind for some time, sleep evading him.

What have I done?

CHAPTER

She'd woken more than once in the night, tucked into his side. While it had felt exceedingly odd, it was not an unpleasant sensation either. Quite the opposite. Though not as good as what he'd done to her last eve.

As she rose from the bed and dressed, Maisie could not stop thinking of Kieran's kisses. Or his fingers touching the most intimate parts of her. Or the pleasure those fingers had brought her. What would it be like to make love to such a man?

Maisie would dearly love to know, but the consequences of such an act were too great. She needed to return to the inn, keep last eve as a memory to warm her bed during the long winter nights to come and remember how far she'd come. For a woman alone in the world, she had done well. And it was imperative Maisie remembered that.

The door opened.

"You are awake."

Maisie turned toward him, willing her cheeks not to flood with heat. They ignored her, of course. He did not make a move toward her, but Kieran did smile.

"You've naught to be embarrassed of, Maisie. You are a widow and have done nothing untoward."

"Except," she argued, "you are not my husband."

“Nay,” he agreed. “I am not. But if two unmarried people cannae find pleasure in each other, then I personally do not wish to follow such a God who prevents it.”

His words, though blasphemous, were not ones she disagreed with, and she told him so. “We’ve no priest in the village but a traveling one. All his teachings are not ones I agree with always, but I’ve never uttered such words aloud.”

“Our priest,” he began, and then stopped. So often Kieran did that, as if forgetting his home was no longer his. At least, in Kieran’s mind.

“You should speak with your brother, if no one else. Perhaps there is an explanation—”

“Aye, there is an explanation. My parents and brother knew I was a MacKinlay and did not tell me. ‘Tis a simple matter, that.”

She disagreed. “They are the same family as before. Perhaps if you just spoke to them?”

“Come along,” he said, this time ignoring her words. “The healer is due in the hall any moment.”

Maisie adjusted her gown and followed him toward the door. “You should have told me so,” she said, knowing that if they lost the healer again it could be some time before they could speak to her again.

“I just did,” he teased as she approached.

Stepping aside, he allowed Maisie to walk past him. Though Kieran smiled, he did not move toward her. Attempt to touch her, or kiss her, or make any other reference to what happened last eve.

A pity, aye. But a relief too, mayhap? Maisie could not decide which.

By the time they made their way belowstairs, the healer was in the hall already. She sat at the same table they’d occupied the day before. She appeared so wee and frail. Until she turned toward them. The woman’s eyes were sharp.

“May we sit with you?” Kieran asked.

“I’ve little time,” the woman said, gesturing to the empty seats. “Hurry along, then.” Both she and Kieran did as the woman asked. “Why do you ask about the missing boy?”

Would Kieran tell the healer his truth? He’d seemed reluctant to do so, and yet if she were to trust him with the information she clearly kept close to her chest . . .

“I may have information on his whereabouts.”

That did not seem to please her. “I would know why you ask about a boy none have spoken about for many years.”

That boy was Kieran. Maisie could not imagine what he was thinking at this moment, but the healer clearly knew the story. Why did he not simply tell her the boy was him?

“I cannae say.”

By his tone, he would not tell her, even if it meant walking away from here without the information she clearly had.

Tell her.

But Maisie’s silent plea went unnoticed as the healer stood. “It seems we’ve nothing more to discuss.”

“Please,” he tried again, Kieran’s voice as deferential as Maisie had ever heard it. “I’ve good reason to keep that information to myself, but I beg you to share what you know.”

For a moment, it seemed as if she might relent. The healer stared at him for a long moment, glanced at Maisie, and then shook her head.

“‘Tis not my story to tell.”

“Whose story is it, then?” he asked. And when it seemed his pleas would produce little, Kieran begged again. “Please, my lady.”

“Know only there are others who will give the information you seek more freely.”

With that, the healer left them without a backward glance.

“Kieran,” she said, immediately after the woman left. “What have you

done?”

His jaw clenched. Kieran was obviously resolved. Finally, he turned to her. “She cannae know.”

“Why?”

Kieran stared into her eyes, as if wishing she could guess the reason. But Maisie could not. There was no reason she could think of for not divulging the boy was him. The healer knew the story, obviously. Likely knew Kieran’s true identity. So why not just tell her?

“Once I do, there is no going back.”

“I do not ken.”

He sighed. “She willnae keep the information to herself. My parents . . .” He swallowed. “My true parents, if they are alive . . . they will know of me. My family will know of me.”

“Is that not what you wish for?” Confused, Maisie leaned forward so they may speak more softly. In doing do, a flash of their night together, coupled with Kieran’s brief glance down at her lips, made Maisie forget their conversation for a moment.

How she wished to reach out and lay her hand on his shoulder. To be closer to him. Kiss him. Comfort him.

Which was silly, of course. Kieran was a warrior and needed no comfort from her. The way he looked at her, willing for her to ken . . .

Finally, she did.

“You left them. Refused to speak to them. But are not yet willing to let go of the only family you know.”

His silence was the only answer Maisie needed to confirm the truth of her words.

“Kieran, if you will it, you can have two families. Knowing your true one does not mean you’re no longer a Duncraig.”

“I am not a Duncraig.”

“Aye,” she argued. “You are. But you’ve just let a woman who can help

you leave, and now you know no more than you did when we came yesterday.”

For the first time since they left their bedchamber, Kieran smiled. “Aye, but I do.”

Her brows drew together in confusion. “Aye?”

“Aye.”

“What do you know that you dinnae before?”

“That the healer knows of the boy for certain. Which means she is not the only one. I will discover the truth without revealing my own.”

He certainly convinced her of his words.

“But first, you must return to your inn.”

“Indeed,” she said. “But I would break my fast first.”

“Of course. And while we do so, perhaps we can discuss a different matter.”

“Such as?”

His eyes narrowed. “Such as last eve.”

CHAPTER

Mayhap it was just as well they never did discuss the night before.

As Kieran and Maisie walked into the Red Stag Inn, he watched as she immediately went to work. She seemed to be everywhere at once, flitting through the hall of the inn as if she owned it. Which, of course, she did.

Capable.

It was the word he thought of most when watching Maisie work. Some others came to mind as well, especially after the evening they'd shared—the one, courtesy of a fight just outside the alehouse and their quick departure, they never did discuss.

Sitting in his usual spot, Alice immediately serving him ale, Kieran considered their ride back. More than once he thought to speak with her about last eve, but Maisie's clear reluctance to do so held him back.

"Kieran," said a familiar voice.

He'd been so intent on Maisie, watching her work, Kieran had not seen his brother approach. It was a problem, being taken unaware.

"You are not my brother."

He could see the hurt on Niall's face at his words, but Kieran would not take them back. Niall knew and did not tell him. For that, Kieran could not forgive him.

"I am as much your brother now as I've always been."

Without asking, Niall sat across from him. Looked toward Alice, lifting his arm. The serving maid immediately brought him ale, Kieran saying nothing. Like their father—or the chief of Duncraig, rather—Niall was a stubborn man. He listened to few people, and asking him to leave would be futile.

“How did you find me?”

“It was not as easy as I expected. But a man such as you does not go unnoticed, Kieran. As you well know.”

He’d wondered if Niall might come looking for him. Kieran had always known if he did, Niall would find him. He did not know a better tracker than his brother.

“Brother,” he spat, unable to consider the word without bile rising in his throat. “If you were my brother, in truth, you’d have told me, Niall.”

“If you had not left without speaking to me, I might have explained that I planned to.”

Kieran had traveled to Glenhaven to visit his brother and his new wife, the sister of the chief of Clan MacKinlay, when he’d overheard that conversation, changing everything.

“I dinnae intend to listen,” he said, oddly not wanting Niall to think it was intentional, the conversation he heard. “The solar door was ajar when I came to see you.”

Maisie had just noticed them. She clearly wondered who the man was that sat with him, but with a gentle shake of his head, he asked her to wait. She understood and moved away, toward the kitchens.

“I realized immediately what had happened when you were nowhere to be found. That you would think I’d keep such a thing from you. To say we are not brothers.” Niall leaned forward. “Kieran. You know me. Better than anyone alive. Look at me.”

He had already been looking across the table, but Kieran’s gaze now did not waver. He did as Niall told him, mostly because he’d always done so. He

idolized his older brother. Thought there was no better man alive, including the chief.

It was the reason his betrayal cut so deep.

“You. Know. Me.”

“I thought I did.”

Niall made a sound, like a wounded animal, deep in his throat. It was the sound he made when he was frustrated. “You truly believe I dinnae plan to tell you?”

“I’d been at Glenhaven from sunset to sunrise,” he pointed out. “You’d plenty of opportunity to do so.”

“Aye,” Niall agreed. “But none worthy of such a conversation. ‘Tis not an easy thing, to tell your brother you’ve learned he is the son of your enemy.”

Kieran raised his chin. “‘Tis not an easy thing to learn such a thing either.”

Niall lifted his mug. “Touché.”

His brother drank. Kieran did the same. And asked the question that had plagued him, despite himself. “How long did you know?”

“I learned when Mother came to Glenhaven a sennight before you.”

Only a sennight before? “I thought . . .”

Niall’s jaw flexed. It was his brother’s turn to be angry. “You thought I knew long ago and dinnae tell you?”

Kieran thought back to the morning he discovered his mother had gone to Glenhaven alone. He’d been angry she took only two men as escort and did not ask him to come along. The thought of her traveling, even for just the day, without him or his brother or father, was something Kieran liked little.

“She went to Glenhaven to tell you?” he guessed.

“Aye. With all the talk of you being named Father’s second-in-command, she came to tell me to cease such speculation. When she gave me the reason for it, I was as surprised as I’m certain you were when you heard the conversation between Lina and I.”

That still did not explain . . . “Why did you not tell me as soon as I arrived that day?” Niall was growing impatient, but Kieran, for once, did not back down. “Why, Niall?”

“If you stayed to hear all of the discussion between Lina and I, you’d have known I planned to that eve. I simply asked her how best to tell you. I was surprised by your visit, unprepared, in fact. But there was never a question of whether or not I’d tell you, only how. And when. I knew it would be a difficult thing for you to hear.”

“A MacKinlay, Niall. MacKinlay. The clan we’ve been raised to hate.”

“I will remind you I’m now married to the chief’s sister.”

Kieran shook his head. And asked the second question he’d wondered most. “Does she remember?”

“Nay. She was but a child. But wishes to help you discover the truth, if you wish to do so.”

Having Avelina, the chief’s sister, would indeed make learning his truth easier. But Kieran had not considered asking before. He’d been too angry with Niall.

“I’ve been to Aberdale more than once. Have been staying here and visiting each day.”

“Here?” Niall looked around the hall. “Why do you not stay in Aberdale?”

Kieran avoided looking at Maisie. He was not ready to tell Niall about her yet. Not ready to define their relationship. Yet.

So he simply ignored the question. “You planned to tell me that eve?”

Already the sting was gone from his tone. Kieran knew the truth of it: Niall was as honorable a man as any.

He had not known either.

“Of course.”

Kieran had another question. Many questions, actually. “Did she ask you not to tell me?”

His brother looked directly into Kieran's eyes. "Aye."

Before he could say anything, Niall continued. "She tries to protect you, Kieran."

"By keeping the truth from me? What does she know?"

Niall shook his head. "She would not tell me. Only the story they'd always given, that you were found on the riverbank barely alive, a gash on your head, and taken to Mother. She claims none knew of your identity."

"And yet, she learned I am a MacKinlay somehow."

"On that, she would not elaborate. Said only that none but she and Father knew, and it was her hope you'd never learn of it. I argued with her, Kieran. Told her it was not right."

"Arguing with Mother is akin to arguing with Father. Neither will budge."

"Agreed. Which is why Lina said she will aid you. I will aid you too, if you'd let me."

"Lina is here?"

"Nay, but I will send for her."

He looked down into his ale. His brother, a Duncraig. Was he? Or a MacKinlay? Or perhaps both? Of that he was still unsure. He still had no parents to speak of. Was betrayed by a mother who never intended to tell him the truth and was as lost now as before.

Kieran looked up.

Perhaps not *as* lost.

He opened his mouth, but no words came out.

"I know, brother. Now tell me what you've learned so far. And how we might fetch a meal. It seems the Red Stag Inn is both our homes for now."

CHAPTER

They did not share the same birth mother, and so Kieran and his brother should not look alike. And yet . . . there was something similar about the men, perhaps the way they sat? Or used their hands when they spoke? Something about them told Maisie that the man Kieran sat with was his brother.

He'd waved her away earlier, but now Kieran caught her eye and nodded toward them. She made her way to the men.

"Niall," he said, much more cordially than she expected as that was, indeed, his brother's name. Yet Kieran was extremely angry with his brother. Or had been. Naught about his tone suggested anger. "This is Maisie, the owner of the inn. Maisie," he said, the look Kieran gave her leaving no doubt about what had transpired between the brothers, "I am pleased to introduce my brother, Niall."

Pleased to introduce . . .

Whatever Niall had said to Kieran, it was clear he forgave him. She smiled at the man who was nearly as handsome as his brother. "I am pleased to make your acquaintance," she said.

Though he did not appear surly or unwelcoming, Niall's smile was not as freely given as his brother's. "As am I, my lady. 'Tis a fine establishment, one I've been to just twice before. Once not many years ago, though I do

remember a different owner.”

“My late husband,” she clarified.

“I am sorry to learn of your loss.”

Maisie could see Kieran watching her from the corner of her eye. She refrained from answering that it was no loss of hers that her husband had died.

“Many thanks,” she said instead. “Shall I bring two pigeon pies?”

“Aye,” Kieran said. “And a room for my brother?”

“Apologies, but the inn is full this eve. Tomorrow a room will become free. I would be pleased to keep that one aside? And can provide an extra bedroll and coverlet for your chamber.”

At the mention of the coverlet, a flash of Maisie tucked into Kieran’s side after he pleased her nearly made her blush, but she pushed the memory aside.

“I would accept both,” Kieran began, but Niall stopped him.

