

JAYNE
CASTEL



Highland
Yuletide

Three festive novellas to transport you back in time.

HIGHLAND YULETIDE



*Three festive novellas to transport you back
in time.*

HIGHLANDER PLEDGED
THE LAIRD'S RETURN
WINTER'S PROMISE

JAYNE
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Highland Yuletide, by Jayne Castel

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Published by Winter Mist Press

ISBN: 978-1-99-117478-9 (Kindle)

Edited by Tim Burton

Cover design by Winter Mist Press

Cover photography courtesy of www.depositphotos.com

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To everyone who adores Christmas!

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HIGHLANDER PLEDGED

Stolen Highland Hearts



JAYNE
CASTEL



They wed in the heart of winter as the Scottish Highlands prepare for Yuletide—and while snow falls, an arranged marriage blossoms into a love match.

Robina Oliphant's wishes have never been considered by others, so she isn't surprised when her father marries her off to the ruthless clan Gunn in order to secure a political alliance. She does her duty, but underneath her meek façade, Robina is furious at her kin, fate—and the arrogant young clan-chief who is now her husband.

Tavish Gunn has a reputation to uphold. Now head of one of the Highland's most feared clans, and with four younger brothers coveting his position, he can't let his guard down, can't show the slightest sign of weakness.

But Tavish has long desired Robina. He now has to convince her that he fully intends to honor their marriage vows: to love, protect, and cherish her. Some promises are made for life.

Love all, trust a few, do wrong to none.

—William Shakespeare

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WINTER'S CHILL



Castle Gunn
Caithness, Scotland

Winter, 1429

ROBINA OLIPHANT REINED in her horse, her gaze settling upon her destination.

Castle Gunn.

The last place in Scotland she wanted to be—and yet she'd shortly be swallowed within its stone maw.

The castle perched upon an exposed finger of land and looked as if it would topple into the sea at any moment. It appeared even grimmer than usual today, its grey stone walls dark against a stormy sky as the gloaming settled over them.

Within the shadow of her fur-lined hood, Robina grimaced.

Lord, this was an awful, bleak place. Over the years, her father had dragged her on several trips south to Castle Gunn in the hope of finding a husband for her—and this time, he would actually succeed.

A biting wind howled around the fortress, bringing with it stinging needles of ice.

Robina's shoulders rounded. Despite her thick cloak, winter's chill drilled into the marrow of her bones. She could no longer feel her feet, and her gloved fingers, which clutched the reins, were frozen into claws.

She needed to get indoors, needed to wrap her hands around a steaming cup of mulled wine near a roaring fire.

But such was her dislike of this castle, and the men who resided within it, that she'd have preferred to stay outdoors, even when cold blanketed the world.

"Hurry yerself up, lass!" Her father's hearty voice cut through the wind and intruded upon Robina's brooding. Up ahead, Ramsay Oliphant turned in the saddle and gestured to his daughter. "This isn't the weather to be tarrying in!"

"Aye." Her mother's irritated voice responded. Robina glanced left to see Isla Oliphant draw her horse up alongside her. "I swear, if I have to ride much longer, I shall perish!"

Her mother's already ruddy cheeks and long, thin nose were even redder than usual, chapped by the wind and cold. Her mouth was drawn up with discomfort.

Robina imagined her own face looked just as miserable—although for different reasons to her mother's.

Clenching her jaw, Robina urged her mount on, following her father across the headland toward the rickety bridge that spanned the gap between the cliffs and the rock on which Castle Gunn perched.

Her horse, a sturdy cob of a usually unflappable temperament, snorted nervously as the Oliphant party clattered across the bridge toward the gates.

Robina made the mistake of looking down then, her gaze resting upon the sharp rocks and foaming surf below. Her head spun, dizziness catching at her throat.

Judas, how she hated heights.

Swallowing hard, she tore her attention away from the perilous drop to the razor-like teeth of the raised portcullis before her.

Dread coiled in her belly—*into the jaws of the beast.*

The three of them clattered into Castle Gunn's wide bailey, followed shortly after by the four warriors of their escort. A large covered wagon brought up the rear.

Sliding down from her horse, Robina turned an anxious eye to where the hide sides of the wagon billowed and snapped with the wind. "Please take the goshawks to the mews," she called to the wagon driver.

"He can bring in our trunks first," Isla Oliphant piped up, irritation making her tone snappish.

"My hawks can't stay out here, Ma," Robina replied. She didn't argue with her parents on most things—not these days anyway—but her goshawks were her joy and solace. She imagined Moth and Thistle hunched on their perches, seething under their leather hoods. They needed to be homed as soon as possible in the mews and fed some fresh meat for their supper.

Her mother made an impatient clucking noise before motioning to their escort. "The men will take care of everything, *including* yer hawks." Lady Oliphant had a habit of speaking as loftily as if she were the Queen of Scotland rather than a clan-chief's wife. Isla then caught her daughter by the arm and steered her, none too gently, toward the keep. "Come, let's get inside where it's warm."

Despite Robina's reluctance to set foot inside, Castle Gunn's great hall was a welcoming sight after the chill outdoors. A huge hearth roared at either end of the rectangular space, and although the air smelled of burning peat, damp wool, and wet dog, a sigh of relief gusted out of Robina.

Thankfully, the great hall was virtually empty at this time, for supper was still an hour away. Only one or two servants moved about, scrubbing down the long trestle tables and

setting out wooden plates and eating knives for the coming meal.

Grateful for the reprieve—for she would see the hated Gunns soon enough—Robina headed straight for the nearest fire. An old Highland Collie was curled up before it—a shaggy grey and white bitch, who rose to her feet and wagged her tail tiredly at Robina’s approach.

Despite her weariness and low mood, Robina’s mouth lifted at the edges. The dog nuzzled her hand, and she fondled its fluffy ears.

“Don’t touch that creature, dear ... it’ll give ye fleas.”

Robina ignored her mother’s words and the woman herself as Lady Oliphant pushed in next to her daughter, extending her fingers, swollen from cold, before the fire.

Instead, Robina smiled down at the collie’s soulful brown eyes. Ever since she’d been wee, she’d loved animals—and had found solace in their companionship. Unlike people, they didn’t try to change or control her.

“I know yer father is keen to see ye wed to Tavish Gunn as soon as possible,” Isla went on. “But making us travel in such cold weather is barbaric.”

Robina nodded absently, hardly taking her mother’s comment in, before casting a look over her shoulder at the door. She’d expected her father to follow them in here, yet he’d remained outdoors to oversee his men. Indeed, her heart had sunk when he’d announced over bannocks one morning the week previous that, now the Gunns had a new clan-chief, Tavish Gunn was ready to take a wife—and wished that wife to be Robina Oliphant.

“All the same, I thought that yer chance to catch yerself a Gunn had gone.” Her mother sniffed. “After Alexander Gunn disappointed us all.”

Robina’s mouth thinned. That hadn’t been a disappointment to *her*. When George Gunn’s firstborn had fallen out with his father and been disowned, she’d been giddy with relief.

Alexander Gunn—a huge brute with wild dark hair, storm-grey eyes, and a silver scar slashing down his left cheek—had terrified her.

She'd told her father she didn't want to wed the man, yet Ramsay Oliphant had dismissed her desires. "Ye shall wed whom I say, lass," he'd roared, slamming his fist down upon the table in an uncharacteristic display of temper. "The Oliphants and the Gunns *will* be united in marriage. I won't be thwarted!"

"I can't believe Alexander Gunn took up with that Mackay woman," Isla continued with a scowl. "Aye, she is a chieftain's daughter, yet *ye* are the daughter of a clan-chief!"

Robina didn't answer. Instead, she stroked the collie's neck as it leaned into her.

Even two years on, whispers still traveled the Highlands about how the fierce Alexander Gunn had forfeited his birthright and thrown everything away to be with Jaimee Mackay. Robina had heard that the pair were now wed and had a bairn. Gunn had been accepted by the Mackays and worked as a blacksmith at Farr Castle.

Robina had been stunned by the news. Alexander Gunn hadn't been the man she'd imagined—on those few occasions they'd met, she'd thought him to be as ruthless and ambitious as his father. But he'd given it all up—and now that George Gunn was dead, the second son had stepped into the role of clan-chief.

Tavish Gunn: the man she was to wed.

And as if thinking about the devil summoned him, the doors to the great hall opened and a tall leather-clad figure with a fur-lined cloak rippling from his shoulders stalked in.

Robina went rigid, her gaze tracking his path toward her.

Although the new Gunn clan-chief lacked his older brother's formidable musculature and size, he still managed to dominate the room.

Tavish Gunn's gaze—the grey of storm clouds—met hers, and his step faltered. An instant later, he halted.

Robina wasn't one to hold a man's eye. Her mother had instructed her years earlier that men found it challenging and irksome, and so—the biddable daughter that she was—Robina had taken her advice to heart. She'd rarely met Alexander Gunn's gaze either, for the man had scared her witless after all, yet his brother didn't provoke the same terrified response.

She barely remembered Tavish from her earlier trips to Castle Gunn—she'd been too focused on making herself invisible—and so she studied him now. He had a handsome, if slightly hawkish, face and long black hair that was presently tangled by wind and rain.

The moments drew out, and Robina realized she had looked at him too long. Swallowing hard, she dipped her head just as her mother turned from the hearth.

“Laird Gunn,” Isla greeted him with a simpering tone that made Robina clench her jaw. Her mother had two faces. The first she wore before men—it was meek, sweet, and obliging. But her second mask she wore before women—and that one was bossy, prattling, and opinionated.

Robina had never seen Isla Oliphant contradict her husband.

Never.

“Lady Oliphant,” Tavish Gunn acknowledged Isla coolly. Robina glanced up to see his gaze was still trained upon *her*. He wore a penetrating expression that made Robina's skin prickle. “Ye are late.”

“Aye,” Isla simpered. “I do apologize for our tardiness ... the weather turned against us, I'm afraid.”

“I was about to ride out myself to see if any harm had befallen ye,” he replied, his attention never leaving Robina's face.

She had the impression he was speaking directly to her, even if Isla was the one conversing with him.

“How gallant of ye,” Robina's mother said before a sigh gusted out of her. “I must admit, the journey was wearisome.”

Tavish Gunn nodded before moving closer to the hearth. His attention dipped to where the Highland Collie still pressed against Robina's damp skirts. The corners of his mouth then lifted.

"I see ye have met Misty."

"Aye," Isla sniffed, a groove forming between her eyebrows. "I must say, the hound reeks."

Robina cut her mother an irritated glance. "No, she doesn't." They were the first words she'd spoken since Gunn's entrance and so quietly uttered that she wondered if the clan-chief had even heard her.

"Misty is an old lass," he murmured. He paused then, a cheek dimpling as he smiled. "For years, she kept our castle's livestock safe from predators, and she's now earned her place by the fire."

As if realizing she was the subject of conversation, the shaggy collie's tail started to thump on the wooden floor.

"It's a pleasure to see ye again, Robina," Gunn said after a pause. "I have been looking forward to this day for a while now."

Isla made a clucking sound of approval, her cheeks flushing as she drew herself up with pride. Heat also flushed Robina's cheeks, although the reason for it was mortification rather than pleasure.

Dropping her gaze to her muddied boots, Robina checked the urge to pick up her skirts and flee from the hall.

Tavish Gunn had been looking forward to this?

She barely remembered the man, yet from the gleam she'd spied in his eyes, he couldn't wait to make her his bride.

THIS TIME TOMORROW



SHE HADN'T RESPONDED in the way he hoped.

As Tavish had stepped into the great hall, he'd imagined a demure smile, a gentle greeting.

Yet he'd received neither.

Old Misty had glued herself to Robina Oliphant's leg, reveling in the attention the young woman was giving her—yet his bride-to-be hadn't even raised a smile for him.

She was staring resolutely at the floor now as if studying the grain of the worn oak. Her pretty face and elfin features were taut.

As if sensing her daughter's diffidence, Lady Oliphant stepped forward. Mother and daughter didn't look much alike, Tavish noted. Robina was small and fey with delicate beauty, while her mother was much taller and rake-thin. The woman had a high-colored face, sharp blue eyes, and a long red-tipped nose.

“And of course, Robina has also been looking forward to seeing *ye* again, laird,” the irritating woman gushed. “I apologize for her silence ... she is merely shy and weary after our journey.”

“That is to be expected,” Tavish rumbled, his gaze shifting back to Robina. The lass looked as if she was going to bolt at

any moment.

“I understand that the wedding will take place on the morrow, as planned?” Lady Oliphant continued.

Tavish nodded. “If yer daughter is happy with that date?” he replied, his irritation rising.

“Of course she is,” Lady Oliphant said with an emphatic nod.

“I’d prefer to assure myself directly from yer daughter, Lady Oliphant,” Tavish answered, his tone cooling. The Lord preserve him from this interfering woman.

Lady Oliphant cut her daughter a beseeching look. However, when Robina didn’t reply, she moved close to her and dug a bony elbow into her ribs.

Robina tensed, her chin jerking upward. She then, albeit reluctantly, met his eye. “Aye,” she murmured, with as much enthusiasm as if he’d invited her to take part in a bloody battle the following day. “I am ready.”

Ready. That wasn’t the same as ‘happy’. Tavish had expected a warmer welcome.

He’d ‘hoped’ for a warmer welcome.

He’d wanted Robina for years now—ever since her first visit to Castle Gunn four years earlier. She’d barely been of marriageable age then, yet her father had been eager to find her a match—and there were few as good as a Gunn heir.

But after his first-born’s disgrace, George Gunn had ceased his invitations to Ramsay Oliphant. Tavish had been bitter about that, yet every time he brought up the subject, had suggested *he* could wed Robina, his father had snarled at him. George Gunn didn’t like to be reminded of Alex’s disgrace, of how he’d given up everything for Jaimee Mackay.

But now George Gunn was dead—taken by a massive seizure one afternoon—and the old man was barely in the ground before Tavish issued an offer of marriage to Robina Oliphant. He’d waited long enough.

Realizing he wasn't likely to get much out of Robina at present, Tavish took a step back and nodded. "Then tomorrow it is," he said briskly. "I shall let ye both retire to yer chambers now ... the servants have readied them on the top floor of the keep." He shifted his attention back to Robina then, wishing she'd raise those limpid hazel eyes once again. "I shall see ye both at supper."

Robina Oliphant wasn't any more garrulous at supper than she had been earlier.

However, it didn't help that her father never ceased his prattle. The man seemed to abhor silence.

"And so," Ramsay Oliphant went on, helping himself to a slice of roast pork. "I was hoping to lease some of yer land next spring ... The Ida Valley would be ideal."

"And what would ye be using it for?" Evan, one of Tavish's four younger brothers asked with a scowl. "That's good land."

"Aye," Oliphant agreed with an eager nod of his head. "I am buying in a new mob of Shetland sheep and need grazing for them." He paused then, perhaps noting the frowns on the faces of the Gunns surrounding him. "Of course ... I'd share the profits with ye," he added.

Tavish raised a pewter goblet of bramble wine to his lips. "Aye, that goes without saying, Ramsay," he replied. Annoyance simmered within him; he and Robina weren't even wed yet, and the man was making demands. "But we'll speak of this closer to spring, shall we?"

Ramsay Oliphant's full mouth pursed. He was a heavy-featured man with his greying hair pulled back at the nape. "If I'm going to put in an order for the Shetlands, I'll need to do so before—"

"We'll speak of this later," Tavish cut in, his voice a drawl. Cods, this man was a boor. It was a testament to how much Tavish wanted his daughter that he put up with him.

Tavish shifted his gaze to Robina, his attention lingering upon her. She was even lovelier than he remembered. Seated

between her parents, she wore a dark-green kirtle made of heavy wool. The garment was low-cut, revealing the gentle swell of her pale breasts. She'd matured since he'd seen her last—was now much more woman than lass. In the past, she'd worn her light brown hair braided and coiled around the crown of her head—a severe style. But tonight it was unbound, falling in soft waves over her slender shoulders.

Robina ate her supper in small, neat bites, her gaze rarely straying from the platter before her.

Frustration rippled through Tavish. He wanted her to glance up and meet his eye again, yet she refused.

Tavish clenched his jaw. Alex hadn't wanted Robina. "She's too meek for me," he'd once informed Tavish. "I don't want a mouse for a wife."

Tavish had rejoiced at his brother's lack of interest in the lass *he'd* developed an obsession with. Even so, he'd disagreed with him. Robina Oliphant wasn't a meek mouse—she was reserved and shy—both traits he found appealing.

She'll warm to me once we've wed, he told himself, taking another sip of wine. *Once we get to know each other.*

"Lady Robina," he addressed her directly then. "My men tell me ye have brought two goshawks with ye. Are ye a keen hawker then?"

That got her attention. Robina's chin kicked up, her gaze widening. Her lips parted then as she readied herself to answer.

"It isn't a particularly feminine interest, I'll admit," Ramsay Oliphant cut in, his grizzled brows knitting together, "but the lass can be willful on some things."

Tavish fought the smile that tugged at his mouth. *Willful.*

Robina's high cheekbones blushed at that, and she swallowed.

"It wasn't a criticism," Tavish drawled, snaring Robina's gaze with his. Finally, she'd looked up from her supper. "I too enjoy hawking," he murmured. "What are yer hawks' names?"

Robina stared back at him, her blush deepening. “Moth and Thistle,” she eventually replied. The low, husky timbre of her voice made Tavish’s belly tighten, desire arrowing through his groin. How many times over the past years had he fantasized about that voice, huskier still as she gasped his name in the throes of passion?

If he was honest, Robina Oliphant had become something of a fixation of late. He’d once sneered at Alex’s infatuation with Jaimee Mackay, but he no longer viewed it with disdain.

A woman could cast a spell over a man—consume him. When his father had denied him Robina, after Alexander’s departure, it had been the only time in his life that Tavish had considered rising up against the old man.

Instead, he’d choked down his anger and waited—and just as well, for George Gunn was now dead, and this time tomorrow, Robina Oliphant would be his wife.

“They are bonny names,” Tavish replied with a smile. “I look forward to seeing yer hawks hunt.”

“Fill yer horn up, Tav!” Roy slurred drunkenly, lurching across the table with a jug of mead. “Enjoy yer last night of freedom.”

Mead sloshed over the rim of the jug, soaking the sleeve of Tavish’s lèine.

Irritated, he jerked the half-full horn of mead he was still struggling through out of his brother’s reach, causing more mead to spill across the table. “No more ... I’m done.”

“Done?” Roy sneered. “Satan’s bollocks, ye drink like a lass.”

Tavish stared back at him, his own lip curling. “And ye swill mead like an ale-house slattern.”

This comment caused guffaws of laughter to ripple down the table. The two youngest brothers, Evan and Will, were engaged in a game of Ard-ri, while Blaine looked on, making derisive comments as each brother moved.

However, all three sniggered as Roy slumped back on the bench seat mumbling another insult.

Tavish ignored him. Instead, he leaned back on the clan-chief's carven chair—a chair his father had occupied until recently—and let his gaze sweep over the great hall. The Oliphants had all retired hours earlier, and only drunken warriors remained.

A servant approached the table then—a small, comely lass his father had tumbled a number of times. Gaze averted, she began to clear away the empty tankards and jugs. Her movements were deft and fast as if she wished to remain inconspicuous.

Unfortunately for her, she was not.

“Come here, bonny Jean.” Roy lunged forward, grasped the serving wench around the waist, and hauled her onto his lap.

Jean's face went rigid. She tried to struggle, but Roy's thick arm held her fast.

“Now's yer chance, Tav,” Roy slurred, groping the lass's breasts. “Yer last woman before ye shackle yerself with a wife.”

Tavish heaved a sigh. Roy was wearisome at the best of times, although tonight his brother was really getting on his nerves. Ever since Tavish had stepped into the role of clan-chief, Roy had been sour when sober and boorish when in his cups.

“Ye don't want her?” Roy jeered, nuzzling Jean's neck. “Well, in that case, I might have a tumble ... all this talk of weddings makes my balls tight.”

Snorts of mirth followed this comment, although Jean didn't look best pleased. Her blue eyes had gone as wide as moons, and she wore an expression of horror.

Tavish sucked in a deep breath before letting it out slowly. “That's enough, Roy. Let the lass be.”

Roy lifted his head from Jean's neck and stared at his elder brother. His grey eyes were glazed and unfocused with drink,

yet Tavish knew better than to underestimate him. All the brothers knew Roy was dangerous when drunk.

“I’m having her,” he slurred, challenge in his voice.

“No, ye aren’t. Father didn’t mind ye groping the servants, Roy ... but I do.”

Their father had deliberately chosen pretty women to work in his hall—and he’d swived his way through most of them.

“What’s wrong with ye?” Roy countered, his mouth twisting. “I’m only taking what’s owed to me after all.”

“Ye are owed nothing.” To make his point, Tavish drew the dirk he always carried at his hip and began to clean his nails with its wickedly pointed tip, focusing on that rather than Roy. “And if I have to repeat myself, blood will be spilled this night.”

A dangerous quiet settled over the great hall at these words. Blaine, Evan, and Will had lost interest in the board game and were watching the interaction between their two elder brothers with interest.

Roy had made no secret of his resentment toward Tavish, or of his desire to be sitting in that chair, yet he usually minded his elder brother.

Would he tonight?

WIFELY DUTIES



“I MUST SPEAK to ye of yer wedding night, daughter.” Isla Oliphant’s voice held an eager edge that made Robina’s belly clench. She’d known this ‘talk’ was coming and had dreaded it.

She’d been traumatized by her mother’s conversations regarding intimate matters in the past and feared this occasion would be worse.

Standing in the midst of the chamber while Fiona, the maid who’d been assigned to her, laced up the back of her gown, Robina glanced her mother’s way. *Must ye?*

She wished she could say the words, yet her mother had a quick temper and even quicker slap—and so she swallowed them.

Isla met her eye, her blue eyes gleaming. She then cleared her throat. “A wife has certain ... duties ... she must perform.”

Robina went hot and then cold. “Aye ... Ma?”

She knew that. There had been occasions in the past when her mother, and her nurse, had spoken about the vile appetites of men. The servants at Kellie Castle, the Oliphant seat, had also often gossiped of indelicate matters. The snippets Robina had overheard had left her feeling queasy. After one such incident, she’d told her parents she wished to take the veil at Iona, yet her father had refused outright. “If I’m to pay a

dowry for ye, Robina, it will be to make an alliance with one of our neighbors,” he’d informed her. “Not to fatten the coffers of the church.”

“Well ... on yer wedding night, ye must allow him to take his rights,” her mother plowed on, “as a husband.”

“Aye, Ma ... he will bed me.”

Robina wasn’t daft, she knew how bairns were made. She inwardly prayed her mother could cease this painful speech.

However, heedless, Isla Oliphant continued. “It will not be pleasurable, daughter, but ye must endure it, for that is a wife’s lot.”

Robina stared at her mother, not knowing how to answer, yet Lady Oliphant was not yet done.

“Carnal relations between husband and wife have just one purpose—to beget a bairn. I have given yer father four ... and although he takes his pleasure upon me whenever he wishes, I shall admit that I have never enjoyed it.” She drew in a sharp breath then. “Prepare yerself, daughter, for an ordeal. On my wedding night, I felt as if I were being torn asunder. Now, it’s true yer father is a ‘big’ man, but when he—”

“Ma!” Robina gasped, just as Fiona made a faint choking sound as if stifling a laugh. “That is sufficient. I need no further explanation.”

Isla scowled. “I just want ye to be prepared, daughter.”

“Well, now I am,” Robina replied stiffly, her cheeks burning.

Had she imagined it, or had there been a vindictive edge to her mother’s voice as she revealed those details? They’d never been close. Robina was the eldest child and three boys followed her—Isla’s sons were her pride; she fussed over them, even now they were grown, in a way she never had over her husband or daughter.

Holding her mother’s eye now, Robina realized the truth of it. Isla saw her daughter as a rival.

She was pleased Robina was marrying well for the sake of the clan, yet she didn't wish her well. She was enjoying frightening her.

A chill stole over Robina then, dousing the blush of embarrassment. Her mother's words just served to feed the fear that writhed in her belly. Her nurse had once told her that men were beasts in the marriage bed—that they enjoyed inflicting pain and embarrassment upon their wives. Murdina, who'd passed away the previous winter, had been a pious woman who'd never been wedded. Robina had wondered how her prudish nurse had gained such lurid details, yet her confusion hadn't eased the terror that had taken wing inside her at Murdina's words.

"There, Lady Robina." Fiona stepped back. "The gown is done ... shall we start on yer hair?"

"Aye," Robina murmured. She glanced down at her dark plum gown edged in gold then. She would wear a surcoat a shade darker on top of it.

Truthfully, she wished to send both her maid and mother from the chamber and lock the door behind them.

She felt as if she perched on the edge of a cliff with the sea roiling underneath her. She was clinging to the rocks by her fingertips, fighting the fall. But the plunge would come shortly, and there was no getting out of this.

"Leave my daughter's hair down," Isla instructed. "It flatters her face ... makes her complexion less sallow."

Robina's jaw clenched. How she dreaded her union to Tavish Gunn. Last night, he'd watched her during supper with the intensity of a hungry wolf. Frankly, the thought of becoming his wife made her feel as if she were going to the gallows. Nonetheless, as much as she didn't want to be here, she wouldn't miss being undermined by her mother.

"No," she said firmly, drawing her shoulders back. This was her wedding day, and she would decide how to wear her hair. They were away from Kellie Castle now, and already she could feel her mother's hold over her lessening. It filled her

with unusual boldness. “Please put my hair up, Fiona.” She flashed her mother a quelling look as she started to protest. “Use my amber combs.”



The wind howled across the bailey, bringing with it flurries of snow. Standing upon the top step before the chapel, Tavish fought the urge to hunch his shoulders as he finished repeating the vows that would bind him and Robina Oliphant together.

All the while, he didn't take his gaze off her.

And unlike the day before when she'd been able to look elsewhere, Robina stared back.

Her hazel eyes were wide, startled. Snowflakes settled on her brown hair and upon the shoulders of the plush velvet surcoat she wore.

Even the freezing wind and threatening blizzard couldn't dim her loveliness.

Robina spoke her vows after him, her voice husky, with a slight nervous tremor. And she was nervous—he could virtually smell it on her.

It was understandable really—for the pair of them had spent little time together and shared few words. Yet Tavish wasn't apprehensive. He knew what he wanted—what he'd wanted since Robina Oliphant's first visit to Castle Gunn.

The ceremony concluded swiftly, for the wind was now blowing horizontally, causing tendrils to come free from Robina's intricately braided hair.

The chaplain was hunched in his dark robes like a crow, his beaky nose bright red.

Deftly, he unwound the strip of Gunn plaid that bound their joined hands. “Ye are now husband and wife,” he muttered between chattering teeth.

Robina went to draw her hand away. Her fingers were slender and ice-cold, yet Tavish didn't relinquish his grip.

Instead, he squeezed gently before bending his head and brushing her lips with his.

Robina went rigid, and when Tavish pulled back, he saw that her eyes had gone wider still. Her elfin face had blanched.

It was only a kiss, yet she looked as if he'd just attempted to ravish her.

Pushing aside the unease that wreathed up at her reaction, Tavish turned his attention to the small knot of kin that had gathered to watch the ceremony.

"Hurry up!" his younger brother Will called. "My cods are freezing!"

This comment brought a censorious look from Lady Oliphant, even if her nose was as red as the chaplain's.

"It's done," Tavish called down to them. "Let us go into the great hall ... where mulled wine and a great feast await us."

The well-wishers didn't need to be told twice. Cloaks flapping in the wind, they turned and hurried toward the keep. Castle Gunn's tiny chapel sat squeezed between the forge and the guard house.

Still holding his bride's hand, Tavish set off after them.

Snow swirled around them, creating a momentary veil of privacy between the couple.

Tavish glanced Robina's way. Her face was still taut, her jaw set as if she were readying herself for battle.

"Fear not, lass," he said, before flashing her a smile, "the worst is over with."

Robina's chin kicked up, her gaze glancing across his. The look he saw there made the uneasy sensation of earlier return, and his belly tensed. "Is it?" she rasped.

Seated at the table, cowed by the din inside the great hall of Castle Gunn, Robina reached for her goblet of wine.

Fingers fastening around the silver stem, she raised it to her lips and took a large gulp, and then another. The bramble wine warmed her belly, settling the writhing nerves.

I'm a wedded woman.

Robina swallowed hard before sneaking a glance at her husband's hawkish profile.

Not quite, she reminded herself. There's still the wedding night to endure.

Her jaw clenched. And endure it she must. As if it wasn't enough that her mother had succeeded in putting the fear of God into her when it came to losing her maidenhead, the thought of being intimate with a man she didn't want made resentment simmer within her.

I don't want this—any of it, she thought bitterly. And I don't want him.

Feeling her stare, Tavish Gunn stopped conversing with one of his brothers—the heavysset one with a thuggish face—and glanced her way.

Their gazes locked, and to her ire, the man's lips twitched.

“That's better,” Gunn murmured. “If ye can meet yer husband's gaze without flinching, that's a start.”

Heat flushed through Robina as sharp anger rose, an emotion that managed to settle nerves and shyness.

How tired she was of being treated as if she didn't matter. Farther down the table, her parents were digging into roast venison and making merry. The high-pitched trill of Isla Oliphant's laughter cut through the deep rumble of male voices around her.

And now Tavish Gunn was viewing her as if she were a skittish mare that needed to be broken.

Robina had had enough.

“If I avoid yer eye, I have my reasons,” she replied. The wine made her bold, and she took another gulp to fortify herself. “I didn’t wish to wed ye, Tavish Gunn ... although ye seem too dim-witted to notice that ... or to care.”

Her words had been wielded like a filleting knife, and they had the desired effect, for all humor faded from the Gunn clan-chief’s face.

Tavish Gunn was an attractive man—not in the chiseled way his elder brother had been—but he had hawkish, slightly wild looks that softened when he smiled. However, when his brows drew together as they did now, and those storm-grey eyes hooded, Robina was reminded that she had wed a Gunn—warriors that were both feared and hated by many.

“No woman should be forced to wed against her will,” he said after a pause. “Had ye come to me yesterday and spoken to me thus, I would have respected yer wishes.”

Robina fought a lip-curl. “Plenty of women wed when they wish not to,” she growled back. “The law states one thing, but kin another.” She paused then, casting a meaningful glance down the table to her father.

Ramsay Oliphant was in the process of draining his third goblet of wine, his cheeks flushed.

Ire writhed like a nest of vipers in her gut. Now that she’d let the beast out of the cage, it didn’t want to go back in.

Swiveling her attention back to her husband, she found he was still staring at her. His face was expressionless, although his eyes had gone hard.

“My father has coveted an alliance with the Gunns for years,” she continued, biting out the words. “He was bitterly disappointed when yer elder brother disgraced himself ... and vexed when yer father refused to speak of another marriage contract with ye or one of yer brothers.” She paused then, her fingers tightening around the stem of her goblet. “It seems George Gunn was set upon me wedding Alexander.”

Tavish Gunn’s mouth thinned, his gaze narrowing. “Aye,” he said roughly. “My brother never wanted ye though,

Robina.” He leaned forward then, his gaze never leaving hers.
“Yet I do.”

NOT YER ENEMY



HIS BRIDE'S HAZEL eyes flew wide, and Tavish had the brief satisfaction of seeing her delicate features stiffen with shock, the fire in her gaze dimming.

In contrast, his own kindled. The woman had just spoken to him like something she'd scraped off her shoe.

He felt duped. Where was the gentle-mannered lass he'd wed? He'd thought he was taking a demure, if timid, woman as his wife—not a scold.

Disappointment clenched within him, yet not as quickly as his rising temper. "Aye, that's right," he bit out. "Alexander fell in love with a Mackay ... a wild, willful woman who stole his heart. He thought ye a meek mouse." Tavish broke off here, noting the way her slender jaw clenched. "But he was mistaken, wasn't he? Ye were just playing at being biddable and sweet."

His words were deliberately provocative, for underneath his anger and disappointment, Tavish was nursing a sharp embarrassment. Somehow this slender, elfin-faced woman had made a fool of him. He'd developed an infatuation with the image he'd formed of Robina Oliphant from a distance. And now she knew it.

The pair of them stared at each other for a long moment—a duel of wills. And as they did so, Tavish's temper gradually

cooled.

No, this wasn't the gently-spoken woman he'd developed an obsession with from her first visit to Castle Gunn. Instead, his bride had spirit. It occurred to Tavish then that life with Robina would not be easy, yet could possibly end up more rewarding for it. She held his gaze with the intensity of one of her goshawks.

Excitement quickened in Tavish's gut, arousal tightening his groin. Suddenly, he wished this wedding banquet were over. The noise of the revelers and the coarse boom of Roy's laughter next to him faded.

The world became Robina's eyes—and as their stare drew out, he sensed a change in her.

His wife's breathing altered, her bosom lifting and falling in sharp movements, her soft pink lips parting.

Desire knifed through Tavish.

Aye, he couldn't wait till this wedding banquet was done.

What have I done?

Heart slamming against her ribs, Robina gazed into Tavish Gunn's eyes.

Her temper had gotten the better of her—and for a fleeting moment, a sense of power had thrummed through her.

She'd enjoyed shocking him, enjoyed seeing that arrogant smile fade.

But then he'd turned the tables on her.

And now he was looking at her like a hungry wolf—and she was his prey.

Judas, I'm a fool.

Blood roaring in her ears, Robina did tear her gaze from Tavish's. She was still reeling from his revelation. Before arriving at Castle Gunn, she'd thought he had agreed to wed her for political alliance, not because he 'wanted' her. Instead,

all this time, he'd coveted her, even when he'd believed she'd been meant for his brother.

Even now, as she raised her goblet shakily to her lips, she could feel the heat of his gaze upon her. It scorched her.

Tavish Gunn didn't need to say a word: one look at his tight expression, his burning eyes, told her that he lusted after her. Inadvertently, she'd stoked that lust with her shrewish words.

She'd wanted to wound, to put him off, and yet it had had the opposite effect.

Robina took another large gulp of wine.

The saints preserve her, how was she supposed to survive her wedding night?

The wedding banquet was over too quickly. The food stuck in Robina's throat, the wine had gone straight to her head, and she'd broken out in a cold sweat—yet no one noticed or cared.

The music grew louder, as did the raucous laughter and singing. Queasiness stole over Robina, and when the tables below the dais were pushed back and couples took to the floor, fear clamped her belly.

She didn't want to dance with her husband.

And yet she had no choice.

Tavish rose from his seat, took her hand, and led his bride out onto the floor. The strength and heat of his hand engulfing hers only served to make Robina's galloping pulse race even faster.

The lyre played a gentle melody, and the couple settled into a *basse danse*, a courtly dance in which they circled each other.

Robina wasn't a confident dancer—she'd always been too shy to truly enjoy it. And it made her feel like a prize filly, parading in front of potential suitors for her parents' benefit.

Laird and Lady Oliphant sat upon the dais, faces flushed with wine. The self-important expression on her father's face

and the smug look upon her mother's made bitterness sour Robina's mouth.

They'd sold her off to the Gunns without a thought to her happiness.

Tavish Gunn's father, George Gunn's, cruelty and brutality were legend throughout the Highlands. Did they think his sons weren't cast in the same mold?

Maybe they did, but they didn't care.

As she went through the motions of the dance, taking care to avoid her husband's wolfish gaze, Robina spied his brothers. The loutish one now had a serving lass upon his lap. Grinning, he groped the young woman's breasts while she squirmed and tried to get away.

Robina suppressed a shudder. Roy Gunn was a pig. Catching her looking in his direction, Roy's grin widened. The man then had the audacity to lift his tankard of ale to her, with the hand he wasn't using to molest the serving lass, in a mocking salute.

Jaw clenched, Robina looked away.

The dance came to an end, and husband and wife bestowed each other with a formal bow.

Not waiting for the music to recommence, Robina fled back to her seat.

Moments later, Tavish joined her. "I take it ye aren't fond of dancing?" he asked, wry amusement lacing his voice.

"No," she replied, her own tone clipped. "I find I have little aptitude for it."

Tavish quirked a dark eyebrow. "Ye seemed perfectly graceful to me."

Robina glared at him, searching for mockery in his eyes. However, she saw none.

Their stare drew out, and then Tavish shook his head. "Ye give me an ill-favored look, Robina. I'm yer husband, not yer enemy."

Robina stiffened, yet she managed to swallow the words that clawed up her throat, desperate to spill out. She wasn't sure what was wrong with her this evening; it was as if a lifetime of resentment had just come to the boil—and now it surged up, seeking release.

All those things she'd wanted to say to her parents over the years—but hadn't—now surged within her.

Tavish inclined his head. “Ye are angry, wife. Does my presence vex ye so?”

Robina drew in a deep, steadying breath as she attempted to calm the storm within her. She needed to get ahold of herself—to put her anger back in its cage. Raging at the man who was now her husband wouldn't help matters. When it came to the bedding, he'd just be even more brutal. Her mother had told her once that it was no good trying to deny a man his base carnal needs. He'd only take what he wanted in the end after he'd hurt her all the more.

“It's not just ye,” she said eventually, her voice rough with the force of the emotions churning within her. “It's everything.”

He raised his eyebrows, inviting her to continue.

Robina sucked in another breath. She really didn't want to confide in this man, for she didn't like or trust him—and yet the loneliness of her existence, the fact that there was no one she could confide in, was getting too much. Suddenly, she felt so terribly alone; she felt that there wasn't a soul alive who cared how she felt.

“My wants have never mattered,” she admitted after a pause, her voice husky. “To my kin, I'm just something to be used to foster an alliance between our clans.” She heaved in a shaky breath, aware that she was now raving but unable to stop herself. “When I told my father that I didn't wish to wed, it was as if one of our fowls had just informed them that it no longer wanted to lay eggs. He made it clear that my only purpose was to help our clan prosper. What else are daughters good for?” Her voice trailed off as heat swept over her.

Embarrassed and aware that her cheeks now flamed, Robina dropped her gaze to the goblet she clutched.

Wretchedness clenched within her. What in the devil was she doing confiding such things to Tavish Gunn? He would think her a mewling wench.

Tensing, she waited for his scorn, his derision. Yet none came.

Long moments passed, and then Robina glanced up. Tavish Gunn was still watching her—and yet there was no sneer upon his face, no disdain or mockery in his eyes.

Instead, his mouth lifted at the edges, even as he continued to hold her gaze. “Yer wants matter to me,” he said softly.

TIME FOR THE BEDDING



ROBINA DIDN'T KNOW what to say to that.

Her first reaction was disbelief. How could she matter to him? He didn't even know her. Moments passed, and then a chill settled in her belly. Was he patronizing her?

"I mean it," Tavish continued, his voice low, as if he was ensuring no one overheard them. "I've wanted ye for years, Robina. We are but strangers still ... yet I wish to change that."

Heat flushed over Robina, dousing the chill.

There was an intimacy to his voice that embarrassed her. She'd gone and done it now—had dug a hole for herself. She'd wanted to keep herself walled off from her Gunn husband, and yet the opposite had happened.

Robina glanced down at her goblet of wine—it was nearly empty. Had Tavish added some potent herb to it, to addle her wits?

Fingers clenching around the stem, Robina dismissed the notion. No, she couldn't blame Gunn for this. Her outburst, the tide of details her husband had never asked for, had flowed out of her tonight.

"Time for the bedding," Roy slurred then, his voice intruding. Shifting her gaze across to Tavish's brother, she saw

the brute still had the hapless serving lass upon his lap. The poor woman's eyes were wild with panic as he continued to paw at her ripe breasts with one hand—delving under her skirts with the other.

“Come on, brother,” Roy continued with a leer. Farther down the table, the three younger brothers—Blaine, Evan, and William—were now grinning like idiots. All gazes were upon the wedded couple. “What’s wrong ... afraid ye are not up to the task?” Roy cast Robina a lingering look. “I can bed yer wife instead, if ye like?”

Robina's stomach lurched at the suggestion. Roy's younger brothers laughed, although no one else at the table—her parents included—showed any mirth.

And neither did Tavish.

Placing his goblet on the table before him, her husband's gaze raked over his brother as if taking his measure. An instant later, his lip curled. “I can bed my own wife, thank ye, Roy,” he replied, his tone cool. “And I've warned ye before about groping that poor lass.” Tavish met the young woman's eye before nodding. “Off ye go, Jean.”

Relief suffused the lass's face. She twisted out of Roy's grip and scrambled from his lap before hurrying off in the direction of the kitchens.

Silence fell over the table, and Roy's face went the color of raw meat.

His expression then screwed up, and he spat upon the dais, between him and Tavish. “My brother,” he snarled. “The priest.”

Tavish fastened him with a humorless smile. “No ... yer brother ... the clan-chief.” He reached out and took Robina by the hand, guiding her to her feet. His gaze then shifted down the table to Robina's parents. Ramsay and Isla Oliphant had been viewing the exchange between the brothers with keen interest.

As had everyone else at the table.

“We shall bid ye all a good night,” Tavish announced. “Please continue to make merry ... and we shall see ye on the morrow.”

Tavish’s fingers tightened, just a little, around Robina’s then, and her heart quailed.

Mother Mary, it was about to happen—the bedding.

Tavish led Robina from the great hall, amidst a chorus of drunken, ribald calls. Face flaming, Robina kept her gaze fixed firmly on the door. And although she’d been dreading the moment she and her husband would finally be alone, a strange relief swept over her when the heavy door thudded shut behind them and they were making their way up the spiral staircase to the floors above.

“I must apologize for my brother,” Tavish said after a pause. He still held her hand, his grip both firm and yielding. “He oftentimes forgets himself ... especially when he’s had a skinful.”

Robina didn’t reply. All the same, her feelings toward Roy must have shown on her face, for Tavish’s hawkish features tensed. “Don’t worry, I’ll ensure he minds his tongue around ye in future.”

Robina’s mouth pursed. “He resents ye, doesn’t he? Roy wishes he were clan-chief.”

Tavish snorted a laugh. They were approaching the top landing now, the light from the cressets upon the walls gilding the proud lines of his face. “Aye ... it’s always galled him that he was the third-born son ... and not the first.”

“And yet, with yer eldest brother gone from Castle Gunn, Roy is next in line should anything happen to ye.”

Tavish cocked a dark eyebrow. “Ye think he’ll try to rid himself of me?”

Robina could hear the wry edge to his tone, although her own gaze remained serious. “Perhaps ... ye should be wary of him.”

Their gazes fused, and then Tavish's mouth quirked. "Fear not ... I already am."

The chaplain was waiting for them. Entering the large chamber through the clan-chief's solar, Robina tried to slow the panicked beating of her heart by taking deep, measured breaths.

However, at the sight of the chaplain standing before the biggest bed she'd ever seen, Robina's belly churned and bile stung the back of her throat.

Lord, how will I weather this?

The chaplain blessed the bed, sprinkling holy water over the coverlet, before murmuring a blessing over Tavish and Robina as they perched, side-by-side, upon the edge of the bed.

The blessing was spoken quickly, and then the chaplain left, the door whispering shut behind him.

Robina drew in a deep breath as her pulse now thundered in her ears. The time had come—and she wasn't ready. She doubted she ever would be. Long moments stretched out as she and Tavish continued to sit in silence. And with each passing moment, Robina's panic grew.

Tavish reached out then, covering her hand with his. "I meant what I said earlier," he murmured, his voice a low rumble. "Ye matter to me, Robina ... long have I wished to make ye my wife."

Robina realized he'd only said such to allay her fears—however, his words merely made her break out in a cold sweat.

Tavish Gunn might have made the decision to wed her, yet Robina felt as if she'd been bullied, pushed, and guilted into this position.

Ma says it will hurt.

She recalled Isla Oliphant's words earlier in the day—and the glint in her gaze as she'd uttered them. Her mother had enjoyed scaring her daughter, and not for the first time over

the years. Together, Isla and Murdina had created a terrifying impression of what happened between a man and woman.

Robina closed her eyes.

She just wanted it to be over.

Tavish's fingers hooked gently under her chin then, and he angled her face toward him. Robina's eyes flickered open, her heart quailing when she saw the hunger in his storm-grey eyes. And then, without another word, he leaned in and kissed her.

His lips brushed across Robina's, feather-light at first, as he judged her reaction. And then he kissed her again, his hands gently clasping her shoulders as he drew her into his embrace.

And despite that she was terrified, despite that her heart was beating so fast she felt as if it would leap from her chest, she noted the pleasant smell of him: a blend of wood smoke, wine, and the male musk of his skin.

His lips brushed across hers once more, and then his tongue gently parted them.

Robina froze, panic flaring like a fiery beacon within her breast.

Lord, no!

"Just relax, mo chridhe," Tavish murmured. "Let yerself enjoy it."

My Heart. The endearment didn't soothe Robina; instead, it just unsettled her further. She couldn't enjoy it—not when she knew what it would lead to.

Even so, if she sprang away from him, things would only get worse for her.

Robina's mother had lectured her endlessly on how a wife should obey her husband in all things. And so, Robina would have to suffer Tavish Gunn's kiss.

Cupping her face with his hands, he kissed her again, his tongue sliding against hers in a gentle, languorous rhythm.

And, curse her, she found herself liking the taste of him. He had a way of kissing—both gentle and passionate—that

caused a kernel of heat to ignite in her belly, like a tender flame. He cupped her face with his hands with reverence, as if he held something delicate and precious.

Robina's heart still drummed against her ribs, sweat now bathing her limbs, yet his gentle approach, his sensual mouth, kept the panic within her from bubbling up, from spilling over.

And then one of his hands slid to the back of her head, possessively cradling it as he deepened the kiss. The tender flame within Robina flared brightly for an instant, as the heat of Tavish's desire washed over her.

But when a low groan issued from his throat and he drew her toward him—that flame sputtered and went out.

Ice-cold fear flooded through Robina's veins. Her body went rigid, and she tore herself away from him, tumbling off the edge of the bed in her effort to flee from her husband's side.

Hitting the cold flagstones, Robina scrambled backward before cringing against the wall.

And all the while, she never took her gaze from Tavish, lest he leap at her.

Breathing hard, Robina lifted a hand to her lips, still tingling from his kisses. It was no good—she'd tried to force herself to go through with this—to do her duty.

But she couldn't.

If Tavish touched her again, she'd screech and claw at him like a hell-cat.

“Robina?” The horror on her husband's face, the shock in his eyes, barely penetrated Robina's crippling panic. “What is it? What's wrong?”

“Everything,” she gasped, her voice catching in her throat. “I can't do this ... please don't make me.”

TAVISH'S PLEDGE



TAVISH STARED AT his wife as if she'd just transformed into something else entirely. Not a comely woman with a sweet-tasting mouth and soft lips that begged to be kissed—but a wild, panicked animal that cringed away from him.

In an instant, the lust that had heated Tavish's blood cooled, and the erection that had been pressing almost painfully against the tight leather trows he wore tonight eased.

The terror in Robina's eyes was sobering indeed—only Tavish didn't understand what had caused it.

"I don't understand, Robina," he murmured, gentling his voice, as he did when dealing with a frightened horse. "Why do ye fear me?"

Her large eyes gleamed with unshed tears. "I don't want ye to hurt me."

Tavish stilled. "*Hurt* ye? Why would ye think I'd do that?"

Robina wrapped her arms around her slender frame. "Ye wouldn't be able to help yerself ... ye are a man after all."

Tavish frowned. He was truly struggling to comprehend the woman. None of this made any sense. She seemed to believe he was going to brutalize her.

"I promise nothing of the kind would happen," he said after a pause. "Have I not been gentle till now?"

She shook her head, denying his words. “Only to draw me into yer net ... to get me to trust ye.” A shudder went through her then. “But I know what comes after.”

Tavish raised an eyebrow. “Ye do?”

“Aye ... and I do not wish to be treated that way ... to be hurt and humiliated.”

Heat washed over Tavish—a mixture of horror and rising anger. “I don’t know what manner of beast ye believe me to be, Robina, but I would never do either of those things to ye.” He paused then, seeking to rein in his reaction. He didn’t want to frighten her further. Gentling his voice, he continued, “A woman’s first time can be ... uncomfortable ... yet only her first. After that, it can be very pleasurable ... for *both* parties.”

Robina stared back at him, her features taut with fear. “I don’t believe ye,” she rasped. “That’s a lie.” Her voice cracked then, and Tavish’s anger dimmed.

Satan’s cods, the lass thought that coupling meant agony for the woman. Who had led her to believe such things?

Terror pulsed from her, so potent he could almost taste it.

Slowly, so as not to scare her further, Tavish slid off the bed, sinking onto the floor so that their gazes were level.

Robina tracked him, her body coiling as if she thought he might pounce on her.

Something deep in Tavish’s chest twisted. He couldn’t help it—he was bitterly disappointed. He’d been looking forward to this day—this night—for months, yet his bride abhorred his touch.

Stubborn determination welled within him then. This was a setback—a large one—but he couldn’t let this shaky start ruin his marriage. He couldn’t continue to let Robina gaze upon him with fear shadowing her eyes.

This had to be nipped in the bud, right from the beginning.

Slowly, he slid forward so that they were around two feet apart—close enough that he could reach out and touch her.

“Give me yer hand, Robina,” he murmured. When she didn’t move, he swallowed. “Please ... I won’t harm ye.”

A nerve flickered in her jaw, a little of the fire he’d seen during the wedding banquet resurfacing. Moments passed before she slowly reached out a trembling hand toward him.

Tavish took it, his fingers folding gently over hers.

“I know ye weren’t keen on this marriage,” he said, his voice low, “But I’d hoped ye would warm to me all the same.” He paused then, seeking the right words, ones that wouldn’t alarm her. “Ye need never fear me, Robina. I solemnly make ye a pledge this night ... that I will always treat ye gently ... that I will treasure yer body.” His gaze held hers fast. “One day, when ye are ready, I will show ye how it should be when a man takes his wife ... but I am prepared to wait.”

Robina stared back at him, her face pale, her jaw tense.

“All that I ask in return,” Tavish continued, cupping their joined hands with his free one, “is that ye trust me enough to believe that I mean ye no harm.” He could feel her pulse racing under his fingertips yet pressed on. “I wish ye to share my bed tonight.” Alarm flared in her eyes, and she tried to pull away, yet his grip remained firm, as did his gaze. “I swear to ye ... I will not touch ye, yet there will never be any trust between us if ye don’t let me prove myself to ye,” he murmured. “Ye have my word that I will not overstep ... however, I need yers that ye will meet me halfway.” He paused then, letting the moment draw out. “Will ye?”

Silence fell between them. Far below, Tavish could hear the muffled sound of music and laughter. Oblivious to the turmoil within his chamber, their guests and kin continued to make merry.

Long moments passed, and then, just when Tavish began to believe he’d pushed things too far, Robina nodded.



Robina stirred in the bed, coming awake slowly. For a few blessed instants, she imagined she was back home, in her old bed—and then she remembered.

Castle Gunn.

The wedding ceremony.

The banquet.

The terror that had pulsed through her as she'd cringed away from her husband.

Eyes flickering open, Robina tensed. She lay facing the wall, yet sensed she was not alone in the bed. Heat fluttering at the base of her throat, she remained there, wondering at her next move.

Her husband's deep, even breathing filled the bed-chamber. Tavish was still asleep.

Carefully, so she didn't wake him, Robina rolled over, her gaze alighting on Tavish's sleeping face.

He lay on his side, facing her, his sharp features soft in repose.

Robina continued to watch him, her gaze shifting to where one naked arm lay on top of the blankets. To her relief, although he'd stripped off his lèine and vest, he'd left his trows on.

It had been painfully awkward, those moments after she'd agreed to trust him, yet they'd both managed to ready themselves for bed and climb in without another scene erupting.

Robina had undressed behind a screen in a corner of the bed-chamber before donning a night-rail and woolen robe. She'd then emerged and darted across the room before diving under the covers—careful to keep to her side of the bed.

“Goodnight, Robina,” Tavish had murmured, a note of dry humor in his voice.

“Goodnight,” she'd replied stiffly.

And that was it—the last words between them before dawn the following morning.

There was a little light in the bed-chamber, for the brick of peat in the hearth still burned low and watery light filtered into the room through a gap in the shutters—enough light to allow Robina to study her husband's sleeping face.

She was relieved he wasn't yet awake—for she was embarrassed in the aftermath of the night before. She couldn't believe she'd lost control like that. Fear had turned her witless, yet Tavish had somehow managed to calm her.

And he'd remained true to his word—he'd 'let her be' overnight. He hadn't touched her.

Robina's belly tightened. How long would it be before he pushed the boundaries with her?

He'd made her a pledge, yet would he keep it?

Tavish stirred then, his long, lean body stretching. His eyes fluttered open. They were a little unfocused from sleep, yet they sharpened when he saw that she was watching him.

"Good morn, wife," he greeted her, his voice a little gravelly. "Did ye sleep well?"



Watching her parents depart, Robina felt nothing but a wave of relief. Her mother had observed her like a hawk all morning—and had even asked her how the bedding went.

Robina had ignored her, pretending not to hear.

She wouldn't answer Isla Oliphant's prying questions: not now, not ever. The things her mother had told her about coupling, about the agony it put a woman through, still plagued her. A few times, she caught her mother scrutinizing her face as if searching for a sign of trauma.

Robina would give her nothing.

“Our Robina will give ye plenty of strapping sons,” her father boomed as he slapped Tavish on the back. They stood in the bailey, snow fluttering down from a colorless sky. “I expect to hear by spring that she is with bairn ... as well as news about leasing the grazing land we spoke of.”

Tavish grunted at this comment before stepping back next to Robina.

“Safe travels home,” he said, his voice bland.

“It’ll be slow ... with this damned snow,” Isla Ramsay sniffed. “I was hoping ye would invite us to stay for Yuletide ... as would have been proper.”

Tavish favored Lady Oliphant with a cool smile. “It would have been my pleasure, but as I have kin arriving for the festive season, there will not be enough bed-chambers to accommodate ye all.”

“But *we* are family now,” Isla informed him imperiously. She sat atop her courser, shrouded in furs, her long face sharp with disapproval.

“Aye, Lady Oliphant,” Tavish replied smoothly, “yet blood kin always takes precedence, does it not?”

“Aye,” Robina’s father answered heartily, swinging up onto his mount. “Of course it does. Stop whining, Isla.”

Lady Oliphant’s cheeks colored at this, her lips thinning, yet she minded her husband.

Robina lifted a hand in farewell as the Oliphant party turned and crossed the bailey toward the raised portcullis and the rickety wooden bridge beyond.

“Do ye really have kin visiting for Yule?” she asked Tavish softly, her gaze never leaving her parents retreating backs.

“No,” Tavish replied.

Robina glanced his way to see that her husband wore a half-smile, his eyes glinting. “But I’ve had enough of their company,” he continued, “as I wager have ye.”

MEETING IN THE MEWS



“FIONA, MAY I ask ye something ... something personal?”

“Aye, Lady Robina.” The maid glanced up from where she was sorting through a box of combs and hair pins. “Of course.”

Robina shifted uncomfortably upon her chair. She’d been on edge all morning since her parents’ departure. She wouldn’t miss them—Tavish had been right about that, although she wasn’t about to admit so to him.

In truth, his blunt comment had made her even more ill at ease in his presence.

She wasn’t used to being seen, noticed.

Robina glanced up to see her maid was waiting for her to voice her question. Embarrassment suddenly swept through Robina, and yet—seeing the frank look on the lass’s eyes—she forced herself to speak.

“It’s about what happens” —Robina cleared her throat—
“between husband and wife.”

Fiona stilled before her eyes widened. “Aye ... and?”

“Have ye ever lain with a man, Fiona?”

The maid’s cheeks went a delicate shade of pink.

“Fear not ... I won’t tell anyone,” Robina added hastily, heat rising to her own face. “It’s just that I wish to know what happens ... and how much it actually hurts.”

Fiona’s features tightened, her gaze roaming over Robina’s face. “Ye didn’t lie with yer husband last night then?”

Robina shook her head. “I panicked ...”

Fiona made a sound of disbelief in the back of her throat. “Surely, ye don’t believe what yer mother told ye yesterday, Lady Robina?”

Robina frowned. “My mother isn’t the only one who has said such ... my nurse also warned me about men’s beastly ways.” Her frown deepened. “Why would either of them lie about something so important?”

Fiona took a step closer, her gaze shadowing with concern. “If I may speak plainly, Lady Robina, I found the things yer mother said to ye to be ... unfounded.”

Robina’s frown turned into a scowl. “So, it isn’t agony?”

Fiona shook her head. “The first time can bring ye a little discomfort ... for a moment or two ... but then” —a smile stretched her face— “it becomes immensely pleasurable.”

Robina stilled. “Pleasurable?” She said stupidly.

Fiona’s smile widened. “Aye ... if a man knows what he’s about, he can give a woman as much pleasure as he takes.”

“And ye have met such a man?” Robina was both aghast and intrigued.

A blush bloomed once more across Fiona’s cheeks. “Aye ... Malcolm ... the castle’s austringer.”

Robina stared back at her maid, concern bubbling up inside her. Why would any woman voluntarily lie with a man, if the experience was as traumatic as her mother and nurse had led her to believe?

Seeing the look on her mistress’s face, Fiona huffed a laugh. “Have I scandalized ye, Lady Robina?”

Robina shook her head, although the truth was that her maid's words had sent her into turmoil.

The women's gazes met and held for a few moments before Fiona inclined her head. "Ye could do far worse than Tavish Gunn as a husband, my lady." Fiona's expression changed then, her eyes developing a mischievous glint. "And I've heard from one of the chambermaids, who once had an 'encounter' with him ... that the laird knows his way around a woman's body."

Robina's face was still glowing like a beacon when she left the women's solar.

The Lord preserve her, she'd never had a more embarrassing conversation.

Fiona's frank speech, and the way she so eagerly imparted intimate details, made Robina blush right down to the tip of her toes.

So her husband had once bedded servants, had he? Heat rolled through Robina once more. He'd told his brother off the night before, but was he really any different?

Robina's mouth thinned. *Beasts ... all of them.*

Upon the landing outside the solar, she found Misty, the Highland Collie, waiting for her. The dog rose stiffly to her feet and approached Robina, tail wagging.

"Good morning, lass." Robina ruffled her fluffy head and ears. "I'm going up to the mews. Do ye wish to join me?"

The dog leaned into her leg, and for a moment, Robina forgot her embarrassment, her confusion. The collie's uncomplicated affection soothed her.

Robina gave Misty's side a stroke before leading the way up the stairs toward the roof of the keep. Tavish had told her that the mews was located up here—and she longed to see her two goshawks. She'd been so distracted by the wedding that she hadn't visited Moth and Thistle since her arrival at Castle Gunn. She was irritated with herself now, for she should have

at least checked earlier to make sure their lodgings were suitable.

The mews at Kellie Castle was a stone building in the outer ward—yet the setup at Castle Gunn appeared to be quite different.

At the top of the stairs, Robina pushed open a heavy wooden door to the outside before climbing another set of stairs—these slippery with ice and snow. Misty still padded behind her, and woman and dog emerged onto the castle roof.

Drawing her fur-lined cloak about her, Robina breathed in the gelid air while her gaze scanned the crenelated wall that lined the space.

It had stopped snowing for a spell, and the sky had lightened. Moving to the ramparts, Robina surveyed the panorama before her.

She'd never liked Castle Gunn—had always found it a bleak, soulless place—but she had to admit that the view from this height was breathtaking. She just had to ensure she didn't move too close to the edge and look directly down.

To the east, the sea glittered silver in the weak winter sun, while to the west, ivory hills, so pristine white they almost hurt the eyes, rolled into a hazy horizon.

Robina heaved a sigh. Aye, it was beautiful—yet a cold, stark beauty all the same.

Turning, she crunched across the snow to the squat stone building that sat on the eastern edge of the roof. Robina paused before the door and cast a look over her shoulder. Misty had halted and was viewing her expectantly.

“Best ye remain here, lass,” she murmured. “Ye might make the birds nervous.”

The collie sat down, soft brown gaze imploring.

Smiling, Robina turned back to the door, knocked briefly, and then entered.

Stepping into a dimly lit interior, the air sharp with the odor of bird droppings, Robina's gaze went to the brazier that

glowed a foot away.

A young man stood there, warming his hands over the glowing coals.

He glanced up, his blue eyes widening at the sight of her.

Robina favored him with a tight smile. “Ye must be Malcolm,” she greeted him.

The austringer—the keeper of the Gunn’s hawks—nodded. “Good morning, Lady Robina.” He offered her a smile then, his youthful face turning handsome in an instant. “It’s a cold morning to pay the mews a visit.”

Robina stood there a moment, embarrassment warring with the need to spend time with her hawks. Knowing that this man was her maid’s lover made her uncomfortable, yet the austringer had no idea that Fiona had confided in her mistress.

“Aye,” she replied, noting how her breath steamed indoors despite the brazier. “But I wanted to see how my goshawks are settling in.”

Malcolm’s smile widened. Stepping back from the brazier, he adjusted the heavy fur around his shoulders before motioning to the row of partitioned spaces that covered two walls of the mews.

There, sharing a partition and tethered to a perch, sat Moth and Thistle.

A wide smile bloomed across Robina’s face at the sight of them, and for an instant, she forgot her discomfort. “Good morn, my lovelies,” she murmured. Approaching the two goshawks, she whispered other endearments to them before reaching out and stroking their feathered necks and backs with the back of her hand.

“It takes a brave soul to do that, Lady Robina,” Malcolm murmured from behind her. “Those beaks can do serious damage.”

“Moth and Thistle won’t harm me,” Robina replied. “My father’s austringer stole them from a nest when they were tiny.

He took them too young, and they nearly died ... so I raised them ... trained them.”

A draft of chill air gusted into the mews then—with the opening of the door behind her. Robina glanced over her shoulder, going rigid when she spied her husband’s lean form. Encased in leather, a fur mantle about his shoulders, and his long dark hair fastened at the nape—Tavish Gunn had the same predatory look as the birds of prey housed within the mews.

“Laird,” Malcolm greeted him, surprise lacing his voice. “I wasn’t expecting—”

“It’s all right, Malcolm,” Tavish replied with an aloof smile, even if his gaze remained upon Robina. “I was looking for my wife.”

“And ye have found her,” Robina replied. She turned back to her goshawks, frustration curling like smoke within her. *Can’t he give me a moment alone?*

Tensing, she heard the tread of his boots on the stone floor, and then Tavish stood at her shoulder.

“They are bonny hawks,” he murmured, “although it surprises me ye own two ... training just one hawk to hunt and return to yer wrist is quite some work.”

“Moth and Thistle are sisters ... I didn’t want to separate them.” She paused then and cut him a glance. “Do ye hawk?”

Tavish nodded before gesturing to one of the partitions farther along the wall. “The sparrow hawk is mine.”

Robina shifted her attention to where a male hawk perched watching her with gleaming black and amber eyes. It was a beautiful bird with blue-grey features upon its back and wings, and a rust-colored belly and lower face.

“Don’t let his small stature fool ye,” Tavish continued. “Reaper is the best hunter in the mews.”

“Aye,” Malcolm agreed from behind him. “He’s been known to take down prey twice his own size.”

Robina suppressed a snort. Men and their propensity for boasting. Everything was a competition.

“Both Moth and Thistle are able hunters,” she replied, glancing back at her goshawks. They were both larger than Reaper—with mackerel bellies, walnut-colored wings, and a distinctive white arrow above each eye.

“We shall have to ride out for a spot of hawking soon then,” Tavish replied, “as soon as the snow melts.”

Robina nodded, a kernel of warmth igniting within her. She was pleased her husband liked hawking. The sport had been her escape, her solace, over the years.

“I haven’t yet exercised yer birds today, Lady Robina,” Malcolm said, interrupting their conversation. “If ye’d like to take them out onto the roof?”

Robina glanced over her shoulder at the austringer. She didn’t like the idea of exercising the birds up here. Her dislike of heights meant she wouldn’t be able to relax. “Ye don’t have a weathering yard?”

“No, Robina,” Tavish answered before Malcolm had a chance. “We let our hawks fly from the roof.” There was a challenge in his voice as he continued. “Hopefully, yer birds are well-trained enough to return to yer glove?”

Robina’s mouth thinned as she rose to the bait. She swiveled back to her husband, meeting his eye. “They are.”

MY WIFE, NOT MY PRISONER



THE CHILL AIR bit at Robina's face when she stepped back out onto the roof, one arm aloft. She wore a leather hawking glove—upon which Moth sat, leashed to her wrist by a thin leather hunting jess.

Behind her, Tavish followed, with Thistle perched upon his right wrist. Wordlessly, the pair of them crunched across the snow, past where Misty now lay watching them, to the crenelated wall.

Making sure to stay well back from the edge, Robina waited until Tavish had stopped at her shoulder before glancing his way. "Ready?"

"Aye." He flashed her a grin. "Let these ladies fly."

They loosed the hawks' jesses, and an instant later, both birds took off, flying high into the winter sky.

Robina watched them, craning her neck as Moth and Thistle dived and soared.

"Ye adore them, don't ye?" Tavish observed, a teasing edge to his voice.

"Aye," Robina replied, not taking her gaze from the sky. "They make me feel ... free."

Silence stretched between them before Tavish answered, "Ye aren't caged, Robina."

Tensing, she forced herself to look at him. “Aren’t I?”

He held her gaze, his expression more solemn than she’d yet seen it. “No ... ye are my wife, not my prisoner. Ye have the freedom to wander this keep at will ... and beyond if ye wish.” He paused then, his gaze narrowing. “All I ask is that ye cease looking at me as yer dungeon master ... or as if I’m about to rape ye.”

Heat rose to Robina’s cheeks then. She’d been so focused on her goshawks that she’d almost forgotten her conversation with Fiona earlier that morning and the acute embarrassment that followed it.

Pleasurable.

That was the word her maid had used to describe the union between a man and woman. And then, heedless to her mistress’s burning cheeks, the maid had gone on to explain, in great detail, how the act actually worked.

Recalling the description, Robina swallowed. She really didn’t want to blush again, to give herself away.

Now that Tavish held her eye once more, the details her maid had imparted made her feel a trifle breathless and giddy.

It’s my empty belly, she told herself. Indeed, she hadn’t eaten since the night before.

“Ye already promised ye wouldn’t ravish me,” she said huskily.

“Aye.” He stepped closer before reaching up with his ungloved hand. “I’m not the kind of man to take a woman against her will.”

Robina tensed, forcing herself not to shrink back. Tavish’s hand hesitated, his gaze shadowing before he drew it away. “I was only going to stroke yer cheek, Robina. There’s no need to pull away from me as if I’m a leper.”

Swallowing, Robina stepped back from him. His nearness was disconcerting, confusing.

She glanced away, following the path of her goshawks as they swooped overhead.

“I’ve lived a sheltered life, Tavish,” she said softly, realizing that it was the first time she’d addressed her husband by his Christian name. “More so than I realized.” When he didn’t answer, she continued. “I have no sisters or female cousins or aunts ... my mother and nurse were my only source of conversation and advice” —she swallowed hard— “on certain matters.”

She looked over at Tavish, who was observing her, a nonplussed expression on his face. No doubt, he was wondering what her point was.

She had to enlighten him.

Heart pounding, Robina severed eye contact with him once more. “My mother told me that marriage is a trial ... that a woman will only ever find pain and discomfort in the marriage bed.”

Her husband’s smoky gaze snapped wide. “Why the devil would she say that?” Tavish asked, his tone hardening.

“I don’t know ... bitterness ... vindictiveness perhaps,” Robina replied, something twisting deep within her chest. In truth, she had no idea why her mother would wish to scare her so. She’d always been competitive with her only daughter, yet this seemed a step too far.

“Surely, ye would have heard views contrary to hers though ... from servants?”

Robina shook her head, still not looking his way. “My nurse was a pious woman with very stern opinions on morality. She’d never wed and had never wanted to.” Her voice died off there, embarrassment flushing through her. “And she often warned me of the ‘vile appetites’ of men.”

She wasn’t sure why she’d spoken honestly to Tavish—she’d never been this frank with anyone.

However, strangely, coming to live at Castle Gunn had unleashed something in her. Her husband was an arrogant warrior, yet being in his presence made honesty flow out of her—like an icicle melting after a long, cold winter freeze.

“So that’s why ye were so frightened of me last night,” Tavish said after a pause. “Yer mother and nurse put the fear of God into ye.”

Robina nodded once more.

Another silence stretched between them then before Tavish spoke, a husky edge to his voice, “Please, look at me, Robina.”

Steeling herself, Robina turned to him. She’d expected to see annoyance or frustration tightening his features—yet she didn’t. Instead, he was watching her with a look of concern, his gaze shadowed.

“I must admit, I’m in new territory with all this,” he said, offering her a tight smile. “The past day has taught me how little I know of women.”

Robina snorted a laugh then—she couldn’t help it, for his candor caught her off guard. “At least ye admit it.” She replied, a smile tugging at her lips. “Most men wouldn’t.”

He stepped toward her, and this time, she didn’t shrink back. “I lost my mother young and have no sisters. With a dominant father and five aggressive brothers, I’ve only ever lived in a man’s world.”

Robina met Tavish’s eye. Once again, his honesty surprised her. But this time, she didn’t laugh. “Ye are a man of many contradictions, Tavish Gunn,” she murmured. “I don’t know what to make of ye.”

He cocked a dark eyebrow. “And I am completely baffled by ye, lass.” He smiled then. “But we have time ... to put all of that right.”

Robina’s belly fluttered. A strange, yet not unpleasant, sensation.

Their gazes held for a moment longer, and then Tavish looked away, digging into the pouch Malcolm had handed him before they went outside. He extracted two chunks of meat—from rodents the austringer trapped for his birds—and handed one to Robina.

“Let’s put Moth and Thistle back on their perches and go inside,” he murmured. “The noon meal approaches ... and I think we could do with some mulled wine.”

Robina smiled back, taking the meat from him and holding her gloved hand up. She adored mulled wine—a special treat at this time of year, with costly spices such as cinnamon and cloves added. “I’d like that,” she murmured. Then she let out a shrill whistle, calling to her goshawks.

Moth plummeted from the sky, alighting gracefully upon her gloved wrist. Next to her, Tavish caught Thistle—and fed her the piece of meat.

Robina and Tavish’s gazes met then and held—and warmth spread through Robina’s belly. Something had shifted between them this morning. She wasn’t sure what the change was exactly, only that she was starting to view Tavish Gunn, not as an oppressor or captor, but as someone she might come to like.



It was snowing again when Tavish stepped out into the bailey. The noon meal had come and gone, and afterward, Robina had gone upstairs to spend the afternoon making holly wreaths for Yule with her maid, Fiona.