“I shall send for Lina tomorrow, but then should we not stay closer to Aberdale?”

If they did that, there would be no reason for her to see Kieran again. And though she wished otherwise, Maisie could not will it to be so.

“We will remain here,” Kieran said, his tone leaving no room for discussion.

Niall appeared confused. He looked as if he would question his brother further, but did not. Instead, he looked up at her.

“Thank you for your offer. A meal and coverings for my brother’s floor are most welcome.” His wee smile told Maisie he jested with her. Like Kieran, he’d likely slept in much worse places than on an inn floor with a pillow and coverlet.

“I would speak with you privately, Maisie,” Kieran said, surprising her. She was certain he did not wish his brother to know there had been anything between them. And yet, he stood and followed Maisie to the back of the inn.

“Nay, not here. More private than this,” he said.

She glanced back at Niall.

“I will worry about my brother,” he said, and so Maisie headed instead toward the kitchens, a separate building from the inn. As they walked through the door, instead of actually entering the kitchens, she turned a corner so they were now at the back of the inn.

“Private,” she said. There was no reason for anyone to come this way. The stables were on the other side of the building. Back here, naught but tall grass and a field that was not a part of the inn’s property.

Yet.

Maisie had been saving coin to purchase it and expand on the number of rooms the Red Stag kept.

“My brother found me,” he said, standing closer to her than they’d been all day.

“Aye.” Maisie chuckled. “I’ve seen as much.”

Kieran’s smile warmed her heart. He was truly happy in a way she’d not seen him since they met. With the exception of last eve, after he’d pleased her.

“Can I come to you this eve? As always I will remain in the hall until ‘tis empty. But we must talk, Maisie.”

Her heart skipped a beat. “If you do so, will your brother not realize there is something between us?”

“I care not for that. Unless,” he said suddenly, “you do not wish him to.”

“You are reconciled?”

“We are. I will explain all later. If you’ll allow me.”

She hesitated. Maisie wanted nothing more than to be with him again. To have Kieran hold her, kiss her . . . pleasure her. Again. Yet each moment that passed she could feel herself being drawn to him, a man who did not plan to marry. Not that she would ever accept another husband. But that simply meant, if they were not to be together, this thing between them was a passing

thing.

Her heart told Maisie otherwise.

“I willnae touch you,” he said, as if to convince her. Then Kieran’s smile touched the corners of his eyes. Mischievous. Knowing. “Unless you wish it.”

Undecided, Maisie did not know how to answer.

Say no. You cannae stop thinking of this man. Being alone with him will do naught to alleviate the ache in your heart when you’re not in his arms.

Maisie looked up, into his eyes. Imploring her with their intensity.

What she should say and wanted to say were two very different things. How did one decide between what was the right thing to do and what the heart willed? The feelings he elicited in her were at war with memories of her husband.

“You hesitate. Why?”

Maisie had always found herself being more candid with him than she should. Resigning herself to the fact, she told him the truth. “I do not want to care for you.”

He said nothing.

For a moment, Maisie was certain he would not respond. Which, in truth, was as she expected. What could he say in return?

“Maisie.” Without warning, he reached out his hand, cupping her cheek with it as he moved even closer. “You already care for me. As I do you.”

She could not look into his eyes any longer. Closing them but feeling the warmth of his hand on her cheek, Maisie was lost.

Opening her eyes, she said the only word she could. “Aye.”

He did not gloat, or even widen his smile. Kieran simply dropped his hand, looked at her as if he understood what she was feeling, and nodded back toward the inn.

Mutely, she followed.

They parted.

Maisie found Margaret and asked her to bring two pigeon pies to Kieran and his brother.

And then she walked through the front door, sat on the bench in front of the inn, under the wooden sign that swung back and forth in the wind, and listened to it. To the horses in the nearby stable. To muted voices from within the inn she'd somehow managed to keep, and allow to thrive, since Baldwin's death.

She'd said *aye* when she should have said *nay*. And that, Maisie knew, would be all the difference not just in the night ahead, but how her life would proceed from here. Because of one simple *aye*.

CHAPTER

“Why do we remain in the hall when nearly all have taken their beds? It has been a long day, brother.”

Though not the first time Niall had asked Kieran that question, this time, there was no way to avoid it. He'd thought of half-truths to avoid telling him about Maisie, but there had never been lies between them.

With one exception.

Though they'd not spoken about it again, and Kieran had forgiven his brother, having learned more about what happened, that he'd not told him immediately still stung. But Kieran could also acknowledge he likely should have stayed long enough to speak to his brother before leaving.

Nay, running away.

But it was a jarring thing, to learn your family had been lying to you and that you were, in fact, related to the very clan you had been taught to hate.

In response, he looked at Maisie. She was wiping tables, doing work she could have easily asked one of the serving maids to do. Unlike some, however, she'd not been raised with coin in hand, the inn passing down to her from wealthy relatives. And it was evident.

“Who is she?”

“The innkeeper,” Kieran said, taking a final sip of ale. He'd drunk enough that night and was ready to retire. Nay, ready to be with Maisie in whatever

way she wished. If naught else, he would speak to her about last eve.

“I know as much already. Brother?”

He’d cherish that word now more than ever before. “Aye?”

Niall looked at him in a very familiar way. It was the same look his brother gave him if he suggested finishing their training for the day.

“She is the reason we are not staying in Aberdale.”

“Ahhhh.” Niall looked back and forth between him and Maisie. “How did I not see it before?”

Kieran shrugged. “Likely because you were not looking.”

“She is quite beautiful.”

“And capable. Her husband was much older, an arranged marriage that should not have been. A bastard, by his reputation. And from Maisie’s accounts. She took over the running of this inn from him and has done quite well.”

“It seems she has,” Niall said. “No rooms available. And the pigeon pie. . . I would return for it alone.”

“‘Tis hers,” Kieran said. “Only recently she trained the cook to make them.”

His brother’s eyes narrowed. “You care for her?”

There was no reason to deny it. “I do.”

“Have you. . .”

Niall did not have to finish. His knowing expression was clear enough.

“Nay,” he said. “I’ve no wish for a wife. And she, none for a husband.”

“Yet you care for her. And clearly desire the woman.”

“I cannae deny either.”

“Hmm. If ‘twas desire alone, I could advise you easily. But the first . . . ‘tis a more complicated matter.”

“And I fear will become more so. You can take the bed,” Kieran said as the last patron retired. It would not be long now until Maisie did the same. “I will speak to Maisie first and am unsure how long ‘twill be before joining

you.”

“*Speak to her?*”

“Aye.”

“I can think of only one matter that needs addressing at such an hour.”

Kieran watched Maisie from the corner of his eye. She was nearly finished with her duties.

“‘Tis the matter of us sharing a room last eve.”

He’d already told his brother about the healer but had not mentioned Maisie had accompanied him.

“She was with you,” Niall said, though it was not, in fact, a question. “Tread carefully, brother. She may be a widow, but ‘tis clear to me the innkeeper is more than a passing dalliance to you.”

Indeed. He was beginning to ken as much.

Maisie glanced their way.

“If you wish to retire, I willnae stop you.”

Niall laughed. A rare sound but one Kieran had missed. “It seems I’ve been dismissed.”

“You have,” Kieran agreed as Niall stood.

“For this eve only,” Niall clarified. “You are my brother, for life. Do not suggest otherwise ever again.”

Kieran had wondered when Niall would get to chastising him. Always the older brother, and in this, Kieran’s words were ones he should never have said. But he’d been angry and could not apologize for them. Instead, he nodded, acknowledged Niall’s words, and watched as his brother walked away.

Maisie stood there instead.

“You wished to speak with me?”

Kieran wished to do much more than speak with her, but he’d not say so aloud. “Aye, lass. I do indeed.”

CHAPTER

She should have more.

Stepping through the door of her bedchamber, it was Kieran's first thought. Though the room was unmistakably Maisie, it was not much bigger than his own room.

He'd intended to talk.

To ask Maisie what she'd been thinking since last eve.

To tell her about Niall.

To simply be in her presence for a bit longer.

And yet, when she closed the door behind him, he did not want to talk at all. Kieran said he'd not touch her unless she willed it, so he kept his word.

Except . . .

"One quick kiss," he said, moving toward her, his intentions clear.

He could reach out and touch her, but didn't. Kieran waited, never wanting anything more than to kiss this woman. Her brief, barely perceptible nod was all he needed. When he pulled her toward him, Maisie fairly crashed into his chest. His head descended, his lips capturing hers.

Maisie opened for him, knowing now the dance their tongues engaged in. Her head tilted, her moans making him grow hard. But that was not to be. This was a simple kiss. And yet. It felt anything but simple.

In fact, it felt intense. Complicated.

His arms wrapped around her as Maisie's did the same. Kieran had meant this to be a quick kiss but was loathe to break apart. He wanted more, and by Maisie's movements, it seemed she did too. When her hands moved to his chest, her fingers splayed as if attempting to feel him beneath the material of his plaid and shirt, he did break the kiss.

The look she gave him . . . he must have misinterpreted it.

"Maisie?"

"I want to know you, Kieran."

His response was swift and certain. "Nay. We cannae. You said you do not wish to care for me . . ."

And I wish the same. How could I ever take a wife when I don't know who I am? What I have to offer?

"Can we not place feelings aside for this one night? I've had a taste of the pleasure that being with a man could bring, one I'd not known was possible. And now I wish to know more even if there is pain in this act itself. Show me, Kieran."

He could not.

But wished to very, very much.

"There would not be pain between us Maisie. Even still . . ."

"Let me please you too."

Her words were too much for him to bear. The thought of making love to her. Being inside her.

"You said there are ways, to prevent. . ." She looked down.

"There are. I would not spill my seed in you," he said bluntly, wanting her to ken. "But Maisie. Are you certain?"

She did not hesitate. "I am."

He reached for her once again. This time, their kiss was not one of desperation. It was a slow precursor. While his lips moved over hers, so did his hands. With each touch of his tongue, he untied, tugged, and eventually undid the laces that kept Maisie's gown in place. She aided by shrugging out

of the sleeves, the two of them not once breaking their kiss.

And so it went with their boots. His plaid. Maisie's shift. In the most sensual of ways their kiss was broken only temporarily as one by one their pieces of clothing fell aside. With a fire roaring, two candles and a lantern offering plenty of light to see her, Kieran guided Maisie to the bed, stopping only briefly to grab the cloth by Maisie's washbowl and place it on the bed.

"You are glorious," he said, unsure where to lay his eyes first. The swell of her breasts? The curve of her hips? That place that he'd touched and would do so again? Aye. There. As she lay against the pillows, it was there Kieran began as he lay beside her. "Open your legs for me," he whispered into her ear, her hair tickling his face.

She did.

He slipped first one, then two fingers inside, kissing her neck and making his way to Maisie's delectable mouth. She was so wet, Kieran had to resist making love to her immediately. He didn't want this to go too quickly. In many ways, she was still a virgin even if her maidenhead had been broken.

"Mmm," she moaned against his lips.

Kieran pulled back, using his fingers to ensure she was more than ready for him.

"You like that, sweet Maisie?"

"I do," she murmured.

He'd never wanted to please a woman more. She deserved it. She deserved so much. More than he could give her. But at least he could give her this.

Pulling his hand from her, Kieran moved atop her, willing himself to go slowly. He cursed her already dead husband for the look of fear that flitted across her face.

"I will go slowly. Gently," he said. Then, with a smile, "Unless you will it otherwise."

She blinked. "Which I willnae."

Aye, Maisie. You will.

Guiding himself into her, Kieran nearly spilled his seed. She was so damn tight. And beautiful. He might not be the first to be with such a woman, but he would be the first to have her find pleasure in lovemaking.

To that end, when he was fully buried in her, Kieran did not move. Instead, he allowed her to feel the fullness and become accustomed to it.

Even if the stillness nearly killed him.

She held on to his arms, Maisie's fingers a caress as sweet as the woman herself. When she, ever so slightly, pulled him into her, Kieran began to move. Slowly. Withdrawing and pumping back into her.

"My God, you have magnificent breasts."

"You have magnificent . . . everything," she said.

Kieran chuckled, something he didn't typically do during lovemaking. Enjoying their banter, enjoying being joined with her, he kept it going.

"Why, thank you, my lady. Shall I show you precisely how magnificent I can be?"

Accustomed to him now, looking completely relaxed, Maisie smiled. "If it pleases you."

"Oh, it pleases me very much."

Propping himself with one arm, Kieran reached between them. Slowly rubbing circles with his thumb as he entered her more deeply, he watched the expression on her face. A moment ago, she'd been smiling. Almost laughing. Now Maisie's lids hooded and her mouth opened. The sound she made?

Nearly his undoing.

He did not relent, alternately making love to her ever so slowly, continuing to use his hand to bring Maisie to climax, and now faster. Kieran was determined for her to find pleasure in an act she surely had not before.

Nay, not just pleasure. He wanted Maisie never to forget this moment.

"Do you like that, sweet Maisie?" he asked, his voice low. His words, like another caress. "Me inside you?"

“Kieran.” Her fingers attempted to grip his shoulders. “Look at you,” she said, more to herself than him.

She was close.

“I want you to let it all go for me. Can you do that?”

“Kieran,” she said again, her hips arching up toward him in perfect rhythm. He was buried full hilt now.

“Let. It. Go.” This time he demanded, and she did exactly that. Pressing up into him, she squeezed her eyes shut and made the most seductive of sounds. Removing his hand from between them, he braced himself and, after one final thrust, wanting nothing more than to remain buried inside her, spilling his seed . . . he pulled out.

And came instead into the cloth he’d placed beside them.

By the time Kieran recovered, Maisie had turned to him. Head on the pillow, the curve of her hips too enticing not to touch, he jumped from the bed, disposed of the cloth, and lay back next to her. Wordlessly his hand splayed on her waist and then moved downward. It stilled on her hip, Kieran content to leave it there as he looked into Maisie’s eyes.

“You do not cover yourself,” he said.