Left to his own devices, Tavish went out to check on the horses. The Eve of Yuletide was just a day away now, and the weather seemed to have turned even colder. It was difficult to exercise the horses in deep snow—they would be restless.

But as Tavish approached the stables, shouting reached him.

He frowned. The commotion was drifting out from the stables.

Shouldering open the doors, he stepped into the wide aisle between the rows of stalls, the musty smell of horse greeting him. A wall of leather, fur, and plaid-clad bodies blocked his

view, but it was evident from their excited voices that a brawl was going on.

Mouth thinning, Tavish elbowed his way through their midst. Grunts and curses followed, although his warriors stilled their complaints when they saw their clan-chief amongst them.

They pulled back, giving Tavish an uninterrupted view of the fight.

Tavish's jaw clenched when he spied Roy and Will slinging punches at each other. Their two other brothers, Blaine and Evan, stood at the side-lines bellowing encouragement, while the horses snorted nervously in their stalls.

Roy was far bigger and stronger than Will, who had a leaner, lankier build—and Roy was laying into his younger brother with such viciousness that Tavish's step faltered a moment.

“What's going on here?” he growled to Blaine.

Grinning, Blaine glanced his way. “Roy took offense to something Will said.”

“Aye,” Evan chipped in. “Will's smart mouth has gotten him a hiding this time.”

Actually, the fight didn't look entirely one-sided. Blood trickled from Roy's nose, and he wore a twisted, mean look on his face that Tavish recognized well. Roy had the worst temper of any of them, one that was a match for their late father's.

And as Tavish moved forward to intercept them, Roy spat out a filthy insult and head-butted Will. His younger brother staggered back, but Roy didn't let up. Instead, he grabbed him by the hair and smashed him in the face with his fist before driving a knee into his belly.

“Roy!” Tavish snapped. “Stop this!” Roy ignored him. Will sank to his knees, and still gripping him by the hair, Roy smashed his head down on the cobbled floor.

Will's body went limp.

Letting go of Will's hair, Roy rose above him and started to kick his prone form.

Tavish sucked in a deep breath, his temper rising like a sudden draft of wind. "Roy," he barked. "Cease this!"

But Roy did not.

Tavish's blow caught him unawares. It was a hard hit to the side of the head, a 'haymaker', designed to topple Roy in one blow—and it did.

The big man fell sideways, collapsing against the frame of one of the stalls.

Meanwhile, Will lay face-down and worryingly still upon the cobbles.

Breathing hard, fury writhing in his gut, Tavish went to Will. Taking him by the shoulder, he rolled him over.

Blood trickled down his brother's brow from a gash upon his forehead. He was still breathing, yet he hadn't come to.

Tavish glanced up, his gaze spearing Roy. The warrior had sunk to his knees and was shaking his head, dazed.

Around them, the stable had gone deathly silent. Blaine and Evan were no longer grinning like fools. Both of them had been at the receiving end of Roy's temper in the past, yet it was entertaining to see someone else get pummeled by him.

However, Roy had taken it too far this time.

Will's face had drained of all color, and his breathing was erratic.

"Ye shouldn't have interfered, Tav," Roy mumbled, meeting Tavish's gaze as his vision cleared. "This was between me and Will."

Tavish held Roy's stare. There was no missing the challenge, the belligerence. This had to be nipped in the bud.

"I'll say this just once, Roy," he growled, his voice cutting through the now silent stable. "If I catch ye raising yer fists to anyone in this castle, *ever* again, ye shall be banished from it." Tavish paused there, letting his words sink in. Roy's gaze

narrowed, his expression turning mean once more. “And if Will doesn’t wake from the thrashing ye’ve just given him, I will personally flog ye before casting ye out.”

RESTLESS



ROBINA RAISED A goblet to her lips and took a sip of wine. A fabulous spread of food lay before her, for it was the eve of Yule—and the cooks had put on a feast of roasted goose, stuffed with pork and chestnuts. Platters of braised kale, buttered carrots, and fresh bread accompanied the goose. Boughs of holly and ivy decorated the great hall, as did pretty wreaths on each table.

But the atmosphere at the table was anything but festive.

Tavish wore a hooded expression as he helped himself to some goose, ignoring the wintry stare Roy was giving him. Roy's nose was swollen and looked to be broken. Farther down the table, Blaine and Evan had wary gazes—while Will was pale, his face mottled with bruises.

The whole keep had heard of the fight between Roy and Will a day earlier. Indeed, Will had been carried, insensible, up to his bed-chamber and had only awoken that morning.

Roy had almost killed him, yet the man didn't look remotely sorry about it.

Instead, he watched Tavish as if he'd have liked to take his fists to him too.

Robina suppressed a shudder. Roy Gunn was more than a brute—he was trouble. She'd already warned Tavish about him, and the urge to repeat it bubbled up inside her.

But when she glanced her husband's way and saw the watchful set of his features, she realized the warning was unnecessary. After the incident in the stables, Tavish was keeping an eye on Roy.

He'd told Robina about the fight as they'd lain abed together in the darkness, explaining how Roy would have kicked Will to death if he hadn't interceded.

"Didn't anyone else try to stop him?" Robina had asked aghast.

"No," Tavish had responded, a note of bitterness lacing his voice. "Few do at Castle Gunn."

Tavish's words had haunted Robina ever since. What a harsh world she'd entered, one where brother was at odds with brother. She hadn't enjoyed the dynamic within her own family over the years, yet it now seemed idyllic compared to the relationship between the Gunn brothers.

"Is the feast to yer liking, Robina?"

Tavish's voice intruded then. Robina glanced up from where she'd been pushing her food around her platter before favoring him with a smile.

"Aye," she murmured.

Tavish's mouth quirked. "Roast goose doesn't grace our table very often ... my father only used to want it at Yule."

Robina held his gaze. "But ye are clan-chief now, Tavish ... ye can ask for it whenever ye wish."

His smile widened. "Aye ... ye are right."

Watching him, Robina realized that for all his calm aura of confidence, this role was still new to Tavish. It was no surprise the likes of Roy challenged him, for all of them were getting used to not having George Gunn at the helm.

Robina glanced away, spearing a piece of meat with her knife. "Yer father terrified me," she admitted.

Tavish huffed a wry laugh. "He scared all of us," he replied before leaning in close. "Even Roy minded his tongue around

him.”

Robina took a mouthful of goose—it really was delicious. Swallowing, she met her husband’s eye once more. “George Gunn never had much time for women, did he?”

She wasn’t sure why she asked him that, only that the more time she spent with Tavish Gunn, the more curious she grew about him and his upbringing.

Tavish inclined his head. “Ye are an observant one, Robina ... no ... except for the servants who warmed his bed ... he had little time for yer sex.” Tavish paused then, swirling the wine in his goblet. “I doubt he cared much for our mother ... I don’t think I ever heard him refer to her with affection ... either before or after her death.”



Readying herself for bed behind the screen in the clan-chief’s bed-chamber, Robina tried to quell the nervous fluttering in her belly.

Tavish had honored his word—the night before, he hadn’t touched her or made any advances—yet all of this was so new to her.

It felt strange to share her bed with a man.

Leaving off the heavy robe—for it had gotten too hot and restrictive wearing it over the past couple of nights, Robina decided that she would go to bed clad in her night-rail. Although filmy, the garment covered her from neck to ankle.

Robina emerged from behind the screen, padding across to the bed, where Tavish waited. The glowing hearth across the room threw out a warm, golden light, and a candle flickered on the table next to the bed, illuminating the proud lines of her husband’s face.

Slipping into bed, Robina pulled the covers up under her chin. Outdoors, the wind rattled the shutters and whistled

against the walls.

“I wouldn’t be surprised if another blizzard hits us tonight,” Tavish said, breaking the ponderous silence between them. Robina wondered if he found this situation as awkward as she did. “We’ll be snowed in by the Epiphany if it keeps up.”

Robina pulled a face. “I was hoping to go hawking before then.”

“And we will,” Tavish assured her. The bed shifted, and she felt his gaze upon her. “I’m looking forward to it, Robina.”

She looked at him then, steeling herself for the impact of their gazes meeting. She had to admit that her husband looked handsome lying there, his dark, unbound hair rippling across the pillow. His eyes were slate grey in the candlelight.

Their stare drew out, and Robina swallowed. Then, dragging up her courage, she spoke. “Fiona assures me that it only hurts a little ... the first time ... coupling ... I mean.” She broke off there, mortification washing over her in a hot tide. Mother Mary, she hadn’t meant to speak so frankly. She’d been mulling over Fiona’s words for the last couple of days, and after her discussion with her husband on the roof, her mind would not let the subject go.

A slow smile crept over Tavish’s face. “Fiona, eh? So it’s true that she and Malcolm have been meeting ... I thought he was looking pleased with himself the other day.”

Alarm flared within Robina. “Don’t say anything ... please. I don’t want to get them in trouble.”

Tavish’s smile faded. “I have no intention of speaking a word to either of them ... their business is their own.” He paused then, his gaze ensnaring hers. “But Fiona likely speaks true.” His gaze twinkled then. “Although, since I’m a man, I’m not the one to seek assurances from.”

“Fiona gave me the impression that coupling is ... agreeable.”

“*Agreeable?*” He propped himself up onto an elbow and raised an eyebrow. Amusement gleamed in his eyes. “That’s an interesting way of describing it.”

“She also said it’s rumored ye know how to bed a woman.”

Hades, what was wrong with her mouth tonight? It seemed to have a will of its own. She’d only imbibed one goblet of wine with her meal, yet she felt strangely bold as she lay talking to her husband.

To her surprise, Tavish laughed, the warm sound filtering over the chamber. “Did she? What else did saucy Fiona tell ye?”

“Just that.” Robina glanced away, sure that her face would now be as red as a holly berry.

“Well, I’m flattered that word of my prowess circulates the castle,” he replied, mirth in his voice. “Although, since I’ve only ever bedded two women within these walls, it’s likely unfounded.”

Robina couldn’t help it; curiosity got the best of her, and she looked at him once more.

A smile curved Tavish’s mouth, and he was looking at her in a way that made Robina feel all hot and restless.

“They were both servants?” she asked.

He nodded.

Robina wanted to ask more, yet this time good sense checked her. If she was truthful, she probably didn’t need to know about Tavish’s past conquests.

Silence fell between them once more, and the unsettling restlessness within Robina grew. “I’m not as scared as I was,” she admitted quietly, “about what happens between husband and wife.”

His gaze turned limpid. “If ye like, I can show ye a little of how yer body can respond to a man’s touch,” he replied, his voice a low, sensual rumble. “Nothing more than that ... I promise.”

Robina’s breathing quickened, heat pooling in her lower belly. “I’d like to touch ye instead,” she whispered. “Will ye let me ... will ye show me what to do?”

Tavish stared at her a moment, his eyes growing dark. “Aye,” he replied, a slightly strangled edge to his voice. “Are ye sure that ye are ready?”

“As long as we end things there, aye.”

Robina’s heart was now beating wildly. For some reason, the thought of touching him was less frightening than the other way around. This way, she could control the encounter.

“Very well.” Tavish rolled onto his back. “Go ahead, wife.”

There was no mistaking the challenge in his voice. “When it gets to the critical point, I shall guide ye.”

Her mouth dry with both excitement and trepidation, Robina sat up and rolled down the coverlet, revealing her husband’s naked torso. He wore woolen leggings to bed tonight, although there was no mistaking the arousal that tented them.

Robina’s pulse started pounding in her ears.

She couldn’t believe she was looking upon her husband in this way. However, she’d thought much about the things her mother and nurse had brought her up to believe. She didn’t want to be kept prisoner by them any longer.

Cool air feathered across the bed now that she’d drawn back the covers, yet neither Robina nor Tavish paid the chill any mind. He was staring up at her, while she slowly reached out, running her fingertips from the hollow of his throat and down across the sculpted planes of his chest.

He shivered under her gentle touch, and she noted that his nipples had hardened into tight buds. Following instinct, she bent down and brushed her lips across them.

Tavish uttered a soft groan. His arms lay by his sides, and she noted his hands flexed—yet he didn’t reach for her. She was grateful. She wanted to be able to touch him uninterrupted, to explore his body without distraction or fear.

The long, lean length of his torso, the way his belly hollowed, and the way the dark hair on his chest arched

down to the waistband of his leggings made her breathing come in soft pants.

Tavish Gunn was a delight to look upon, she realized.

Leaning down once more, she trailed her lips over his chest, breathing in the warm musk of his skin, and down his belly. Her hair, unbound and brushed out, trailed after her, shielding her face from him.

Robina reached the waistband of his leggings and straightened up. The tenting of the material was even more evident than before.

“Ye can touch me there, Robina.” Tavish’s voice was husky, imploring. “If ye wish.”

Did she?

Robina swallowed. Aye, she did. Curiosity and something else—a sensation that made her feel breathless and needy, writhed within her.

With a trembling hand, she reached out, trailing a fingertip down the long hard length of his outlined erection, from tip to root.

IN HAND



TAVISH FOUGHT THE urge to reach for her, to pull her down into his arms and claim her mouth with his.

Did Robina have any idea what she was doing to him?

With just one touch, she'd made his rod ache with need. And now, sitting back on her heels, she was gazing down at the bulge in his leggings with an expression of rapt fascination.

Lord, if she continued staring at his groin like that, he'd spill.

His breathing caught then, as she reached out once more, trailing her fingertip down the length of his engorged shaft.

"It's so hard," she whispered.

"Aye," his voice was choked now. "See what effect ye have on me, Robina?"

She glanced up, her hazel eyes widening as her gaze met his. Her throat bobbed as if fear warred with desire.

Moments passed, and then she looked away, gazing down at his groin once more. She stroked him again, more firmly this time—and then, drawing in a shaky breath, she took hold of the waistband of his leggings and rolled them down over his hips.

Tavish's rod sprang up to meet her, swollen and ready.

Robina stilled, her gaze wide as she stared at it.

Tavish couldn't take his eyes off her face. Her expression was a picture: a blend of delight, shock, and nervousness. A faint blush now stained her cheekbones.

Tavish's fingernails dug into his palms as he clenched his hands tighter.

It was killing him not to reach for her.

Robina reached out once more then, stroking the length of him again before cupping his bollocks.

Tavish groaned.

"What do I do next?" she murmured, her voice delightfully breathy.

"Take me in hand," Tavish replied, a rasp to his voice now. "Here ..." He uncurled his fists and reached up, taking her hand and folding her fingers around the base of his rod. "Aye ... firmly ... like that." Christ's bones, he was going to explode. The feel of her cool, slender fingers gripping him was nearly too much.

"Aye ... and what now?" she whispered.

"Ye stroke me ... like this." His hand remained on hers as he guided it up to the swollen head of his shaft and then down.

Tavish let go of her hand then, fisting his own by his side once more as Robina started to work him.

Her attention was wholly upon her task, her chest rapidly rising and falling now. She wore a flimsy night-rail, and the firelight illuminated the jutting lines of her small, high breasts, the nipples hard and dark against the pale fabric.

Tavish's stomach muscles tightened as he imagined sucking them. He gritted his teeth. This was torture—pleasurable, yet barely endurable all the same.

"Harder," he grunted, angling up his hips to meet her. "Ye can tighten yer grip."

Robina's lips parted, and she nodded. She did as bid, pumping him more enthusiastically. And then, to his surprise,

she halted, lowered her head, and kissed the glistening crown of his shaft.

Tavish's ragged breathing filled the bed-chamber. He whispered an oath then, a deep groan escaping when her pink tongue darted out, exploring him.

Pleasure barreled through Tavish in a hot tide. Lord, he was close to spilling now.

Robina drew back once more then, her hand working him, hard, as he'd asked for. He had no need to tutor her any further. This woman knew how to pleasure him.

Arching his hips off the bed, Tavish threw his head back, his climax hitting him with the full force of a battering ram. But Robina continued to stroke him, extending the pleasure that pulsed through his loins. Breathing hard, he glanced down and saw that he'd spilled his seed all over his belly.

Tavish's gaze shifted up to Robina's flushed face to see that her eyes still lingered on his groin in fascination.

A moment later, she looked up, their gazes meeting. And then, Robina favored him with a slow, delightful smile.



A grin stretched Robina's face as she urged her garron on, up the hillside. The pony's feathered fetlocks sank into the snow, although the morning was clear—the sun a hard white pinprick in a washed-out blue sky.

There had been a light dusting of snow overnight but not the blizzard that Tavish had been concerned about. As such, he'd suggested they go hunting after breaking their fast.

It was the day of Yule, and the servants were preparing a great banquet—one that would be even more elaborate than the evening before—to celebrate.

It was a treat indeed, to go hawking on Yuletide morning.

Reaching the crest of the hill, gloved arm held aloft, with Moth perched there, Robina glanced over her shoulder at the man who'd followed her up the hill. Like her, the Gunn clan-chief rode a hardy highland pony—a good choice when crossing snowy terrain. These garrons were as surefooted as mountain goats.

Robina's excited grin softened to a smile as her gaze lingered on her husband. A heavy fur about his shoulders and his sparrow hawk, Reaper, perched upon his outstretched wrist, Tavish Gunn definitely drew the eye. He'd tied back his long dark hair at the nape this morning, yet Robina could still remember it, fanned out around his head upon the pillows as his eyelids flickered close, his face contorting in pleasure.

To her surprise, she'd enjoyed every moment of that encounter—even more so, for he'd let her take the lead, let her bring him to climax without reaching for her.

The whole scene had been incredibly exciting, and heat pooled in the cradle of Robina's hips as she recalled the details.

But best of all, after she'd retrieved a cloth and wiped Tavish's seed off his belly, they'd pulled up the covers—shutting out the night's bitter chill—and cuddled close.

Lying there, spooned by her husband's warm body as his breathing deepened and sleep took him, a feeling of contentment, unlike any Robina had ever known, had stolen over her.

If that was a taste of what it could be like between a man and a woman, did she need to be so afraid?

Robina glanced away from her husband then, urging her pony on once more, down the hill into the wide glen below. Her smile faded as she recalled all the frightening things her mother and Murdina had said over the years—the fear they'd both cultivated in her.

She was beginning to see that it had been, indeed, all a lie.

Pondering this, even as anger tightened her belly, Robina rode down into the glen and drew up her pony, waiting till

Tavish stopped alongside.

“This spot will do nicely,” he announced.

Robina smiled, her brooding forgotten. Indeed, the glen was a perfect hunting ground for the hawks. The birds would be able to spot prey easily against the pristine snow, and Robina and Tavish could view them hunt from this vantage point. “Aye,” she murmured. “Let them stretch their wings.”

With that, they removed the hoods from their hawks, loosed the jesses, and flung their arms skyward, letting the birds fly free.

Moth and Reaper needed no further encouragement. In an instant, the pair whirled high into the cloudless sky.

Robina watched them, her breath catching. It didn't matter how often she went hawking, she never tired of this sight.

“I like seeing ye smile, Robina.” Tavish's voice intruded then. Tearing her gaze from the sky, she met her husband's eye. Tavish was looking at her with an intent expression that made a blend of excitement and nervousness flutter within her.

Swallowing, she held his gaze. “Thank ye for taking me out hawking,” she murmured.

His cheek dimpled as his smile widened. “We shall do this regularly,” he replied. “It is a passion we share ... and it gives us a chance to spend time together ... away from the prying eyes of servants and kin.”

Robina cocked an eyebrow at this comment. It was true—there was little privacy in a stronghold, for a great number of people resided within. However, like her, Tavish had grown up inside the walls of a castle. She would have thought he was used to it.

“A clan-chief is always the center of attention,” she replied after a pause. “I wouldn't think it would bother ye.”

He huffed a laugh. “It doesn't ... usually.” His gaze never wavered from hers. “But at times, it gets wearisome having four ruthless younger brothers ... all of whom covet my position.”

“Surely, not *all* of them do?” She pointed out. “Just Roy?” Her brow furrowed as she said the name of the Gunn third-born. Just mentioning him cast a shadow over the morning. “Roy is more obvious than the others,” Tavish replied, his features tightening, “but don’t be fooled thinking Blaine, Evan, and Will aren’t just as ambitious.”

Silence fell between them then. Robina glanced up at where Moth glided overhead, surveying her domain. “Would Roy really have killed Will the other day?”

“Aye ... if I hadn’t stopped him. He and Will have always clashed, although I’ve never known Roy to be so vicious.”

She swung her attention back to Tavish, noting the veiled look in his eyes. This wasn’t a subject he wanted to discuss, and yet she wanted to know more about the dynamics within the Gunn family. She was one of them now, and forewarned was forearmed. “Do ye know what set him off?”

Tavish met her eye before he shrugged. “Roy didn’t say. But out of all of us, he takes after our old man the most.” He paused then. “Our father once nearly beat Alexander to death, years ago now ... when Alex was around thirteen.”

Robina’s gaze widened, although she didn’t reply, giving him the space to continue.

“It was over something inconsequential,” Tavish said quietly, glancing away, his expression hooding. “Alex had merely answered him back over the noon meal. He lay unconscious for days after that beating.” His gaze swung back to Robina then, spearing her. “Is it any wonder that we all grew up to be brutes?”

Robina stilled, taking in his proud profile. “Ye aren’t a brute, Tavish,” she murmured after a pause. “And ye choose whether or not to follow in yer father’s footsteps.”

UNDER THE MISTLETOE



ROBINA BREATHED IN the scent of pine and wood smoke, warmth flooding through her chilled limbs. She and Tavish had returned to the castle just in time for the Yule banquet. Stepping inside the great hall of Castle Gunn was a pleasant surprise. The servants had done a bonny job of decorating it for the evening before, yet today they'd added extra touches.

Boughs of drualus—mistletoe—trailed from the rafters, as did garlands of wreathed holly and pine. Banks of candles flickered in every corner, and a Yule log—a weighty branch of oak—smoldered in the hearth.

A woman sat at a harp near the fire, the lilting strains echoing above the rumble of conversation. Two Highland Collies, one of them Misty, sat at the harpist's feet.

Robina halted near the hearth, a smile curving her lips as she took a cup of mulled wine from a passing servant.

She did enjoy Yuletide, especially since it represented a turning point in winter's darkness—from this day on, they began the slow journey to spring.

“Ye know what happens to a woman who stands beneath a bough of drualus?” A rough male voice intruded then, interrupting Robina's reverie.

She glanced up to see Roy Gunn looming over her. His bruised and broken nose looked almost purple in the firelight,

and although it had barely gone noon, his eyes were glazed with drink.

Glancing above her, Robina's chest constricted when she saw that, indeed, she'd stopped beneath a dangling sprig of mistletoe, the silver-green leaves and tiny white berries gleaming in the firelight.

Robina's jaw tensed. Of course she knew the tradition—nonetheless, it would be an icy day in hell before she'd let this man kiss her.

Stepping back, Robina tried to put some distance between them. However, with a grin, Roy reached out, gripped her by the arm, and hauled her toward him. Wine sloshed over the rim of her cup, staining the sleeve of the pine-green kirtle she'd worn for the Yule banquet. Roy paid it no mind.

His gaze was on her mouth. "Tradition is tradition ... sister-by-marriage. Let's taste those sweet lips."

"Kiss her, Roy, and I'll shove yer teeth down yer throat."

Roy's bulky shoulders stiffened, his gaze darting to where Tavish now stood.

Relief gusted from Robina at the sight of him. Tavish had been on the other side of the hall earlier talking to Blaine. But her husband must have spied Roy approaching her, for he had appeared at her side.

"Don't get yer braies in a knot, brother," Roy growled, his grip on Robina's arm tightening. "It's *tradition*."

Tavish's gaze narrowed, his face all taut angles. "Not anymore."

Long moments passed, and Robina was aware of conversation dying away around her. Even the harpist had stopped playing and was now gawking at them.

Robina's teeth clenched. Curse Roy—the man constantly stirred up trouble.

He now wore a truculent expression as he stared his elder brother down. But there was also a gleam in his eye. She realized then that his attempt at kissing her beneath the

mistletoe was just a power play. He was seeking to undermine Tavish, to rile him.

She recalled the things her husband had revealed to her, earlier in the day, about how it was between the males of his family.

Her pulse began to race then. Roy would never stop challenging Tavish. He wanted to rule and could not bear to see another take the clan-chief's carven chair.

"Yer wife looks to be a cold bitch," Roy said finally, releasing Robina's arm with a sneer. "She's a fine match for ye, brother."

Tavish's dark brows crashed together. "Ye still haven't learned yer place, have ye?"

Roy's sneer morphed into a scowl. "No ... and I never will."

Rubbing her bruised arm, where Roy had so roughly gripped it, Robina eyed her husband and brother-by-marriage warily.

Hades, they weren't going to start brawling, were they? Not right before the Yule banquet?

Tavish set his cup of wine down on the mantelpiece before rolling up the sleeves of his quilted velvet gambeson. "I think it's time we clarified matters," he growled. "If ye want a hiding, ye shall have one."

"Tav." Will appeared then, stepping between his two elder brothers. The youngest of the Gunn brothers was still pale after the thrashing Roy had given him two days earlier, his face mottled with bruises. However, his gaze was determined as it met Tavish's. "The shitbag isn't worth the trouble ... not here ... not now." Will shifted his attention to Roy, whose lip had curled.

The loathing in Will's eyes chilled Robina.

Upon her arrival at Castle Gunn, she'd marked the simmering tension between the brothers. Of all of them, Tavish and Will appeared to get on the best. Perhaps, as the

youngest brother, Will was less of a threat. Nonetheless, the exchanges she'd witnessed between Tavish and Roy always held an undertone of barely suppressed dislike, and ever since Tavish had broken up that fight, Roy's resentment had taken on a more menacing edge. Whether it happened today or not, blood would one day be spilled between the Gunn brothers—she knew it in her gut.

The silence drew out, and Robina readied herself for Tavish to throw the first punch. However, he surprised her by flashing Will a hard smile.

“Never were truer words said, Will.” He then slapped his youngest brother on the back, even if tension vibrated off his lean form. Despite his words, he was only just holding himself in check. “Why give him what he wants?”

Exactly, Robina thought, noting the fury that contorted Roy's features. It was confirmation that he had, indeed, been deliberately goading Tavish.

Ignoring his brother, Tavish stepped close to Robina, flashed her a smile that didn't quite meet his eyes, and linked an arm through hers. “Come, mo chridhe, the Yule feast awaits.”



The banquet passed without incident—mainly because Roy didn't join them.

After his near brawl with Tavish and ensuing humiliation, Roy had muttered a threat to Will and stalked from the hall.

His departure made relief sweep over Robina. As soon as Roy left, a festive mood returned to the hall. The harpist resumed playing, and the Gunns and their retainers took their seats at the long trestle tables that groaned under the weight of platters of roast meat—venison, mutton, and boar; bowls of buttered, mashed turnip; baskets of breads studded with walnuts; and platters of braised onions and kale. Servants had

also carried in huge rounds of aged cheese as well as oatcakes drenched in honey.

Robina had rarely eaten so well—the cooks at Castle Gunn definitely had more talent than those at Kellie Castle.

The banquet drew out, the afternoon sliding into dusk before a lively ceilidh began. Robina and Tavish joined the dancers, twirling around the floor as the music soared. And as she danced, Robina found it impossible not to smile.

Perhaps life at Castle Gunn wouldn't be the ordeal she'd anticipated. Perhaps she could actually be happy here?

The reveling drew out into the evening and continued long after dusk settled over the world. Yet, eventually, Tavish bid his kin and retainers a good eve and led his wife upstairs.

Robina was glad to retire for the eve. Her feet ached from all the dancing, and she felt sleepy after the rich food and wine.

However, the feel of her husband's strong hand clasping hers made her stomach flutter nervously. She wasn't completely at ease when they were alone. Tavish's presence, his masculinity, overwhelmed her senses.

After what they'd shared the night before—after what she'd done to him—she now felt a trifle embarrassed.

Stepping inside their bed-chamber, the door thudding shut behind them, Robina turned to her husband. Her lips parted as she readied herself to speak to him. Yet she noted he wasn't looking at her but at the sprig of drualus that dangled from a beam directly overhead.

His mouth quirked. "How did that get there?"

Heat flushed through Robina. No doubt he thought she had deliberately hung it, to claim a kiss from her husband.

But she hadn't. In fact, she'd been about to ask if he could merely hold her close again tonight. She wasn't sure she was ready to take things further—not quite yet.

"Fiona must have hung it," she replied weakly.

Tavish's smile widened, and the fluttering in Robina's belly increased. Lord, he had a smile that did strange things to her insides. "Clever lass," he murmured, his gaze spearing Robina's. "Does this mean I may give my wife a kiss?"

Robina stilled. Of course, when he asked so politely, it would seem churlish to refuse him.

Nervously, she cleared her throat. "Aye ... go on then."

He laughed. "Try to appear a little pleased by the request, Robina. I won't bite."

Robina's jaw clenched. She didn't appreciate being teased, especially when she was this tense.

Sensing her shift in mood, Tavish sobered. Moving close, he reached up and cupped her cheeks.

Robina's breathing caught. She knew what she'd done to him last night should have broken the barriers between them, yet there was something about the melding of two mouths that seemed even more intimate.

Tavish leaned in, and his lips brushed hers, once, twice.

It was pleasant. His lips were soft, and up close, she inhaled the spicy scent of his skin.

A moment later, he kissed her again, the pressure firmer—and then his tongue parted her lips.

Robina gasped out at the invasion, yet Tavish's hands remained upon her cheeks, his tongue sliding gently against hers.

And to her surprise, Robina realized she liked it—as she had the first time he'd kissed her, before she'd panicked. The heat of his mouth, the way his lips slanted across hers, and the wicked glide of his tongue made heat ignite in the pit of her belly.

Without even understanding her reaction, she swayed against Tavish, losing herself in his embrace.

MAKE ME YERS



TAVISH HELD HER gently, as if she were something precious, something that might shatter if he handled her too roughly.

And all the while, his mouth gently explored hers, his tongue sliding against Robina's, teasing and testing.

Robina slowly gave herself up to the kiss, leaning into him further as his hands slid around to cradle the back of her head. He deepened the kiss then, his teeth grazing her lower lip.

Need arched up within Robina, and suddenly, she was kissing him back. Her hands went up, her palms splaying across the velvet material of his gambeson. She could feel the hardness of his chest, the warmth of his body beneath the quilted material.

Her palms itched to touch his naked skin.

"Robina," he whispered as he tore his lips from hers and let his mouth trail down her jaw to the column of her neck. There was a plea to his tone, a hoarseness to his whisper that made desire shiver through her.

Robina reached up, clinging to his shoulders as his lips explored the length of her neck before traveling up to the shell of her ear.

She trembled against him, her knees weakening.

Tavish claimed her mouth with his once again then, and this time, his kiss wasn't gentle. Instead, there was an urgency, a hunger, to it that made Robina respond in kind.

She kissed him wildly, forgetting how afraid she'd once been of him, forgetting all the terrifying things her mother and nurse had told her about what passed between a man and a woman.

How could something that felt so good, that made her body quiver with want, bring her harm?

The kiss continued, and Robina found herself leaning up against the wall, the length of her body pressed flush against Tavish's lean frame.

And then she felt the rock-hard column of his erection pressed against her belly.

Had she not already explored him the night before, had she not already taken him in hand and brought him to climax and watched his body respond to her touch, she might have been alarmed by the discovery.

But instead, a wild sensation—reckless and insatiable—reared up within her.

Without thinking, she pushed her hips against him, grinding slowly against his arousal.

The groan that rose in Tavish's throat inflamed her—and when he reached up and unbound her hair, letting it fall in waves over her shoulders, she undulated herself against him once more.

Murmuring an oath, Tavish tore his mouth from hers. His face was all lean angles, his grey eyes almost black in the firelight as he stared down at her. He reached up then, his fingers tangling in her hair, his lips, swollen from their passionate kisses, parting. "I think we should stop there," he rasped, his chest rising and falling sharply, "for if we continue in this vein, I may forget myself."

Robina stared up at him. Likewise, she was out of breath, yet her body tingled and pulsed in the aftermath of their embrace, and a deep ache pulsed between her thighs.

It hit her then that she didn't want him to stop.

She wanted Tavish Gunn to forget himself—she wanted him to make her forget as well.

Reaching up, she took his hand and entwined her fingers with his.

“I'm ready, Tav,” she whispered, her voice catching as nervousness swelled in her breast. Pushing the sensation aside, she plowed on. Aye, she was a little scared of what was to come—yet she trusted her husband. She wanted to be joined with him. “I want to lie with ye ... tonight.”

Tavish stilled, his gaze hooding with desire as he continued to stare down at her. “Are ye certain about this, Robina?” he asked, his voice husky now. “Once things go past a certain point, we can't go back.”

“Aye,” she whispered. “Make me yers.”

Tavish watched her for a moment longer, and then he stepped back, his gaze raking over the length of her body—the look was so hot, so carnal, that Robina shivered. With just one look, he'd stripped her naked.

He reached out and began to unlace the bodice of her kirtle. His movements were deft, yet Robina noted the slight tremble in his fingers.

The man was holding himself on a tight leash.

Breathless, Robina watched him finish unlacing her bodice—and then he reached down, gripped her kirtle and lèine with his fists, and drew the garments up over her head.

Naked except for her slippers, Robina stood before him. Despite the roaring fire a few feet away, drafts still found their way into the chamber. As such, goosebumps prickled Robina's skin and her nipples hardened.

Tavish's heated gaze swept over her. “Lovely,” he murmured. “Ye are even bonnier than I imagined.”

Robina gave a nervous laugh. “Ye have imagined this moment?”

His gaze hooded further. “Many ... many times.”

The sensual rumble of his voice made her shiver—and it had nothing to do with the chill drafts that pushed their way into the chamber through the gaps in the shutters.

It was in anticipation of what was to come.

Wordlessly, Tavish stripped off his own clothing, leather and velvet pooling around his feet.

Robina hungrily took in the hard, lean lines of his body and the magnificent shaft that bobbed before him. However, she didn't get the chance to gaze upon him for long before Tavish stepped close and lowered himself before her.

His hot mouth took a nipple and began to suckle her.

Robina's shocked gasp filled the chamber, and she clung to his shoulders once more, her eyes fluttering shut at the new, exciting sensation.

He drew the nipple deep into his mouth before gently pulling at it and grazing it with his teeth.

Robina gave a soft cry, arching against him as he focused his attention on her other breast.

She drew back slightly then, watching him in fascination. She'd always thought her breasts too small, yet they ached and throbbed under Tavish's touch; her nipples felt swollen and breathlessly sensitive.

A cry of disappointment ripped from her as he lowered himself further, his mouth leaving her breast and trailing down to her belly.

Yet the disappointment lasted only an instant, for when he nudged her thighs apart and lifted one of her legs over his shoulder, the feel of his finger sliding gently inside her made Robina gasp his name, her body trembling as he started to stroke her there. And then when he parted her wider still and she felt his mouth upon her, Robina unraveled.

Quivering, she arched her pelvis up to him, greedily taking the pleasure he gave her. She lost herself utterly in the

sensation—all shyness, all nervousness and apprehension forgotten.

The feeling of his finger, sliding deep within her now and curling, as well as the flick and glide of his tongue, was too much.

With a raw cry, she arched against his mouth and shattered.

Tavish released her and rose to his feet then, sweeping Robina up into his arms. It was just as well since she had gone weak and boneless, aching pleasure still rippling through her loins.

Three paces took them to the bed, and Tavish lay her down upon it.

He then spread her wide once more and positioned himself between her thighs.