“Nor do you. Why are you surprised that I do not?”

“Never mind that. I am glad that you do not. You have a beautiful body, Maisie.” As they spoke, his fingers caressed her soft skin.

“I have the body I was born with. No more, no less.”

“A body that sang for me this eve.”

“A song I’d gladly sing again.” She smiled. “I was no virgin before this night, but had never truly made love before.”

As he suspected. “Tonight,” he insisted, “was as it should be.”

Kieran moved closer to her so that he could feel the heat of her body. Neither of them moved to get underneath the coverlet, and he realized it was a unique situation, to lie with a woman this way.

He quite enjoyed it.

“I’ve not met a woman like you before.”

Maisie’s hand rose toward his head. Smoothing back a lock of his hair, she traced her finger along his jaw.

“Nor I, you.”

“I came to speak with you about last eve, and yet, we’ve not done so. You did not wish to do so today on the ride back.” It was not a question, nor did Maisie respond. She sighed instead, dropping her hand on the bed between them. Somewhat reluctantly, Kieran removed his hand from her hip and laid it atop her own.

Neither of them spoke for some time.

“I like looking at you,” she said finally.

“Not as much as I do you, lass. But you are cold,” he said, having seen her shiver.

“Will you warm me?”

He’d love nothing more. “Come here,” Kieran said, tugging the coverlet down and pulling her toward him. “I will gladly do so before I leave. We should talk, however. ‘Tis why I came.”

“To talk,” she said, her naked body now pressed to his side.

“Aye,” he responded, ignoring the teasing tone of her voice. “To talk.”

“Mmmm,” Maisie murmured, not seeming inclined to do so. But then again, neither was he. In fact, it was a discussion he dreaded, knowing his mind. And hers. Especially after what had transpired between them.

I’ve not met a woman like you before.

It was true. Neither had he ever wanted so much to please a woman as he had Maisie. Likely because of her past experience with her husband, no more than that.

He wanted to see her face and so leaned back just slightly. Sleeping. Maisie’s eyes were closed, her breathing steady. And she was sleeping, in his arms. He’d intended to speak with her and leave, but no part of him wished to do that.

And so he pulled her tighter against him and closed his eyes instead.

CHAPTER

He was gone.

When Maisie had woken up, her bed had felt incredibly empty. She'd been glad for that emptiness since Baldwin had died. Though he'd kept his own bedchamber, when he did visit her, it was never a pleasant experience. Anything but that, in fact.

Last night, however?

"My lady?"

Alice looked at her as if it was not the first time she'd attempted to gain Maisie's attention. She'd gone about her duties this morn, her usual gusto absent. Not only had her bed been empty, but it did not appear Kieran, or his brother, were coming to break their fast. They'd have done so by now, and it took all her will not to check the stables to see if their horses were there. She should not care.

"Aye, Alice?" She needed to stop thinking of last eve. Stop thinking of him.

"I've come from the stables. The horses are fed and groomed."

Their stableboy had taken ill, and Alice currently fulfilled his duties.

"Very good," she said, about to give Alice other duties for the day.

"Also, my lady, the Duncraig warrior. The one who has been staying each night?"

“Kieran Duncraig,” she said, a vision of him atop her not one she was able to stop from entering her mind. “Aye?”

“He asked that I tell you he and his brother will return later this eve.”

So he’d left, as she suspected, but not without word. Maisie attempted to appear unaffected. “Thank you, Alice.”

She bobbed a curtsy, certainly not necessary, and walked away. For the remainder of the morn, Maisie had one thing on her mind. Namely, Kieran. What would he say when he returned? Would he learn anything that day now that his brother was aiding him?

What were they to do about their predicament? Because there was no doubt, it was a predicament surely. Each day that passed, she’d become more and more fond of him. When the door of the inn opened, something Maisie typically did not notice as it happened often enough, something drew her eyes to it.

Sure enough, it was a woman, and not one she’d ever seen before. Two men followed her inside. Certainly she was one of the most beautiful women Maisie had ever seen. And she was looking directly at her.

Something drew Maisie to the newcomer, and she greeted the group herself.

“Welcome to the Red Stag Inn. I am Maisie, the innkeeper here. Are you seeking rooms for the evening?”

“Perhaps,” the woman said as her companions found a table. She unclasped her cloak and took it from her shoulders. She wore a simple, but elegant, deep green riding gown. “I am looking for my husband, whom I am to meet here.”

Niall’s wife.

“You are Lady Avelina of Clan Duncraig?”

She smiled at that. “‘Tis odd to hear myself called so, but aye, I am indeed.”

Odd because she was the sister of Clan MacKinlay’s chief. “I am

acquainted with your brother-in-law,” she said. “Kieran has been staying at this inn while . . .” She stopped. Of course Lady Avelina would know what he was doing, but it was not Maisie’s place to speak of it. “He and your husband have gone into Aberdale, my lady.”

“Ahh, of course. I could join them.” She seemed unsure how to proceed.

Maisie offered her a choice. “Or you might rest and allow me to serve you a meal first? It seems rain threatens, and you would do well to avoid a storm.”

“Indeed,” she said. “I will await them here. Did my husband procure rooms already?”

“He did,” Maisie said. “I am happy to show you to yours. Will you require two additional ones for your men?” Thankfully the priest and his retinue who had taken four of her rooms had left that morn, which allowed her to offer a room for each of them.

“Aye, if you have them.”

“I do, my lady.”

Maisie fulfilled both of her promises, feeding and housing the newcomers. As she worked, she could not help but glance at the woman, who so easily conversed with the warriors with whom she traveled.

What must it have been like, to marry a man who was your enemy? Had these men, and the others at Duncraig, readily accepted her? It wasn’t until later that day she had the opportunity to ask her any of these questions. When Lady Avelina came from her room, refreshed and looking for a path to walk, Maisie volunteered to accompany her.

“I am sorry it dinnae rain, that I advised you to stay at the inn rather than travel to Aberdale.”

“‘Tis of no concern,” she said, both women pulling their cloaks tight as they walked the same path Maisie had with Kieran days before. “Niall would likely have wished me to stay and wait for him. But I am impatient to speak with Kieran. You’ve come to know him, then? How goes he?”

Maisie was uncertain how much she should say. “He is well. As you can expect, he was hesitant when your husband arrived, but the two have reconciled.”

Lady Avelina seemed surprised by her candor. “So you know of their disagreement.”

“I do,” Maisie said.

Lady Avelina looked at her even closer than before. “I am glad to hear of their reconciliation. Kieran left before Niall could speak with him properly.”

“I told him ‘twas ill-advised and urged him to return and do so but . . .” She shrugged. “Kieran does not seem to listen well.”

At that, Lady Avelina laughed. “A trait he shares with his brother and their father.”

“I am afraid Kieran does not seem as ready to forgive the latter as he was his brother.”

“So he has told you . . . everything?”

“Aye,” Maisie said softly, avoiding her gaze. Until she could not any longer.

Lady Avelina stopped, forcing her to do the same.

“You are the owner of the Red Stag Inn?”

“Indeed.”

“The sole owner?”

She knew what Lady Avelina was asking. “My husband, the previous owner, passed. So aye, I am its sole owner.”

That, it seemed, was all Lady Avelina needed to hear. Her eyes widened as she continued to stare at her, for so long that Maisie nearly looked away. “You are in love with him.”

In love? Nay, she was not in love with him. She’d given herself to him, aye. Was well pleased by him. But in love? She began to shake her head, but Lady Avelina put up her hand.

“You may deny it to yourself, but you’ve no need to deny it to me. I can

see it in your eyes. Hear it in your voice. I myself fell in love not long ago and can see the signs easily.”

In love. With Kieran?

“I have no wish to marry again. Nor does your brother-in-law wish for it.”

Again, she laughed. A beautiful, tinkling sound so different than Maisie’s own harsh laugh. “You may not wish it. And Kieran may think he does not either. But that means little to your heart. Seeing you, speaking with you . . .”

She smiled. “I’ve no doubt Kieran feels the same.”

“Nay, my lady, you are wrong. I do not . . . he does not . . .”

“We shall see soon enough.” Lady Avelina nodded down the path. “Come, we will talk and become acquainted.”

She said it as if there was a reason they should become so, and that reason was Kieran. But Lady Avelina was wrong. Even if Maisie did love Kieran—was it possible?—that did not mean he loved her. Neither did it matter. She’d not give another man, even one such as Kieran, control over her ever again.

Lady Avelina, who asked she call her by Lina only, was as kind as she was beautiful. She asked about Maisie and told her of her own childhood. How she’d lost her father and so many other relatives at the Battle of Black Friars. Avelina told her how she met Niall, and of their courtship, as they turned back toward the inn.

“Of course I had not wanted to fall in love with my enemy.”

“Nor do I want to fall in love with any man,” Maisie blurted before thinking better of it. Her tongue seemed to loosen of its own accord around this woman. “But your enemy,” she said, hoping to move on. “That could not have been easy.”

“My brother is still wroth with me, though Niall’s clan has been very welcoming. More so than either of us expected. His father took some time.” She shrugged. “As will you.”

Maisie glanced at her walking companion but said nothing.

“You are reluctant because of your husband,” she continued. “Which I

can ken easily. But Kieran is an entirely different sort of man. He is very much like Niall, in fact, but with an even easier temperament than my husband.”

“That may be so, but . . .” There was something she had to ask the woman. “You’ve not yet spoken to Kieran and know not his feelings toward me. And I am but an innkeeper, no lady born. Yet you seem” She did not know how to finish, precisely.

“Excited by the prospect of you with my brother-in-law? Because I am. I’ve wished for a sister my whole life, and can easily surmise your character, noble born or nay. You and Kieran, ‘twill happen. I am sure of it.”

She laughed. The woman was mad. “I willnae marry again.”

“You will.”

“Kieran does not care for me in that way.”

“He does.”

Maisie shook her head. “You cannae know such a thing.”

Avelina winked at her, as if she knew a secret, just as they approached the inn. It was not possible, however. She’d just arrived, had not spoken to Kieran, and so it was not possible. Yet, the lady seemed very certain of herself.

No matter.

She and Kieran were simply not meant to be.

CHAPTER

They'd only just sat down, Maisie nowhere in sight, when his sister-in-law looked at Kieran as if she would chastise him. Though she'd greeted him warmly—not unexpected, given the new circumstances surrounding his background—Avelina appeared anything but warm now.

“What are your feelings toward Maisie?”

Not what he'd expected.

“Rather than discuss that we may be related, or are at least fellow clan members, or what Niall and I discovered today, you wish to know . . . my feelings toward Maisie?”

“Aye. I spoke to the maid, Alice, earlier. She told me that you remain in the hall each night until all of the inn's patrons are abed. I can think of one reason to stay so far away from Aberdale rather than right within its village.”

Astute woman.

“Do you now wish to know what we learned today?”

“I wish to learn that and how you feel about the innkeeper.” He was about to answer when Avelina kept going. “I spoke with her, and the woman is clearly capable, very beautiful, and quite taken with you.”

“Taken with me?”

Niall looked back and forth between them as if he was enjoying their banter.

“You were not aware of it?”

Niall nearly spit out his ale. Kieran smiled as well, thinking of Maisie lying nude beside him, his hand on her hip, her breasts fairly beckoning him. How sensual she looked lying on that bed. How wonderfully tight she was.

“As you can see,” his brother said. “Kieran is well aware of it. We were to share a room last eve but”—Niall cocked his head to the side, as if thinking—“I slept most of the night with no companion. I did wonder where he’d gone off to—”

“Enough,” Kieran stopped him.

Avelina’s eyes could not have been opened any wider. “So, ‘tis as I thought.”

He reserved comment.

“Are you in love with her?”

“Lina,” Niall said. “I should mention that love is not required for a man and woman to be together. In fact, if you remember our own courtship—”

“I am well aware of the fact, husband. And also that she is a widow. But one does not remain in the hall of an inn all evening for a woman he simply wishes to bed.”

“Nay?” Niall asked. “‘Twould seem a fine reason to wait.”

“Niall.”

“Lina.”

Kieran leaned back, looking through the hall again but still not seeing her. Crossing his arms, he waited for the two of them to finish their conversation.

About him.

He cleared his throat just as Niall leaned into his wife and kissed her on the nose. “You are cute when you’re angry.”

“My feelings for Maisie,” Kieran said when his brother finished, “have naught to do with the fact that Niall and I learned there was, indeed, a boy who went missing at the battle from Clan MacKinlay. I met a healer who said as much but would reveal no further details unless I told her why I wished for

the information.”

“You willnae tell her your identity?”

Where was Maisie? It was unlike her not to be in the hall for such an extended period of time.

“I do not believe the woman would keep the information to herself. So nay, I dinnae tell her. But today we spoke with others who remember the battle, and the boy.”

“You,” Avelina clarified.

“Aye, me.”

“And?” Avelina prompted. “What did they tell you? Did they know of the boy’s identity? And why have neither of you told me before now?”

He smiled sweetly at his sister-in-law. “You seemed intent on discussing other things.”

“Oh, you. Tell me,” she said.

Kieran was about to. But there was still no Maisie anywhere despite being mealtime. She’d never missed a meal that he could remember.

“Niall will tell you what we’ve discovered. I will be back,” he said, standing.

When he found one of the serving maids, he realized they had not seen Maisie for some time either. Something was amiss. He caught Niall’s eye out of more caution than was likely necessary, and without hesitation his brother stood and joined him.

“She is always here during the meal,” he said. “The maid has not seen her, which is also unusual.”

“I will get Dougal and Hamish.”

“The stables,” Kieran said, intending to begin his search there since he’d not seen her walk through the hall. “And then the kitchens,” he added, heading toward the door. There was no reason for Maisie to be in her rooms, and with every step he took, Kieran knew he should have begun looking for her earlier. She should have been in the hall.

A chill that promised the start of a new, even colder season forced most inside. He spotted no one, and nothing seemed amiss. Even so . . . Kieran could not get rid of the feeling something was wrong with Maisie. Why had he not gone looking for her earlier?

He froze.

There was a sound from behind the stables, barely perceptible over the ones from inside, but one that his trained ears as a tracker told him did not belong. As he ran toward it, his worst fears came true at the scene before him. Three men stood there, two watching while a third held a woman against the back of the wooden stables.

Maisie.

She noticed him before the others did. Her mouth covered by the bastard's hand, while his other pinned both of her hands above her head, she looked as scared as he imagined she felt. A rage surfaced inside him that Kieran had never—not in any battle or any other time in his life—experienced. He unsheathed his sword so quickly that none of the men noticed until he was directly upon them.

Yanking the man off Maisie, he noticed three things at once.

The man was MacBrannigan.

His clansmen's swords were already drawn.

And there was blood on the corner of Maisie's lip.

For that, this day would be MacBrannigan's last. "I'll not kill an unarmed man," he said, standing back, waiting for him to unsheathe his own sword. "But I am going to kill you for this."

The others came toward him, Kieran now outnumbered three to one. He vaguely heard Maisie screaming his name when another voice, a very familiar voice, rang out from behind him.

"Do not," his brother said to MacBrannigan's clansmen. "Unless you wish to join your man in hell."

By now MacBrannigan's sword was drawn and at the ready. A quick

glance back told Kieran what he already knew. Niall, Dougal, and Hamish were at the ready. ‘Twould be a slaughter if MacBrannigan allowed it.

MacBrannigan squared off against him, sword in hand, and it seemed his men were no longer considering interfering. And though the man was strong, Kieran fought like he never had in his life. Not giving MacBrannigan any quarter, he ignored Maisie’s calls. Ignored everything save the rage that found the edge of his sword more than once come close to his opponent’s neck. He did not aim to disarm him, as Kieran had done during their first fight.

He aimed to kill him.

And would have if he didn’t see the flash of Maisie’s gown just as Kieran lifted his arm to deliver a death blow, one even his men knew was coming by the sounds they made. She attempted to come to him, Niall grabbing her at the last moment.

He did something then that Kieran never, ever did in a fight. Lost his concentration. Instead of watching his opponent, he looked toward his brother and Maisie. Seeing that blood on her lip, thinking of what might have happened if he’d not gotten to her sooner . . .

“Kieran!” Niall yelled.

But it was too late. The sword sliced his arm at the same time he heard his brother scream and saw the terror in Maisie’s eyes. Without hesitation, Kieran turned and delivered what he knew instantly would be a blow to end the miserable bastard’s life. He wore no armor, and Kieran’s sword found its mark in his opponent’s chest. If he had any thoughts of preserving his life, as Maisie clearly wanted him to do, the gash in Kieran’s arm prevented any further such thoughts.

Everything happened at once.

“Whore,” MacBrannigan uttered, his last word on this earth a disparaging one, unsurprisingly.

Sheathing his sword and taking Maisie from his brother, he and Niall

exchanged a quick glance and Kieran knew he would take care of MacBrannigan's men. Though he could hear the chaos behind him, he cared only for Maisie.

Wiping the blood from her mouth, he held her to him as she cried.

"Shhh," he said, smoothing her hair. "'Twill all be well. You are safe."

She continued to cry on his shoulder, Kieran murmuring words of comfort until she stopped. He glanced back to see MacBrannigan's men carrying his body away.

"He . . . he nearly killed you," she said finally, lifting her head. Though her face was wet and splotched with red, to him, Maisie was the most beautiful thing in the world at this moment. She was alive, and naught else mattered.

"This?" he asked, nodding to his arm. "A scratch, 'tis all. I was in no danger of dying this day," he lied. Becoming distracted in a swordfight could, indeed, have been the death of him.

"It's bleeding," she said.

His brother seemed to notice the same thing. Tearing off a portion of his plaid, Niall wrapped Kieran's arm. "Does your village have a healer?" Niall asked Maisie.

"Aye," she said. "We shall send for her."

"Indeed," Niall agreed, waiting.

Pulling back even farther from Maisie, Kieran grabbed one of her hands and squeezed. "Tell us, lass, what happened." Before she began, he noticed their men were missing. He was about to ask Niall, but his brother seemed to anticipate the question.

"Ensuring MacBrannigan's men leave the premises, as they were instructed."

"Mmm." He turned back to Maisie and waited.

"I was looking for Fergus," she said. "He and his men were just arriving. I told him he was not welcome at my inn, and he dinnae take kindly me

saying so.”

Kieran wanted to ask why she did not come for him first before delivering such news, but he refrained. He’d not question her judgement. Maisie was accustomed to running the Red Stag alone, and though he hated the fact, it was the way of things.

“I believed, at first, he was simply moving on. He and his men went into the stables, I presumed to fetch their horses. I waited for some time, but they never emerged. Until they did. Standing at the door, peering inside, I was taken unaware when MacBrannigan appeared suddenly and grabbed me, dragging me to this spot.”

“You fought him, clearly,” Niall said just as Lina ran up to them.

“I could not remain any longer,” she said. “Maisie?”

“She is well,” Kieran said as Lina went to Niall’s side. He explained. “Maisie was attacked and was explaining what had happened.”

Lina looked around. “Attacked? By whom? Where is the attacker?” She met Kieran’s eyes, understanding immediately. “Ahh.”

“I tried to fight him,” Maisie continued. “But he dragged me to where you found us. I could not scream and prayed only that you would come to find me. Which you did.”

“I should have come sooner. I thought it odd you were not in the hall.”

“I am thankful you came when you did. But you’re injured and . . .” She swallowed. Likely it was the first time Maisie had seen a man killed. Even a bastard such as MacBrannigan, a man who attacked her . . . it was not an easy thing to witness. Nor should it be.

“The bastard deserved to die,” he said. “Tales of his cruelty are well-known. Likely he’d never have left you alone.”

“Who was the man?” Lina asked.

“Duncan MacBrannigan,” Niall said.

“He is the MacBrannigan chieftain, is he not?” she asked.

“Was,” Kieran corrected.

None said any more for a time until Maisie, unfortunately, pulled her hand from his. “Come, we will fetch the healer. Your arm continues to bleed through.”

He wanted to say so much more. To tell Maisie that, despite his many battles, he’d never felt a terror rip through him as it had when he saw her pinned against that wall. Instead, he agreed as their party made their way into the inn.

Between what he and his brother had learned that day, the attack, and his feelings about what had transpired, they had much to discuss. It seemed from the way Maisie looked at him as they walked through the door, she agreed.

CHAPTER

If Maisie thought Kieran protective before, this eve he was more so than usual.

She insisted on returning to work, the inn needing her attention after she'd gone missing unexpectedly. None knew what had transpired behind the stables, and Maisie hoped to keep it as such.

MacBrannigan was dead.

She did not mourn the loss of such a man, precisely, but as Kieran had correctly surmised, seeing him slain was not something she could rid her mind of. One moment, he was alive, coming at Kieran when he turned to look at her.

The next, he lay on the ground, blood seeping into the grass. It was the sounds she remembered most, strangely. Of swords clanging. Of MacBrannigan's men shouting, promising their revenge against Kieran and Clan Duncraig.

"My lady?"

"Aye, Margaret?" she asked the maidservant.

"Cook sent me to tell you the stores of grain are low."

That could not be so. "We've had grain delivered less than a sennight ago."

Margaret shrugged as if to say she knew not the reason for it. "I will

speak to her.”

Reminding herself to do so, Maisie attempted not to think of what had happened earlier. Her fear when she realized MacBrannigan had made good on his promise. She should have waited until she'd come back into the inn, with Kieran at her back, to tell him to leave. But the way he sneered at her . . . she shook her head as if to clear it of the memory of him.

Kieran watched her.

He sat with his brother and sister-in-law, as well as their men, but had not once looked away from her all eve. Promising to speak to her at the end of the evening, hinting he had much to tell her, Kieran had been tended to by the healer and, thankfully, his arm no longer bled. A new shirt hid the bandage she knew was underneath.

For a moment earlier, she thought he might be killed. That Maisie feared more for his life than she had her own—and she'd been quite terrified MacBrannigan would rape or kill her before anyone, namely Kieran, could intervene—was all she needed to know about her feelings toward him.

Lady Avelina was right.

She loved him.

Maisie had gone and fallen in love with a man. Something she swore never, ever to do.

CHAPTER

The door to Maisie's bedchamber was locked, as it should be. He knocked, having told her he would meet her here after fetching his things from his own chamber, now Niall and Lina's.

Maisie had clearly taken so many precautions and learned to navigate running the Red Stag on her own, and yet still she'd been attacked. Shuddering at the thought of what might have happened had he not gone to her, Kieran vowed to never let her get so close to danger again.

And he would tell her so this eve.

He had no wish for a wife, given his circumstances. But seeing her earlier pinned to the stable wall by MacBrannigan . . . something powerful had stirred within him that was hard to deny. At dinner, his sister-in-law was less reticent with her appraisal of the situation.

"'Tis a simple matter, really. You love her and she loves you. I think she is a fine woman and would make just as fine an addition to our family. You should marry her."

Ignoring her husband's laughter at Lina's declaration, as well as Kieran's attempt to change the subject of discussion, she had continued.

"Why neither of you wishes to admit it, I cannae say."

"You spoke to her of me?"

"I did."

“What did she say?”

“Very little, but ‘twas not what she said that matters.”

And so it went for the remainder of the night. They spoke alternatively of MacBrannigan—speculating on what his men might do to retaliate—as well as what they’d learned that day.

And, of Maisie.

“You’ve your belongings,” Maisie said, noticing his satchel as she opened the door. Her hair was wet, in a long braid, and she wore naught but a chemise.

“I do.”

She said nothing further but stood to the side, allowing him entry. Immediately upon closing and locking the door, he pulled her into him, breathing in the fresh scent of lilac. She wrapped her arms around him, and though he wanted to kiss her, to make love to her, after what she’d experienced that day, Maisie needed something different. And so, he held her for some time.

When she finally did pull back, he leaned down and placed one gentle—chaste, even—kiss on her lips. He stepped away, growing hard and not wishing to push her any further.

A wooden tub sat before the fire.

“Go on,” she said. “I’ve washed and dried already.”

He dipped his fingers into the water. “‘Tis hot still.”

She smiled. “Aye.”

A hot bath.

Kieran did not have to be offered it twice and wasted little time disrobing. Maisie watched him until he was nearly stripped bare and then made to turn from him until he stopped her.

“You’ve seen me before,” he said. “And dinnae shy away.”

“Somehow it seems more . . . intimate to do so again. As if it is a common occurrence.”

“It will be,” he vowed.

Maisie seemed rightly confused.

“As I said, we’ve much to discuss.” Kieran tossed his clothing to the side, now standing before her completely nude. He wanted her to become accustomed to him, as he would her. The memories she had of what was between a man and a woman in the bedchamber would be completely forgotten, replaced with new ones.

She listened, though, and was no longer turning away. Maisie watched him get into the tub.

“‘Tis a shame you’ve bathed already.”

Her eyes widened as Kieran took the rag and soap on a wee table beside the tub. He began to wash himself, the feel of hot water and intensity of Maisie’s gaze upon him making him want to pull her into the tub with him.

“You’ve a magnificent body, Kieran,” she said, sitting on a chair not far from him, in front of the fire.

“As do you, Maisie.”

“Does your arm pain you still?”

It did, but he’d not have her worry. “I’ve endured much worse injuries than this.”

“I thought he would kill you,” she said, not for the first time. “I dinnae wish you to die.”

Kieran laughed. “I am glad to hear it.”

“I . . . meant only that, when I thought you were in danger . . .” Maisie stopped, but he knew what she wanted to say because he’d felt the same when he’d thought she was in danger. But before they could discuss the matter, he wanted her to know first what they’d learned that day.

“I am not the son of a clan chief,” he said, “but one of a blacksmith.”

“You learned something today?” she said, obviously surprised.

“I did. And had planned to tell you earlier.”

“But were distracted.”

He was pleased to see her smile. That she could do so, and jest about the incident, did not mean she was beyond it yet, but it was good all the same.

“Aye,” she said. “We were a wee bit distracted. Tell me.” She moved her stool closer to him, and he was pleased to see her look down into the wooden tub.

“Do you seek something in particular, my lady?”

Her head snapped up. “You are no gentleman to say such a thing.”

“I am very much a gentleman,” he responded. “As well you know. But I am also a man who has known you, Maisie. And wishes to again.”

Her eyes widened.

“Would you like that too?”

She nodded. “Aye. But we—”

“But we have much to discuss, as I’ve said before. First, my father.”

Maisie’s hand flew to her mouth. “You so distracted me, I realized only now what you said. Son of a blacksmith? Did you find your father?”

Kieran set the cloth and soap aside, draped his arms over the side of the tub, and shook his head. “I dinnae. He is dead. As are my mother and older brother.”

She leaned forward.

“We spoke to a woman as old, if not older, than the healer, who remembered my disappearance well. I’d gone to the battle, as did many, but since my mother died in childbirth and both my brother and father in the battle, when I did not return, none looked for me in earnest.”

“You are certain ‘twas you?”

“I am. The boy, she said, had a burn from his father’s smithy here.” Kieran lifted his uninjured arm. Just beneath his elbow there was a mark from what appeared to have once been a bad burn. “We spoke to others who knew of the boy, but tracked down this woman in particular as she was rumored to have once lived beside the blacksmith and his family. Her knowledge of this scar was the precise kind of information we’d hoped for to confirm ‘twas me

the others spoke of.”

Maisie did not seem pleased. “The healer would have known as much. She likely treated you. And yet, said naught.”

“Indeed. I’ve thought the same.”

“This woman does not know the boy was you?”

“Nay. She inquired, of course, as to the reason for our questions, but answered them freely even though we remained evasive.”

He let Maisie consider the information he’d had all day.

“Your family. All dead.”

“Not all. She said there was a sister, an aunt who worked as a kitchen maid for the chief and his family. Though she no longer serves in the castle, we plan to question him on the morrow.”