Fascinated, her breathing coming in needy pants, Robina watched him fist his quivering shaft and guide it into her.

“I will try to go slowly,” he managed between gritted teeth, “yet this first time may hurt ye ... a little.”

Aye, Fiona had warned her of that—although her mother had said much worse.

A flicker of apprehension surfaced then, as she recalled the chill that had slithered down her neck when Isla had told her that being taken by her husband the first time had made her feel as if she were being ripped asunder.

And yet, Tavish wouldn't cause her agony. She trusted him.

Inhaling deeply, she let her fears fall away and allowed her body to relax.

Tavish eased his way in, working his thick shaft into her tightness. Robina drew in deep, shuddering breaths, marveling at the fullness, at the feeling of being stretched.

There was a sting then, as he pushed past the barrier of her maidenhead, and she gasped, yet the discomfort was fleeting.

An instant later, he slid to the root, and the sensation of being completely filled made Robina catch her breath.

Tavish stared down at her, his face taut. “Are ye comfortable, lass?” he ground out.

“Aye,” she breathed, tentatively rolling her hips and then gasping as pleasure rippled through her lower belly. “Oh ... aye!”

He muttered a curse then, his fingers digging into her hips. She watched him withdraw, with aching slowness, before sliding deep once more. The look on her husband’s face was so strained, he almost looked as if he were in pain.

He repeated the act—another long, slow stroke that made Robina whimper in pleasure—and she realized he was holding himself back, for her.

Wrapping her legs around his hips, she drew him against her, angling herself to meet his next stroke.

“More,” she gasped. “Harder.”

“Robina, I—”

“Harder!”

With a strangled sound, he held himself up over her and started to pound into her in deep, hard thrusts.

Aching heat surged in the cradle of Robina’s hips, her cries echoing through the chamber.

The wet sound of their bodies coming together was so erotic that she writhed against him, demanding more, crying his name again and again. Tavish let himself go, his own cries joining hers until he found his release inside her, a violent shout tearing from his throat.

Tavish collapsed on top of his wife. His breath came in ragged gasps, sweat bathed his skin, and his limbs shook.

He’d never climaxed like that before, so hard that his vision had actually darkened for a few moments.

Aware that he was likely crushing his slender wife, Tavish rolled off her onto his back. There he lay, one arm thrown over his eyes, as he struggled to regain his breath. He felt strange in

the aftermath of the passionate coupling—his chest ached, and his throat was tight.

“Tavish?” A soft voice reached him, and he removed his arm from across his eyes to see that Robina was staring down at him.

Christ’s bones, she was a sight. Her long dark hair fell around her shoulders in wild disarray; her cheeks, neck, and breasts were flushed; her hazel eyes were bright; and her lips were bee-stung from his kisses.

“Are ye well?” she asked huskily, reaching out and placing a soft hand on his chest where his heart still bucked against his ribs.

Tavish stared up at her. “Not really,” he admitted, a trifle shakily. Hades, what was wrong with him?

ALL OF YE



ROBINA'S HAZEL EYES widened, and Tavish saw worry shadow them.

He reached up, his hand covering hers that still lay upon his chest, and squeezed gently. "I wanted to go gently with ye, but I lost control, lass ... did I hurt ye?"

She shook her head.

Tavish's chest constricted. "Are ye certain?"

"Ye didn't hurt me," she whispered, her gaze gleaming now. "I wanted it, Tav ... I wanted ye to give me all of ye."

He stared up at her, the ache in his chest increasing. He wasn't sure he liked the sensation—he'd never felt like this after taking a woman.

Exposed. Raw. Vulnerable.

"It's never been like that for me," he admitted huskily after a pause. It was true—he'd always held a piece of himself back with his lovers. And now, in the aftermath of this passionate coupling with Robina, he understood why.

This woman had stripped away his shields, his armor. He felt as if he was revealing his soft underbelly to her—and he was, both literally and figuratively.

Tavish didn't like feeling so exposed.

Letting his guard down wasn't wise. He lived in a den of wolves, and although Robina was supposed to be his safe haven—one he'd longed for—the reality of what he felt for this woman scared him. He hadn't been prepared for the emotional intensity that had come with their joining.

Holding his gaze, Robina favored him with a tremulous smile. "Is it not always like that then?" she asked, shyly. "Between husband and wife?"

"I don't know," he replied, deciding it was best to be honest with her. "But ye are quite a woman."

It was the truth. He'd imagined their first coupling numerous times but hadn't anticipated just how lusty his wife was under her nervous, reticent façade. Her passion delighted him, however, the churning melee within him did not.

"Come here, wife," he murmured, pulling her against his chest.

She curled into him, warm and soft, her breath feathering against his neck, and something raw tugged deep inside Tavish's chest. He felt torn between wanting to protect this lovely, vulnerable woman who had just given herself to him and shielding his own heart.



Robina awoke to find Tavish gone. Stretching in the big bed, she reached out to where her husband had lain. The mattress was still warm. He hadn't been gone long.

A sigh of contentment mixed with longing rose up within her. She'd just passed the most magical, and most revealing, night of her life.

She knew now that her mother and Murdina had filled her ears with lies, with poison, all those years.

Coupling didn't bring agony and humiliation—not with the right partner.

Tavish had shown her another world.

She'd hoped he would take her again, yet he'd pulled her close, and they'd fallen asleep like that, wrapped in each other's arms.

Tavish had seemed a little odd in the aftermath of their coupling as if he was struggling with something.

Robina understood how he felt—for she hadn't expected that either. However, he'd appeared disturbed by it.

Pondering this, Robina swung her legs over the edge of the bed and got up.

It was early; the faint watery light of dawn was just starting to filter through the shutters.

Shivering, Robina added another lump of peat to the guttering hearth and then dressed. It was a chill morning, and so she chose her warmest woolen kirtle and wrapped a fur shawl around her shoulders.

Impatient to seek out her husband, she pulled on a pair of fur-lined boots and went next door to the solar. She'd expected to see him there, warming his hands before the fire, but the large chamber was empty.

The door opened then, and Fiona entered, bearing a tray of bannocks, butter, and honey.

“Good morning, my lady,” the lass chimed with an impish smile. “Did ye sleep well?”

Robina's cheeks warmed. Of course, she and Tavish had made quite a bit of noise the night before. Did half the keep now know the laird and his wife had enjoyed a night of passion?

“Aye, thank ye,” Robina replied, deciding it was best to brazen the moment out.

Fiona's smile widened. “I'm pleased to hear it.” The warmth in her maid's voice eased Robina's embarrassment. Fiona wasn't like her mother—she was genuinely happy that Robina and Tavish were forming an attachment to each other.

“Have ye seen the laird?” Robina asked as she helped herself to a wedge of bannock, slathering it with butter and honey. She usually had a poor appetite in the morning—but not so today. “Has he gone up to the mews?”

Tavish had told her once that he often went up to the roof to watch the sun rise over the sea, or when he wanted some solitude. After his odd mood following their coupling, she wondered if he’d indeed gone there this morning.

Misgiving feathered through her then, puncturing the cloud of well-being that she’d been floating on since the night before. Something was amiss.

“No, my lady,” Fiona replied as she went to tend to the fire. “I saw him heading toward the stables with two of his brothers.”

A short while later, after finishing a wedge of bannock and washing it down with a cup of milk, Robina emerged from the keep into the snow-covered bailey.

More snow had fallen overnight, and a crisp crust crunched underfoot as she drew her shawl close and made her way across to the stables.

The chill bit into the exposed skin of her face and hands and drilled through her layers of clothing. The dawn of Saint Stephen’s—the day after Yule—was a cold one indeed.

It was a still morning, yet to the east, the sky glowed a silver pink. A snow-sky if Robina had ever seen one.

She was surprised then when she saw Tavish lead a saddled horse out of the stables, excited dogs capering at his heel. Two more men—Evan and Will Gunn—followed close behind. All three brothers carried longbows and quivers of arrows slung over their backs.

“A cold morning for a ride,” Robina greeted Tavish, approaching him. Meeting her eye, Tavish favored her with a devil-may-care smile.

“Aye, wife, ... but we Gunns don’t feel the cold.”

“It’s our Saint Stephen’s hunt.” Will piped up with a grin.
“A Gunn tradition.”

Robina nodded, even if a pang constricted her chest. Tavish knew she loved to hawk and hunt and would have gladly accompanied them.

However, clearly, she wasn’t invited this morning.

She stood there, drawing her shawl closer still, and wondered if her husband would bestow her with a kiss before heading out.

Yet Tavish didn’t.

Instead, he checked his horse’s girth and swung up onto the saddle before turning to the men at the gates and calling out, “Raise the portcullis.”

Tavish then turned back to Robina and favored her with another smile—the expression held the arrogance that had once galled her about the Gunn males. But now, since she’d gotten to know her husband, and since they had become intimate, she found his arrogance oddly alluring.

Goose, she chided herself. I do believe ye are smitten.

Nonetheless, this arrogant and slightly aloof clan-chief hardly seemed the same man who’d given himself to her the night before.

Seated atop his shaggy, feather-footed mount, he seemed untouchable—unreachable.

“I shall see ye at noon, wife,” he said then before whistling to his dogs and reining his horse around.

Robina watched as the party thundered out of the bailey and onto the wooden bridge beyond. She stood there for a few moments after their departure, as snow started to fall silently from the dusky sky—and the same misgiving she’d felt earlier in the bed-chamber returned.

However, this time the sensation was sharper and accompanied by a knot in her belly.

Was Tavish Gunn one of those men she'd heard the servants at Kellie Castle gossip about? The kind to lose interest in a woman once a conquest had been made?

The memory of Robina's lovely face, her cheeks flushed with cold, lingered in Tavish's mind as he led his brothers across the western hills.

She'd looked achingly beautiful, standing there, her face framed with fur. He'd wanted to step forward, to haul her into his arms for a searing kiss—despite any jeers and taunts from his brothers.

But he hadn't.

Instead, he'd favored his wife with a careless farewell as if she hardly mattered to him. He'd seen the hurt in her eyes—for he knew Robina liked to hunt. And yet he'd deliberately not invited her.

He needed some time apart from his alluring wife. Time to clear his head.

That morning, he'd awoken before dawn, rolled over, and gazed down at Robina's sleeping face. Terror had swept over him—a chill, prickling sensation that had cramped his gut and catapulted him from the bed.

This was what he'd wanted, wasn't it? He'd lusted after Robina Oliphant, had dreamed of making her his for years—but now that she'd given herself to him, the reality of what it meant to be truly close to another person hit him like a mallet between the eyes.

Tavish had never trusted anyone, never been truly open with anyone—and to let his guard down now went against every survival instinct he had.

Snow fluttered into Tavish's eyes, and he brushed it aside, his gaze sweeping the snowy vista before him. Woodland lay farther west, and in it roamed a herd of red deer. Their tracks would be easy to find and follow in the snow.

“Come on!” he shouted to his brothers, who were lagging behind. Enough fawning over his wife. A clan-chief needed to remain tough, aloof. “Race ye both to the woods.”

WRESTLING IN THE SNOW



THE BROTHERS RETURNED to Castle Gunn with a dead hind slung over the back of Evan's horse. The snow fell heavily now, the thick flakes settling upon the backs of the hounds and frosting the manes and forelocks of the horses. They'd been fortunate, for although the snow had continued to fall throughout their hunting trip, the weather hadn't worsened further.

As the bulk of the fortress appeared in the distance, through the swirling snow, Will cut Tavish a look. There was a shrewd glint in his eye that Tavish didn't miss.

"What?" Tavish frowned. He'd caught the youngest of his brothers favoring him with veiled glances all morning—it was starting to get on his nerves.

"Things seem to have thawed between ye and yer bride," Will observed. This comment brought a snigger from Evan.

Tavish ignored the references to the noises they'd all likely heard the night before.

Indeed, Tavish had forgotten himself. He'd forgotten that, despite the thick stone walls, sound carried at Castle Gunn. He'd been so lost in his wife, he hadn't cared.

However, his brothers' jibes in the aftermath were wearing.

“I would have thought ye would have lingered in yer bed this morning,” Will continued, undaunted by the clan-chief’s silence. “Not drag yer carcass out to join us.”

“Aye,” Evan grunted. “Blaine and Roy couldn’t be bothered ... and we didn’t expect to see ye either.”

Tavish flashed them a wolfish smile. “What ... and break with tradition?”

Will snorted. “None of us have a comely wife warming our bed.” He cut Tavish another sly look. “Unless yer insistence on keeping with tradition has more to do with keeping Robina in her place.” He paused then. “Perhaps ye are more like our father than ye realize?”

A shiver that had nothing to do with the snow, or the biting north wind, cut through Tavish.

Will’s words hadn’t been meant as a compliment.

All of George Gunn’s sons had obeyed him, minded him, yet it hadn’t been out of respect but fear. Their father had ignored the woman who’d borne him five sons and hadn’t grieved her passing.

He’d been a selfish, cold man who’d taken his pick from the prettiest servants.

Over the years, Tavish had often seen the cowed, haunted look in the serving lasses’ eyes the morning after they’d shared the clan-chief’s bed. George Gunn had been a brute—and he’d tried to beat and bully his sons into his own image.

The likes of Roy needed no tutoring, yet it galled Tavish to have Will make a comparison between them.

I’m not like that bastard, he thought, clenching his jaw.

But as the dark walls of Castle Gunn loomed above them, Tavish wondered if, indeed, there was no escaping the fact that George Gunn’s blood flowed through his veins.

Roy and Blaine were overseeing a wrestling match in the bailey when Tavish, Will, and Evan rode under the portcullis.

Seemingly oblivious to the swirling snow, two warriors, stripped to the waist, their bare feet reddened with cold, held each other in a death grip.

Around them, the other men heckled and shouted while they exchanged bets.

The noise of their cheering echoed off the stone walls of the fortress and made the horses snort and side-step nervously.

Blaine called out to his brothers, who acknowledged him with a nod, yet Roy ignored them.

Instead, he heckled one of the wrestlers, who'd just slipped in the snow. "Useless shitbag!" he roared. He then ripped off his cloak and léine, heeled off his boots, and shoved the losing opponent aside. "Let me show ye how it's done."

Behind Tavish, Will muttered something under his breath. Tavish's mouth thinned. These days, he shared Will's deep dislike for Roy. The meanness and spite their brother carried was bone-deep these days. Like Will's, Roy's face still bore the bruises and swellings from the other day, yet—as always—Roy Gunn was spoiling for a fight.

A roar went up as Roy felled his opponent and then ground him face down into the snow with an elbow between the shoulder blades.

Roy's gaze then cut across the bailey, to where Tavish and the others had just dismounted. There was no mistaking the challenge in his voice as he called out. "Yer turn, Tav ... let's see how long ye last against me!"



The roar of men's voices drew Robina and many others out of the keep.

"They're wrestling in the snow, Lady Robina," Fiona informed her, her voice tight with excitement as they cast fur mantles about their shoulders and followed the servants

outside. “Malcolm says the laird and Roy Gunn have already gone five rounds!”

Robina’s belly tightened at this news before her jaw tensed. *Men*. Why did they always have to be so aggressive with each other? Her own brothers had scrapped constantly over the years. However, here at Castle Gunn, the sparring had an edge of danger to it.

Roy didn’t bother to hide his hatred for Tavish—and never missed an opportunity to undermine him. Had Tavish just played straight into his hands?

A crowd had gathered in the heart of the bailey, although the servants parted respectfully to let Lady Gunn and her maid into their midst.

An icy wind whipped across the keep then, chapping Robina’s cheeks.

Hauling her mantle tightly around her, she let her gaze settle upon the two half-naked men who grappled with each other. Tavish and Roy didn’t appear to notice the numbing cold.

Robina’s breathing stilled as she watched them. It was hard to believe the pair were brothers, as, despite their dark hair and grey eyes, Tavish and Roy Gunn looked nothing alike. Tavish was long and lean while Roy was built like an ox—the latter’s huge shoulders gleamed with sweat. The man was built for wrestling, as he could use his superior size and weight to his advantage.

However, his opponent moved with a litheness and agility that Roy lacked.

Tavish twisted like an eel under Roy’s bruising grip, his bare toes digging into the snow as his brother tried to topple him.

Robina had stopped next to Will and Evan, who were looking on, their grey eyes gleaming.

“It’s the deciding round,” Will informed her with a grin.

“Aye ... Roy’s in a rage about it too,” Evan quipped. “He’d hoped to trounce Tavish by now.”

Indeed, Roy’s bruised face had gone bright red, his eyes narrow slits. Sweat poured off his heavy brow.

In contrast, Tavish’s lean face was taut in concentration, his brows knitted together as he resisted yet another attempt from Roy to topple him sideways.

Tavish struck then, his heel slamming down on Roy’s foot before he wrapped a leg around his brother’s.

With a roar of rage, Roy collapsed on his side.

Cheering erupted from the sidelines.

Robina, who had been as tense as a drawn bow-string during the bout, let out the breath she hadn’t realized she’d been holding.

“We have a winner!” Blaine called out. “Our clan-chief is the victor!”

More cheering ensued, and glancing around at the faces of the onlookers, Robina noted the genuine joy on their faces.

They respected Tavish, she realized. They wanted him to best his thuggish brother.

But Roy wasn’t taking his defeat well. His face had gone an ugly shade of purple as he staggered to his feet. He then growled a curse and spat on the snow.

“Sore loser!” Will crowed, his tone deliberately goading.

Tavish straightened up and reached for the lèine Evan passed him. However, his attention wasn’t on Roy, his other brothers, or the applauding crowd, but upon Robina.

His gaze was searing.

Heat ignited in Robina’s chest, sweeping over her as if she’d just sunk to her chin in a bathtub of steaming water.

It was an intimate look, one of sultry promise.

Tavish barely glanced in his brother’s direction as Roy shouldered his way out of the crowd and stormed off. The

clan-chief then shrugged on his lèine and flashed his wife a grin. The expression was cocky and purely masculine.

And in an instant, Robina forgot her hurt and burgeoning worries of that morning.

When he smiled at her like that, the rest of the world faded—under its force, she could barely recollect her own name.

Maybe she'd worried unnecessarily—things were new between them after all. A lifetime of feeling misunderstood had left Robina sensitive to any perceived slight.

But when he looked at her with such melting eyes and that sensual smile, she could almost believe she'd imagined he'd rejected her.

STRANGERS ONCE MORE



HOWEVER, ROBINA DIDN'T imagine things the following morning when her husband rolled away, gently disentangling his limbs from hers, and rose from the bed.

Robina awoke, blinking as her eyes adjusted to the darkness. It was early—before dawn—and too early to be rising from their bed.

Rubbing her eyes, she sat up. “Tavish,” she murmured, her voice husky with sleep. “Where are ye going at this hour?”

“Go back to sleep, lass,” Tavish replied, his voice a low rumble in the dim light. The fire in the hearth had dimmed overnight and was close to going out. A deep chill had fallen over the chamber.

Robina tensed, her gaze following his tall frame as he finished dressing and then crossed to the hearth. She couldn't believe he was leaving again. Moments later, crackling filled the chamber when he fed the fire and stirred the embers to life with a poker.

“Before we coupled for the first time, ye always lay abed with me in the morning,” she said softly, “but now ye sneak off like a thief.”

Tavish snorted. “I'm not *sneaking off*.”

“Then why won't ye come back to bed?”

“I’m an early riser.”

“An early riser?” She couldn’t help it; her voice rose a notch. “But it’s the middle of the night.”

He snorted again, turning to her. Ruddy firelight caressed his hawkish features, yet Robina could see irritation there.

Her belly tightened.

He hadn’t been irritated yesterday when he’d swept her off her feet and carried her to bed, kicking the chamber door closed behind him.

Tavish had then torn off her clothes and spread her out on the bed, taking his fill of her till they were both dripping with sweat and gasping for breath.

They’d spoken little in the aftermath of their coupling, and Robina had missed the easy conversation they’d shared following their wedding.

Now they’d become intimate, her husband didn’t seem to want to talk to her anymore.

“Go back to sleep,” he replied, his tone firm now. “I’ll see ye later.”

Robina stared up at him, hurt knotting in her chest. “I don’t understand,” she said, her voice barely above a whisper. “Why have ye changed?”

“I haven’t changed, woman,” he grumbled, his voice edged with irritation.

“Aye, ye have,” she replied, dogged now. “It takes a lot for me to trust others, Tav ... but yer gentleness with me, the way ye listened to me ... made me believe that there was one person at least in this world whom I could confide in, could rely on.” She broke off there, trying to ignore the way her throat constricted and the hot tears that prickled her eyelids. She didn’t want to weep, not now. “But did I form the wrong impression of ye?” she asked finally. “Is that not who ye really are?”

Tavish stared at her for a long moment, and then his gaze hooded. “Ye wed a Gunn, Robina ... we aren’t like the men of

yer clan.”

She swallowed a bitter laugh at that. Aye, she knew all about the Gunns—but she also knew that the men of her own family didn’t treat their women like queens.

“That’s just an excuse,” she said, her voice catching. “Ye aren’t like the others, Tav ... ye are different.”

He cocked his head. “Am I?” His features hardened then. “The fact of the matter is that ye hardly know me at all ... I was raised to fight, to see everyone as an adversary. I don’t think I can be anyone else.”

Robina drew herself up, her temper quickening. “That’s nonsense. Ye decide who ye are, not yer kin ... or yer dead father.” She paused then, swinging her legs off the bed as she rose to face him. “Don’t ye want us to be close ... to be friends as well as husband and wife?”

Tavish shook his head and took a step back toward the door. “No,” he said softly. “I can’t give ye any more than this, Robina.”

With that, he turned and stalked from the bed-chamber, the door thudding shut behind him.

Tavish climbed the stairs to the roof, letting himself out onto its flat surface.

It had snowed again during the night, and a glittering white crust frosted the tower top and the crenellations. The mews lay in darkness at this hour. Yet the torches on the ramparts below cast a pale gold light over the fortress.

The sky was still shadowed, although the eastern horizon, where the dark bulk of the sea met the sky, held a faint glow.

Dawn was approaching,

Drawing his fur cloak about him, Tavish stared out into the pre-dawn gloom.

What’s wrong with ye, man?

He'd acted like a complete dolt back in that chamber—had been callous and cold. He now wished he could take those words back.

But it was too late; they were already out there.

The sight of Robina sitting naked on the bed when he'd turned from the fire, her dark hair spilling over her shoulders, her eyes soulful and trusting, had branded him.

She wanted to be close to him, to develop a bond between them, yet now that he'd won her, Tavish was paralyzed by fear.

Fear of being known, of giving someone a weapon to use against him.

He was a survivor—and had only lived this long in such a hostile environment through wiles and ruthless cunning.

Robina would turn him soft, would give the likes of Roy weapons to use against him.

I can't let that happen.

And yet the crushing pain that rose under his breastbone when he recalled the hurt on his wife's face made Tavish realize that he was fighting a losing battle.

The truth was that he was desperately in love with his wife, and he wouldn't be able to keep his distance from her forever.

Coldness stole over him then; it was freezing up here this morning. But his focus wasn't on the cold but on his wife.

It had taken a lot for him to penetrate Robina's reservations, to get her to trust him. She'd just admitted as much.

Like him, Robina was wary of revealing her heart to anyone.

Tavish shivered as the gelid morning air bit into his exposed skin. But still, he lingered upon the roof. This place had always been where he went when he needed to sort out his thoughts and make difficult decisions

Aye, Robina would soon raise her shields again, and they would be strangers once more.

Tavish Gunn had a choice to make.



“Have ye seen the clan-chief?” Roy Gunn’s casual question to Malcolm, the austringer, caught Robina’s attention.

She’d broken her fast alone in the solar, again, before venturing out into the bailey in search of her husband.

It seemed she wasn’t the only one looking for him.

Roy and Malcolm were standing by the stone well to one side of the keep. Neither had seen Robina as she stood in the shadows.

Robina wasn’t sure why exactly she was bothering to seek her husband, for Tavish’s words before dawn still stung—yet something within her wouldn’t let things lie.

She didn’t want to withdraw, to become the Robina of old. Tavish had freed her from that prison. With him, she hadn’t needed to hold back. But now he was the one retreating, and she wasn’t sure what to do about it.

Hunting her husband down likely wasn’t the answer, but she couldn’t remain in the solar pretending to care about embroidery or weaving. Tavish had given her a glimpse of happiness, of what their future could look like, and she didn’t want to let it go.

Even so, she stepped back farther into the shadows as Malcolm replied. “Aye, I just saw him. He’s up on the tower top ... exercising Reaper.”

Roy nodded, his expression strangely inscrutable.

Then, without another word, the warrior turned and walked off in the direction of the steps leading up into the keep.

Robina waited until he’d disappeared inside before she picked up her skirts and followed.

“Good morning, Lady Robina,” Malcolm called out to her cheerily.

Robina favored the austringer with a smile and a wave yet didn't break her stride.

There was something about Roy's manner this morning—a quiet cunning, a determination in his eyes—that she didn't like.

A storm had been brewing between Tavish and his brother for a while now—since before she'd arrived at Castle Gunn, she wagered—and it was about to break.

THE BREAKING STORM



THE HIGHER ROBINA climbed, the harder her heart pounded. Not from exertion, as she was used to climbing stairs multiple times a day—both here and at Kellie Castle—but from a growing sense of dread.

The back of her neck prickled.

She could hear the scuff of Roy's boots on the landing above. She was gaining on him yet didn't want to alert him to her presence.

All she could think about was the expressionlessness of his face in the bailey below contrasting against the gleam of his grey eyes.

The man was up to something.

Robina sped up, taking the steps two at a time now—not an easy feat with skirts swishing around her legs.

Rounding a corner, she spied Roy's broad form up ahead.

He reached for the handle of a heavy oaken door, drawing his dirk from his hip as he did so.

A scream rose in Robina's throat at the sight of the long, thin blade glinting in the light of a nearby cresset.

Oblivious to her presence, Roy shoved the door open and took the final set of stairs to the roof. Robina raced up the icy steps behind him before barreling out onto the tower top.

As she feared, Tavish had his back to them.

He was standing at the western edge of the tower, face tilted up as he watched his sparrow hawk swoop high overhead.

Roy raised his dirk high, aiming for a spot between the shoulder blades, and lunged.

“Tavish!” The scream ripped from Robina’s throat. “Move!”

And he did.

Although her husband’s attention had been elsewhere, his senses were sharp, his reactions honed. He side-stepped and swung around, just as Roy collided with one of the merlons that ringed the tower top.

Roy’s curse rang through the still morning air, while above, Reaper’s cry echoed him.

A heartbeat later, Roy recovered and went for Tavish again, blade flashing.

There was no time for Tavish to draw his own dirk. Instead, he stepped close, under Roy’s guard, and grabbed his brother’s thick wrist. “It’s come to this, has it?”

“Aye,” Roy snarled back. “It’s time for ye to die, brother ... time for me to take yer seat.”

A few yards away, Robina halted, her heart in her throat. *That traitorous bastard!*

Roy lunged forward then and head-butted his elder brother. Tavish hadn’t anticipated the move, and he reeled back, losing his hold on Roy’s wrist.

Tavish stumbled and fell, rolling across the snowy surface of the tower. Roy went after him, his face savage, dirk swiping—but despite that he was at a disadvantage, Tavish evaded him, rolling lithely to his feet and bouncing back as his brother’s blade flashed just inches from his exposed throat.

Roy lunged again, and Tavish dove under his guard once more, aiming a punch squarely in his brother’s gut.

Roy's grunt split the freezing air, and he made a grab for Tavish's hair—however, his elder was faster.

His next punch landed in Roy's groin, bringing the bigger man to his knees.

The brothers were locked in a stranglehold then, a parody of the wrestling match of the day before.

Roy was livid, the veins on his forehead bulging as he angled his blade toward Tavish's throat.

But Tavish held his wrists once more—and although he lacked his brother's brute strength, the blade wasn't giving an inch.

Frozen to the spot, Robina frantically glanced around. She wanted to help her husband, yet there was nothing upon the tower top that she could wield as a weapon—no brick or iron bar she could lob at Roy's head.

Desperate, as the dirk-blade glinted in the pale winter sun, she reached down and, scooping up snow in her hands, formed a hard-packed ball. She then stepped forward and hurled it at Roy.

It caught him hard on the cheek, the impact making him lurch sideways, his murderous gaze snapping to her.

The distraction was all Tavish needed. He drove Roy's wrist down and punched him in the face, crushing his already broken nose.

Roy's roar followed.

Tavish kept moving. He slammed his brother sideways and smashed his head up against one of the merlons.

The sickening, hollow thud of the impact made Robina's jaw clench.

She wasn't surprised when Roy slumped, insensible, against the wall, his dirk slipping from his fingers.

Tavish grasped the weapon and tossed it in Robina's direction. Even though Roy was momentarily incapacitated, he wasn't taking any chances.

Expression stone-hewn, Tavish drew his own dirk then and stood over his brother, waiting for him to awaken. Meanwhile, Reaper swooped down and perched on one of the merlons. The sparrow hawk studied the brothers, his gaze dispassionate.

Wordlessly, Robina stepped forward and picked up the dirk from the snow. As she did so, she heard Roy groan.

His eyes flickered open, unfocused at first, before his gaze settled upon the clan-chief's face.

For a few moments, the two brothers merely looked at each other.

“There are some lines that can never be crossed, Roy,” Tavish said, his voice low and cold. “I’ve warned ye what would happen if ye ever challenged me.”

Roy stared up at him, loathing twisting his face. However, this time, he had nothing to say.



Roy Gunn was driven from the castle that morning.

It was a brutal scene, yet one that Robina forced herself to watch.

She'd thought her husband would flog Roy for attempting to murder him, yet instead, he let the inhabitants of the fortress deal out justice.

Dressed in nothing more than braies, boots, and a thin lèine, Roy stumbled across the bailey hounded by howling servants. They pelted him with anything to hand: rotten food, animal manure, and stones.

Their fury and venom was shocking to behold, revealing the depth of dislike the folk here had for Roy.

Blood trickled down his temple where a stone from one of the stable hands had caught him, and as a turnip smacked him

across the back of the head, Roy tripped and sprawled headlong in the snow.

Robina glanced over at her husband and saw the severe lines that etched his face, the fury that simmered in his storm-grey eyes. His three other brothers—Will, Blaine, and Evan—all stood behind the clan-chief, their expressions similarly grim.

All of them continued to watch Roy, yet none of them moved to aid him.

“Ye are banished from Castle Gunn.” Tavish’s voice carried across the bailey as the clamor of the mob died down for an instant. “Ye are cast from this clan . . . and if ye ever set foot on my lands again, I shall hang ye from the walls.”

The threat hung coldly in the air, and Roy snarled, before one of the serving lasses—Jean, the young woman Robina had seen him harass—emptied a bucket of slops over his head.

The mob closed in then, and one of the men picked up a brick, advancing toward Roy.

Picking himself up, Roy lurched forward, fleeing the mob’s wrath.

Watching the scene unfold, Robina suppressed a shudder. It was a frightening thing to behold—the fury of an enraged crowd—and she saw how Roy’s expression altered when he glanced over his shoulder at the encircling mob.

There was fear in his eyes now.

He bolted for the gate, ducking his head as projectiles flew at him. An instant later, he disappeared under the portcullis and onto the bridge beyond.

His pursuers followed.

A heavy silence fell in the bailey then as the shouts and cries drew away.

Eventually, Blaine muttered an oath. “Christ’s teeth, they really hate him.”

Tavish's mouth thinned, although his gaze remained riveted upon the gateway. "Aye," he murmured. "Fear isn't the same thing as respect ... something Roy and our father never learned."



Seated by the fire in the solar, Robina finished a neat stitch and held up the pillowcase to admire. It was a cluster of yellow daisies—a design that made her yearn for the warmth of summer.

Heaving a sigh, she lowered her embroidery to her lap and shifted her attention to the dancing flames in the hearth.

She'd taken her noon meal alone up here and had been grateful for the solitude. After the violence and fury of the morning, she needed to be on her own for a while.

It was warm and peaceful in the solar, and sleepiness descended upon her.

Perhaps it was a reaction to shock, but she felt as if she could fall asleep in her chair.

However, the solar door whooshed open then, and a tall dark figure entered, intruding upon her solitude.

Tavish closed the door behind him, his lean face tense as his attention swept to her.

The impact of their gazes meeting made a frisson of heat ignite in the pit of Robina's belly, her sleepiness dissipating.

When Tavish spoke, his voice was both rough and soft, tension emanating off him. "Robina, we need to talk."

OUR SECRET



“AYE,” ROBINA MURMURED, casting aside her embroidery. “We do.”

Tavish crossed the solar and halted before her. Robina didn’t want to remain seated, to crane her neck up to hold his gaze, and so she rose to her feet.

“Firstly, I must give ye my thanks,” he said, his throat bobbing. “Yer help this morning was appreciated.”

Robina huffed a nervous laugh. The intensity of his stare was putting her on edge, as was his strange formality. “Ye would have likely overpowered Roy on yer own ... but I had to do something.”

“Ye did well.” He stepped closer to her, his gaze roaming her face. “The bastard would have knifed me in the back if ye hadn’t warned me.”

Robina swallowed. There was no arguing that. “Are ye sorry he’s gone?” she asked after a pause. “I know Roy tried to kill ye ... but he’s kin after all.”

Tavish’s face tensed, and a shadow moved in the depths of his eyes. “Part of me is sorry, aye,” he said, his voice developing a husky edge. “But, after what he did, Roy had to go.”

Robina nodded. She understood. Attempted murder wasn't something Tavish could overlook, and it was a relief to know that Roy's presence, and his aggression, had been removed from Castle Gunn.

Tavish held her gaze, silence stretching between them for a few moments before he cleared his throat. "Secondly, I must ask yer forgiveness," he continued. "I've acted like an arse, Robina."

She inclined her head, surprise feathering within her. However, she didn't speak—instead letting him elaborate.

"Fear made a coward of me," he said softly, reaching out and taking her hands. "For years, I've dreamed of having ye as my wife, but when that day came ... and ye gave me what I wished for ... the reality of what that actually meant suddenly terrified me." His face twisted then, and she knew these words were costing her proud husband. Yet she remained silent, allowing him to explain himself further.

"I don't know how to give of myself," he said finally. "I've never let anyone in before."

Robina gently squeezed his hands. "Neither have I," she whispered. "I arrived here determined to hate ye, Tavish Gunn ... and I almost succeeded ... yet ye won me over."

His grey eyes shadowed. "And then I hurt ye ... I'm sorry, mo chridhe."

Robina's throat thickened. "I'm scared too," she said, her voice husky now. "I'm not used to being seen ... I too worry that if I trust too deeply, I'll have my heart ripped out."

His grip on her hands grew firmer then before he lifted one of her hands to his lips and bestowed a kiss upon the back of it. "Yer heart will always be safe with me, my love. I made ye a pledge, and I intend to honor it. I promise to cherish ye as ye so deserve."

Robina's vision misted, the pressure in her throat increasing. "I love ye, Tavish," she whispered, "and when I thought Roy was going to kill ye, it was as if the world stopped."

His mouth came down upon hers then, fierce, desperate, and he hauled her into his arms.

Robina kissed him back with the same desperation, her lips parting eagerly under his. The strength of his arms about her, the taste and scent of him, filled her senses.

She craved him like sunlight after a bitter winter.

His mouth never leaving hers, Tavish swiveled around and walked her back so that her backside hit the edge of the table that dominated the solar. And then he lifted her up onto it.

Robina reached up, her fingers tangling in his silky, unbound hair as their kisses grew deeper, hungrier—a clash of teeth and a tangle of tongues.

He reached down, fisting her skirts and drawing them up, his fingers sliding over the skin beneath.

Robina eagerly parted her thighs for him, gasping as he slid a finger deep into her. She was already so wet for him, so needy.

Her hands trailed down over his gambeson to the waistband of his braies, and she released him. Her fingertips traced the iron-hard, velvety length of his shaft, marveling at its beauty, at how it leaked at the crown.

He too yearned for their joining.

“Do ye see what ye do to me, mo ghràdh?” he growled.

My love.

He slid a second finger into her then, and a groan tore from Robina’s throat. “Aye,” she gasped. “Oh, aye ... Tavish!”

The way he was touching her, the slick glide of his fingers, made her quiver around him.

With a muttered oath, he removed his questing fingers, spread her wide, and drove his shaft into her in one deep thrust.

Robina’s throaty cry echoed around the solar. She wrapped her legs around his hips and lifted her hips, bringing him deeper still, as he thrust into her once more.

And all the while, their gazes remained fused—the intimacy of it rending.

It was almost too much, to hold her husband's gaze as he rode her. The raw look on his face, the fierceness in his eyes, made wildness quicken within her.

And then something deep inside unraveled, and Robina shattered around him. Her body quivered, her head falling back as pleasure crested and carried her off.

“Robina!” Tavish's raw cry joined her own. “My love, my heart!”

He thrust into her fiercely then, his fingers digging into her hips. She glanced up to see that he was struggling to keep control. “I can't,” he grunted. “I want to ... but—”

“Let go, my love,” she gasped, undulating her hips in a sensual roll that made her breathing catch. “Fall into me.”

The look on his face then, the naked vulnerability of it, made tears blur her vision. She rolled her hips once more, tightening her core around him as she dug her heels into his buttocks, drawing him deeper still.

Tavish's raw cry shook the solar, and she watched transfixed, as he reared above her, his face twisting as if he were in agony. An instant later, he stiffened, and she felt the hot rush of his release inside her.

Panting, he reached for Robina, pulling her up so that he could hold her.

Likewise, Robina wound her arms about his torso, holding on tight as if they were being buffeted by a violent storm.

She could feel the tremble in his body, the tension in the lean muscles of his back—and when she raised a hand to his cheek, she realized it was wet with tears.

Tavish clung to his wife in the aftermath of their coupling. He had to hold her tight, for if he let her go, he would crumble to dust.

Robina dredged up emotions within him that he didn't even realize he possessed, emotions that brought up memories long buried: the grief and loneliness of losing his mother, the sickening fear as he'd watched his father beat his elder brother, Alex, half to death years earlier.

His wife tore down his defenses; she made everything rush in.

And as he held her tight, aware that hot tears now slicked his cheeks, he realized he'd never felt so scared, exposed—or alive.

Gradually, the rawness of the moment drew back, and Tavish lifted a shaky hand, tangling it in his wife's soft tresses. And when he leaned back, his gaze finding hers once more, he saw that her hazel eyes gleamed with love.

"Ye aren't to tell anyone about my soft underbelly," he murmured, as she reached out and brushed away the last of his tears. "If my brothers ever discovered that my wife made me weep like a maid, I'd never hear the end of it."

Robina's throaty laugh surprised him. Her soft pink mouth curved into an impish smile. "It will be our secret," she replied huskily. She then slid closer to him, wrapping her legs even more firmly around his hips.

Still buried deep inside her, Tavish felt his rod stiffen. Her gaze widened then, her smile softening into a deeply sensual expression.

"Why don't ye carry me to bed," she murmured, "and reveal some more secrets?" The husky rasp to her voice inflamed him further still, and when she squirmed against him, Tavish's breathing caught.

"Aye, wife," he growled, sliding his hands under her naked bottom and lifting her off the table. "And let us see if I can make ye do the same."

And with that, he carried her into the bed-chamber.

EPILOGUE

THE GIFT



Three months later ...

A SMILE CURVED Robina’s lips as she watched Thistle glide high above the castle. An instant later, the goshawk spied prey on the ground and dove.

Robina’s breathing caught as the bird plummeted—swift, silent, and deadly—and plucked something small off the lush green meadow to the north of the castle.

Around her, the signs of spring were everywhere, bulbs poking up from the damp earth and newborn lambs and goat kids frolicking around on the hills west of the castle.

It was a blustery morning. The sea to the east was a mass of foaming whitecaps, yet the wind was from the south and carried with it the scent of grass and blossom.

Robina’s smile widened. Winter, and all the upheaval it had brought into their lives, was behind them.

Once Thistle had gobbled down the hapless creature—most likely a field mouse—she flew back to Robina, landing upon her glove.

“Well done, my lovely,” Robina murmured as she made her way back to the mews. “Ye will have to boast to yer sister of yer deed.”

Thistle favored her with an arch look, as if such things were beneath her, but Robina paid her no mind. She was used to her goshawks' imperious looks—it was one of the things she loved about them.

Inside the mews, she interrupted Malcolm stealing a kiss from Fiona. The maid had ventured upstairs with Robina before ducking in to see him.

Breaking apart, they both cast her an embarrassed look, and Fiona's cheeks went a charming shade of pink. Judging by the lustiness of their embrace, Robina wondered if Castle Gunn would see another wedding by mid-summer.

“Don't mind me,” she said cheerfully, placing Thistle back on her perch next to her sister and fastening her leash.

Malcolm ducked his head. “Did yer goshawk have a successful hunt, Lady Robina?”

“Aye ... a field mouse caught her eye, I believe,” Robina replied. She noted the way Malcolm and Fiona eyed each other. The atmosphere inside the mews was charged, as if they couldn't wait to resume the kiss she'd interrupted. “I will take Moth out after the noon meal.”

She left the mews moments later, shutting the door behind her with a smile, and made her way downstairs. There was something about seeing two people so obviously smitten with each other that warmed her soul.

For years, she'd only had her parents' union as a model—and her mother and nurse's bitter, poisonous words to form a distorted picture of relations between husband and wife.

Robina's smile widened. She now knew better.

She found her husband outside the stables, shoeing his courser. Old Misty sat a few yards from her master, although the Highland Collie rose to her feet and went to greet Robina as she approached.

Lowering one of the hind hooves he'd just shod, Tavish flashed Robina a smile.

And as always, the sight of him made Robina's belly flutter. Three moons had passed since Roy had been driven from the castle and the last reserves had dropped between them, and the time since had been a joyful discovery.

Robina liked that she and Tavish were inseparable these days. They often hawked and hunted together, and her brothers-by-marriage had gotten used to her accompanying them on stag and boar hunts. Robina might have been slender and slight of build, but she had a stout heart and a sense of adventure they'd all come to appreciate.

Will, who was rubbing his horse down a few yards away, waved to her, and Robina favored him with a smile in return.

Ever since Roy's departure, a shadow had lifted from Castle Gunn. Relations between the remaining brothers had improved, and the rivalry that had once characterized their rapport had eased a little.

Tavish had relaxed into the role of clan-chief, and it pleased Robina that he now smiled often.

"How are Moth and Thistle?" he asked with a grin.

"Enjoying the sunshine," she replied, "as am I."

"Do ye want to go for a ride before the noon meal?" he asked, slapping his stallion's rump. "Thorn is almost shod ... and itching to stretch his legs."

Robina nodded, her heart lightening further at the suggestion. Her husband knew she loved to get out of the castle regularly. "Aye, I shall go and ready one of the garrons."

"Wait," Tavish replied, still grinning. "There's someone I'd like ye to meet first." He stepped forward then, taking her hand and leading her into the stables.

Intrigued, Robina cut him a questioning look, yet her husband merely winked and led her to the farthest stall from the door.

And there she found a beautiful, leggy chestnut mare.

The horse greeted Tavish with a whicker, nudging at him, before she swung her head over to Robina and snorted softly.

“Hello, lass,” Robina breathed, stroking the courser’s face. She then shot her husband a look, smiling widely. “Is she mine?”

“Aye ... if ye wish to keep her?”

“Of course I do, she’s lovely.” Robina couldn’t stop smiling as she let the mare snuffle at her neck. “What’s her name?”

“Amber ... but ye can change it if ye wish.”

“No, Amber is a fine name.” Robina squeezed his hand she still held. “When did ye sneak her in here?”

“Yesterday afternoon ... I bought her at the Lybster horse market. On a whim.” He paused then. “I thought it time ye ride something other than a pony.”

Robina’s throat constricted as their gazes met. “She is a bonny gift, Tav ... the best ... like ye.” She leaned into him then, and they shared a lingering, tender kiss.

When she drew back, Robina’s chest ached with tenderness and she noted that her husband’s grey eyes gleamed.

“I’m glad ye are pleased,” he said gruffly. “I thought it was time I spoiled ye.”

A smile flowered across Robina’s face. “Ye spoil me daily, husband ... I risk becoming a thoroughly pampered lady.”

“And ye are worth every bit of it,” he said huskily, reaching up and stroking her cheek. “Plus, ye make me feel like the luckiest man alive ... I wanted to do this for ye.” Next to them, Amber snorted, irritated at being ignored.

A moment later, something nudged Robina’s leg. She glanced down to see that Misty had followed her into the stables. The collie was gazing up at her with soft brown eyes, making it clear that she, too, was feeling neglected.

Smiling, Robina reached down and stroked the dog’s head. She then met her husband’s eye once more. “Thank ye, Tav,” she murmured. Her smile widened, excitement fluttering within her. “I’ll saddle her now, and we can race.”

He favored her with a masculine, indulgent grin in return.
“Amber won’t outrun Thorn, my love.”

Robina lifted her chin, her look issuing him a direct challenge. Aye, he rode a powerful stallion, yet he clearly hadn’t noticed Amber’s long, finely-boned legs. Anyone could see the mare was swift. “We shall see about that,” she replied.



The End

FROM THE AUTHOR

I hope you enjoyed Robina and Tavish's emotional, and steamy, story! I introduced these two during *HIGHLANDER FORBIDDEN* and just couldn't forget about them. And as soon as I started work on this tale, I was hooked. I'm a bit of a sucker for arranged marriage stories, and of course, Historical Romance gives me the perfect opportunity to write them.

I adore both characters, their blend of strength and vulnerability, and how they are each other's safe haven. I also enjoyed setting it around Christmas—my favorite time of year!

This story takes place at Castle Gunn, a real location. The fortress, also known as Gunn's Castle and Clyth Castle, is situated on a rock above the sea, eight miles southwest of Wick, Caithness. It was once a splendid and strong castle. Sadly, virtually nothing remains of it these days.

Jayne x

THE LAIRD'S RETURN

The Immortal Highland Centurions



**JAYNE
CASTEL**



Is it too late for a second chance at love? An embittered laird. A loyal wife. A new start. A Yuletide romance in Medieval Scotland.

Robert De Keith has spent the last eight years rotting in an English dungeon. But when he returns home to Dunnottar Castle, he soon realizes he doesn't fit into his old life anymore.

His wife, Elizabeth, has ruled the castle in his absence. However, the woman who greets him now seems a stranger. Time and events have altered them both.

As Yule approaches, Robert and Elizabeth struggle to salvage their marriage and overcome the bitterness and distrust that separates them. But can they—or has life changed them both too much?

THE LAIRD'S RETURN is a stand-alone Highland Festive Novella about the power of enduring love set in the same world as THE IMMORTAL HIGHLAND CENTURIONS.

“It’s not what they take away from you that counts.

It’s what you do with what you have left.

—Hubert Humphrey

I



THE IMPOSTER

Dunnottar Castle

Scotland

Winter, 1308

HIS FEET AND hands were numb by the time Dunnottar rose against the northern sky.

Robert De Keith drew up his sturdy garron, his gaze taking in the view before him.

How often over the past eight years had he dreamed of this moment? There had been times when he'd despaired, when he'd believed he'd never see home again, never set foot on Scottish soil once more.

Robert blinked, dislodging a snowflake that had settled on his eyelashes. Around him, white blanketed the world in a chill crust. His garron stood up to its fetlocks in snow. Winter held Scotland in its grip as the 'Long Night' approached. Yuletide was just a few days away now.

Remaining there, staring at the grey curtain walls, Robert felt as if he'd strayed into a dream. It had been a long journey up from Warkworth Castle in Northumberland—where he'd been imprisoned for nearly a decade. Even when they'd let him walk free, he'd had difficulty believing it.

He'd expected to feel joy at seeing Dunnottar again—but, strangely, he didn't.

Instead, he felt nothing.

Urging the garron forward, Robert rode toward the cliff-top opposite the castle. Dunnottar held a strategically defensive position upon a rocky outcrop, linked to the mainland by a thin strip of land. The approach was difficult—much to the chagrin of those who'd attempted to lay siege to the castle over the years. A steep path led down from the gates to the bottom of the cliff on which Robert now dismounted his garron.

Carefully, he led his mount down the slope, testing each step. Under normal circumstances this slope was tricky, but covered with snow it was perilous. Robert didn't want his faithful mount to break a leg.

Reaching the bottom, Robert swung up onto the garron's back once more and urged the stout pony up to the gates. Craning his neck, he spied the outlines of men wielding spears silhouetted against the pale sky and fluttering snow.

“Who goes there?” One of the guards shouted. “What's yer business at Dunnottar, stranger?”

Robert's mouth twisted into a bitter smile. *Stranger?*

Aye, he'd been gone long enough now that his own men wouldn't recognize him these days. Frankly, despite that this magnificent keep belonged to him, he didn't feel comfortable returning.

Shoving aside the sensation, Robert peered up at the helmed face above him. “I'm Robert De Keith,” he called back, his voice ringing off stone. “Laird of this castle. Open the gates!”



The Captain of the Dunnottar Guard met Robert in the lower ward bailey.

Cassian Gaius's face split into a wide grin as he strode across the snow-covered cobbles to meet him. A cloak of De

Keith plaid—blue, green, and turquoise cross-hatchings—rippled from his shoulders. “Robert! You’re alive.”

The welcome, although warm, made tension ripple through Robert.

So, they all think I’m dead?

Once again, a sensation of displacement flooded over him. He didn’t belong here. He was an interloper, a man who’d risen from the dead.

“I am.” Robert managed a tight smile. None of this was Cassian’s fault. He’d always liked the Spaniard—an enigmatic warrior who’d joined the Dunnottar Guard a few years before Robert’s capture and proved himself worthy of leading it within the turning of a year.

As the captain neared, Robert noted that he looked older: his skin was a little more leathery, and there were laughter lines around the eyes. However, his brown hair, slightly longer than Robert remembered, was still untouched by silver.

Aye, we’re all older. Robert was sure he too had been weathered by the passing of time. *Have the years been kind to Elizabeth?*

The thought brought Robert up short, his gaze flicking to the keep towering above him. The numbness in his chest disappeared then, replaced by a squeezing sensation.

Was his wife even here? Nearly a decade had passed since his capture. If she, like Cassian, thought he was dead, she may have returned to her kin.

“Captain.” Robert dismounted the Highland pony and strode to the big man. They clasped arms, and for the first time since leaving Warkworth, Robert felt a flicker of warmth within him.

The joy on the captain’s face wasn’t feigned. Cassian’s eyes gleamed, his gaze riveted upon Robert. “So, those bastards finally let you go?”

Robert nodded, his mouth thinning. His release had been a shock to him too. He’d dreaded the day his captors would take

him from the cells and to the walls, where they'd string him up on the gallows.

Years had inched by as he waited for the day to come.

But it hadn't.

"So, David's gotten comfortable in my chair, has he?" Robert cocked an eyebrow. It was better if he kept this exchange light, even if his gut was now tying itself up in knots.

He wasn't looking forward to seeing David. His brother had always coveted power and wouldn't want to relinquish his position.

The captain grew still, his hazel eyes narrowing. "You don't know about David?"

Robert frowned, the tension within him winding tighter. "I've been locked up in an English dungeon for years, Gaius," he growled. "Not one missive from Dunnottar reached me in that time. How would I know what has befallen my brother?"

Cassian's expression grew grave. "He's dead, Robert. Seven years ago now."

Silence fell between them while Robert took in this news. He wasn't going to feign grief. David had been a weasel, and likely hadn't made the slightest effort to get his elder brother returned.

Even so, he hadn't expected this.

"How?" he asked finally.

Cassian cleared his throat. "Well ... that's quite a tale, De Keith." He paused then, dragging a hand through his shaggy hair. "He tried to kill Edward Longshanks and got a dirk to the throat for his trouble."

Robert sucked in a surprised breath. "What?"

Cassian's mouth twisted. "I know ... hard to believe, but true. Go up and see Lady Elizabeth ... I'm sure she'll fill you in on all the details."

So, she's still at Dunnottar after all.

Robert's pulse started to race. The mention of Elizabeth was a jab to the belly. He wasn't ready to face her again, not yet.

Coward.

This was what he wanted, wasn't it? All he'd thought about for many years was his wife. The promise of being reunited with her was the only thing that had kept him going. But when he didn't hear from her, despair had slowly descended upon him. Anger followed, till an ember of resentment glowed hot in his belly. For the last months, he'd felt torn whenever thoughts of Elizabeth crept into his mind.

And now that he stood within Dunnottar's lower ward bailey—laird of his lands once more—longing warred with bitterness and anger.

Aye, Elizabeth hadn't returned to her kin. All the same, she likely thought herself a widow these days. How would she feel about having her husband return from the dead? He felt like an imposter—but would she treat him like one?

Robert cleared his throat, his heart now pounding—and despite the chill day and the snow that continued to fall silently around him, he was sweating. When he spoke, his voice held a hoarse edge. "Elizabeth ... is she well?"

Cassian smiled. "She is. Lady Elizabeth has been laird of Dunnottar in your absence."

II



AN AWKWARD REUNION

“ELIZABETH! YER HUSBAND is here!”

The words, which Gavina cried as she burst into the solar, made Elizabeth stab herself in the finger.

Dropping both the needle and her embroidery, Elizabeth stared—dumbstruck—at the heavily pregnant woman before her.

Gavina’s belly had grown huge over the past fortnight. Elizabeth was sure the birth was just days away now. Gavina had actually started to waddle as she walked.

But Elizabeth paid none of that any attention at present—instead, she stared at Gavina as if she’d just announced a troupe of brownies had flooded into the keep.

“What did ye just say?” The question came out in a strangled gasp.

“Robert!” Gavina clasped her hands over her swollen belly. “He’s returned!”

Elizabeth rose to her feet, her embroidery fluttering to the floor. Her heart started to thud painfully against her breastbone, and she suddenly felt light-headed. “Where is he?”

“On his way up to see ye.”

Elizabeth stared at Gavina a moment longer.

Robert’s here?

Rousing herself, she shot past her friend, her feet moving of their own accord.

Joy filtered up as the shock abated. For years, she'd believed him dead—that King Edward of England had ordered him executed after what her brother-by-marriage had done.

But Gavina wasn't lying. She'd seen the truth in the woman's eyes.

Robert was alive and had returned to Dunnottar.

Picking up her skirts, Elizabeth practically flew down the hallway, past the chamber where Father Finlay was teaching Robbie Latin—she could hear their voices as the lad recited words after the chaplain.

But Elizabeth didn't alter her course, didn't halt to take her son from his lessons.

She had to see this first. She had to witness Robert with her own eyes before she'd believe he'd survived.

They met halfway down the stairs.

Elizabeth halted, her gaze alighting upon a tall, broad-shouldered man with long brown hair, who came to a stop a few steps below her.

For a moment, they just stared at each other.

Elizabeth drank him in.

Robert was both unchanged, and yet different.

He had the same flowing hair and short beard, the same piercing brown eyes. Clad in a mail shirt and thick leather braies, a heavy fur mantle about his shoulders, he was every inch the warrior she remembered. Yet his face was altered—thinner, more careworn, his eyes hollowed from fatigue. There were also flecks of silver in his hair and beard that hadn't been there years earlier.

Robert stared up at her, his gaze as searing as she remembered. Yet he didn't smile, didn't exclaim at the sight of her.

Pushing aside the uneasiness that stole over her, Elizabeth drew in a sharp breath, gathering her courage.

Goose ... he's yer husband. What do ye have to be nervous about?

And yet she was.

“Robert,” she murmured his name—and then she moved, taking the next few steps toward him, while he did the same, alighting the last steps till they collided.

Elizabeth’s breathing caught as his arms went about her. Claspng him close, she realized that underneath his mail shirt, leather vest, and lèine, he was as lean and wiry as a hunting hound.

The man she’d seen off that fateful day over eight years earlier had been broad and muscular. The English clearly had been starving him.

Tears welled, hot and stinging, and Elizabeth’s vision blurred. She squeezed him tight, as if to make sure he was real and not merely a figment of her imagination.

Her voice came out in a whisper. “Rob ... is it really ye?”

“Aye, Liz.” That voice—how she’d missed it, dreamed of it. The low timbre, the slight gravelly edge. It had haunted her dreams. “Ye still smell of lilies.”

Elizabeth smiled through her tears. She’d always worn oil perfumed with the scented leaves of lily—a perfume she remembered Robert loving.

All those years ago, when they’d been young and carefree.

Drawing back, Elizabeth brushed away her tears and raised her chin to meet her husband’s gaze.

He stared down at her, a strange, almost pained expression upon his face. “Ye haven’t changed at all,” he murmured. Did she imagine it, or was there a note of reserve in his voice? “Whereas, I fear I’m not the man ye remember.”

“Nonsense,” she scoffed, even if the look he was giving her put Elizabeth on edge. It wasn’t true she hadn’t changed.

Whenever she caught a glimpse of her reflection these days in the looking glass, she thought how tired she looked. “Ye are thinner than I remember,” she continued, nervousness making her tongue run away with her, “but just as handsome.” Elizabeth stepped back from him. She wanted to catch his hand, entwine her fingers through his, but suddenly felt too nervous to do so. “Come up to the solar, and I’ll have some supper brought up to ye.”

The crackling hearth cast a warm glow over the laird’s solar. A large lump of peat burned there. It gradually warmed Robert’s chilled limbs, his numbed fingers and toes.

Sighing, Robert reached for the cup of wine at his elbow before meeting the eye of the woman seated across the table from him. “That,” he said with the barest hint of a smile, “was the best thing I’ve ever eaten.”

Elizabeth smiled, and he found himself staring at her full lips and the dimple on her right cheek. “I recall that pottage and oaten dumplings were always a favorite of yers,” she replied.

“Aye.” Robert took a gulp from his cup. “As is bramble wine.”

“It was a good year for brambles,” she replied, still smiling, although her midnight-blue eyes had a guarded, watchful look to them. “The hedgerows were overflowing this year. We had brambles with every meal for weeks ... they’re Robbie’s favorite.”

Elizabeth halted here—it was the first time she’d mentioned their son. Since they’d come upstairs to the solar, the pair of them had spoken of inconsequential things—the weather, Yuletide preparations, and their meal.

It was as if they were strangers.

Robert had deliberately kept her at arm’s length since their meeting in the stairwell. Even if seeing her again had stripped him of breath.

Robert lowered his cup, his gaze taking his wife in. When he'd told her she'd barely altered, he'd meant it. Truthfully though, the woman was even more beautiful than he remembered. She wore her thick dark-blond hair unbound, and the dark-blue kirtle she wore suited her coloring, accentuating the loveliness of her skin and the brightness of her eyes. It also highlighted the lush curves of her body, curves that were perhaps more generous than he remembered, but only added to her loveliness.

Eight years had passed since he'd seen this woman—and his gaze couldn't get enough of her.

And yet, he held himself in check. He couldn't bring himself to tell her how much he'd missed her—how it was thoughts of her that kept him going over the years, before hope had turned to ashes.

Instead, his voice was cool and detached when he finally asked, "And how is Robbie?"

"Growing faster than a weed," Elizabeth replied, smiling once more. And yet once again, Robert noted the reserve in her eyes. "He just had his tenth birthday."

"The fifteenth of December," Robert murmured.

Elizabeth's gaze widened. "Ye remember?"

He inclined his head. "Of course."

Elizabeth cleared her throat, while Robert took another sip of wine. God's teeth, it was awkward between them, and he couldn't seem to find the words to ease things.

"Cassian told me how David died," he said after a lengthy pause. "But he said ye'd fill me in on the rest."

Her full mouth thinned. "It happened in 1301," she confirmed. "While Edward Longshanks held Stirling, yer brother went there with the purpose of bending the knee."

Robert scowled. "What?" His brother had been a snake, but he hadn't thought he'd kiss Longshanks's arse.

"It was a ruse," Elizabeth assured him hurriedly. "Wallace was in hiding here at the time, and he wanted to know what

Longshanks was planning ... and I wanted to make a plea for yer life.”

Robert went still. During his lost years at Warkworth, the only news from the world beyond that had reached him was the death of William Wallace. His guards had crowed over it. Discovering now that Wallace had been sheltering at Dunnottar wasn't hugely surprising—after all, the freedom fighter had once liberated the stronghold. Instead, he focused on the fact his wife had spoken directly to Edward of England on his behalf. “Ye did?”

Elizabeth frowned. “Ye sound surprised,” she observed. “Did ye think I'd just leave things as they were?”

Robert took a sip of wine, in an attempt to mask the discomfort that now washed over him. Aye, in the end he had. “I was locked away for a long while, Liz,” he said after a moment. “When the years passed and I didn't hear from ye ... I thought ye'd moved on.”

Silence fell between them then, broken only by the crackling of the hearth.

“Longshanks agreed to send ye a missive from me,” Elizabeth said stiffly. Hurt flickered across her face. “But after David's assassination attempt, I imagine he set fire to it.”

Her words hung between them.

The knowledge that his wife had pleaded to Edward to deliver word to him should have brought Robert solace, but instead the urge to accuse her of giving up on him writhed within him. That incident was years ago. Had she never tried again?

Although she'd greeted him warmly, Robert had seen the shock in his wife's eyes, followed by an uncharacteristic reserve.

He was a ghost from her past.

Robert's throat constricted. Once again, he felt as if he was intruding. His wife hadn't exactly been pining for him. Before he'd entered the keep earlier, Cassian had been full of praise for how well she'd ruled Dunnottar since David's death.

“It’s nearing Robbie’s bedtime, but would ye like to see him first?” Elizabeth broke the brittle tension between them by wisely changing the subject.

Robert shook his head, weariness descending upon him. He wasn’t ready to see his son. Robbie had been halfway through his second summer when Robert had been captured—barely more than a bairn. His conversation with Elizabeth had shredded his nerves; he didn’t want another reunion tonight.

He suddenly felt bone-tired—as if he could sleep for a week. He was sore, both of heart and spirit, and just wanted to crawl away and lick his wounds.

“Not tonight,” he replied, downing the last of the wine.

III



SEPARATE CHAMBERS

ELIZABETH TENSED, HER fingers curling around the cup of wine she'd barely touched.

The man opposite her—the husband she'd longed for to the point of pain over the years—had just refused to greet his child.

His son.

For a moment, she merely stared at him, waiting for him to rethink his decision.

But when he didn't, anger quickened in her breast.

"Robbie has indeed grown while ye were away," she said, her voice turning cold. "He was barely more than a babe when ye left ... and is now almost the same height as me."

Robert tensed, his gaze shuttering. And when he replied, his tone was also wintry. "Ye speak as if I've been away on Crusade, Liz." His gaze fused with hers. "I didn't 'leave'. I was captured." A nerve flickered in his cheek, before he put down the pewter goblet he was holding with a 'thud'. "The lad has gotten used to living without a father. One more night won't make a difference."

Elizabeth sucked in an angry breath, heat flushing through her. The man she remembered had been proud and arrogant—a warrior to the core—but he'd also been warm, with a ready smile. Before his capture, Robert De Keith had readily shown affection for his wife and son.

Elizabeth didn't recognize the man before her now. He was so cold, so distant.

Her throat constricted. His behavior reminded her of the argument they'd had before he left Dunnottar years earlier. She hadn't wanted him to go on that campaign. The urge to broach the subject bubbled up inside her, yet she swallowed it. Tonight wasn't the right time for such a conversation.

Robert then dragged a tired hand down his face. "I'm exhausted," he muttered. "I shall withdraw to my chamber."

Elizabeth went still. She'd noted the inflection on the word 'my'. He was retiring for the evening—alone.

The laird and lady of Dunnottar had always had separate quarters, each with a solar, dressing chamber, and bed-chamber. Elizabeth's chambers looked south over the coast and the sea, while Robert's held a commanding view of the cliff-top and green hills to the west. But before his departure, Robert had spent his nights in his wife's bed-chamber. They'd rarely slept apart.

A chill settled in the pit of Elizabeth's belly, dousing her anger. Her joy at seeing her husband alive and well faded as she realized they weren't going to be able to pick up where they left off.

There was a high curtain wall between them now. One Elizabeth had no idea how to scale.

Robert reminded her of his younger brother tonight. David De Keith's scornful attitude to the women in his life had always angered Elizabeth. During his six-year marriage to Gavina—who was now happily wed to Draco, and pregnant with their third child—Elizabeth had hardly ever seen him treat his wife with anything but scorn.

Robert had always been so different, and just a little part of her had been smug at how fortunate she had been. Like most well-born Scottish lasses, she'd had little choice in her husband—but she'd found happiness with Robert De Keith.

Before his capture, he'd been devoted to her.

Silence hung between them now, and when Elizabeth didn't answer, Robert rose to his feet. "Goodnight, Liz."

He didn't move across to her, didn't favor her with a smile or a kiss on the cheek.

Instead, he crossed the wide solar and disappeared, the door closing softly behind him.



Robert stood before the hearth in his bed-chamber, his gaze upon the large lump of peat that glowed there.

His chamber was exactly as he remembered it—a large space with deerskins covering the cold flagstones and a huge bed draped in fine blankets and furs in the center. The room was largely unadorned. There was only a table by the bed, where a bank of candles burned and a wash bowl sat. The stone walls were plain, save for the huge claidheamh-mòr hanging opposite the bed. Robert turned from the fire, his attention settling now upon the weapon.

His father's sword. The great blade had a nick in it, the result of an axe blow during one of the many battles his father had fought in.

Robert's mouth curved in a humorless smile. He came from a long line of warriors. Sometimes it seemed as if he'd come out of the womb fighting.

Tonight he felt drained by it all—by life itself.

Turning back to the fire, he began to undress, unfastening his mail shirt and unbuckling his belt.

He'd offended Elizabeth.

A sigh gusted out of him as he recalled how her dark-blue eyes had narrowed, her beautiful mouth flattening. She'd always been strong-willed, yet tonight he didn't have the energy to spar with her.

And nor had he the energy to meet his son.

Ten winters old.

In a few years, the lad he remembered as a toddling bairn would be a man.

Another warrior who would one day take his father's place as laird.

Robert draped his clothing over the back of a chair and padded naked to the bed. A groan escaped him as he slid under the blankets. It had been a long while since he'd slept in a bed, let alone one as comfortable as this.

His narrow cot in his cell at Warkworth had been better than the damp stone floor many prisoners had to deal with. Even so, it had been an uncomfortable bed, with rough, scratchy blankets. And then, there had been unwelcome bed-fellows: the spiders and rodents who'd sometimes crawled onto the cot while he slept.

In comparison, this bed was paradise.

The only thing missing was a woman's warm body.

Robert stared up at the rafters, his thoughts turning back to Elizabeth. She was truly lovely to behold—bright sunshine after a long, bleak winter.

But he'd seen the chagrin in her eyes when he'd announced he was going to bed—alone.

She likely remembered that he'd always preferred her chamber. The air in that room was always warm and lightly scented with lavender. Colorful tapestries covered the walls, and soft cushions lay scattered about. Robert wondered if the space had changed over the years.

Perhaps not, but Elizabeth had. She'd grown more confident, competent. She had gotten on with her life, as she should have. He knew he shouldn't judge her for doing so, and yet he found that resentment still smoldered in his gut.

He'd changed too—had turned into a bitter individual who couldn't even feel joy at being reunited with his family. Right now, he was disgusted with himself.

It's not her fault. Robert clenched his jaw. *I'm not the man I was. Perhaps I should have done everyone a favor and stayed away.*

Nonetheless, he'd returned home, and that meant facing his wife. Given time, he would seek to ease the tension between them, even if he wasn't sure where to start.



Elizabeth felt oddly tearful as she readied herself for bed. Her maid, Morag, had helped her undress and was now brushing her hair in long, hard strokes.

Gritting her teeth as the hog-bristle brush caught on a knot, Elizabeth blinked rapidly, glad that her maid's roughness distracted her from the tightness in her throat and her blurring vision.

What a bitter disappointment this evening had been.

She'd been giddy with excitement earlier, asking the cooks to prepare supper for the laird; fortunately, there had been left-over pottage from the nooning meal. She'd also dressed carefully, in her finest blue kirtle that matched her eyes.

He didn't even notice.

Not that it mattered though—for the general awkwardness between them made the effort she'd made seem foolish and vain.

"That's it, My Lady," Morag announced. "Yer hair is done."

"Thank ye," Elizabeth replied, cursing the husky edge to her voice.

"Will that be all, My Lady?"

"Aye."

Morag was a dour older woman who'd served Elizabeth for years now—after her previous maid, Jean, met an unfortunate end. The lass, who'd secretly been David De Keith's lover,

had died on the journey back from Stirling. They'd been fleeing for their lives after David had tried to assassinate the English king.

Adjusting the lace that did up the neck of her night-rail, Elizabeth rose from the stool and crossed to the hearth, letting the warmth seep through the thin material. Behind her, she heard Morag shuffle from the room.

She couldn't believe how badly her conversation with Robert had gone.

First he'd all but accused her of not caring what happened to him, then he'd refused to say goodnight to his son. And to complete things, he'd gone off to his own bed rather than sharing hers.

She'd been angry afterward, but now that she was alone, Elizabeth's throat constricted, despair welling within her. Perhaps it was best they slept apart now—for she wasn't sure she could weather more awkwardness between them.

What had happened to her loving husband, the man who used to tease her, his brown eyes gleaming with mischief?

She didn't recognize the cold stranger who'd returned to her.

A tear escaped, trickling down Elizabeth's face. *What did the English do to him?*

IV



SPARRING

ROBERT STEPPED OUT into the lower ward bailey and drew in a deep breath of gelid, salt-laced air.

The smell of Dunnottar, how he'd missed it over the years. The stench of Warkworth dungeons still lingered in his nostrils. He wondered if memories of the place would ever fade.

The cold bit into the exposed skin of his face—yet Robert welcomed it. He'd spent too many years trapped indoors, the world beyond limited to the tiny window high above.

Wrapping his fur mantle around himself, Robert crunched through the snow, past the stables on the right and the chapel on the left, to the blacksmith's forge that lay against the eastern walls. The castle's steward, Donnan De Keith, had let him know his son would be there this morning, helping the smith.

A frown creased Robert's brow as he approached the forge. His father would have smacked him around the head for spending time with the castle's smith.

A laird's son had better things to do with his time.

The clang of a hammer greeted him. Robert ducked inside to find a burly young man bent over an anvil, hammering out a sword-blade. Behind him was a lanky lad clad in leather braies and vest. The boy had his back to him.

Neither of them had yet noticed the laird's arrival, and so Robert observed his son for a few moments.

Elizabeth was right, the lad was growing like a weed. Robert had been like that at the same age—all long, gangly limbs—before his body filled out with muscle.