“The MacKinlay chief?”

“Aye.”

“Lady Avelina’s brother.”

“The very one.”

“Your enemy.”

He shrugged. “Once my enemy, aye. But the blacksmith was indeed a member of Clan MacKinlay, which means I was once too.”

“Is he old enough to know of this kitchen maid? He is of a similar age as his sister, is he not?”

“He is,” Kieran acknowledged. “But we’re told my father’s sister—”

“Your aunt.”

He had difficulty referring to these people as family despite learning the truth of it that day. “My aunt,” he said. “Served there for many years, apparently. Until recently.”

“Where has she gone now?”

“‘Tis the precise question we aim to have answered. Having Lina with us should make the task easier. Her brother may hate me and Niall, but I do believe he will give his sister the answers she seeks.”

“You are the son of a blacksmith,” she mused. “And had a brother.”

She mourned for men she did not know. It was very much like Maisie to do so. “I have a brother still,” he said.

Maisie smiled. “You do. And perhaps an aunt who is alive.”

“Perhaps. Most importantly, as the son of a blacksmith, and a MacKinlay, I can never become my brother’s second in command. If I ever wanted such a thing,” he added, still uncertain if he could forgive his adopted father, and mother, for their deceit.

“You are sad about that.”

“Not sad, lass. But concerned it may matter to you, as my future wife.”

He stood, reached for a drying cloth, and watched Maisie’s expression turn from surprise to kenning to, unfortunately, disbelief.

“First, why would such a thing matter? I am the daughter of a farmer.”

“You are a very wealthy innkeeper, no longer simply a farmer’s daughter.”

She seemed to ignore that. “More importantly, I am not your future wife.”

“Nay?”

“Nay,” she said, looking down at him as Kieran finished drying. He took a step toward her.

“That, my dear Maisie, is the second matter we must discuss. But first, as you continue to look at me such, it seems there is another matter to address first.”

She wanted him as much as he wanted her. The desire was there, in her face, to see plainly.

“Which matter might that be?”

He was hard, fully erect. And very much ready. “Rather than discuss it, I’d show you instead.”

CHAPTER

Kieran's revelations.

MacBrannigan's attack.

His death.

So much had happened that day, and yet as Kieran strode toward her, all Maisie could think was how much she wished to be in his arms. To feel his body against her. Inside her. When he lifted her chemise, she raised her arms to assist him.

He reached behind her, pulled Maisie's braid forward, and began to undo it. "I would see your hair flow freely between us as I make love to you."

As I make love to you.

With her hair now tumbling around her shoulders, Maisie moved toward Kieran, whose hands gently caressed first her neck, and then downward over her shoulders and then arms.

"I would touch every part of you," he said, his fingertips on her waist and then gliding upwards, finally cupping both breasts. She closed her eyes, giving herself completely over to his touch. When his hand glided down between her legs, she held on to his shoulders to steady herself.

"So wet," he said, his voice so low she could hardly hear him. Maisie's eyes popped open. "So ready for me."

That, she heard.

When he removed his hand and guided her toward the bed, she expected to lie beneath him as she'd done before. Instead, Kieran lay on his back. Pulling her atop him, he guided her until she straddled him from above.

“You are in control.”

She looked down, unsure how to proceed. His smile did not help matters.

“Kieran,” she said. “I do not know how to do this.”

“I assure you.” He gripped himself with one hand and splayed his other on her hip, guiding it upward. “You do.” Easing onto him, Kieran’s groan of pleasure encouraging her, Maisie propped herself on his shoulders with both hands and began to move.

Though his hands remained on her hips, aiding her as she moved up and down, it was Maisie who set the pace. Maisie who controlled their movements.

“I like this very much.”

“Good. You will be doing it a lot.”

She was about to ask what he meant by that, precisely, when his hand moved between them, his thumb rubbing and pressing her just right. In response, her hips seemed to move of their own volition. Circling and pressing until Maisie’s entire body screamed for release.

“Kieran.” She watched him as his lips parted, Kieran’s expression one of pure pleasure. She was doing this to him. “I . . .”

“Go on,” he said, his thumb circling to perfection.

His gentle encouragement was all Maisie needed. Her toes curled as her core squeezed tight and then released, everything tensing, but blessedly so. As the glorious feeling began to ebb, her movements made even easier, if such a thing were possible, because of the wetness between them . . . she realized . . .

“You are not pulling from me?”

“Should I?”

The implications of his words flooding her, Maisie’s body coming alive

once more, she said nothing. Instead, she began to move again. Up and down, watching Kieran's expression as he grabbed her hips in earnest and pumped into her from below.

This time, he was in control, even with her atop him.

"Nay," she said, the building of sensation inside her stomach once again threatening to overtake her. "Nay," she said again, her words seeming to push Kieran over the edge. With a roar of pleasure, Maisie's core once again clenching as he thrust one final time into her, Kieran held her hips in place.

And spilled his seed inside her.

Joined, irrevocably, she fell atop him. Exhausted. Sated. But also . . .

Terrified.

She lifted her head after some time.

"What have we done?" she asked, the waves of pleasure once again ebbing.

"We've made love," Kieran said, his eyes bright with merriment. "And you came twice for me. I will take it as a new standard for our lovemaking."

She could not resist smiling along with him. "I dinnae know such a thing was possible."

"There are many things I've yet to teach you."

She blinked, considering his words that eve. "You speak as if we willnae part when you learn all you need to know of your past."

"Surely you do not think I'd make love to you in that way and then leave?"

Propped up on him in the most intimate of positions, she and Kieran stared into each other's eyes for some time. And for one wild moment, she considered saying the words that had been true even before she'd accepted them.

She loved him. And wanted nothing more than to be with this man. And yet . . .

"I will never marry again."

“I willnae leave you, Maisie. Not after this night. Or before it, even. When I saw you in MacBrannigan’s clutches . . .” His expression changed rapidly. “I willnae leave you.”

“I would not have you leave,” she admitted. “The thought of you riding away from the Red Stag, never to return . . . yet, I made a vow to myself.”

“A vow you made because of your husband. But I am not him. Surely you realize as much.”

She did. Maisie certainly did. Yet the thought of giving Kieran complete control over her life . . . If she married him, all she had would be his. Including herself. It was simply the way of things.

“I do,” she said. “But—”

His finger touched her lips, stopping her. “Do not voice it. Instead, think of what we just shared.”

“How could I not,” she teased, “lying atop you this way?”

Kieran did not answer. Instead, he pulled her head down to him and kissed her. His tongue exploring. His hands holding her head in place, as if she would dare move from him . . . the kiss was unlike many of their others.

It was slow.

Passionate.

Loving.

He’d not said the words either, but she could feel Kieran’s love in the way his mouth moved over hers. His words implied it. His actions this night were easy to interpret. And though her heart soared at the prospect of not parting from this man who kissed her so affectionately, a part of her held back.

She could not marry again, not even him. And Maisie doubted Kieran would accept such an arrangement. Nor did she wish it, for she was not fool enough not to realize eventually their lovemaking would produce a babe. One whose parents should be wed.

Tomorrow Maisie would think more on it. For now, she gave herself over

to Kieran's kisses and the promise of sleeping in his arms once again.

CHAPTER

“Come with us.”

Kieran watched Maisie dress, knowing he should do the same. But holding her, making love to her as they woke, being with her as she prepared for the day . . . he was loath to leave.

“When I was gone so recently? I cannae.”

Once the idea took hold, he could not abandon it. “All was well when you returned, was it not?”

“Aye, but—”

“Come with me. I may likely meet my aunt this day, and would have you by my side.”

Maisie licked her lips, a tempting sight if he’d ever seen one. If his brother and the others were not already waiting for him below, Kieran would pull her back into this bed at this very moment.

Instead, he reluctantly began to dress.

“You have your brother with you,” she said. And back and forth they went until, finally, Kieran pulled her toward him.

He silenced her pleas with a kiss. A slow, lingering, full-of-promise kiss. When he finished, he looked into her eyes. This woman that would be his wife.

She may deny it. Think she did not will it. But as he’d watched her sleep

last eve, the problem of their future became less and less of one. In fact, it was a simple matter.

He'd not be parted from her for one simple reason.

"I am in love with you, Maisie."

She froze in his arms. Opened her mouth to speak, but he silenced her with his finger. "Say nothing until you are ready to accept me fully. But I tell you this. After yesterday, and last eve, there is nothing you could say, or do, that would convince me to leave you. I've never felt such terror in my life as I did when MacBrannigan held you against your will. I knew then, and perhaps much sooner, but worried you may not want a man such as me."

"A man such as you? Surely, you jest."

"My past—"

"Means naught to me. As I said, I am the daughter of a farmer. Not some noblewoman who cares for titles and the like. I wish only for food on my table. And freedom."

"Which you think you'd be forced to give away if we were to marry. But you must know already in your heart, Maisie, I am not that sort of man. I would have you do as you wish. My only aim is to please you."

"I do not think you are like him in any way."

"Then marry me."

She said naught. It was too soon.

"Then it will be my duty to convince you. In the meantime, I would have the woman I love with me this day."

That seemed to sway her. It was only some time later, as Maisie rode beside him toward Aberdale, that he began to truly consider the implications of this day. Speaking to Lina's brother, a man who, if all he'd learned were true, was not truly the enemy but, in truth, his clan chief.

"You are more quiet than usual," Maisie said as she rode beside him. The others rode in front of them, their party of six heading toward Castle MacKinlay.

“I was raised the son of the Duncraig clan chief,” he said, voicing his thoughts. “And yet Lina’s brother, if what I’ve learned is true, is my true chief.”

“Nay, Kieran. Your true chief is the man you choose to follow. When we met, you were wroth with your brother until you spoke to him. You must do the same with your parents. Surely you realize as much?”

The topic was a serious one, and yet visions of Maisie above him, his hands guiding her soft hips, were all he could think of suddenly.

“Kieran, when you look at me that way, I cannae remember our discussion.”

“We discussed,” he said as they approached a river crossing, “how beautiful you are. How much I cannae wait to make love to you again.”

She pretended to think on that. “I do believe we discussed a very different, and important, topic.”

“Nay,” he said immediately. “There is naught more important.”

As he said the words, Kieran realized the truth of them. How quickly Maisie had become more important to him than all else. When he’d asked for her to accompany them this day, Kieran had not realized how much he needed this woman by his side.

He loved her and would make her his wife. Of that, he had no doubt.

“When you say such things, I think . . .”

Though she did not finish as their riding party stopped at the riverbank, there was no need. He did not have to hear the words. She loved him. It was plain enough in her expression. But Maisie was scared too, and that fear overrode all else.

They found a spot where the water was shallow and crossed. Lina led them expertly, as they were now on MacKinlay land. She gained entry for them through the castle gates, and it was not until all six of them entered the hall of her home that Kieran realized something. He pulled Lina aside as they waited for her brother to be fetched.

“When I was here last,” he said, referring to the time when she and Niall met, when they’d come to inquire about the MacKinlay cattle grazing on Duncraig land, “there was a familiarity about this hall I could not place.”

“You’ve been here before,” she finished for him.

“Aye,” he said, that feeling he had now making sense. “I have. As a child.”

Lina frowned. “I am sorry I do not remember you, Kieran. If you were here, then surely we met before.”

“Perhaps,” he said, knowing a blacksmith’s son likely had little reason to frequent the clan chief’s hall very often. “What sort of reception do you believe your brother will offer?”

“A poor one,” Niall said, coming up to them. “Dougal and Hamish grow impatient to leave.”

Lina laughed. “We’ve only just arrived.”

“As I said.” Niall shrugged. Not long ago, ‘twould be unheard of for any Duncraig to stand in the hall of a MacKinlay. But things had changed with Niall and Lina’s marriage. At least, for some things had changed. As Avelina’s brother strode into the hall, it was clear he did not share the sentiment. Though likely pleased to see his sister, there was no doubt that having this many Duncraig warriors in his hall did not bring him comfort.

“Why do you bring them here?” he said to his sister, MacKinlay’s distaste quite clear.

“What sort of greeting is that for your sister?” she replied, clearly annoyed.

“As I said when you chose to marry him”—he nodded to Niall—“I dinnae accept it.”

“You’ve not changed your mind on the matter? His clan readily accepts me, Ewan. Can you not do the same? Perhaps we can bury this feud once and for all?”

“Bury?” The man looked, as he had most often when Kieran was in his

presence, as if his head might burst from his body at any moment. “His family killed—”

“You do not need to say it. We are all aware, as you are, that Niall and his brother were children at the time.” As if realizing why they were there, she added, “If you willnae welcome us in your hall, we should retire to the solar for a more private conversation, after which I will take my leave.”

“‘Tis inconceivable,” Niall added. “That you willnae offer your sister a meal. Welcome her in her own hall.”

The MacKinlay clan chief had naught but vitriol for them. “I willnae welcome a Duncraig in my hall, and well you know it.”

Lina made a sound, lifted her skirts, and marched back the way they came. “Kieran, Ewan, follow me.” And to her husband, “Take the others to the courtyard. We will meet you there.”

Kieran exchanged a glance with Maisie. He smiled at her wide eyes, Maisie not having seen Lina in full force until now. She was perfectly matched with his brother, and as he followed her to the solar chamber, Kieran was not surprised her brother did as well. He was clearly equal parts angry but also in awe of her, as most people were.

Wait until they met Maisie.

Kieran had a vision of such a meeting, her and his parents. They would adore her, his mother especially. His smile fled from his face the moment he remembered.

“We come with a question. Do you know of a kitchen maid named Abele? I’d not heard of her, but thought perhaps you had.”

Clearly, as a servant closed the door behind them, this was not the question MacKinlay expected to be called on to answer.

“A kitchen maid? You came to ask me about a kitchen maid?”

“Do you know of her?”

Lina’s brother looked back and forth between them. “I remember her, aye. But am not surprised that you do not, as she left when we were

children.”

“I was told she served here until recently. But that confused me, as I do not know her.”