A mane of light brown hair fell over his shoulders as he finished stoking the forge and straightened up. Turning to speak to the smith, the lad suddenly realized they were no longer alone.

A face that was far more like Elizabeth's than his own stared back at him. The lad had De Keith eyes though: the color of weathered oak.

Robert stilled, and the same misgiving that had surfaced earlier that morning, when he'd told himself he needed to seek out his son, revisited him once more.

He had no idea what to say to this lad.

The blacksmith glanced up then, his gaze widening. "De Keith?"

Robert met his frank gaze. Of course, this man hadn't been smith when he'd last lived here. Blair Galbraith had worked this forge then—an ill-tempered brute but highly skilled all the same.

Robert had been shocked when Donnan told him that Galbraith had betrayed them all seven years earlier by informing Longshanks that the Wallace was sheltering at Dunnottar. A siege had followed, but fortunately the English king had been called away by an uprising to the south, sparing the fortress.

Struck dumb momentarily by the tale, and irritated that Elizabeth hadn't informed him of these events the night before, Robert had eventually asked the steward if Galbraith had ever paid for his treachery. He had. Word had reached the castle a year after Edward's siege that Comyn had sent men to Fintry to deal with Blair Galbraith. He'd not lived long enough to savor his vengeance upon the De Keiths.

Robert pushed aside thoughts of everything he'd missed in the past years and favored the smith with a tight smile. "Ye must be Connell?"

"Aye ... pleased to finally meet ye," the man replied with a grin. He then gestured to the lad behind him. "Someone's been looking forward to seeing his Da again."

Robbie shot Connell a frown, clearly not appreciating the comment, before he straightened up properly, squaring his shoulders. "Morning, father."

How strange that word sounded.

"Father?" Robert quirked an eyebrow. "Since when did the De Keith's start talking like Englishmen? I'm yer 'Da', lad."

Robbie flushed, while Connell chuckled. "He's been a wee bit nervous, De Keith."

Robert nodded, before he stepped back, gesturing for his son to follow. He couldn't have a proper reunion with Robbie with Connell's commentary. His son's cheeks were glowing like twin embers now.

Robert walked out onto the lower ward, his boots sinking into powdery snow. Above him, the sky was pale, the glow of the winter sun barely visible. Another snowfall was on its way.

Robbie emerged, his face still burning. His expression was guarded, although Robert didn't blame him: the pair of them were strangers.

"Walk with me, lad," Robert grunted. "Let's go up to the walls." They crossed the bailey, passing the steps to the chapel and taking the postern door that led up to the upper ward.

The air was even colder up on the walls, yet Robert was too distracted to notice. He felt oddly uncomfortable in this lad's presence. He wasn't sure what to say to him. For years, he'd held onto an image of Robbie as an apple-cheeked bairn. Was this lanky boy with messy brown hair and a wary expression really his son?

Robert stopped before the southern ramparts, his gaze sweeping over the snow-clad hills, the frosted cliffs, and the

grey North Sea.

“It’s a grand view,” he murmured, “and one I thought I’d never see again.”

“It’s good to have ye home, fa—Da ...” Robbie replied.

Robert tore his attention from the sweeping panorama, taking in his son once more. “A laird’s son shouldn’t be working in a forge, Robbie.”

The lad’s jaw tightened. “Ma doesn’t mind. She says the work is good for me ... it builds muscle.”

Robert snorted. “Sword practice and wrestling make a lad strong too,” he replied. “They’ll also prepare ye for the day ye’ll have to fight yer first battle. Knowing how to hammer out a blade won’t be much use to ye then.”

Father and son locked gazes, and Robert saw how Robbie’s jaw firmed, his spine growing stiff. The lad might have been nervous about seeing him again, yet he wasn’t a coward. Robert flashed him a smile. “I’m keen to see how well ye wield a sword, lad,” he continued. “Go fetch two wooden blades, and let’s have a fight.”



The “clack, clack” of wooden swords greeted Elizabeth when she emerged from the keep.

The morning drew out, and the noon meal approached. She hadn’t seen her son or husband since dawn. She’d finally sought out Donnan, and the steward had told her that Robert had gone out to see Robbie in the forge.

Warmth had rushed through her chest at the news. Robert had clearly considered his rudeness the evening before and wanted to rectify matters.

However, when she stepped outdoors into the fluttering snow, her gaze traveling to two figures stripped to lèines and braies, the warmth faded.

Clack. Clack. Clack.

Robert was baring down on his son, face set in grim lines, as if the lad was a foe to be vanquished. Robbie—as game as ever—fought back. However, he wasn't a match for his father. He staggered back now, his left foot sliding in the snow as he struggled to keep his feet.

The duel had attracted a crowd. Captain Cassian Gaius stood a few yards away, his friend Draco next to him. Both men wore inscrutable expressions as they watched father and son fight. A few other men nearby were calling out encouragement to Robbie.

Elizabeth's pulse quickened, anger kindling in her belly. Why had Cassian and the others allowed this? Many of them had sons. Did they think such a fight was fair?

However, the laird had returned—and his word was law here.

And as she watched, Robert leaped forward, striking hard.

Robbie's sword flew from his hands. He staggered, slipped, and sprawled on his back in the snow.

Breathing hard, his father approached him, standing over the lad.

Robbie glared up at him.

“Ye need a lot of work on yer parrying, lad,” the laird informed him. “I could have gutted ye thrice, if I'd wanted.”

Elizabeth had heard enough.

Picking up her skirts, she trudged across the snow, her belly churning with rage. “He's half yer size, Robert.”

The laird tore his gaze from his son's face, surprise flickering in his brown eyes. He clearly was taken aback to see her out here.

“Elizabeth.” His use of her full name was a warning. “A man's size doesn't matter ... clumsy blade-work does.”

“He's only ten winters old,” she countered, stopping a few yards back as Robbie rolled to his feet.

“Ma,” her son began, his face flushing. “All is well . . . he’s right, I’m—”

She cut him off, her gaze spearing her husband’s. “No, he’s a bully.”

Silence fell in the lower ward bailey then. Snow swirled like apple blossom caught in a wind gust. The flakes settled on Robert’s hair and short beard. His son forgotten, he moved toward her, and as he closed in, Elizabeth noted that snowflakes now frosted his eyelashes.

Robert had always had lovely long eyelashes—lashes his son had inherited.

However, the gaze behind them had gone hard.

She’d succeeded in angering him.

Good. Anger was easier to weather than the cold detachment she’d witnessed in his eyes till now.

Wordlessly, Robert caught her by the arm and steered her toward the armory. “We need to have a word,” he said, each word clipped. “*Without* an audience.”

V



DREDGING UP THE PAST

ELIZABETH LET HIM lead her into the armory. Quite a crowd had gathered to watch father and son spar, and, like Robert, she didn't wish to give them a spectacle.

Even if fury now pulsed like a stoked ember in her gut.

Twin cressets burned on the walls of the armory—a long building that smelled of iron. Spears and blades hung from the walls, but Robert paid the weapons no mind.

Instead, he turned to Elizabeth the moment the door closed behind them, his face pale, his jaw rigid. “What kind of mother undermines her son like that?”

Elizabeth drew herself up. “And what kind of father humiliates his young son like that? The devil take ye, Rob ... ye've only been back less than a day. Is a ten-year-old lad such a threat to ye that ye couldn't wait to assert yer dominance over him?”

Robert sucked in a sharp breath, as if she had landed a physical blow. “That wasn't what I was doing,” he replied through gritted teeth. “God's bones, woman ... the lad barely knows how to hold a sword. Instead, ye have let him become a smith's apprentice.”

“Connell's been kind to him,” she growled back. “And the work has done him good.”

Robert's lip curled. "Aye, that's what Robbie told me too ... looks like ye have him firmly clinging to yer skirts."

"Well, his father hasn't been here to guide him."

The moment the words were out, Elizabeth regretted them.

Her husband's face hardened—the light of the cressets highlighted the lean, angular lines of his cheekbones.

"No, he hasn't," Robert said when the brittle silence between them drew out. "I was availing myself of fine English hospitality ... enjoying my daily weevil-infested bread and gristle stew."

Elizabeth heaved in a deep breath. "This would never have happened ... if ye hadn't ridden out to the English that day," she said. The sharpness of her tone made her inwardly wince. *I sound like a fish-wife*. But this time she didn't regret her words.

Robert's expression changed, his gaze narrowing.

There it was—the thing that had been building between them ever since her husband's return the day before.

She knew he remembered their last words—how she'd begged him not to ride out on that last campaign. Misgiving had dogged her steps for days before he left. She'd slept fitfully and had been visited by dark dreams.

But when she'd shared her fears with Robert, he'd dismissed them.

They'd argued, and then he'd left the next day. A month later, word arrived at Dunnottar that Robert had been captured by the English in a skirmish near the River Cree, on the south-west border.

And when the news arrived, part of her hadn't been surprised.

Elizabeth had sensed in her bones that Robert's last campaign was ill-fated, but he'd been too bull-headed to heed her.

The silence drew out for a few heartbeats, and then Robert moved toward her, closing the space between them. His presence dominated the armory, and despite that she wasn't afraid of him, Elizabeth backed up.

Three steps brought her hard up against the armory door.

Robert shifted close and placed a hand on the door near her head, leaning in so that their faces were only inches apart. "I've never forgotten, Liz," he said, his voice roughening. "The last words between us were angry ones."

Elizabeth swallowed. His closeness was getting too much. Despite that the snow fell outside, it suddenly felt hot and airless inside the armory.

Part of her didn't want to dredge up the past—didn't want to go over the things they'd said to each other on that last morning.

But it hung over them like a brooding storm cloud.

His mouth quirked, his gaze holding hers. "What ... aren't ye going to tell me how right ye were? Now's yer chance."

Elizabeth wet her lips. "I didn't want to be right, Rob," she replied, her voice barely above a whisper. "I prayed I was mistaken."

"But ye weren't," he whispered back.

They stared at each other for a long moment—the tension between them rising further.

Elizabeth's pulse quickened. She didn't want to fight with him, didn't want his return home to be laced with bitterness. But she couldn't help what she felt—and nor would she stand by while he took his ill-mood out on their son.

"Ye could have heeded me," she said eventually, but yer pride wouldn't let ye."

"And ye could have just let me make my own choices."

"But yer choices don't just affect ye, do they?" she shot back, ire erupting within her once more. "Ye left us alone ... left yer brother to rule. Left me imagining the worst." She

broke off there, breathing hard as she tried to stem the tide of words that surged up within her.

Eight years of words.

“Why didn’t ye tell me of the siege upon Dunnottar?” he grated out the question. “Surely, as laird, I shouldn’t have to wait for my steward to tell me such things.”

“I was going to,” Elizabeth replied, her belly clenching. “But last night ... ye seemed so weary. I didn’t want to burden ye.”

“Burden me?” He stared down at her, a nerve flickering under his right eye, betraying the stress he was under. “I’m yer husband, not yer son. I don’t need to be protected.”

Elizabeth drew in a sharp breath, heat flushing through her. How dare he?

Robert glared down at her, their gazes locked in silent combat. The rasp of their breathing filled the armory.

And then, unexpectedly, he lowered his head and kissed her.

The embrace was bruising, desperate. Robert’s lips crushed against hers, before his tongue sought entrance. And despite her fury, her frustration, Elizabeth welcomed him.

She drank him in like the first gulp of cool ale at the end of a hot summer’s day. She’d forgotten how good he tasted, how his kisses had always been able to scatter her wits to the four winds.

His mouth never leaving hers, he stepped closer still, his long, lean body crushing hers against the door.

Elizabeth gasped at the feel of him; it brought her alive after so long, made her yearn for something she’d forgotten.

The sweet oblivion of being kissed by Robert De Keith.

Her hands went to his chest, her fingers curling against his leather vest. His kiss was wild, dominant—how she loved it.

Words had failed them both, and so now he was trying to bridge the gulf between them with his body.

It would be easy to give in to it, to the sensual promise of his questing tongue, to the rasp of his short beard against her cheek.

But even if he lifted her skirts and took her against the door, even if she let him lose himself in her, it wouldn't change the fact that the man who'd returned to her wasn't the man she remembered.

Elizabeth's fingers tightened into fists against his chest, and—mustering all her will—she ripped her mouth from his, turning her face to the side as she sucked in a deep, steadying breath.

Her treacherous body sang for him.

They'd wounded each other—had both drawn blood with barbed words. Giving into this wouldn't change anything.

“Liz.” His voice was a rasp, a plea. “What's wrong?”

Tears stung her eyelids as she closed her eyes.

Everything.

“Ye have been away too long,” she replied, cursing the tremble in her own voice. “I don't know ye anymore.”

“Some things ye haven't forgotten,” he replied huskily. “Yer body remembers ... even if ye don't.”

Her head snapped around, and she met his gaze once more.

Curse him, she wished he wouldn't look at her like that—the man had a stare that could melt stone.

Her body was weak—but fortunately her wits had returned to her. Robert was her husband, but they were indeed strangers. She hadn't liked the man who'd just humiliated his ten-year-old son, the man who couldn't even hold a conversation with her, who was openly suspicious of her.

There had always been a strong attraction between them. From the first moment they'd been introduced—the young, headstrong laird of Dunnottar and laird Strachan's eldest daughter. It had been a union to bind two clans, but right from

the beginning, just a look from Robert had set her blood aflame.

It should have come as no surprise that even after so many years apart, the heat was still there.

VI



AWAY TOO LONG

ROBERT WATCHED HIS wife leave the armory. A stone had settled upon his chest, yet he made no move to stop her.

The look on her face when she'd pulled away had struck him like a blow.

The reserve in her eyes, especially after such a heated kiss, made it difficult to draw breath.

And yet he said nothing.

He just let her go.

The armory door thudded shut, leaving Robert alone.

He moved back, leaning against a high wooden bench where rows of helmets were neatly stacked.

Ye have been away too long ... I don't know ye anymore.

Elizabeth's words repeated themselves over and over in his head.

Robert clenched his jaw.

That made two of them.

Did she think he liked being this way? All those years in that tiny, damp cell had eroded away at him. He'd spent too long alone with his own thoughts—and in the end, they'd turned on him.

Robert lifted a hand to his lips, where the sting of their fierce kiss still remained.

Just for a few instants, he'd forgotten himself.

They'd both been angry, had both sought to wound the other—but the moment he'd kissed her, none of it had mattered.

She'd tasted as sweet as heather honey, her soft curves pressed against him, her mouth as eager as his.

But although her body was willing, her soul wasn't.

Robert wasn't the only one who'd changed. The Elizabeth he remembered always had a ready smile and a laugh that brought sunlight into even the dullest day.

Yet smiles didn't come easily to his wife now. There was a severity to her that had been absent last time he'd seen her.

Of course, she'd been laird for years now—a responsibility indeed. And she'd believed herself a widow. She could have taken another husband, although with his death unconfirmed, the church would take a dim view.

Such things happened nonetheless.

And yet, Elizabeth had remained faithful to his memory.

Robert muttered a curse and dragged a hand down his face.

Damn it all—he was doing a poor job of reuniting with his family.



“The accounts are all in good order ... our coffers are healthy indeed.” Robert glanced up from the ledger, meeting Donnan De Keith's eye.

The steward of Dunnottar smiled back. “Aye ... we've had a few lean years, especially with all the problems Longshanks and his son have caused us. But yer wife has managed yer lands well ... even if yer brother nearly brought us to ruin.”

At the mention of his younger brother, David, Robert scowled. Laird and steward sat at a table in the center of the solar, enjoying cups of warmed mead while they went over the accounts together. Robert had been back at Dunnottar two days now, and was happy to resume his duties as laird. Donnan had just been filling him in on some of the other events that had taken place over the past eight years.

“So, Shaw Irvine turned against us,” Robert murmured when the steward had concluded his summary. “The bastard broke our truce.”

Donnan nodded, his own brow furrowing. “Aye ... we were all shocked when he joined with Longshanks as he lay siege to Dunnottar.”

“And how did Gavina take the news of her brother’s treachery?”

Lady Gavina Irvine had been wed to his brother—a match Robert had been instrumental in organizing. It was a marriage that David had resented him for, for he’d never wanted to wed an Irvine, even if the Irvine laird’s daughter was a beauty. Later, Gavina’s brother had broken the peace between the two clans and even sided with the English during the siege of Dunnottar.

Now heavily pregnant with her third child to her current husband, Gavina still resided in Dunnottar. Her man, a warrior named Draco, worked in the Dunnottar Guard. Robert had caught a glimpse of Gavina earlier as he re-entered the keep; the contentment on the woman’s face these days was a stark contrast to how pale and strained she’d once been.

After David’s death, Gavina had forfeited her position as laird by wedding Draco—but she hardly seemed to care.

“She was as upset as the rest of us,” Donnan replied. “And she didn’t shed a tear when news of Irvine’s death reached us.”

Robert leaned back in his chair and took a sip of mead. “How did the bastard die?”

The steward’s mouth curved into a humorless smile. He’d aged a lot since Robert had seen him last, his once brown hair

almost entirely grey. However, his gaze was as sharp as ever. “They say it was a hunting accident.”

Robert cocked an eyebrow, encouraging the steward to continue.

Donnan cast him a sly look. “It was well known that the Wallace wanted his guts. After William left Dunnottar ... I’d wager he paid Irvine a wee visit at Drum Castle.”

Robert took this news in before he smiled. “We have much to thank the Wallace for, it seems.”

Indeed, the Wallace had come to their aid years earlier—when the English had taken the stronghold. He’d burned the English garrison to death in the chapel—and the walls of it still bore char marks. However, when he’d eventually chosen Dunnottar as his hiding place, he’d brought Edward of England’s wrath down upon them all.

Robert’s smile faded. They were both dead now—William Wallace and ‘The Hammer of the Scots’—but the turmoil that had plagued this land for years now hadn’t died with them. Edward’s son was proving to be as problematic as his father had been.

Loosing a deep breath, Robert met the steward’s eye once more. “God’s teeth, Donnan ... why do I suddenly feel weary of it all?” He pulled a face. “I think I’m getting old.”

Donnan snorted. “Ye are still a pup compared to an old hound like me.” His gaze searched Robert’s face. “Ye have just suffered a lot ... and it will take time for ye to feel yer old self again.”

Robert looked away, at where the hearth crackled and popped, casting a warm embrace over them both.

Maybe Donnan was right. He expected much of himself, and of Elizabeth. He needed to leave his past resentments and hurts behind—or he would never find the peace that currently eluded him.

Elizabeth deserved better than the bitter husk that had returned to her.



“Are ye not happy to have Rob home?”

Gavina’s question hit Elizabeth in the breast like a well-aimed quarrel. She paused her work on the holly-wreath she was fashioning and glanced up. “Of course I am.”

Even to her, the words seemed forced.

And of course, Gavina wasn’t fooled. “Ye don’t look pleased,” she observed, reaching for a length of red ribbon to tie on the wreath she was making.

The two women sat near the hearth in the women’s solar—hard at work on Yuletide decorations. The ‘Long Night’ was swiftly approaching.

There were still many preparations to be made, and Elizabeth was glad of it, for the tasks took her mind off her churning belly and her memory of that searing kiss she’d shared with Robert the day before. She’d avoided him ever since, but the time was coming when they’d have to speak again.

She was dreading it.

Elizabeth heaved in a deep breath. “I’ve never been able to hide much from ye, have I?”

Gavina’s mouth curved. “Nor I ye ... that’s why we are as close as sisters.”

Their gazes met, and warmth seeped through Elizabeth. She had two younger sisters, but she hadn’t seen either in years, and they’d never been close as bairns. Gavina didn’t have any sisters—and had only been cursed with a treacherous elder brother. During Gavina’s first years at Dunnottar, the women’s relationship had been pleasant but interlaced by formality—they’d been sisters-by-marriage rather than friends. But the years had forged a bond between them, and once Gavina wed

Draco, it was impossible not to be drawn to the happiness that emanated from her.

The door to the women's solar opened then, and two pretty brown-haired women hurried in. One had smoke-grey eyes and a slender build, while the other possessed grey-green eyes and lush curves.

Aila Gaius and Heather Cato—the steward's daughters. These days, Aila was wed to the Captain of the Dunnottar Guard, while Heather now lived with her husband and two daughters in nearby Stonehaven.

The sisters carried large baskets filled with ivy, mistletoe, pine sprigs, and holly. Their faces were flushed with cold as they hurried toward Elizabeth and Gavina.

“Sorry, we're late,” Aila gasped. “Callum had a tumble in the snow this morning ... it took me a while to calm him.”

Gavina frowned at this news. “Did he hurt himself?”

Aila shook her head. “Just a fat lip and bruised pride. His brother won't stop tormenting him over it.”

Despite her low mood, Elizabeth found herself smiling. Callum and Duncan, born just eighteen months apart, were both tempests, despite that they were only aged four and six.

“It took me an age to get here from Stonehaven this morning,” Heather announced, taking her place at the table. She then started to pull out the various items she'd collected for wreath-making. “The snow's deep for this time of year ... it was up to my knees in places.”

“Here.” Elizabeth passed Heather a cup of warmed mead. “This should make the blood return to yer toes.”

Heather grinned back at her, before she wrapped her pale fingers around the cup, lifting it to her lips.

Elizabeth watched her, her mood lifting just a little. Heather and Aila were such vibrant company, although now that Heather had moved out of the castle, they didn't see as much of her as previously.

Aila set down her basket on the table and took a seat. Her gaze flicked from Gavina to Elizabeth, where it rested. “How is Robert settling back in?”

Elizabeth tensed. She’d been relieved to have her conversation with Gavina interrupted—she really didn’t want to answer questions about Robert at present.

Sensing Elizabeth’s mood, Aila’s expression clouded. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” Elizabeth lied. Heather was now watching her, a groove etched between her brows. “It’s just taking a bit of getting used to ... having my husband home again.”

“It must feel ... strange,” Aila agreed. Her expression turned speculative then, and Elizabeth realized that Cassian had likely told her about the incident in the lower ward bailey.

“It does,” Elizabeth replied, heaviness settling upon her. “We aren’t the same people we once were ... and we’re both struggling to come to terms with that.”

VII



DECORATING THE HALL

ELIZABETH KNOCKED GENTLY on the door. “Come in,” Father Finlay’s voice greeted her. She pushed the door open to find two figures bent over an open book seated near a glowing hearth. Robbie was haltingly reading out verb conjugations in French, while the chaplain patiently corrected him.

Robbie glanced up. Usually, if Elizabeth interrupted his lessons with the chaplain, her son favored her with a beaming smile. The lad found hours of Latin and French drills tedious and was always looking for an escape.

This afternoon though, his gaze was wary.

Elizabeth had seen little of him since the incident in the lower ward bailey the day before.

If she hadn’t known better, she’d think her son was avoiding her.

“I need yer help in the hall,” she greeted her son with a smile before shifting her attention to Father Finlay. “Can I steal Robbie away a little early, Father?”

Did she imagine it, or did relief flare in the chaplain’s dark eyes? Robbie was a challenging student at the best of times—and since his father’s return to Dunnottar, the lad was understandably distracted. “As luck would have it, we were about to conclude our lessons for the day, My Lady.” Father Finlay deftly closed the book Robbie had been reciting from. “Off ye go, lad.”

Robbie nodded and rose to his feet. However, he hardly looked joyful at being let away early. Wordlessly, he followed his mother from the chamber.

Elizabeth led the way down the stairs to the long gallery below that would take them to Dunnottar's hall. Finally, when the silence between them drew out, she cut him a glance. "Are ye angry with me, Robbie?"

"No, Ma," he replied quickly—too quickly.

"Ye wish I hadn't interceded yesterday?"

A silence followed, and it was only when the oaken doors to the hall loomed ahead that her son answered. "Ye made a fuss about nothing, Ma ... we were only sparring."

Elizabeth's spine stiffened. Was that what everyone looking on thought too—that she was an overbearing wife and over-protective mother?

"He's three times yer size, Robbie," she replied, trying to keep the hurt out of her voice. "Ye are too young to spar with a blade."

"But it's made of wood," the lad burst out. "And father ... Da ... says that he learned how to wield a sword when he was younger than me."

Elizabeth's jaw tightened. Why didn't that comment surprise her? Robert had been brought up to be a warrior—and he wanted his son to follow him. They were all warriors, the De Keith men.

Pushing open the doors to the hall, Elizabeth led the way inside. Earlier in the day, the hall had been a flurry of activity as servants decorated the long tables with wreaths of holly and pine. The resinous scent of pine now filled the air, blending with the pungent smell of peat-smoke drifting from the fire.

Not replying to Robbie's earlier comment, Elizabeth motioned to the ladder leaning against one wall. "I need someone young and agile to hang mistletoe and ivy from the rafters."

Her son nodded, his expression now earnest.

Elizabeth's chest constricted.

Robbie was a good lad—and he always tried so hard to please her. Robert, curse him, was right when he'd accused her of cossetting the lad.

He was all she had. For years now, it had been her and Robbie against the world.

The thought of any harm befalling him made her break out in a cold sweat.

Forcing down her anxiety, Elizabeth passed her son a basket of mistletoe and flashed him a smile. "Up ye go then ... I'll hold the ladder."

Heavy oaken beams, blackened with smoke from the fire, hung overhead.

Elizabeth held the ladder tight while Robbie scaled it, racing up like a squirrel.

"There are hooks up there," she called to him. "Just hook the mistletoe over them."

Her son did as bid, finishing the task in moments. He then slid down the ladder, a grin plastered on his face.

Why was it that lads loved to climb and teeter from great heights? At the same age, Elizabeth had been content to play with her poppets and embroider pillowcases. It seemed that from the moment they could walk, lads went looking for danger. Elizabeth wanted to protect him from it, but she knew the day was swiftly coming when she couldn't.

They shifted the ladder to the next beam, and Robbie scaled the ladder once more—this time with a basket of ivy.

He'd just started to hang it when the doors to the hall opened, and a tall man strode inside.

Elizabeth's grip on the ladder tightened at the sight of her husband walking toward her.

Curse him, but Robert drew her eye as much as he ever had. Dressed in leather braies and a velvet lèine, a snowy ermine

stole around his shoulders with his brown hair spilling over it, he looked every inch the laird.

“Da!” Robbie called out.

Something twisted in Elizabeth’s chest. The eagerness in Robbie’s voice caused a strange jealousy to rise inside her. All these years taking care of her son, raising him, and his father only had to walk back into his life to alter their relationship forever.

Robbie had appeared cowed after being trounced by his father in the lower ward bailey—Elizabeth had expected the incident would make him wary around his father, but it seemed that wasn’t the case.

“Making yerself useful I see,” Robert greeted his son. “Good lad.”

“Aye ... Ma doesn’t want to climb the ladder,” Robbie replied. “So I’m hanging the decorations instead.”

Robert smiled—and Elizabeth caught her breath. It was the first real smile she’d seen since his return.

A pity then that it wasn’t for her.

“Just one more beam should do it,” Elizabeth told Robbie. Her voice had a brittle note to it—but she couldn’t help herself.

She’d been enjoying having her son’s full attention. But the moment his father walked into the hall, she was all but forgotten.

“Aye, Ma ... shall I hang up some fir boughs on this one?”

“Go on then.”

Robert stopped a few yards away, watching silently as Robbie finished his task.

When the lad slid back down to the floor, empty basket in hand, Robert glanced around, taking in his surroundings. “I’d forgotten how grand this hall is,” he murmured. His gaze went to the De Keith banner hanging over the hearth and the motto inscribed there: *Veritas Vincit*—Truth prevails.

Elizabeth saw his gaze rest there and noted how his handsome features tensed.

Did truth always conquer all? Elizabeth had been brutally honest with him in the armory—but it hadn't cleared the air between them. Instead, it had created a gulf.

“I like the smell of Yuletide, Robbie announced. “It’s like standing in a pine-thicket.”

Robert tore his gaze from the banner. “Aye, lad ... do ye fancy a ride out tomorrow if the weather clears a little? We can see if we can flush out some deer in the woods north of here.”

Robbie’s face lit up like a candle. “Aye, Da!”

Robert approached the lad then, and to Elizabeth’s surprise, he reached out and ruffled Robbie’s hair. It was the first gesture of affection toward his son she’d seen since his return. Perhaps their altercation the day before had made him think on things?

Even so, Robert’s suggestion made Elizabeth tense. Heather had said the snow was deep; she didn’t want Robbie to hurt himself.

“Run along now, lad,” Robert continued with another smile. “I wish to have a word with yer Ma.”

“Can we all have supper together today?” Robbie asked, the hope in his voice almost painful. The lad had clearly gotten over his bashfulness in regard to his father.

Being knocked flat on his back by the man had shattered Robbie’s reserve.

Elizabeth’s mouth thinned. Sometimes she didn’t understand males at all.

“Aye ... that sounds like a fine idea,” Robert replied, still smiling. “Ye can join us in my solar.”

With a hurried ‘goodbye’ to Elizabeth, Robbie rushed off, the hall doors thudding shut behind him.

Silence followed as Robert’s gaze settled upon her.

“Ye have clearly impressed someone,” she said, inwardly cringing at the bitter edge to her voice.

Robert’s mouth curved. “Aye ... but not ye it seems.”

He approached her then.

Elizabeth stood her ground, although the memory of what had passed between them last time he’d moved close, of the passionate kiss they’d shared, made her pulse quicken.

“The snow’s too deep to take a bairn out riding,” she said after a pause.

Robert made an irritated sound at the back of his throat. “God’s teeth, woman, the lad longs for some adventure.” His gaze fused with hers. “Sooner or later, ye are going to have to let him grow up.”

Elizabeth sucked in a deep breath. “He’s still a bairn, Rob. Don’t wish these years away ... once they’re gone, they’re gone forever.”

He snorted. “Taking the lad out on a ride isn’t going to catapult him into manhood.” He moved in closer still, towering over her now. And when he spoke again, his tone had softened. “I’ll not take him from ye, Liz. A son needs a father, that’s all.”

Elizabeth held his gaze, her throat thickening. Damn him, but the man had read her too well. He’d always done so in the past, yet the detached stranger who’d returned to her had appeared incapable of such empathy.

But as she stared into his eyes, Elizabeth wondered if some of the man she’d once loved still remained.

VIII



STARTING AFRESH

“CAN YE PASS me the bread, Robbie?” Elizabeth’s request broke the tense silence in the laird’s solar.

The three of them sat at the huge, polished table—a light supper of braised cabbage, goat’s cheese, and fresh oaten bread before them. In the days leading up to Yule, the folk of Dunnottar avoided meat and ate simply, in preparation for the feasting that was to follow.

The roaring hearth cut through a cold evening. Outdoors the snow had ceased for a while, although a biting wind had sprung up, whistling in from the frozen north. It rattled the shutters and pushed its way in through any gaps it could find, causing a draft that made the flames in the hearth dance.

Robbie did as bid, his gaze shifting to his father though. “Captain Gaius chose a pony for me last summer ... he’s a garron named ‘Hunter’.”

At the far end of the table, the laird smiled before lifting his pewter goblet to his lips. “A fine name for a pony.”

“He’s hardy,” Robbie assured his father. “A wee bit of snow won’t bother Hunter.”

“Even so ... if there’s a blizzard, ye won’t be riding out in it.” Elizabeth spoke up, only to earn a reproachful look from her son. She didn’t like the role she’d unconsciously stepped into since her husband’s reappearance—that of watchdog. However, the words of censure flew from her mouth before she could prevent herself.

With a jolt, she realized that part of her sought to undermine Robert.

She'd been in charge here until two days ago, and although the responsibilities of laird had weighed upon her at times, she realized now that the power was hard to give up. She was supposed to revert to the role she'd had before Robert's capture—that of biddable wife.

Women's work was her ken now, the bigger decisions were not.

"This is a good supper," Robert offered when silence stretched out once more. "Ye have no idea how I missed Scottish fare."

"Was English food vile, Da?" Robbie asked, his gaze widening.

Robert pulled a face. "The food they served me was, at least."

"We're having spit-roasted venison for the Yuletide banquet," Robbie replied, "followed by honey cakes and clotted cream."

Robert rolled his eyes, flashing his son a grin. "Then I shall have to be careful not to gorge myself." His gaze flicked to Elizabeth then. "I have happy memories of Yule, Robbie ... yer mother and I were wed just before it."

Robbie swallowed a large mouthful. "Really?"

"Aye ... yer Ma had mistletoe in her hair, I remember ... and wore a pale blue gown. She was beautiful. She still is."

Robbie paused eating, his attention shifting to Elizabeth. "Ye are blushing Ma," he observed with a cheeky smile.

"It's warm in here." Elizabeth muttered, reaching for her own goblet of wine.

They all knew she was lying though—the heat in her cheeks had more to do with her husband's honeyed words.

I can't believe I'm so easily flattered.

Elizabeth focused on her supper then, aware that Robert was watching her. Truthfully, it had been years since she'd felt beautiful.

She'd worn widow's black for a long while after Robert's capture. After that, she'd focused on running Dunnottar. Her busy life had left her little time for herself. As laird, she'd held a position of respect.

Men didn't flirt with her anymore.

Not until tonight.

They finished their meal—with Robbie's lively chatter providing a bridge between them. Elizabeth had never seen the lad so animated. However, when he went off to bed once supper had concluded, his parents were left alone.

Servants came and went, collecting the empty dishes and replenishing the bramble wine. Seated by the fire in high-backed wooden chairs, facing each other, Robert and Elizabeth lapsed into a drawn-out silence.

"I wasn't merely flattering ye earlier," Robert spoke up eventually. "It's the truth. I'd forgotten just how bonny ye are, Liz."

Elizabeth glanced up, her fingers tightening around the stem of her goblet. "I'm no longer the lass ye wed," she said softly. Sadness enveloped her then. "The years have taken too much from me."

"They've also given ye something." He replied, his tone firming. "Yer beauty shines stronger than I remember."

Elizabeth's breathing hitched. Part of her wished he wouldn't say such things—but another part of her craved to hear the words.

The urge to deny his compliment rose within her, but she shoved it down.

She wouldn't let bitterness ruin this moment.

“I missed ye so much,” she finally whispered. “For a while, I hoped ... and then after David tried to kill Longshanks that flame died within me.” She lifted her goblet to her lips and took a gulp of spicy wine. “I’ve been harsh since ye returned, and I’m sorry for it ... it’s just seeing ye alive, after I’d long told myself ye were dead, is taking some time to get used to.”

He huffed a laugh, his gaze meeting hers. “It’s a shock to me as well ... being back here again after so long. I feel like an imposter.”

Elizabeth shook her head. “This is where ye belong, Rob ... even if the sweet woman ye remember has turned into a blade-tongued harpy.”

He laughed, and the warm sound rolled over her, making the tension in Elizabeth’s shoulders ease just a little. “Ye were never biddable, Liz ... and just as well, for I never wanted a wife who had nothing to say for herself.”

He set his wine aside and rose to his feet, crossing to her.

Elizabeth stopped breathing as he gently took her wine and placed it on the mantelpiece. He then took hold of her hands and drew her to her feet.

“Ye have done well as laird,” he murmured. “Donnan showed me the books ... they are healthier than I remember.”

Her mouth quirked. “Is that surprise I hear in yer voice, Rob? Ye didn’t believe a woman could manage this castle and its lands?”

He huffed another laugh. “If I did, I stand corrected now.” He paused then, gazing down at her. “I don’t want to fight ye,” he murmured. “I’ve come home ... but I won’t truly belong here until ye and I are no longer strangers.”

Elizabeth let out the shaky breath she’d been holding. “Why do I feel like a nervous bride?” she whispered.

His mouth curved. “Because we’re starting afresh ye and I.”

He reached out, his thumb brushing her lower lip.

A soft sigh gusted out of Elizabeth. Even after all these years, his touch still had a visceral effect on her. The feel of his skin on hers made it difficult to think, let alone respond to him.

“Will ye lie with me tonight, Liz?” he finally asked. “Can we put the angry words of the past two days behind us and start again?”

“Aye,” she breathed. His nearness, the heat of his body, enveloped her like a warming winter mantle. Before she even realized what she was doing, Elizabeth swayed toward him.

Robert’s mouth slanted across hers then, his arms claspings about her.

Elizabeth melted into him. Her lips parted, and she hungrily welcomed his tongue. An instant later, her arms went up and entwined about his neck.

The kiss deepened, their bodies flush now.

A fevered heat rushed through Elizabeth, unleashing wildness.

Lord, it’s been so long.

She’d forgotten how good he tasted, how strong and masculine his body felt pressed against her.

She clutched at his shoulders, clinging to him now as the kiss grew deeper, hotter. She wanted to crawl inside him, to forget all those long years of grief and loneliness.

An instant later, Robert pulled back from her, swept Elizabeth up in his arms, and made for the door that led into his bed-chamber. Heart thundering in her ears, Elizabeth sank against the wall of his chest, need pulsing through her now.

The laird’s bed-chamber was a large, starkly-masculine space—a room that Elizabeth rarely ventured into, especially since Robert’s departure.

However, it seemed fitting that he’d take her in here. In many ways, she did feel like a new bride. She suddenly ached for Robert to make her his, to let herself go completely.

He set her down on the deerskin rug before the fire, his mouth claiming hers once more.

They devoured each other now, their hands ripping at each other's clothing. Elizabeth was desperate to rid him of the layers of linen, wool, and leather that separated them.

A chill draft from the shuttered window feathered down her naked back when he stripped her lèine from her, but Elizabeth barely noticed—her attention was upon her husband's hard-muscled body.

Even though he was leaner than she remembered, he exuded a virility, a masculinity that made her lower belly catch aflame. And the sight of his shaft, rigid and swollen, made her heart leap against her ribs.

She wanted him buried deep inside her.

They sank down onto the deerskin rug then, their mouths fused, not even bothering to move to the bed. The softness of the deerskin brushed against Elizabeth's sensitized skin as she reached for Robert, pulling his naked body flush against hers.

A cry of joy escaped her when he parted her thighs and thrust into her, seating himself fully.

How she'd missed this, how she ached for him.

IX



COMING HOME

ROBERT WAS LOST. The feel of being buried deep inside his wife nearly sent him over the edge.

He was being consumed, driven to madness with wanting.

His mouth branded hers before tracing a path down her jaw and throat. She tasted so sweet, and the softness of her lush body under his felt as if he held heaven in his hands.

For so many years, he'd dreamed of this, longed for this—and then finally, in the last years of his imprisonment, he'd thought he'd never again lie with his wife.

He'd lost hope.

But here they were.

Robert withdrew from her—something that required a great act of will—and moved down, grasping her breasts and pushing them up into his face. He suckled them hard, feasting on their fullness while Elizabeth writhed beneath him.

She was making soft mewling noises, her eyes closed, and a look of intense rapture on her face.

It was too much—he had to be inside her again. Now.

Robert plunged into Elizabeth, holding himself up above his wife as he took her in deep, hard strokes. She cried out, arching up to meet each thrust. Reaching up, she clutched at his shoulders, her fingernails digging into his skin.

He continued to thrust into her, the wet sounds of their coupling filling the chamber. When Robert's climax finally slammed into him, it caught him with such force that his vision dimmed for an instant. He was vaguely aware of Elizabeth's cries, the shudders that wracked her body—as he arched back, a ragged shout tearing from his throat.

Breathing hard, he collapsed, before propping himself up on his elbows, lest he crushed her. Likewise, Elizabeth panted, sweat gleaming upon her naked skin, illuminated by the fire's warm glow.

Their gazes met and held—a long, silent moment passing between them.

A moment that Robert was loath to fill with words.

Elizabeth reached up, her fingertips tracing the line of her husband's face.

In the firelight, he looked younger, more vulnerable.

It was the face of the man she'd fallen in love with fifteen years earlier.

The man she thought she'd lost forever.

He was still buried inside her, and she never wanted him to leave—never wanted this feeling of completeness to end. She'd thought their first time together after so many years would be awkward: two strangers pretending they were still a couple, despite the gulf between them.

Yet the evening had brought clarity.

Perhaps the conflict between them had been necessary after all, for it had eventually led them here.

“Am I still a stranger to ye?” Robert eventually asked, his smile tentative, boyish even.

Elizabeth smiled back, her fingers trailing down to his chest, where she traced the whorls of crisp hair. “Perhaps not,” she murmured, suddenly feeling as shy as a maid at her first dance.

“We fit together even better than I remember,” he continued, his voice lowering to a sultry rumble.

“Aye, we do,” she whispered.

He reached out then, his fingers tangling in her thick dark-blond hair, which was spread out on the deerskin. “Ye always brought out the best in me,” he continued, his throat bobbing. “I fear that without ye ... I’d let bitterness and anger consume me.”

She heaved in a deep breath. “I’m not surprised.” Elizabeth paused there, searching his face. “Were they cruel to ye?”

Their gazes fused, and then his mouth quirked. “I was given a good beating when I arrived at Warkworth, and another when I kicked one of the guards in the cods ... but after I learned my place, my English captors left me alone.” He broke off there, his face turning somber. “The loneliness was the worst,” he said finally. “It wears down on ye ... makes yer mind turn against ye.” He paused there, his gaze shadowing. “And when I never heard from ye, my imagination ran away with me.”

“Ye know Edward refused to tell me where ye were imprisoned?” Elizabeth asked, her fingers clasping around his. “I was convinced that Longshanks would kill ye in retribution for what David did.”

The words hung between them, a reminder of how fortunate Robert was not to have been hanged.

A moment later, Robert’s mouth curved. “Lucky for me, Longshanks had more pressing issues to attend to at the time.”

His gaze turned limpid then, and he raised Elizabeth’s hand to his lips, kissing the back of it softly. “Life has given me a second chance, Liz ... and I don’t intend to waste it.”

Heat spread across Elizabeth’s chest at these words, at the huskiness in his voice.

She gasped then, as she felt him stiffen inside her—and a delicious ache started to pulse in her lower belly. She wanted him again, wanted to chase away all the dark memories, all the loneliness that had plagued them both.

She lifted her hips to him, undulating them in a slow and sensual roll that dragged a deep groan from her husband.

Then Robert's mouth crushed down on hers, and all rational thought fled.



“It’s a fine day for a ride,” Cassian Gaius announced, squinting up at the hard blue sky ... just keep away from the cliffs.”

Robert snorted at the warning. He’d grown up at Dunnottar and knew just how perilous some areas could be when covered in snow. “We’ll ride to the oakwood, west of Stonehaven,” he replied, swinging up onto the saddle. This morning he sat astride a bay courser, while Robbie perched atop Hunter, his shaggy garron.

The Highland pony tossed its head, eager to be off. After days being cooped up, Hunter longed to stretch his legs.

Robert met his son’s gaze. “Ready, lad?”

Robbie nodded, excitement glinting in his eyes.

Reining his horse around, Robert urged it toward the gates. “We’ll be back mid-afternoon at the latest,” he called over his shoulder. “In time for the first ladles of mulled wine.”

Tonight was the eve of Yule. Night would fall early, and then the residents of the keep would gather in the hall to set fire to the great oaken log in the hearth, drink mulled wine, and feast on the first of the Yuletide treats: game pie followed by aged cheeses. Haunches of roast venison would be served the following day.

Leaving the walls of Dunnottar behind, Robert let his courser pick its way down the snowy defile and up the steep bank to the cliff-top opposite.

It hadn’t snowed for a few hours now, and the snow lay in a pristine white crust for miles around. With the winter sun

sparkling off it, the whiteness was blinding.

Reaching the cliff-top, Robert drew in a deep breath of sharp, cold air.

A smile then spread across his face.

For the first time in days, he truly felt like he'd come home.

Last night would forever remain etched in his memory.

Liz, her creamy limbs spread open to receive him, her blue eyes dark with passion, and her cries filling the bed-chamber.

And when they hadn't been making love, they'd talked—long into the night.

With the rising of the sun, Robert De Keith felt as if he were twenty once more. He'd told Elizabeth that, as they'd curled up together, exhausted in bed—and her mouth had curved. “Ye certainly have the lustiness of a young man,” she'd murmured.

He'd favored her with a cheeky grin. “It's incredible what having a beautiful woman in yer bed can do for a man.”

Robert's body still felt relaxed in the aftermath of that torrid night, his limbs loose. He looked forward to taking Elizabeth to his bed again tonight and exploring her delicious body once again.

However, for now it was a brisk, bright morning, and he'd promised his son a ride.

They rode out across the snow-covered hills, and Robert noticed that his son's mount was indeed in high spirits. The garron side-stepped and danced, as it snorted and tossed its head. As Robert looked on, the pony bucked, nearly dislodging its rider.

“Hunter's a feisty one,” Robert commented. “Unusual for a garron.”

“He's often too sluggish,” Robbie informed him, his face tensing. He was struggling to keep his mount in check. “So, I fed him half a bucket of oats last night.”

Robert frowned at this news. “Well, that’ll do it,” he replied. “I’d say he’s got energy to burn now ... let’s stretch his legs.”

With that, he urged his courser into a canter, kicking up snow behind them. “Race ye to the woods!”

X



THE FADING LIGHT

“YE ARE LOOKING pleased with yerself,” Gavina greeted Elizabeth with a knowing smile. “Ye look like a cat that’s just caught a nice fat thrush.”

Elizabeth smiled back. “The sun is shining for the first time in days.” She motioned to the swath of blue sky out the open window she perched next to.

It was a bit too cold to stay by the window for long—but the fresh air chased away the lingering peat smoke.

Elizabeth was enjoying the sting of cold air on her cheeks—and she couldn’t wipe the grin off her face. Happiness bathed her in warmth as if she were standing next to a roaring heath.

Last night had been unexpected.

Last night had been wonderful.

She turned her attention fully to Gavina then as she approached the window. Her friend looked tired this morning, and uncomfortable. That belly of hers was quite a weight for such a small woman to carry.

“I have my husband back,” Elizabeth said softly.

Gavina’s cornflower-blue eyes gleamed. “It warms my heart to hear ye say that,” she replied. “Relations between ye seemed so ... strained.”

“They were ... but things are different now,” Elizabeth assured her.

Gavina grimaced then, a hand settling upon her swollen belly.

Elizabeth frowned. “Is something amiss?”

“No,” Gavina replied with another grimace. “I just feel like an over-stuffed sack of oats these days.”

Elizabeth laughed, moving away from the window. “Come.” She guided Gavina over to one of the chairs flanking the hearth. “Sit down for a bit.”

“I shouldn’t really.” Gavina muttered. “I’ve left the bairns with Draco ... lord knows what mischief they’ll get up to.”

Elizabeth cocked an eyebrow. “He’s usually the one who instigates such trouble.”

“Aye ... and he’s got them down in the kitchens with the cooks, helping make sausages for tomorrow’s banquet. I should really rescue the poor cooks.”

Nonetheless, Gavina did as Elizabeth bid, lowering herself with a groan into one of the chairs.

Smiling, Elizabeth pulled up a chair opposite. “It’s incredible how things turn out,” she murmured. “Who’d have thought ten years ago that we’d all be where we are now?”

Gavina glanced up, her eyes crinkling at the corners when she smiled. “Aye ... Robert had yet to be captured, William Wallace was still alive, and I was wed to David.” Her smile dimmed then. “I never thought I’d find such happiness, Liz. Sometimes I look at my husband and our bairns and wonder how I managed to find fortune’s favor.”

“Ye are more worthy of it than many,” Elizabeth replied. “I must admit when ye first wed Draco, I thought it would be yer ruin ... but ye two have proven to be a great match.” Elizabeth paused there. “I think ye bring out the best in each other.”

Gavina smiled back. “As ye and Robert always did.”

Warmth seeped through Elizabeth. Aye, it was true. They had once been a good match—and after last night, she hoped that they could again be happy together.

“It must have been difficult for the pair of ye though,” Gavina said, her gaze roaming Elizabeth’s face. “Eight years is a long time to be apart ... and ye have both been through much.”

“He is different to the man I recall,” Elizabeth admitted. “But I hope—”

She cut off there as opposite her Gavina gave a sharp gasp.

A tinkling noise followed.

Dropping her gaze to the flagstones, Elizabeth saw clear liquid pooling there.

Elizabeth rose to her feet, excitement climbing within her. “Yer waters have broken!” She stepped forward, taking her friend by the hands and helping her stand. “The bairn is coming ... just in time for Yule!”



The light was starting to fade when Elizabeth emerged from Gavina’s bed-chamber.

Draco was pacing up and down the hallway outside, his hawkish features taut with worry.

Glancing up, his dark gaze speared Elizabeth. “The babe. Has it come?”

“Not yet,” Elizabeth replied. “Although it’s on its way ... her birthing pains grow strong.” She gestured to the door behind her. “Keep Gavina company while I go and collect some swaddling linen and hot water.”

Seeing the worry in Draco’s eyes, she favored him with a reassuring smile. “All is well ... I’ll be back soon.”

Hurrying down the hallway to the stairwell that would take her downstairs, Elizabeth wondered how her husband and son's ride had gone earlier in the day.

She passed a narrow window in the stairwell and noted that the sky was darkening rapidly, and that it had started snowing again.

She'd been so preoccupied with Gavina she'd barely noticed the passing of time.

Dunnottar didn't have a resident healer or midwife—and Elizabeth had taken up the roles. Helping a woman give birth was a great responsibility, but like her mother before her, she was a skilled healer and competent midwife.

Even so, she wouldn't be able to relax until Gavina delivered her bairn safely.

Childbirth was always such a risky time for women.

On the way down to the kitchens and laundry, Elizabeth made a detour to the laird's apartments—no doubt Robert and Robbie would be warming themselves by the fire with cups of warm wine.

However, she found the laird's solar empty—and when she went to her own quarters, they weren't there either.

Maybe they've gone to the hall already? She really had to collect the clean linen and hot water. But first, she wanted to see her husband and son, and to know how their day had gone.

In the gallery leading to the hall, she encountered the castle's steward, Donnan de Keith. He limped toward her, a grin splitting his face.

"I hear Gavina is about to give birth," he greeted her.

"Aye," Elizabeth replied with a distracted smile. "It's not far away now." She met Donnan's eye. "Have ye just come from the hall?"

"Aye."

"Are the laird and Robbie there?"

The steward shook his head. "Not yet, My Lady."

Elizabeth stilled. “Have they not returned from their ride?”

Donnan’s brow furrowed. “I didn’t realize they’d gone out,” he answered. “Maybe they’re stabling their horses now.”

“I’ll go and see,” Elizabeth replied. A chill sense of foreboding rose within her then, a gnawing intuition that something was wrong.

Without another word to Donnan, she turned and fled toward the entrance hall.

The snow fell heavily in the lower ward bailey, thick flakes swirling and fluttering silently. The glow of torchlight and braziers illuminated the wide space.

Gathering her fur mantle close, Elizabeth hurried to the stables, her boots sinking into the snow.

Inside, she found stable lads feeding the horses their evening mash. Cassian was there too, saddling his courser.

He glanced up, his features tensing when he saw Elizabeth step inside the stables, her gaze darting around. “My Lady?”

“The laird and Robbie ... are they back yet?”

Cassian shook his head. “I expected them back a couple of hours ago ... I’m going out to look for them.”

Elizabeth drew in a sharp breath.

“They can’t have gone far,” Cassian replied hurriedly, seeing her look of alarm. “I’m sure they just took a longer ride than anticipated.”

“Can ye take some of yer men out for a search?” Elizabeth asked. “Something is wrong ... I sense it.”

Cassian frowned. However, he didn’t question her. Instead, he nodded and stepped out of the stall, heading toward the door. “I’ll gather some of the Guard now.”

Heart pounding, Elizabeth followed the captain outdoors, back into the snow.

She nearly ran into Cassian's broad back, for he'd abruptly halted a few feet outside the stable door.

Following his gaze, her own narrowing as she peered through the swirling snow, Elizabeth saw a horse ride in through the gate, leading a pony behind it.

"There he is." The relief in Cassian's voice was palpable.

However, Elizabeth was already rushing forward.

Even in the gloom, she could see that the garron was riderless. Where was Robbie?

As she neared the approaching outline of a tall man on horseback, Elizabeth saw that he carried a small figure in front of him—a figure that was slumped unconscious against his father's chest.

Terror twisted in Elizabeth's chest, and she broke into a run. "Robbie!"

XI



PROTECTIVE

ELIZABETH HURRIED TO Robert's side, her gaze spearing his for an instant, before it traveled down to Robbie's ashen face.

His eyes were closed, and only the rise and fall of his chest reassured her that her son was actually breathing.

"What happened?" The question came out in a panicked gasp. "Ye should have been home hours ago."

"Robbie's garron bolted on the way back from the woods," Robert answered, his voice rough with exhaustion. "The beast then threw him, but his foot caught in a stirrup, and he was dragged a good distance."

Elizabeth gasped, a hand rising to her mouth. "How seriously is he hurt?"

"He hit his head ... and I think he twisted an ankle badly."

"We must get him down off this horse and inside," Elizabeth replied, panic pulsing in her breast, in time with her heartbeat. She was aware that her voice sounded shrill—but she didn't care.

Robert only had one task today—to take his son out and ensure he didn't come to any harm.

He'd failed miserably.

"Elizabeth," Robert began, his voice strained. "I—"

“Help me get him down, Captain,” Elizabeth called to Cassian, who was now striding toward them. “Robbie is injured.”

She’d cut her husband off, but she didn’t care. All she could focus on right now was Robbie.

Gently, Robert lowered Robbie’s prone body down into Cassian’s waiting arms. “Take him to my chamber, Captain,” he said softly.

“No,” Elizabeth interjected, not looking at her husband. “Take him to mine.”

Cassian tensed, his gaze flicking between the laird and his wife. Robert didn’t speak up and so, jaw tensing, Cassian nodded.

“Lady Elizabeth!”

A woman’s voice echoed through the snowy gloaming.

Elizabeth swiveled to see Aila emerge, snowflakes settling on her hair. “The bairn is close now ... Gavina is calling for ye.”

Elizabeth clenched her fists at her sides, frustration exploding within her. She was torn between tending to her son and assisting her friend. However, she knew Gavina needed her help with the birth, so she chose the latter.

Turning back to Cassian, she fixed him with a desperate look. “Make sure Robbie is kept warm and dry ... and I’ll be down to see him as soon as I’m able.”

“Elizabeth,” Robert spoke up once more. “Don’t worry, I’ll look after him.”

She forced herself to look at him then. Her husband’s lean face was pale and strained, his eyes dark in the flickering torchlight. He looked worried—and so he should when he brought his son home half-dead.

“Like ye have done already?” Once again, she heard the sharp edge to her voice.

Robert's gaze widened, his bearded jaw growing taut, but Elizabeth didn't linger to hear his response. Instead, she turned and hurried after Aila.



Rosa Vulcan was born in the wee hours of the 'Long Night'.

A small wailing babe with a surprisingly full head of dark hair, the bairn's red face scrunched up in outrage.

"Someone has a fine set of lungs," Elizabeth noted with a weary smile. "Ye have a feisty lass on yer hands."

She wrapped the wailing bairn up in a soft cloth and handed her to Gavina.

Propped up on a mountain of pillows, her face pale with exhaustion yet glowing with pride, Gavina eagerly took the babe, holding it against her breast. "Rosa," she whispered. "My goodness ... ye are the very image of yer Da."

"Speaking of which ... I know someone who is very anxious to see ye both." Elizabeth moved over to the door and opened it, waving to the man who'd been pacing outside for hours. "Come in Draco ... ye have a bonny daughter."

Draco approached, his face still taut with worry.

"Fear not," Elizabeth murmured. "Both mother and bairn are well."

Her words were a balm to the man—almost instantly, she watched the tension ebb from him. Like Cassian, the first signs of age were on Draco these days. Not much, just the deepening of laugh lines around his eyes, mouth, and nose, and the barest hint of silver at his temples.

Draco Vulcan—like his friends Maximus and Cassian—had once been immortal, cursed by a Pict witch back in the mists of time. But seven years earlier he'd broken the curse, and now could age and die just like any other man.

Elizabeth stepped back to let him enter the chamber. Draco approached the bed and perched upon the edge, his hand reaching for his wife's. "Finally, a daughter," he murmured. "A lass for our boys to protect." He paused there, his gaze resting upon the babe's face. "She's beautiful," he whispered. "Like ye."

"Elizabeth and I both agree she looks like ye," Gavina replied, smiling up at him.

"Poor lass."

"Nonsense ... she will be a striking beauty, with many suitors vying for her hand."

"Not too many I hope," Draco growled. He continued to stare down at his daughter's wrinkled face—and the look of awe that Elizabeth saw there made her vision blur as tears rose.

He looked like the happiest man alive.



The castle slumbered when Elizabeth finally made her way down to her chambers.

The rest of the keep would have celebrated this eve by lighting the great oaken log in the hearth of the hall, and by enjoying a spread of seasonal treats washed down by mulled wine and mead.

Elizabeth hadn't eaten anything since noon—and hadn't any appetite now either.

It had been a privilege to deliver Gavina and Draco's daughter, yet it had been difficult to focus on the task—for her thoughts kept going to Robbie.

She needed to know how serious his injuries were.

Letting herself into the solar, she spied a tray of small pies and a cup of what smelled like mulled wine upon the table.

However, she ignored the food and drink. Instead, she made her way across to her bed-chamber and opened the door.

Two figures lay upon the bed.

Elizabeth drew close, her gaze going to her son. He was wrapped up under a nest of blankets. Relief flooded through her when she saw—in the glow of the nearby hearth—that color had returned to his cheeks.

Reaching out, she lay a hand upon his brow. Warm, but not overly hot. She noted his breathing was slow, deep, and even—another good sign.

Reluctantly then, she shifted her attention to the second individual. Robert lay fully clothed on top of the bed, one arm slung protectively over his son's torso.

Protective.

Elizabeth's throat constricted, and she swallowed hard.

It was all well and good being caring now, when their son had almost met his end.

Even so—and although she bristled at the sight of her husband—her gaze took him in nonetheless. Robert looked exhausted, even sleep hadn't taken the tension from his face, or removed the dark smudges from under his eyes.

“Robert,” she murmured, grasping him gently by the wrist. “Wake up.”

Robert's eyelashes fluttered, and his eyes opened ... his gaze fixed upon her. “Liz?” His voice was gentle, husky—drawing her in.

Elizabeth fought the sensation. “Aye ... I'm back now, so ye can return to yer own chamber.”

Robert removed his arm from over his sleeping son and sat up, running a tired hand over his face. “Hades ... my head feels full of wool ... what time is it?”

“Well after the witching hour.” Elizabeth replied coolly. “Gavina and Draco have a daughter. Most folk are sleeping in their own beds, and so should ye.”

He looked at her then, his gaze settling upon her with a gravity that made Elizabeth tense. “Ye are still angry with me?”

“Aye,” she replied, not bothering to evade such a direct question.

“Ye think the accident my fault?”

“Well, isn’t it?”

He stared back at her, his silence condemning him. “I do blame myself.” he said after a few moments. “But it all happened so fast. Hunter had bolted before I could catch him by the reins.”

“Ye should have kept a closer eye on Robbie,” Elizabeth countered. Her belly clenched as anger spiraled up within her. “Ye treat him like a man, but he’s only a lad ... ye were supposed to look after him.”

“And I failed.” Robert’s voice was toneless as he finished Elizabeth’s sentence for her. “Is that what ye are saying?”

He rolled off the bed and rose to his feet. Moving around the edge of the bed, he stopped before her.

Elizabeth raised her chin to hold his gaze, even if misery now clutched at her breast. She wanted to lash out, to wound. “Robbie’s all I have,” she eventually managed. “I’d never have forgiven ye if he’d broken his neck out there today. *Never.*”

Robert stared down at her, and long moments drew out. And as they did, she watched his brown eyes shutter.

A shield raised between them.

When Robert finally replied, his voice was as chill as the night that surrounded them. “Goodnight then, Liz,” he said, before he moved past her and made for the door.

XII



IN THE STABLES

“YE WERE LUCKY, Robbie ... it’s only a bad sprain.” Elizabeth finished wrapping the bandage around her son’s swollen ankle before straightening up. She met his guileless brown gaze. “It could have been so much worse.”

“Da saved me though,” Robbie replied. He sat up in bed, his fingers wrapped around a fresh bannock smeared with butter and honey. “He stopped Hunter before he took us both over the cliffs.”

Elizabeth’s heart buckled against her ribs.

Robert didn’t tell me that?

“God’s teeth, Robbie ... ye could have died.”

Something in her tone made him stiffen, his eyes widening. “Are ye cross with me, Ma?”

Elizabeth straightened up from wrapping the bandage, meeting his eye. “No ... why would I be?”

“Da said I shouldn’t have fed Hunter all those oats ... especially since he’s cooped up inside with the snow.”

Elizabeth inclined her head. “Excuse me?”

“Didn’t Da say?” The lad’s cheeks flushed as he realized he’d been caught out.

“No,” Elizabeth replied slowly, before a sigh gusted out of her. “Why would ye do something so foolish, love?”

She was trying to keep the frustration out of her voice, but it was difficult.

“Hunter’s such a slug.” Robbie replied with a grimace. “I didn’t want him to embarrass me, especially with Da.”

“Robert wouldn’t have cared.”

“I want him to be proud of me ... I want him to think I’m as capable as he is.”

“But ye are still a bairn,” Elizabeth perched on the bed next to her son. “No one expects that of ye.”

“I’m not a bairn.” Robbie’s jaw set in a stubborn expression she’d begun to see often of late. “Da says I’m almost a man.”

Elizabeth stared down at her son, the desire to argue with him warring with the urge to chastise him. He was a headstrong lad—which was hardly surprising considering she and Robert were his parents.

At ten winters, he was still two or three years off making the transition from boy to youth—and like all lads, that day couldn’t come soon enough.

“Ye have all yer life before ye, Robbie,” she said after a pause, choosing her words carefully. “Don’t wish these years away.”

Her son held her gaze, and she could see he didn’t fully comprehend her meaning.

“Ye will one day be laird of Dunnottar,” she continued, reaching out and taking his hand. “Great responsibility will rest upon yer shoulders ... but for now, ye are young ... and carefree. Try to make the most of it.”

Robbie cocked his head. “Didn’t ye like being laird ... doesn’t Da?”

Elizabeth smiled. “It’s a privilege to rule a castle like Dunnottar ... but when the lives of many become yer responsibility, ye must weigh every decision carefully. Sometimes ye have to make yerself unpopular for the greater good ... it isn’t always an easy mantle to bear.” She squeezed her son’s hand then, aware that she was becoming melancholy.

“But ye don’t need to worry about such things ... ye won’t need to take on the role for a while yet.”

Robbie watched her, and in his face, she saw her own inquisitiveness, her own desire for answers.

He really was a blend of the two of them.

“It’s Da ye are truly angry with, isn’t it?” Robbie said after a pause. “Ye hardly said a word to him when he visited me again at dawn.”

“I was focused on ye,” Elizabeth lied. She rose to her feet and started collecting up the bandages and clay bottles of unguents, placing them into her healer’s basket.

“But ye wouldn’t even glance at him.” Robbie pressed, clearly not finished with the subject. “I saw the look on his face afterward. He seemed ... sad.”

Elizabeth’s chin jerked up.

Her son’s words, untutored and instinctive, were like a punch to the belly.

Sad?

Robbie favored her with a sheepish smile then. “It wasn’t his fault, Ma.”



Robert didn’t feel like celebrating Yule. The morning was bright and crisp, the snow a white veil over the hills around Dunnottar. The scent of roasting meat drifted through the keep, as did the sweet aroma of baking honey cakes—it was the smell of Yule, and at noon the folk of the keep would gather in the hall, under the garlands of ivy and mistletoe, to feast.

But Robert really wasn’t in the mood to join them.

After checking on Robbie, and weathering his wife’s cold shoulder, he’d gone out to the stables to look in on his courser

and the errant Hunter. The pony was perfectly docile now, favoring him with a gentle nudge as he ducked into the stall.

“Morning, Trouble,” he murmured, scratching the garron behind the ears. “I hope ye are going to behave yerself from now on.”

The pony gave a snort in response. Picking up a coarse brush, Robert swept it over the garron’s thick winter coat. The beast didn’t really need grooming, but the action helped settle his mood, helped distract him from his own thoughts.

He would need to have words with Elizabeth at some point—although he wasn’t looking forward to it.

She’d looked at him as if he were the devil last night when he’d brought Robbie home injured. And this morning, she wouldn’t even meet his eye.

“Women,” he muttered, letting out his frustration as he continued to brush Hunter. “Do ye understand them, lad? I certainly don’t.”

He’d been sure he and Elizabeth had turned a corner the night previous. They’d spoken honestly and even lain together, and he’d finally felt as if he’d come home.

But now he was out in the cold again—literally.

Elizabeth made it plain where her true affections lay. Her son was her world, and he couldn’t really blame her for that. He’d been away for so long that Robbie had somehow taken his place in Elizabeth’s heart.

And now she thought he’d deliberately put their son in harm’s way.

I must tell her that it wasn’t the case.

He’d tried last night, but her icy stare had made the excuses die upon his lips, had made anger rise within him. Anything he might have said would have likely been twisted against him—and so he’d held his tongue.

Loneliness swept over him then, dousing any lingering resentment toward his wife, in a cold cloak that chilled him to the marrow despite that the air was relatively warm inside the

stables. It wasn't a new sensation—he'd weathered it for many years, but had thought he'd escaped it now he was home. Once again, he felt like an interloper. He was intruding on the life Elizabeth had built without him.

“Rob.”

He glanced up then as a woman's voice cut through his brooding. Turning, he saw Elizabeth approaching, a fur mantle wrapped about her shoulders, her gaze fixed upon him.

“Liz,” he greeted her gruffly. “What are ye doing out here?”

“Looking for ye.”

He raised a questioning eyebrow. After the look she'd given him the last time he'd seen her, he'd imagined she'd wanted him to hurl himself from the walls. He hadn't expected her to seek him out.

“Why didn't ye tell me ye stopped Robbie's pony from taking him over the cliff?” she asked.

Robert turned properly to face her. “Ye didn't give me the chance.”

Her cheeks reddened then, for he hadn't bothered to hide the note of chagrin in his voice.

“The lad fed the pony too many oats and then wondered why he couldn't control him properly.” Robert continued when the silence between them drew out. “Hunter fought Robbie the whole way to the woods ... but on the way home, he took the bit between his teeth and bolted.”

He cast a dark look over his shoulder at the pony, which was now innocently munching a mouthful of hay. When he glanced back at his wife, he saw that Elizabeth had drawn closer, her midnight-blue eyes—eyes he could drown in—wide and glittering.

“I'm sorry I jumped to conclusions,” she murmured, her voice husky. “It's just that” Her voice died away as she struggled to explain herself.

Robert ducked out of the stall, rising to his full height before her.

“Ye don’t trust me fully yet, do ye?” he asked. His tone was gentle although hurt twisted within him as he asked the question.

Her throat bobbed, betraying the truth. “I want to,” she whispered. “It’s just that for so long, it’s only been Robbie and me ... I’m not used to sharing him with anyone.” She swallowed hard and favored him with a rueful smile. “I’m afraid I’ll never be a match for his father.”

“Nonsense.” Robert moved closer to her, a little of the tension he’d carried in his gut all morning loosening. “Ye are his mother ... no one can ever compete with that.”

“Aye, but it’s ye the lad admires,” she huffed a brittle laugh. “The lad would follow ye through the gates of Hell if ye asked it.” She broke off there, her gaze lowering.

“Liz?” Robert stepped up to her and reached out, his hands cupping her cheeks and raising her face so that their gazes met once more.

Her eyes brimmed with tears now. “And so would I, Rob,” she whispered.

A tear escaped, and he brushed it away with the pad of his thumb. “Don’t weep, my love,” he whispered. “Do ye really think a wee misunderstanding between us would change how I feel about ye?”

“I don’t know,” she admitted softly.

He heaved in a deep breath. “Even after all these years apart, ye still know me better than anyone ... and ye always will. I love ye, Liz.” The admission rushed out of him—and with it went the last remnants of tension. “This absence has only made what I feel for ye stronger. We have something that was made to last, mo chridhe ... please remember that.”

She stared up at him, tears trickling down her cheeks. “And I love ye,” she whispered, “so much that it hurts to breathe.” A beat pulsed between them before she stretched up to him, her lips pressing against his.

An instant later, Robert’s arms went around her, and he crushed her against him, his mouth claiming hers.

EPILOGUE



LIGHT IN THE DARKNESS

ELIZABETH TOOK HER place near the head of the table, to her husband's left—and let the warm glow of contentment flow through her.

This was what she'd missed for so long—the sight of her husband seated in his carven chair at the head of the table.

Robert De Keith, laird of Dunnottar.

Reaching under the table, she placed a hand upon his knee.

Robert's gaze swiveled to her, a smile stretching across his handsome face.

Then, wordlessly, he placed a hand over hers. The warmth and strength of his hand made her breathing quicken, bringing her back to the stables, where he'd kissed her until they'd both been gasping for breath.

Servants appeared at the laird's table then, bringing in platters of roasted venison and goose stuffed with chestnut.

Elizabeth held up her silver, gem-studded goblet to be filled with dark-red bramble wine, while her gaze traveled around the hall. They'd made a fine job of the decorations this year—the scent of pine from the boughs they'd hung over the fireplace perfumed the air, and the garlands of green and red gave the hall a festive air.

Like most folk here, Elizabeth had dressed in her finest clothes: a crimson kirtle and surcoat trimmed in snowy

ermine. Next to her, Robert also wore a surcoat trimmed in ermine, the white contrasting with his rich brown hair.

Around them, the rumble of voices blended with the gentle lilt of a harp.

Elizabeth took it all in—her chest aching as tears threatened. She wasn't a woman who wept at the slightest provocation, yet she had to blink rapidly to keep the tears at bay now.

They were tears of happiness.

Robbie hadn't joined them for the Yuletide banquet unfortunately. Instead, he would eat his meal propped up in bed. Likewise, Gavina, Draco, and their brood were absent from the table.

They would have a quiet celebration at Gavina's bedside.

But Cassian and Aila had joined the laird today—their two lads perched upon their knees, small hands reaching for pieces of venison. Aila wore a lovely emerald-green kirtle that contrasted with her creamy skin and walnut colored hair.

Farther down the table, Elizabeth spied Heather and Maximus and their two daughters. Pink-cheeked from the glow of the hearth, Heather looked as bonny as ever. She laughed then over something her husband had just said, her grey-green eyes twinkling. Beside her, Maximus Cato cut a striking figure, a wolfskin pelt wrapped around his broad shoulders. Silver now sprinkled the temples of his dark hair.

It warmed Elizabeth to know that her three best friends—Gavina, Aila, and Heather—had found happiness with their centurions. Three men who'd been cursed to an immortal life, but were now free to live and die like everyone else. The curse had also prevented them from fathering children, but these days all three were proud fathers.