“She is a twin, likely the reason for your confusion. Her sister served in the kitchen as well. Adeline.”

Lina’s jaw dropped. “Adeline?”

“Aye.”

“Is Abele’s sister?”

“She is. Abele left for Rosewood to live with her second husband. But Adeline never married and still uses her given surname. Why are we discussing kitchen maids, Lina?”

She looked at him.

“Because it is possible they are my aunts.”

If Ewan MacKinlay were surprised by Lina’s questions, he was even more so by Kieran’s statement.

“How is that possible? They had just one brother, a blacksmith who died in the Battle of Black Friars. He was a sworn warrior to Clan MacKinlay . . .”

Suddenly, he stopped. Stared.

It was in that moment, Kieran knew it was all true.

“You are the missing boy.”

“Apparently, aye. I am.”

“Ewan, how do you know all of this? You are not old enough to have remembered such a thing.”

“Nor do I,” the MacKinlay chief said, still looking at him. “But I am chief, and ‘tis my duty to know each and every person in the clan. How is it possible you dinnae know?” he asked.

This, he would rather not discuss, but Kieran supposed he owed the clan chief some explanation. “I’ve not yet spoken in depth to my parents of the incident, but have learned enough. Apparently, I ran from the battle and fell in a nearby river, nearly drowning. I was saved by the Duncraig’s wife.”

“Who kept you as their own?”

“Aye.”

“Did they not realize you must be a MacKinlay? And dinnae think to find your parents?”

“Father,” Kieran clarified. “My mother died in childbirth.” That was one thing the MacKinlay chief apparently did not know. “I’ve not spoken to them directly, but aye, that seems to be the case.”

If he thought such a thing were odd, that Kieran had not spoken to his parents about such a serious matter, the chief did not remark upon it. He turned to his sister, who nodded.

“He is a McKinlay. Our clans are tied tighter than ever before, brother.”

Ewan McKinlay did not seem to care about any ties between their clans. In fact, he somehow appeared even angrier than he was before.

“We are not bound together, Lina. We are enemies. And always will be.”

“Only if you make it so,” Kieran interjected. “The sins of our fathers and grandfathers need not be ours.”

“Sins of the Duncraig,” he spat back. “We nearly lost our entire clan. And now, slowly over the years, everyone seems to forget. Thinks to forgive.”

It was his eyes that gave him away to Kieran. They were not the eyes of a man who simply hated, but were of one nearly mad with that hate. He was not just angry with his sister for thinking to move past their feud, but with anyone who thought to do so.

How could he have not seen it before?

“I was a fool.”

Ewan’s eyes narrowed. Before he tossed out an accusation that would likely get him thrown from the keep, Kieran asked one final question.

“Do you know anything more of Abele beyond that she moved to Rosewood with her new husband?”

At first, he did not think Ewan would answer. But he did. “I do not.”

Very well.

Kieran watched the other man's eyes carefully. "It was you who led those cattle to graze on Duncraig's land."

It did not matter what came from his mouth next. The truth of it was in Ewan's eyes, something Kieran's father had taught him to decipher.

Father.

How many lessons had he taught him? It was so difficult to reconcile that man with the one who'd lied to him his entire life.

"I willnae accept such lies in my very home." MacKinlay seethed with anger. But it was too late. Lina, who at first did nothing but stare at Kieran as if he had, indeed gone mad, turned to her brother.

"It was you." She knew it as surely as Kieran did, and though her brother was attempting to convince them otherwise with his outrage, Lina would not allow it. "You can sputter all you would like, brother, but it makes sense. You've not hidden your displeasure any time a MacKinlay clansman even hints at ending our feud. You insisted on accompanying Niall and Kieran on the search and vowed to continue it on your own to no avail."

"Lina," he said in a way Kieran had never heard him speak to his sister before. "Stop. Talking."

But she would not, and as she stepped forward, Kieran did so as well, placing himself just slightly in front of her, between them.

The gesture did not go unnoticed. And with it, something seemed to have snapped in Lina's brother. Eyes wide, he took a step backward, his chest heaving as if it were an effort for him to breathe. Where his eyes were almost wild before, now they appeared worried.

"I would not dare hurt you, Lina," he said, seemingly appalled that Kieran had stepped between them.

"I know you would not," she replied. "But Kieran was right to defend me. You are not yourself, brother. The hate you've harbored for so long has begun to consume you." Her voice lowered as she reached out her hand and took her brother's, continuing to speak to him. "I love you, Ewan. You've

done something wrong. Very wrong. But none were hurt because of it. In fact, I met my husband because of those cattle.”

She spoke to him as if it were a certainty that it had, indeed, been him who led those cattle to their land.

“Ironic, is it not? Instead of driving the wedge necessary to ensure no MacKinlay falls prey to Duncraig deceit, I brought the two of you together instead.”

It *was* him, as Kieran thought.

“Not ironic,” she said, taking his other hand. “The universe righting a wrong.”

MacKinlay dropped his sister’s hands and looked at Kieran. “I will learn where your aunt has gone for certain so that you may find her.”

It was the first time since they’d met that the clan chief spoke to him in a tone that held no malice.

“If you can send word to the Red Stag Inn north of Aberdale?”

MacKinlay took a deep breath. “You are welcome to await word here.”

At that, Lina burst into tears. Tossing her arms around her brother, she cried on his shoulder. They were the tears of a sister who had just regained a brother. Which, of course, made Kieran think of Niall.

And his parents.

When we met, you were wroth with your brother until you spoke to him. You must do the same with your parents.

“Thank you for the offer,” he said. “But I have reason to return to the inn. I will meet you in the courtyard,” he said to Lina, who wiped her face with a handkerchief her brother had given her.

“Nay, in the hall,” her brother said. “If you willnae stay the night, at least take a meal before you leave. You are, after all, a MacKinlay.”

He may have been so at birth, but no longer. “I am a Duncraig,” he said, certain of it. “But an ally to your clan given the circumstances of my birth. And because of Lina.”

Sniffling, her nose red, his sister-in-law seemed incapable of speaking, but she did manage a smile at him.

Taking his leave, Kieran thought of everything that just happened. When he rejoined the others, Niall asking him if they'd learned anything, he simply laughed. "Aye, brother. We learned much, though I am unsure where to begin."

CHAPTER

Maisie was in disbelief. She'd heard the tale of the MacKinlay cattle, of course. It was the reason Niall and Lina had met. But to think it was her brother, the clan chief, who had attempted to renew the feud in such a manner?

"How did you realize 'twas him?" Niall asked.

Kieran shook his head. "I cannae say, precisely. His manner, perhaps. He was angry, but in a different way than most. When Father forbade Lina in his hall because she was a MacKinlay, it was a different sort of animosity. And though I know MacKinlay's quarrel runs deep having lost the battle, there was just an almost madness there that immediately made me realize it was him."

"All that time," Niall mused. "How did we not realize before?"

Kieran's lips turned up just slightly. It was his perpetual smile Maisie had first noticed. Well, perhaps it was other things, but his smile was certainly one of them.

"You were preoccupied, brother," Kieran said, looking at her.

His implication was clear. It was Kieran's turn to be preoccupied. With her. His words continued to ring in her ears. *I love you. Marry me, Maisie.*

She'd been prepared to share her own feelings when he stopped her, for there was no doubt she loved him too. Even now she could be carrying his

babe, though Maisie suspected not. Her husband had tried more often than she would have liked to plant his seed in her, but naught had come of it.

What am I to do? I cannae marry again. Can I?

“You are thoughtful,” Kieran said as his brother turned to their men.

“‘Tis much to consider,” she said. “Lina’s brother. Your aunts. And one you will likely locate to learn the true story of your birth.”

Though Kieran appeared skeptical that she truly was thinking of such things, likely by the way she looked at him, he did not comment on it. Instead, he cleared his throat, as if wishing to tell her something of import.

“Now it is you who appears thoughtful.”

“You were right,” he said.

“As I usually am,” she teased.

“I’m learning as much,” he teased back. “In this particular situation, I refer to what you said this morn. I must speak to my parents.”

To say she was surprised would be an understatement. “You will do so?”

Kieran sighed. “Perhaps I should find this aunt someday and learn of my birth, but as I watched Lina’s brother lash out at her, it occurred to me the damage such extreme hate can wreak. I would not wish to have such a thing chip away at me in that way.”

“You willnae look for her?”

“Someday, aye. But I know two people who can give me the answers I seek with whom I should speak first.”

“I am pleased to hear it.”

“As I thought you would be,” he said as Lina approached.

“My brother awaits in the hall,” she announced. “And wishes to offer a meal before we leave.”

Niall said nothing to his wife. Instead, he approached her, wrapping his arms around her shoulders. She whispered something into his ear. Maisie looked away. It seemed too intimate a scene to watch. Instead, she glanced up at Kieran.

“I am glad for her, to have reconciled with her brother.”

“As am I.”

He was thinking of his own reconciliation, Maisie was certain of it.

“Perhaps,” she ventured, “the answers you seek are just under your nose, like the mystery of the cattle.”

“Perhaps. It seems,” he said, “the others are ready. Shall we dine with my kinsmen?”

His teasing tone about such a serious matter told Maisie much about how he felt now compared to when they first met. Clearly more at ease with the situation—likely reconciling with Niall had helped tremendously—it seemed he was ready to learn the full truth, for better or worse.

“Your kinsmen,” she said, following him and the others. “They are not housed here.” She mused aloud and did not expect him to respond.

“Nay,” he said quietly. “They are not.”

Maisie froze. Kieran stopped alongside her.

“‘Tis the first time you’ve acknowledged as much since we met.”

“You are good for me, I believe. In more ways than one.”

This time, his smile was tinged with something more. A suggestiveness that she both recognized and appreciated. “When you look at me that way,” she whispered as they began walking once again, “it feels as if I am the most beautiful woman in the world.”

“Because you are, to me. I thought it the first time I saw you, but now knowing you, believe even more. There is no other woman for me, Maisie. Just you.”

His words did something to her insides. Did she want to marry again? Nay. But did she love this man and want to be with him always? Aye, she did, very much.

“This eve,” she said. “We shall talk.”

“I hope to talk well before then. At the meal. On our return. I would speak to you about everything, Maisie. We’ve so much yet to share.”

He spoke as if they would remain together. And if she were being honest, Maisie could not imagine it any other way.

“Indeed,” she said, anticipating what she thought to share with him this eve. “Indeed, we do.”

CHAPTER

He wanted nothing more than to go inside the inn and be with Maisie. But on their ride back, she told him it was not possible for her to leave so soon to accompany him home. Yet he was unwilling to leave her alone after what happened with MacBrannigan. The bastard might be dead, but no doubt his clansmen would be out for revenge.

It was Lina who provided the solution.

She and Niall would stay at the inn while Kieran returned with the others. He could not even wait until morn. Niall told him of some clan troubles he hadn't wished to burden Kieran with earlier.

"We will ride through the night," he told Maisie, dismounting only long enough to speak with her. "I will return posthaste."

"There are things I wish to tell you," she said, glancing at his clansmen, who waited for Kieran to mount and ride out. "But not this way."

His brows furrowed. "What sort of things?" he asked, clearly curious.

Maisie thought of declaring her love for him just then. Telling him that she was still uncertain of marriage, but perhaps in time she could reconcile with the idea. And in the meantime, if he would have her, she'd be glad for him to stay at the inn. Perhaps aid her in its running, though the son of a clan chief, a warrior such as him, might not wish to do such a thing. But if he were willing, she was as well. Being with a man openly, one not her husband, may

not be ideal, but Maisie cared little for others' opinions. After what she'd endured, that some may judge her was of little concern.

"We will talk when you return."

"Do you wish for me to return, Maisie?"

She smiled. "I do. Very much."

He would not dishonor her by showing affection openly, but Maisie had no such qualms. Soon enough, all here would know.

She stepped toward him, raised her arms, and placed them on his shoulders. In response, he leaned toward her. When their lips touched, Maisie closed her eyes and forgot others watched them. She knew only Kieran was leaving, and she wished for him to stay.

"Mmmm," he murmured.

When they broke apart, his look was unmistakable.

"Save it," she said, "Until you return." When she would tell him she loved him too.

"I will be back as soon as possible."

"Go easy on them," she said as Kieran mounted. "Think on your ride home of all they've done for you. For my part, I am grateful you are the jovial, kind man and well-trained warrior that they've raised."

"Perhaps 'twas the influence of my twin aunts."

She laughed, for he clearly jested with her. With a wink, he spurred his mount forward.

As Maisie watched him ride away, an unease settled into her.

"He will be back soon."

She turned to Lina. "Aye," Maisie agreed.

"He loves you."

Niall had taken the horse to the stable, and though Maisie should return without delay to the hall, she could not find the effort to do so at the moment.

"He does," she said. "He told me so."

Lina's smile could not have been bigger. "Did he? Oh, that is wonderful."

She forged ahead. “He asked for me to marry him,” she said, almost shyly. She hoped Kieran did not mind her telling Lina so, but she desperately wished to speak with someone, and not only was she his sister-in-law, the woman was also one of the kindest she’d ever met.

“You and Kieran? Married?”

That she seemed genuinely happy warmed Maisie’s heart. But she did not wish to give Lina false hope. “I dinnae agree. Or tell him I loved him, since Kieran stopped me. He wishes for the two together, and though I do love him”—the words spilled from her lips—“I vowed never to marry. As I’ve told you.”

“Vows are meant to be broken.”

Maisie cracked a smile. “Are they?”

“Nay.” Lina laughed. “My words make little sense,” she admitted. “But neither does your concern. Kieran is not the sort of man to control you, Maisie. Surely you realize that by now. He is one of the best men I know and would treat you as kindly as you deserve. That is a vow I make”—she smiled—“and will never break. I assure you ‘tis so.”

“I should have told him how I felt before he left,” Maisie said, staring at the road as if he might reappear. “I wanted to do so in private. But I will, when he returns,” she said, certain of it.

“You will tell him you love him? Or that you will marry him? Or both?”

Maisie thought she knew the answer to that question, but now was not so certain. Lina’s conviction that she should marry her brother-in-law was both welcome news and not surprising, given what she’d said in the past.

“I will think on it.” She turned to the inn. “In the meantime, I really should see to my duties.”

Lina looked up at the inn with her. “It would seem a man like Kieran could be useful as a partner in running such a place.”

Another problem between them. “Surely he would not wish to do so.”

“If he could find training partners in the clientele? I should think he

would consider it, as close to Duncraig land as we are.”

Maisie remained skeptical. “There are many things he might do,” she agreed. “But becoming an innkeeper? I am not certain.”

“Maisie,” Lina said as they entered the front door of the inn. “For you, I am certain. Kieran would do anything.”

CHAPTER

Home.

He'd never once questioned riding into the gates of Duncraig Castle. To him, these walls were as familiar as the ones in his bedchamber. Or as the smell of freshly baked bread just beneath it, the bakery placed at a most opportune location in the inner courtyard.

Today, however, was very different. Though everyone greeted him as they would had he left for just the day, to Kieran they all felt . . . odd. It was as if he were a stranger here.

By the time he stood in the hall, waiting for his parents—who, he was told, were both in the keep—Kieran could not have been more ready to turn and ride back through the gatehouse to the Red Stag Inn. He missed Maisie. And did not wish to be here after all that had transpired . . .

“Kieran.”

Even to his fog-filled mind, there was no mistaking the absolute joy in his mother's voice as she called his name. Lifting her skirts, she ran to him. And without further ado, tossed her arms around him.

He'd rehearsed so often what he might say, but none of those words came from his lips. Instead, he hugged her back, stroking his mother's hair as she cried on his shoulder. He had seen her cry before, but never in this way. Or for so long.

What a fool I've been. This woman loved me. Of that there could be no doubt.

“Kieran,” she said again, her voice thick with still unshed tears. “I am so sorry. So very sorry we dinnae tell you.”

Before he could consider his response, over his mother's shoulder the chief of Clan Duncraig appeared. A formidable man, he did nothing. Said nothing. Watching until his mother released him, Kieran's plaid soaked with her tears, his father finally stepped forward.

His mother stepped back to allow the two men to face each other. Though he'd heard not one word of explanation from her, Kieran had only to look at her tear-streaked face to remember the tightness of her embrace moments ago, to know he would forgive her.

“You left before we could explain,” his father said, his gruff manner typical of him.

“You had years to explain,” Kieran said, sorry his mother startled at his unusually curt tone, one more typically reserved for Niall. But there was no help for it. He could not pretend to be anything other than displeased.

“And willnae do so here. Already the servants are staring. I'll have a meal brought to the solar. Come.”

He had a mind to say *nay* for the simple fact that his father did not ask but instead demanded. It was always so with him. As chief for many years, he'd become accustomed to giving orders and being obeyed. And all did it willingly because of the man he was. At least, the man Kieran thought he was.

But his father was right. Already his mother's greeting would likely be discussed for many days. So instead of arguing the directive, he strode to the solar with his mother beside him.

“I love you, my son.”

Not Kieran.

My son.

The only words he could offer were, "I love you as well." And rather than qualify it, he let them be, those three powerful words. Because he did love her. It was why Kieran had been so angry to learn of her betrayal.

It was to her he spoke first as they entered the chamber just off the great hall where business, and many wee meals, were conducted.

"You told Niall. And instructed him to lie to me."

"I should not have done so. Your father and I have spoken at length on the matter and know we should have told you years ago. With Niall, I had no choice. If he continued to press for you to be named second in command, the truth would have to be told."

"Because I am a MacKinlay."

"Aye."

He agreed with her. "You should have told me. Long ago. I am no child but a man who held his family as the enemy."

"You've no family worthy of calling them so," his father said.

"I have two aunts, and likely uncles and cousins, very much alive."

"One aunt. The other passed, and the surviving one cares more for placating her husband than the abuse his children endure. His love for ale is even stronger."

"You know who my family is," he accused. "And did not return me to them."

He'd been calm when he came, but Kieran was anything but now.

"Sit," his mother said. But Kieran ignored her. He was too wroth to sit.

"Return you? To a man who struck his own children? Nay. I'd never even considered such a thing."

"How could you know how my uncle treated his children?"

His father's jaw flexed as it clenched. It was his mother who answered. "We knew not who you were for some time. The blow, against, I assume a rock in the river, ensured it. But we assumed you were a MacKinlay, and so your father traveled many times to Aberdale. It was not difficult to learn a

boy had gone missing. Or to discover your mother had died in childbirth and your father in battle. With no siblings to speak of, he found your aunt. And planned to relinquish you to them against my protests. I'd grown to love you then as my own and could not bear to part with you."

"And so, you dinnae?"

"Nay. We dinnae. But not because I had convinced your father to keep you here. He insisted on watching first to learn what kind of family you'd be given to. The first time he saw your uncle strike his son, he returned here to inform me you would be staying."

Her tale made no sense.

"Father has not been to Aberdale, to MacKinlay land, since before the battle."

"I have," his father said. "Many times after we found you."

"And that dinnae cause a stir? The chief of Clan Duncraig in the midst of his enemy?"

"None knew, as I was disguised."

Kieran tried to imagine his father sneaking around Aberdale, in disguise. It was a difficult image to conjure, but he did not question his words. His father had been the one, after all, to teach Kieran how to decipher a lie. And he could not detect one now.

"And my family? You disguised yourself to them as well?"

"'Twas not necessary. They had the good grace to live just beside a treeline. Was easy enough to watch them without being seen."

An even harder image than the other to imagine.

"You hid among the trees watching this family to determine if they were worthy of me?"

"Aye."

He said it with the directness and authority Kieran was accustomed to from the chief.

"He went there many, many times," his mother said. "And a good thing

too.”

If what they said was true, his father had gone into enemy territory on multiple occasions to assure himself the family he would return to would treat him well. It was an act of such love that Kieran could hardly comprehend it. Unlike his mother, his father rarely showed affection. And he told neither Kieran nor Niall he loved them.

And yet . . .

He glanced at his mother, who nodded.

God dammit. If he could remain angry with a man who’d done such a thing, Kieran was worse than Lina’s brother. But he still had questions.

“Why did you not tell me?”

At that, his father looked toward his mother.

“It was I who wished not to. Your father wished to tell you, but I could not bear the thought of you knowing you were kin to our greatest enemy. I worried you would think less of us as your family.”

“She worried to lose you. Even as an adult, her fear of you rejecting us as parents overrode all good sense.”

“Kenneth,” she scolded, but his father did not take back the words. It was something Kieran would have smiled about if it were any other circumstance.

“You told Niall.”

By now, his questions lacked the heat they had when Kieran had begun to question his parents.

“An error in judgment led by fear.”

“Never make decisions based on fear. You say it often,” he said to his father.

“Indeed. And your mother listens to me much less often.”

That time, he could not resist the slightest upturning of the corners of his mouth.

One glance. That was all it took, just one glance at his mother’s eyes. She begged, pleaded, to be forgiven. For him to love her as he’d always done. As

she did him.

The eyes did not lie.

“Forgive me, Kieran. Please say you will forgive me.”

He opened his arms and she came to him. “I forgave you the moment I stepped into the hall,” he said softly. Just when his plaid had begun to dry, his mother wet it again. But he did not care. He had more questions, but for now, Kieran allowed himself to relish his mother’s embrace. When she let him go and his father stepped toward him, Kieran could not have been more surprised when he, too, wrapped his arms around him.

Kieran could remember each time his father had hugged him because the occasions were so rare. As he returned the gesture, Kieran closed his eyes and, for the second time since returning, chastised himself for a fool. He’d run away, when instead, he should have confronted his family.

When his father finally stepped back, Kieran’s knees nearly buckled at the sight. Not tears precisely, but his eyes were wet.

Impossible. His father did not cry.

Those remaining questions he had would have to wait.

“I should have come to you,” he said to them both. “I was angry and confused.” It was the only explanation he had to offer.

“As I would expect,” his mother said. “We are only glad you’ve given us the opportunity to explain.”

Maisie.

“I met a woman,” he said as a knock on the door was followed by his father’s call for admittance. Their meal had arrived. Once the round table in the corner of the solar chamber was prepared for them, Kieran resumed his tale, glad to lift a mug of ale to his lips.

“I went to Aberdale to learn more, and learned my father was a blacksmith who died in the battle.”

“Your mother passed in childbirth,” his father said, maybe to prove he had indeed investigated on Kieran’s behalf.

“Aye. But on the way, I stopped at the Red Stag Inn.”

“I know the place,” his father said. “Owned by a weasel of a man I dinnae care for.”

“No longer,” Kieran said, wincing at the mention of Maisie’s husband. “His widow runs the inn now. Her name is Maisie and . . . I’ve asked her to marry me.”

It was not the ideal marriage for a clan chief’s son, but after everything that had happened, he hoped the status of his future wife would be of little consequence. Though it did not matter. He would marry her either way.

His parents exchanged a glance.

“She is a lovely woman, quite capable, as the inn has thrived since her husband passed.”

“I am sorry, son,” his father began as he placed food on his trencher.

Kieran’s shoulders sagged. Just as they’d reconciled, now there would be another disagreement between them.

“But,” his father continued, “I cannae remember a lovely woman as the former owner.”

Kieran waited but it seemed it was all his father would say.

“I am glad ‘tis your only hesitation.”

“Son, we willnae interfere in your choice of a wife,” his mother said, looking at his father as if waiting for him to disagree. And though Kieran knew it was because of his status as a second son, and not because of his birth, he did not care. That he would have their blessing to marry Maisie was all that mattered.

Of course, the woman herself needed to be convinced first.

“She was forced to marry him,” Kieran explained. “For coin. Her father is a farmer.”

“Mmm,” was all his father said.

“Tell us of her,” his mother prompted. And so he did. When he’d finished, his mother reached across the table for his hand. “She sounds

lovely, Kieran. As you said. We very much look forward to meeting her.”

“You will soon,” he said, hoping his words were true. “I leave in the morn and will return as soon as I am able.”

“Already?” His mother, clearly disappointed, let go of his hand and continued her meal.

“Aye,” he said. “Niall is there now, but I do not wish to leave her for long.” With that, he began another tale, this one of MacBrannigan, which had implications for their own clan. He’d killed a chieftain, after all, even if that man was a bastard.

But instead of chastising him for potentially starting a clan feud, his father smiled. “Ach, well. It sounds to me as if the man deserved killing.”

Kieran returned his father’s grin.

It was good to be home.

CHAPTER

Maisie attempted to tell Niall to go to Lina, but he would not listen. The man was as stubborn as any she'd ever met. The hall was empty but for the two of them.

"There are none here," she said. "I willnae be long finishing here."

"And I will wait for you," he said, sitting at Kieran's table. Crossing his arms and leaning back as if getting more comfortable, he shrugged.

Maisie shook her head and rushed through the remainder of her tasks. She thanked him for his vigilance as he escorted her to her bedchamber and waited until she was safely inside before leaving her.

Though she'd always been careful, the threat of MacBrannigan's men retaliating against her for what had happened made Maisie even more so. She locked the door behind her and prepared for bed, doing what she had each night since Kieran left. Thinking of him. Dreaming of him. Wishing he were here with her.

His absence had convinced her beyond a doubt that Maisie did not wish to live without him. And though she'd vowed never to marry again, vows were made to be broken. Smiling to herself at the memory of Lina's proclamation, she blew out the candle and was about to get into bed when something, though she could not name what precisely, made her go to the window. As it was shuttered, she could not see through it. Opening them,

Maisie gasped.

The stables were afire.

Running to her door, she began to scream, calling out the one word that terrified all.

“Fire,” she yelled over and over again as she fled from the inn. The moment she stepped outside, sounds from above telling her that her yells had been heard, a hand grasped her arm. Another went over her mouth. And for the second time in as many days, she was dragged away by a man.

Though she attempted to wrench free, his grip was simply too strong. The stench of him nearly made her gag as Maisie was taken away from the fire.

The horses.

Tears sprang to her eyes at the thought of them being harmed. With luck they would be spared. She never ceased in her attempt to get away; it was only the sound of a horse’s neigh behind her that made Maisie realize these men intended to kidnap her.

If she got on that horse, she was dead.

Redoubling her efforts, cursing that she wore only a chemise with her trusted dagger back in her bedchamber, she attempted to bite the hand that clamped her mouth shut, and could not.

“Help me get her up,” the man who held her said to a second man emerging from the shadows. She recognized him immediately as one of MacBrannigan’s men.

Kieran’s caution had been justified.

If they took her, Maisie was dead. Yet there seemed to be no escape.

“Drop her or die.”

It could not be.

Her attacker spun, dragging her with him. Where had Kieran come from?

“Dammit,” he muttered, striding toward them with a look in his eyes she’d seen just once before. Before her attacker could say a word, Kieran ripped her from his arms and, with one thrust of his sword, the man that had

held her so tightly lay on the ground. She looked away before seeing more, but there was no doubt he was either dead or would be soon.

The second man had unsheathed his sword but was no match for an angry Kieran. Unlike with MacBrannigan, the swordfight was swift and easily ended in the man's disarming. Then, like his clansmen, he too lay dead on the ground beneath Kieran's feet.

He'd not hesitated, and that had been the men's downfall. That and the anger that seethed through Kieran even now as he looked at her. She ran to him, and Kieran held her with just one arm, his sword arm still at the ready. She did not know if he worried these men might rise from the dead, or that there might be others, but Maisie did not care. Which was when the acrid smell of smoke reminded her that Maisie wasn't the only one in danger. She tried to break away.

"The stables. Horses."

Kieran held her tight. "Niall has them."

Maisie pulled back just enough to see him. "Where? How?"

"I saw flames from the distance. Never rode so fast in all my life. I saw them take you around the back just as Niall tore through the front door, noticing the same. If not for my arrival, he'd be here with you now."

"Oh, Kieran." She wanted to kiss him, but he was looking at the men on the ground, clearly wary.

"There could be others," he said. "Come with me."

Holding her hand, Kieran took her around to the front of the inn, where everyone seemed to be doing something. Buckets of water were being carried back and forth from the kitchens. Horses were being led away from the stables.

"There is no saving it," she said, watching as buckets of water were tossed onto the growing flames.

"Nay," Kieran said, "there is not."

He never let go of her hand as he made his way all around the inn,

searching. He then found Niall, his face black with soot, close to the burning stables, which were now completely engulfed in flame.

“How many?” he asked.

Maisie held her breath waiting for the answer.

“None,” Niall replied. “They are all out safely. She”—he nodded to Maisie—“caught it quickly.”

“What happened?” Kieran asked her.

“I do not know why, as I was preparing for bed, I went to the window and opened the shutters.”

“Perhaps you smelled smoke?”

“I do not believe so,” she responded. “But ‘twas something.”

“Nevertheless,” Niall said. “The fire had just started. We were able to save them, but . . .” He looked at her. “I do not believe we can save the stables. There is simply too much kindling.”

Maisie could not find her voice but nodded instead.

Kieran’s arm wrapped around her. “Did you see them take her?” he asked.

“Aye. At Maisie’s first yell of ‘fire,’ I was up and running from my chamber. I saw both her and you at the same time.”

That seemed to please Kieran. And oddly, it pleased her too.

The rest of the evening went by in a blur. By the time morning broke, a makeshift stable had been crafted with water bins and hay for the horses to feed on, though they needed to be tied off. The fire, though it had consumed her stables, was not fully finished yet. It taunted them even now, the remaining flames fewer than before but ever present.

“I need to begin the morning meal,” she said to Kieran, who had just finished helping to construct the makeshift watering bins.

“In a chemise?” He looked her up and down, grinning.

“Perhaps not,” she said.

“Come, we will change you.”

We will change you.

Stopping briefly in the kitchen, Maisie took a bucket of water, no longer needed as they'd long ago given up attempting to put out the fire, and she made her way abovestairs.

When she finished wiping down her face and arms, Kieran did the same.

"I fear that cloth is no longer for this world," she said, the previously cream fabric having turned completely black.

"I fear you are right."

At that, no more words were exchanged. Maisie simply walked into Kieran's arms and never wanted to leave. He held her tight for too long. She needed to get dressed and return to the hall. But when she tried to break away from him, Kieran stopped her.

"Not yet," was all he said.

And so they stayed that way for a bit longer.

"I love you," Maisie whispered into his ear. "I love you so much, Kieran."

He pulled back. "'Tis good to hear the words."

"I'd planned to say them anyway when you returned. To tell you I was just not ready to marry but that I loved you nonetheless."

"Was?"

"Was. I spoke to Lina. Thought hard about what I was afraid of and realized 'twas unreasonable. You would never attempt to control me. To have me do something I dinnae wish to do."

"Never," he agreed. "And I am glad you know that now."

"I do. My hesitation is gone, and with it, the fear that I've held on to. I would be honored to be your wife, Kieran. In fact, I demand it to happen."

"Demand?" He laughed. "Then who am I to deny a demand from the woman I love?"

"We are to be married."

"Indeed, we are."

“The inn,” she blurted, realizing there was more to their union than simply being in each other’s arms. “I would not wish to relinquish it.”

“How would you feel about a partner in running it?”

Her heart skipped a beat. “Truly? But is that possible? With your responsibilities to your clan . . .”

“I’ve spoken to my father already. And aye, there are times I will be needed. I will find someone to remain here with you, to protect you, if I am away. But I would gladly remain here, running the inn, by your side.”

“Your father,” she exclaimed. “How could I have not asked before?”

“Perhaps because you were nearly kidnapped and endured your stables being burned to the ground?”

She swatted his arm. “Tell me. Hurry, I wish to know. You told him of the inn? Of me? You’ve reconciled?”

“Which question shall I answer first?”

She cocked her head to the side. “Kieran.” Laughing, she waited for him to respond.

“Aye, we reconciled. I will tell you all later. For now, let us get you dressed and back down to the hall.”

“I can dress myself,” she said, realizing Kieran was right and reluctantly pulling herself from his arms.

“Perhaps,” he said, lifting her chemise from the bottom.

Maisie held her hands high as he pulled it off.

“Mmm, give me that,” he said, looking at her body.

“I would love nothing more, but perhaps not at this moment.”

She thought he would agree with her, but instead Kieran smiled in a way that told her he did not agree.

“There is little time, for certain. But enough for this.” And without another word, he closed the distance between them and kissed her in a way that made Maisie wish there were not people waiting for her belowstairs.

When his hand moved between her legs, Maisie thought briefly to tell

him she could not possibly, but when his fingers began to move, his thumb pressing as another finger slipped inside her, all such thoughts fled her mind.

His tongue and hand moved together, Kieran moaning against her lips. That he could find pleasure from bringing hers made it all the more powerful. Without warning, her core began to clench around his fingers, and for that one moment, all of the awful things that had happened the night before melted away. Giving herself over to him, Maisie reveled in the release.

When they broke apart, she found him smiling as if pleased.

“So you are aware, I will be dressing and undressing you each day from this moment on.”

She laughed. “So you are aware, I fully support such an idea.”

“Tonight, I will make love to you properly. But for now . . .” He looked around the room. “If I am to dress you, it would be easier if I knew where to find your gowns.”

Maisie shook her head, smiling, already thinking ahead to the promise of that evening. Making love to Kieran, the man she loved and who loved her in return, one who would become her husband, sounded to her like the perfect end to a day.

CHAPTER

“Do you like it?”

Maisie had just come into the new stables. The men who had helped Kieran quickly construct a new one after the other burnt to the ground had all left. The sun had just set, and a chill settled into the air. He'd been about to fetch the stableboy, whom Kieran thought should be elevated to stable master after all he'd done. The boy had become invaluable to him, like Alice and Margaret were to Maisie. On the cusp of manhood, he was quickly someone Kieran had relied on these past days.

“Very much,” she said. “’Tis so much bigger than the last one.” She walked into his arms.

“Since we will add rooms to the inn on your new land, we’ll need the extra stalls. I had just been preparing to bring the horses inside.”

Maisie looked up to the loft. “I’d always wished for one to place guests when we run out of rooms.”

“I’ve slept many a night in such a loft as that.”

“Have you now?”

“Aye, lass, I have.”

“Slept? Or . . .”

He would not answer that particular question but supposed there was no need. In not answering, he’d inadvertently done so. Maisie’s eyes widened.

“I care little to think of you with other women.”

“As I do to think of you with other men.”

“But I’ve been with just one. And you know the kind of experience it was for me.”

“Ach, well, there’ve been no other women that could compare to you, Maisie.”

“So you’ve said.” With a glint in her eye, she glanced back up to the stable loft. “Perhaps we should be certain of it.”

If she was hinting . . .

“Maisie? Are you suggesting—”

“We should get rid of any memories of you with any woman but me making love in the loft of a stable? Aye. I am.”

Kieran did not have to be told twice that Maisie wished to be with him. But she was unlikely prepared for him to toss her over his shoulder as he’d done.

“Kieran,” she exclaimed. “Surely you do not mean to carry me up there this way?”

“Surely I do, my love.”

Ascending the ladder was easily done. Thankfully, Maisie wore a cloak, which he stripped off just as easily. After laying it down atop the hay, praying none came into the freshly finished stables, Kieran eased Maisie onto the cloak.

“I am fully clothed,” she said. “As are you.”

Fully clothed but still as enticing as ever. Reaching down, Kieran freed himself while keeping much of his clothing intact. Enjoying watching Maisie’s eyes widen—he was fully erect and ready for her—Kieran knelt below her.

When he lifted the hem of her gown, Maisie aided him by pulling it up toward her. The sight of her as such, lying in the hay, skirts up, her garter essentially welcoming him to play, was more than he could handle.

“I need you, Maisie,” he said, leaning into her. Though made a bit more difficult with the bulk of her gown between them, Kieran found his mark.

Guiding himself inside as Maisie held on to his shoulder, he groaned in sweet relief as he finally fully buried himself in her. As she’d been from the start, Maisie was not shy with him.

“I need you as well,” she said, thrusting her hips upward, her hands pulling him down.

They’d had many sweet moments between them. Soft kisses. Whispered words of affection. Lovemaking so slow and sensual, Kieran could not believe he’d ever lived without her. But this was not one of those moments.

He did not go slow. Or softly. And Maisie wanted more.

“Please,” she said. “Kieran, all of you.”

He gave her precisely that, thrusting into her as deeply as he possibly could.

“Yes.” She ground against him, her hips circling as he stilled. “Yes, Kieran. Yes. Please.”

She was close. He would push her over the edge. His hands beside them propping him up, Kieran was able to fully see her, and she him. He looked into her eyes and demanded, not asking.

“Come for me. Do it, Maisie. Come all over me.”

She did.

Screaming his name, a sweet, blessed sound he never again wished to go a day without hearing, Maisie came just before Kieran released everything he had into her. With a roar of pleasure, he collapsed against her.

Neither of them moved, or spoke, for some time.

But they were in the haylofts, and it was getting cold. So reluctantly, he pulled out, and, with a quick kiss, stood and righted himself. Helping Maisie up, he brushed off her cloak as she pushed her skirts back down.

Fully dressed, Kieran smiled at the spot where they’d just made love.

“Now when you think of making love in the hayloft of the stables, ‘twill

be this night you will envision.”

“Indeed,” he said, fully agreeing. “And I’m sorry for not saying as much earlier, but there was never a danger of me thinking of making love to any woman but you.” He took Maisie in his arms. “I know we agreed to wait until the stables were finished and we could afford to leave the inn to marry at my home, but I do not wish to wait. Let us do it here. My family can see the inn. We will have a banquet in the hall. More importantly, there will be no need to wait.”

She did not hesitate. “I would love that, truly.”

“And I love you. To think if I’d not learned of my birth in the manner in which I did, we’d not have met.”

“We were meant to meet,” she said. “As all things are meant to happen.”

“I believe you are right,” he said. And before she could correct him, Kieran added, “As you are most times.”

She laughed. “I am glad you remember it well.”

“I shall never forget it. Nor the moment we met or the first time we made love. Nor you, which will be easily done as you are not leaving my side, ever.”

“I have no desire to, Kieran. I am yours. Today and every day after.”

EPILOGUE

The inn, decorated for Christmas, had never looked so beautiful. With Kieran's aid, they'd made so many improvements already. Maisie could not wait until spring when the weather improved and they could make even more of them.

"They've arrived," she said, spying his father first. She fairly ran to the door as Duncraig's clan chief embraced her. Maisie could not explain their connection, but from the moment the two of them met, she'd felt an affinity to him that she'd never felt with her own father. Perhaps, she'd mused to Kieran, it was knowing what he had done for Kieran when he'd gone missing, juxtaposed with her own father giving her to a man such as Baldwin.

"Greetings, daughter," he said, a moniker he'd used from the day they'd held their wedding in this very hall.

"I am a MacKinlay," Lina said to her father-in-law, "but she is married to one. There must be another reason I do not receive as many hugs as Maisie."

Laughing, the chief pulled Lina into him, kissing the top of her head.

Both Niall and Kieran stared at the three of them, mouths agape.

"Has he ever once hugged you?" Niall asked, loud enough for all of them to hear.

"He did," Kieran responded. "But I had to run away like a wayward child first to receive it."

“Ahh, well, I do not wish to run away. But these two are given them freely when I remember very few as a boy and less as a man.”

“I’ve no reason to hug you,” the chief said to Niall. “You love yourself for both of us.”

Everyone but Niall laughed at that.

Greeting her mother-in-law, Maisie welcomed the newcomers into their hall. Alice took their cloaks and they all sat at a large table Maisie had set aside. Though they would celebrate Christmas at Duncraig Castle in a fortnight, Kieran had the idea to invite his family here to share their news. Though Maisie thought it could wait to see them at the holiday, she loved the thought of hosting them as well.

And so they’d prepared, the inn transforming in a way Maisie had never seen before. Already more than one patron had commented that they would be sure to come each year at this time if the Red Stag planned to decorate this way again.

Once a round of ale was served, she and Kieran stood.

Lost in the way her husband looked at her, Maisie nearly forgot they’d agreed she would give them the news. So often Kieran had deferred tasks typically reserved for a man, or husband, to her. She knew the reason for it and was grateful.

Control her?

Nay. Never.

Well, except perhaps in the bedroom. But there she not only welcomed it, Maisie willed it to be so. She found she enjoyed his demands, there and there only.

“We asked for you to come here,” she began. “Not only because we enjoy being with you, but for another very special reason.” Maisie laid her hand over her stomach. “We will be welcoming your second grandson or daughter,” she said to her father and mother-in-law.

“Truly?” Lina exclaimed. Since she was also with child, it did not

surprised Maisie that she seemed particularly excited.

“Truly,” she said as, one by one, her family members rose to come to her. As they congratulated first her and then Kieran, the mood was as exuberant and celebratory as had ever been seen in this hall.

“A toast,” Kieran raised his mug as everyone finally sat.

While other patrons looked on, clearly curious, those who visited the inn regularly knew this was Maisie’s new family.

“To my wife and our unborn child and his or her cousin,” he addressed Lina, “and his mother. May our love for these women be the foundation for our family’s extension.”

“Slainte,” each of them toasted.

Niall raised his mug as well. “To my brother and his wife, also our hosts. Thank you for welcoming us into your inn.”

It was the second of many toasts. To family. To the clan. Maisie, who never seemed to be without an urge to eat, was glad when the meal was finally served. As she looked around the table, Maisie could not be more thankful for the family she’d always wanted. One that wanted her in return, and not for the coin she could bring with a horrible marriage. They loved her, adopting Maisie as readily as they had Kieran into their family and clan.

Below the table, she took Kieran’s hand. He squeezed it, leaning into her.

“I love you, sweet Maisie.”

“And I you,” she said, knowing their love story was just beginning.



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