I wonder what Robert would say if I told him about the curse. Elizabeth thought idly as she helped herself to some mashed, buttered turnip. Likely, he'd think she'd gone mad.

If she hadn't seen Cassian Gaius virtually rise from the dead seven years ago, she wouldn't have believed it either.

No, their story wouldn't be shared. This would be one secret she would keep. Robert would never learn the origin of these enigmatic three men who served him.

"Ye look pensive, my love." Robert's voice drew her gaze then, and she glanced right to find him watching her. "Does something worry ye?"

Elizabeth smiled. "Not anymore," she murmured. "I was just thinking how fortunate I am ... how grateful ... that ye returned to me." She raised her goblet to him then. "This keep never felt right with ye gone, Rob."

He smiled back and raised his own goblet, toasting her.

They both took a sip, their gazes fused as around them, laughter and merry voices rose and fell.

"And it still wouldn't feel right ... without the woman I love at my side," he replied. "Ye are what kept me going all those years, Liz." His hand, still clasped over hers on his knee, tightened. "There were times when I lost sight of it ... but somehow ye were always there ... the light in the darkness ... drawing me home."



The End

FROM THE AUTHOR

I hope you enjoyed *THE LAIRD'S RETURN*. When I embarked on *THE IMMORTAL HIGHLAND SERIES*, I knew I wanted to tell Elizabeth and Robert's story—and since I'm a sucker for second chance love, I was really looking forward to it.

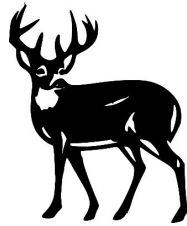
Elizabeth and Robert were once madly in love, but eight years apart have turned them into strangers. I enjoyed exploring their family dynamic and the barriers between two people who have both changed dramatically in their time apart, even though their love had never faded.

I didn't make Robert and Elizabeth up—they were real historical people. Robert De Keith II, laird of Dunnottar, wed Elizabeth Strachan, and they had a son (also called Robert). Their son went on to marry Elizabeth, the daughter of Scottish baron John Comyn.

Robert De Keith took up a military career as a young man but was also considered by other Scottish barons to be a strong leader, being appointed justiciary of the lands beyond the River Forth. He was captured by the English in a skirmish near the River Cree in 1300, but was back in Scotland by 1308 (when this novella starts) and in March 1309 was present at Robert I of Scotland's first parliament at St Andrews. Robert commanded forces loyal to Robert Bruce at the Battle of Bannockburn.

Jayne x

WINTER'S PROMISE



A Dark Ages Festive Romance Novella

JAYNE
CASTEL



The hottest fires burn in the depths of winter.

A storm brings them together, but the world beyond threatens to force them apart.

Erea lives alone in the wilderness. Years earlier her mother was accused of witchcraft and banished from her home. Now her mother's dead, and Erea must fend for herself. But her solitary existence shatters the day a handsome stranger knocks on her door in a snowstorm.

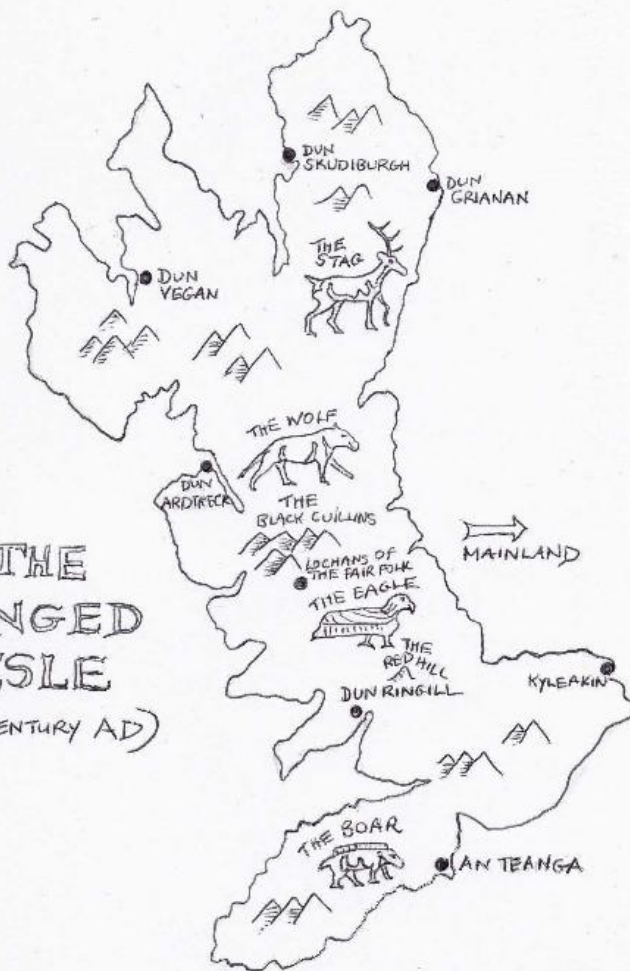
Tadhg mac Fortrenn never expected to find a comely young woman living alone in the wild while he was out deer hunting. The son of a chieftain, he is used to women succumbing to his boyish charm—yet Erea seems immune.

Trapped together inside during a bitter snowstorm, Erea and Tad start to realize that this chance meeting will change their lives forever. In the days that follow, they discover that the hottest fires burn in the depths of winter. Only, as the mid-winter solstice approaches, outside forces put their happiness in peril.

Maps of Scotland and The Winged Isle

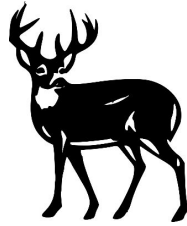


THE
WINGED
ISLE
(4TH CENTURY AD)



*“Every new beginning comes from some other beginning’s
end.”*

— Seneca



Prologue

A Hovel in the Woods

Winter, 369 AD—The Winged Isle

The territory of The Stag

TADHG MAC FORTRENN was lost.

He was still around half a day out from Dun Grianan, when the snow had arrived without warning.

Tad dismounted his pony and raised a hand to his eyes. Stinging needles of ice peppered his skin—the cold had made his cheeks and hands burn as if they were on fire. The blizzard was blinding.

“Come on, lad.” He pulled his pony, a shaggy bay gelding, after him. “We have to keep moving.”

The snow was falling thick and fast, swirling around them in thick flurries. Not only that, but the cold wind knifed

through the layers of wool and leather encasing his body, chilling him to the marrow. Home was still some way off; he and his pony could not stay out here or the storm might get the better of them.

Dolt, he thought as he struggled through three feet of snow, dragging his pony, Caorainn— Rowan—with him. *Uncle warned you a storm was coming.*

Indeed, Bevan had told him he should delay his hunting trip. “The snows are coming *before* Mid-Winter Fire this year,” he had predicted two days earlier. “Wait till spring if you know what’s good for you.”

Clearly, Tad did not know what was good for him.

Even so, he carried a deer slung over his pony’s saddle he had brought down with his bow and arrow that morning. At least the trip had been successful.

Caorainn snorted and tossed his head, the bit jangling. The beast was nervous.

Tad blinked snow out of his eyes and glanced around as he walked. *I don’t know where I’m going.* The blizzard had completely disoriented him, yet he had to keep going.

Gritting his teeth, Tad plowed on, weaving his way through a thicket of dark pines that loomed out of the blinding snow storm like shadowy sentries.

He knew he was somewhere in the Black Boar Woods. However, that knowledge did not fill him with confidence. These woods were huge, carpeting a long valley between two mountains. His father’s broch sat east of here, on the coast of The Winged Isle. Tad had been bound in the right direction before the storm howled in from nowhere, blanketing the world in white.

He trudged on, jaw clenched. What he would have done for a horn of mead and a glowing lump of peat to warm his hands over. With Mid-Winter Fire approaching, the women back in the fort would have baked cakes with honey and apples for tonight’s supper. Tad’s belly rumbled at the thought.

The Hag take me, I can’t feel my feet.

At the back of his mind, he felt a tickle of fear: the beginnings of a realization that he was in trouble. If the snow did not cease, he risked freezing to death out here. Dusk was now settling—it would get colder still after dark.

It was then that Tad smelled wood smoke.

He halted, pulling his gelding up short. He could see nothing through the snow. It was falling so heavily now that it encrusted his clothing and Caorainn's bristly, dark mane, frosting the pony's long eyelashes.

Tad sniffed. *Did I imagine that?*

No—there it was again—an unmistakable scent.

There was a dwelling nearby, and someone was tending a fire.

Tad let out a sigh of relief, the tension ebbing from his shoulders. Thank the Gods someone lived out here in this desolate valley. He was not going to freeze to death after all.

Tad resumed his path through the blizzard, bowing his head to ward off the freezing wind. The scent of wood smoke was coming from the south. He followed the smell, hastening his pace as it grew stronger.

He had traveled half a furlong when the dense press of pines around him drew back, and he stepped into a glade.

There—a dark outline against the surrounding white—was a hovel.

Tad pulled up Caorainn and squinted through the swirling snow at the dwelling. Low-slung, with a sod roof that had puffs of smoke rising from it, the hovel caused a memory to stir within him.

Folk said a witch woman lived in the woods—could this be her hovel?

His father had once banished a woman from the fort after she had caused the death of five children. Tad had been barely three winters old at the time, but stories about her had circulated the broch ever since.

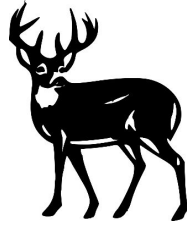
Tad inhaled the aroma of roasting venison then, and saliva filled his mouth.

Yet he hesitated.

Tad did not think of himself as overly superstitious, but he did not like the idea of wandering into a witch woman's lair. Twenty years had passed since that woman had left his people. She was likely to be a hag by now—bent by age and bitterness. Would she want vengeance upon the son of the man who had banished her?

Of course not ... don't be a fool.

Tad pushed aside the thought, focusing instead on his chilled limbs. His fingers were beginning to throb, and his teeth were chattering with cold. He needed warmth and shelter. Pushing aside any lingering misgivings, he urged his pony forward and trudged down the slope toward the hovel.



Chapter One

An Unwelcome Guest

EREA WAS TURNING a haunch of venison on a spit, when a heavy knock sounded. She straightened up, her gaze flying to the door. Made with rough planks of pine and barred from the inside, it was sturdy enough. However, it was not unbreakable.

Thud.

Thud.

“The Hag protect me,” Erea whispered, hailing the goddess who watched over the bitter season. Heart-pounding, she reached for the knife at her waist. “Who is it?” she called out.

Her voice sounded unnaturally loud inside her dwelling. It caused the tawny owl perched on a ledge beside the window to stir. The bird regarded her with unblinking golden eyes. If there was someone outdoors wishing to do Erea harm, Screech would not be able to help her.

“I’ve lost my way in the snow.” A man’s voice, muffled by the door, reached her. “Can you help me?”

Erea did not move.

A man ... here?

She had lived a sheltered existence—had seen few men, or women, over the years.

“Hello . . . are you there?” The stranger called again after a few moments. “I mean you no harm.” Another long pause. “I’ll die out here overnight without shelter.”

Erea’s mouth thinned. He probably would.

Who travels alone in the wilderness in this weather?

Still she did not move. If anything her grip on the bone handle of her knife tightened. She was vulnerable here. She did not know what kind of man lurked outside her door.

On the few occasions she had traveled west with her mother, to barter and trade with villages on the border of The Stag and Wolf territories, she had found the men to be loud and rough. They had watched her mother with hungry eyes. Erea had always been relieved when the pair of them had departed for home.

She did not want to open the door—and yet she did not like the thought of anyone remaining outside on a night like this. The snow had come much earlier than usual this winter.

Heaving in a deep breath, she moved toward the door, her feet crunching over rushes. Then, still grasping the knife in her right hand—while taking care to hide it from view in the folds of her plaid skirt—she lifted the bar from the door with her free hand.

Erea opened the door.

A young, handsome warrior stood before her, a shaggy pony nudging at his shoulder. He was tall with wild curly brown hair and a short beard, and he wore a fur mantle that accentuated the broadness of his shoulders. His youthful face was pale with cold, emphasizing sharp blue eyes. He carried a bow and a quiver of arrows over one shoulder.

The beat of silence between them drew out as they stared at each other—and then the man blinked.

“Sorry to disturb you.” He favored her with a boyish grin, “but I’m freezing my balls off out here.”

Erea did not smile back. “Who are you?”

His grin did not slip. “Tadhg mac Fortrenn at your service ... although you can call me Tad.”

Erea went cold.

Fortrenn—she knew that name well. It was one her mother had cursed often over the years.

“You’re The Stag chief’s son?” she whispered, taking an involuntary step back from him.

Perhaps her horror had shown on her face, for his cocky smile did fade then. “Aye ... do you know my father?”

Erea shook her head.

The warrior was watching her closely now, his blue eyes assessing. “My father would be grateful to learn you showed his son kindness,” he said slowly. “Will you give me shelter?” He gestured then to the carcass slung over his pony’s back. “I’ve a deer you can have ...”

Erea was tempted to slam the door in his face. Her mother might no longer be with her, but she would turn in her cairn to know Fortrenn’s son was staying under her roof. However, the snow was now falling thicker than ever, and that poor pony the warrior led looked miserable. His offering of the deer was tempting too—such a gift would make surviving winter much easier.

“Aye ... just for tonight then,” she said finally. She sheathed her knife, reached over, and took her fur mantle from its hook by the door. “There’s a lean-to behind this dwelling—you can stable your pony there.”

Erea crunched out into the powdery snow, blinking as snowflakes settled on her eyelashes. The gelid air hit her like a blow to the face, and her eyes watered.

No one outdoors would survive long tonight.

Leading the warrior to the lean-to, she cleared a space for his pony next to a pile of recently-split wood that she was leaving to season over the winter. It was not warm under the shelter, but at least it would give the pony some protection from the snow and wind.

She watched as the warrior heaved the deer off the pony's back and strung it up by its hind legs at the far end of the lean-to. He then removed his mount's saddle.

"I don't have any hay for your pony." Erea poured some of her precious supply of oats into a pail. "But he can have these."

"Caorainn thanks you," the man replied, smiling. "Do you mind if I throw some of that sacking over his back? It'll help keep him warm."

"That's fine," Erea replied, avoiding his gaze. She did not like the way this Tadhg mac Fortrenn looked at her. He was too bold—too sure of himself. She brushed by him. "I've got supper to tend ... see you inside when you're done."

With that, Erea left the warrior with his pony and went indoors. Stepping back into the warm, smoky interior of her hovel, Erea looked across at where Screech perched, silently watching her.

"Mother forgive me," she whispered. "What have I done?"



Tad kicked the snow off his fur-lined boots and opened the door to the hovel.

The aroma of roasting venison made his belly growl. He was hungrier than he had realized. He stepped inside, leaving behind the swirling snow and bitter wind, and entered a warm, smoky space.

Low beams hung overhead, and he had to stoop slightly to avoid knocking into the bunches of dried herbs and objects hanging from above. Straightening up, he shrugged off his quiver and bow, placing them against the wall. He then removed his fur mantle and hung it behind the door. The warm air was a balm on the numb chapped skin of his hands and face.

Tad turned from the door, his gaze sweeping over the interior of the hovel. It was a small yet well-kept space. Fresh rushes sprinkled with heather felt soft underfoot. A neatly stacked pile of firewood sat against the wall to his right, and a hearth burned a few feet from it. A scrubbed wooden table sat under the window, piled high with cooking utensils and clay jars. A mound of furs sat at the back of the dwelling, in the shadowy recesses where the roof sloped down.

Perched upon a ledge to the right of Tad sat a large brown owl. The bird watched him, its golden stare unnerving.

Tad ignored the bird, his gaze shifting instead to the comely figure now bent over the fire pit. His gaze devoured her, taking in the long black hair that fell in a dark curtain down her back, almost reaching her bottom. He admired her milky skin and the way that leather vest she wore clung to the generous swell of her breasts.

Lovely ... this is no witch woman.

In any case, she was too young to be the sorceress folk warned lived in these woods. The female before him was at least two or three winters younger than he was.

What's she doing living out here on her own?

Tad cleared his throat, and the young woman glanced from tending the roasting venison. Their gazes met, and Tad stared, momentarily enchanted—as he had been when she had opened the door to him. She had delicate features and moss-green eyes. She would have been the most beautiful woman he had ever seen, if she had not been scowling at him. A deep groove appeared between her dark, finely-drawn eyebrows as she watched him.

Despite that she had agreed to let him shelter in her home, the girl's welcome was decidedly frosty. She had not smiled at him once.

Tad was not discouraged though. His mother had once told him he could charm The Hag herself. He'd soon get this girl to warm to him.

“I introduced myself earlier,” he said with a grin, “but I don’t think you told me *your* name.”

“I didn’t,” she replied, tearing her gaze from his and lifting the venison from the fire. She then carried it over to the table behind her, where she thumped it down upon a wooden board ready for carving.

“And may I know it?” he asked, undeterred.

“Erea,” she replied ungraciously. She reached for the knife at her waist and began to carve the meat.

Erea ...

It was a beautiful name. Even so, Tad was intrigued as to who she was—and why she lived here.

“A strange woman—a sorceress—is said to live in these woods,” he said casually. “She was exiled from Dun Grianan. Have you ever seen her?”

Erea put down her knife and glanced over her shoulder at him. Her expression was cold. “A sorceress?”

“Aye, a hag called Olwen ... the warriors back at the broch say one look at her face would turn a man to stone.”

“The girl’s face hardened, and her lips thinned. Her eyes narrowed into slits as she glared at him.

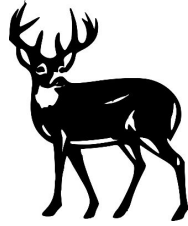
“Do they?” she murmured. Her face had gone pale, except for the high spots of color which had suddenly appeared on her cheeks. “That’s cruel of them to say such things.”

“Not if it’s true,” he answered, lowering himself to a stool before the hearth and warming his hands. “Folk say she was a wicked woman ... that father should have had her stoned to death rather than casting her out.”

The girl turned to him, and Tad saw that she was shaking. Her eyes glittered now, and he realized she was on the verge of tears. “Folk are wrong,” she gasped out the words. “They have black hearts and lying tongues.”

Tad’s own gaze narrowed, and he grew still. “Really?”

Erea fisted her hands at her sides. “I know not this wicked ‘hag’ you speak of, this sorceress.” A beat of silence stretched between them then, broken only by the crackling of the fire and the whine of the wind outdoors. And when the girl spoke once more, her voice trembled. “Olwen was my mother.”



Chapter Two

The Witch's Daughter

THE WARRIOR STARED back at Erea, as if she had just struck him across the face.

There he sat, warming himself in front of her fire, and blithely insulting the only person Erea had ever loved. His very presence here was an insult to her mother's memory.

I should have left him to freeze outside in the snow.

After the words he had just spoken, she wished she had.

"You're the witch's daughter?" he asked finally, incredulous.

Erea dragged in a deep breath. "My mother wasn't a witch," she ground out. "She was a good woman, a healer who only ever tried to help others. Folk at Dun Grianan grew jealous of her skills and plotted against her. They turned your father and his warriors against her—made them believe she was responsible for things she wasn't."

Tadhg mac Fortrenn folded his muscular arms across his chest. "Five bairns died that winter, each after she tended them. She killed them with a dark spell."

Erea took a step toward him, her right hand itching to reach for her boning knife.

“It’s all lies,” she hissed. “Ma told me there was a sickness in the broch that winter. One that had nothing to do with my mother.”

He gave her a disbelieving look. “I can see she has one person at least who believes her.”

Erea stared back at him, momentarily stunned by this man’s conceit and rudeness.

Foolish, soft-hearted wench, she berated herself. This will teach you to open the door to strangers.

Her mother had warned her of men like this—arrogant warriors who strode around as if the world was theirs to command. Recovering, and finding her tongue once more, Erea folded her arms across her breasts, mirroring his earlier gesture.

“You insult both me *and* my mother,” she ground out the words, forcing down her temper. “Leave now.”

Tad realized he had gone too far the moment those last words had left his lips.

He was not sorry for them—for clearly this girl was deluded about her mother—but it dawned upon him that as a guest it would have been wise to hold his tongue.

“Do you have cloth in your ears?” she growled, taking a step closer to the hearth. “I just told you to go.”

Tad raised his hands, as if placating a nervous pony. “Let’s not be hasty. I meant no offence.”

She drew a blade from her belt; this knife was longer and thinner than the one she had been using to carve the meat. “Then you are an even bigger fool than I took you for. Get out of my house!”

Tad eyed that blade.

He was much stronger than her, and was likely better at handling weapons, yet he noted that the girl gripped the bone hilt of the knife with a cool confidence. She might have

appeared young and sheltered, but Erea had just revealed a will of iron.

“I’ll die outside tonight,” he replied softly, hoping to appeal to her compassion.

“Good.” she countered. “I hope The Reaper takes you slow, and that you suffer through every moment of it.”

She stepped closer, brandishing her knife at him. “Get up.”

Tad’s smile faded. Slowly he rose to his feet.

“Arrogant dog.” She spat the insult at him. Her green eyes had deepened to a dark jade with anger. Her face was pale and taut. “My mother was a decent, honest woman,” she continued, her voice quivering from the force of her rage, “but you have attempted to blacken my memories of her. I will never forgive you for that.”

He glimpsed then the grief that shadowed her eyes, and remorse swamped him. Tad was not used to minding his tongue, or holding himself back for fear of giving offence. He had grown up in a crowded, noisy broch, full of dominant men. His mother was gentle and softly spoken, and had forever lived in his father’s shadow.

Tad had never met a woman as fierce as this one.

A long pause followed, before he answered her. “I’m sorry ... I should not have said those things.”

“No.” Her knife blade remained steady, while her gaze narrowed. “You should not.”

“I didn’t mean to hurt you,” he continued, his voice low. “I take it all back.”

Her lip curled. “You can’t. The words have already been spoken. You seemed sure enough of yourself when they danced off your tongue.”

“They were thoughtless,” he replied.

The Hag preserve him, this female was unflinching. A pretty face and lush body hid a mind as sharp as a whetted blade.

Father always warned me of such women.

“I was merely telling the stories I’ve heard since I was a bairn,” he said after a moment. “I didn’t stop to think.”

She snorted. “I doubt you ever do.”

Tad found his face warming at that. Had she just insulted him? However, the rage on her face had ebbed slightly, and she had started to lower the blade. He would not risk angering her again.

He bowed his head. “You’re right.”

Tad glanced up to see she was watching him, her face hard. He took a step back then, sure she would not relent. The thought of going back into that ferocious cold made a weight settle upon his shoulders. However, he would not force his presence on this woman if she truly wanted him gone.

With a sigh, Erea lowered her knife.

“Sit back down ... the meat is getting cold.”

He paused. “I can stay?”

“Aye—till dawn.” She turned abruptly, her voluminous plaid skirt swishing, and returned to the table where the haunch of venison sat cooling. “But then I want you gone.”

Erea sliced a chunk of meat off the bone and placed it on a platter next to a small loaf of coarse oaten and barley bread. She then held it out to Tadhg mac Fortrenn. “Here.”

The warrior took it with a boyish, charming grin. He had a dimple on his cheek when he smiled.

Erea frowned. The man might be attractive, but he had a tongue that could not be trusted. She was angry at herself for relenting—only, the contrite look on his face, the soulful expression in those blue eyes, had penetrated the red haze of her anger.

Even enraged, she could not send him out to die in that blizzard.

Nonetheless, she hated having him here. His smile might have been a thing of beauty, but it was insincere.

Helping herself to some supper, Erea sat on the opposite side of the fire. She had been hungry earlier, yet her stomach had now closed. On edge, she picked at her meal, while she kept one eye upon her unwelcome guest.

Even if he had not told her that he was a chieftain's son, she would have guessed. Not only did he carry himself with unconscious arrogance, but his clothing was exquisitely made. He dressed in form-fitting doe-skin breeches and thick fur-lined boots that reached mid-calf. Across his broad chest he wore a dark vest, laced down the front.

Her own attire felt shabby in comparison, with her faded plaid skirt and worn vest that had been patched in places.

She stole another glance at him, and his gaze snapped up, ensnaring hers.

They looked at each other for a long moment. Tad was not smiling now, although she wished he was. His look was penetrating, as if he could see into her, read her thoughts.

Erea ripped her gaze from his. *Gods, I hope not.*



Tad stirred, awaking to the sound of the wind whistling against the walls. Even huddled under a heavy fur, he could feel the drafts pushing in through the cracks around the door and shutters.

A noise behind him made Tad twist round. He propped himself up onto one elbow to see Erea mixing something in a wooden bowl at the table. Her back was to him, and he silently admired her form. A wide leather belt highlighted a narrow waist, whereas the flare of her plaid skirts beneath accentuated her curves.

“Morning,” he greeted her with a yawn.

She turned, viewing him under hooded lids and with an inscrutable expression. “I was wondering when you’d wake up.”

He smiled. “Why? Have I overslept?”

“Aye, the sun rose a long while ago.”

Tad sat up, pushed his hair out of his face, and stretched. “Is it still snowing?”

“Aye.” She did not sound pleased about that. “Take a look yourself.”

Tad pushed aside the fur and rose to his feet. He moved over to the door, lifted the bar, and pulled it open.

A wall of snow greeted him. A flurry of snow gusted in, dusting him from head to foot in freezing white powder.

A peal of female laughter made Tad turn. Brushing the snow off, he saw Erea smiling for the first time. She was trying not to, but mirth twinkled in her eyes, and her shoulders were shaking. The smile brought her face to life.

Tad raised an eyebrow, blinking snowflakes off his eyelashes. “You knew that would happen, didn’t you?”

She shrugged, her mouth still twitching.

Tad glanced back outside. The sky was white with swirling snow. However, he could not see beyond the door. The white wall in front of him was nearly six foot high.

“I don’t know why you’re so cheerful,” he said, closing the door to the gelid wind and fluttering snow. “I won’t be going anywhere in this weather.”

When he glanced her way once more, Tad saw his comment had wiped the good humor off her face. “Aye ... but it was still worth it,” she replied, before she turned back to the bowl.

Tad brushed the remaining snow off himself and moved over to the hearth, warming his hands over the crackling flames.

“What are you making?” he asked. It seemed a long while since supper the night before, and his belly felt hollow.

“Oatcakes ... I suppose you’d like some?”

“I would.”

She glanced over her shoulder, a frown marring her brow. “I hope this snow doesn’t last much longer. I have barely enough supplies to feed myself.” Her gaze raked over him, assessing him from head to toe. “A man your size will clear out my stores in no time.”

Tad held her gaze a moment before snorting. “I’ll go hungry, if that’ll make you happy.” His gaze met hers. “I know you don’t want me here ... and we didn’t get off to a good start last night. However, I’d rather we weren’t enemies.”

“We’re not,” she replied stiffly, her gaze suddenly uncertain. “I’m sorry if I come across as prickly ... I’m not used to folk.” She broke off here and looked away from him. “This is the longest conversation I’ve ever had with anyone besides my mother.”

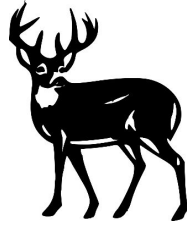
Watching her, Tad tried to imagine what it would be like to grow up in utter isolation as she had. It was nearly impossible for him to fathom, for he had rarely spent time alone. There had been times in the broch when he had longed for some privacy. In fact, he had set off on this hunting trip to get some peace from his father and uncle’s nagging.

“I’ll not be a burden to you,” he said softly. “I’ll earn my keep while I’m here.”

She watched him for a heartbeat longer, and then a smile crept over her face. “I ... could do with some help.”

After an awkward pause, Tad cleared his throat. “What do you need help with?”

Her tentative smile widened. “You can start by clearing a path through the snow, so we can get outside.” She then turned back to her mixing bowl. “However, you can eat first.”



Chapter Three

A Woman Alone

EREA TRUDGED THROUGH the snow, a basket of twigs under one arm. It was slow going, and she sank up to her knees in places.

Thankfully, the snow had stopped falling for a spell, although the sky above was the color of a fresh bruise—warning that it would resume shortly.

Ahead, her home hove into view. A thick white crust covered its roof, and heavy drifts lay against the north-facing wall. However, Tad had cleared away the drift in front of the door, shoveling a wide path so that they were no longer trapped inside.

She heard the ‘thunk’ of an axe, and an odd, strangely warm sensation spread through her chest. After she had fed him oatcakes and honey, Tad had spent the rest of the morning working tirelessly on her behalf. He had mended one of the shutters that had been about to fall off, brought in fresh

buckets of snow to thaw—for her to use for bathing and cooking—and he had mended the roof of the lean-to.

Erea made her way toward the back of her hovel now, her stride hampered by the deep snow. It had taken her a long while to collect a full basket of damp twigs. Yet she needed them to keep the fire going. Some of the wood she was burning had not been properly seasoned. It was a bit sappy, and the pine cones and twigs helped it burn.

She rounded the edge of her dwelling to find Tad splitting logs with her axe. He swung it easily, cutting huge logs in half with just two strokes.

Erea stopped and watched, surprised at how easy he made it look.

Tossing aside the two pieces of wood he had just split, the warrior glanced up and spied her.

“There you are,” he said with a smile. “Where did you get to?”

She showed him her basket, which now seemed pitiful compared to the task he had taken on. He’d cast off his fur cloak, the muscular lines of his arms glistening with sweat. The leather braces on his forearms only emphasized his strength.

Erea’s belly fluttered.

Watching her, and perhaps seeing her stunned look, Tad’s smile faltered. “What’s wrong? Didn’t you want this wood split?”

“Aye,” Erea replied. “It’s just that I already tried splitting those ... and gave up.”

His mouth quirked and those blue eyes took on a mischievous twinkle. “Sounds like you could do with a man around ...”

Erea huffed, attempting to mask her sudden nervousness. “I manage fine, thank you.”

She glanced over at where Tad’s pony rested under the lean-to. It wore a bored, long-suffering expression.

“Shall I crush some barley for your pony ... he must be hungry.”

“Just a handful or two if you can spare it,” he replied, his gaze still upon her. “Caorainn is fat enough as it is.”

Erea moved across to the lean-to, set down her basket, and stroked the pony’s furry neck. Caorainn whickered softly in response.

“You are hungry, aren’t you?” she murmured.

Sitting down upon a stump, she poured some barley upon a flat stone before using a smaller one to crush the grain.

She felt comfortable with the pony’s company—far more than with Tad’s. The animals that inhabited these woods—even the boar and the wolves—were her friends. Every time she went out hunting with her bow, it pained her to take an animal down.

Yet it was either that or starve.

The rhythmic sounds of the axe resumed, while Erea worked in silence. An odd contentment filled her this morning, and she realized how isolated she had been in the long moons since her mother’s death.

It felt good to have company again.

The snow was falling again when Erea made her way back inside. The wind had dropped, but large flakes drifted down thickly, obscuring the sky and the dark carven peaks that rose up either side of the valley.

Inside, Screech was roosting upon his perch. The owl had not been able to go hunting the night before. He would soon grow ravenous. Unfortunately, Erea had no dead mice to feed him.

An iron pot simmered over the hearth; the aroma of meat, onions, and turnip filling the dwelling.

Last summer had been warm, and the vegetable plots—now covered under three feet of snow—had yielded a bounty. Most

of her produce she had been able to store, although her store-hut behind the hovel would be bare by early spring if this cold weather endured.

Tad joined her, brushing snow off his shoulders as he stooped to enter the dwelling. Snowflakes frosted his mane of peat-brown curly hair and his short beard.

“That’s the last of the wood split,” he announced, hanging up his mantle and approaching the fire. “Gods ... that smells good.”

Erea found herself warming under the compliment. “It’s my mother’s recipe,” she murmured.

He gave her a hopeful look. “Are there any dumplings to go with it?”

She shook her head. “I’ve run out of lard.”

She retrieved two wooden bowls and ladled out the stew for them both. Tad accepted his eagerly, before he met her gaze once more.

“When did your mother die?” he asked gently.

“In the spring,” Erea replied. “She developed a cough that would not heal, and then a fever.” She paused there as painful memories assailed her. “Ma was dead two days later.”

He listened, his expression thoughtful “And you’ve survived out here alone ever since?”

Her mouth quirked. He made it sound like some incredible feat. “It’s the only life I’ve ever known ... Ma brought me up to survive. I hunt, fish, and barter vegetables for grain once in a while.”

He frowned. “Where? I’ve never seen you at the fort.”

I would never go near that place, she thought, suppressing a shudder.

“At the villages west of here—on the border with The Wolf,” she replied, deciding against letting her distaste for his people show.

He continued to observe her, his brow furrowed. “It isn’t safe you know ... if the men in those villages learned you live alone, one of them could try and take advantage.”

Erea gave him an arch look. This man was odd, she mused. He was contradictory—one moment arrogant and opinionated, the next ridiculously protective. Were all men like this one?

Tad huffed. “Why are you smiling? You could be in danger here.”

Erea laughed then. Even her mother had not worried over her wellbeing so. “I can look after myself,” she assured him. “Ma taught me.”

He looked unconvinced. “And what if a group of men came looking for you?”

Erea’s smile faded. “Are you trying to scare me?”

“No—I’m just warning you that the world beyond this forgotten valley can be harsh. Whether you believe it or not, you’re at risk here.”

Erea shrugged. “This is my home ... I’m happy and safe here. There’s no need for you to worry.”

His gaze narrowed further, and she realized that she had succeeded in irritating him. Once again, his attitude mystified her. He did not seem to like being disagreed with. He expected her to heed him.

Erea glanced down at his empty bowl. “More stew?”

“Aye.” His expression softened. “Thank you.”

Erea rose to her feet and reached for the ladle. She had just grabbed hold of it when a loud groan—the sound of wood and stone giving way—echoed through the dwelling.

Erea froze and glanced up. An instant later the roof behind Tad gave way. Beams, lumps of turf, and snow came down.

Tad gave a shout and leaped forward, narrowly avoiding the fire. He tripped and sprawled onto the floor. Cursing, Tad got to his feet. However, Erea ignored him. Aghast, her gaze was

upon the gaping hole in her roof, the mess under it, and the snow which now fluttered into her home.

Her stomach knotted.

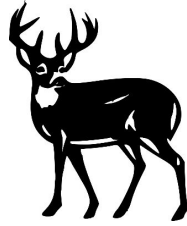
“No ...” she whispered. “Why?”

“Snow’s heavy,” Tad replied from beside her. “Most roofs aren’t built to withstand a snowfall like this one.”

Erea muttered a curse of her own, a colorful one her mother had used often. A chill settled over the interior of her previously cozy hovel, and the fire now guttered, at risk of going out.

“What am I to do?” she whispered, voicing her despair aloud without meaning to.

“Worry not, Erea.” Tad’s voice made her tear her gaze from the snow that gently fell upon the mess on her floor. He was smiling at her, irritatingly confident as ever. “Roofs can be fixed. I’ll help you.”



Chapter Four

Goodbye

THE SNOW FELL for another two days, turning the world into a white, silent land.

It took Tad nearly the entire time to mend the roof.

Erea did her best to assist him, accompanying the warrior while he went out to chop down trees for new beams. She worked hard at his side once the small pines had been felled, hacking off the branches with an axe. They then tied ropes to the trunks and dragged them back to the hovel.

And all the while the snow fluttered down. It numbed Erea's fingers and toes and soaked into her clothing, but she found she didn't really mind.

Instead, she discovered that she enjoyed Tadhg mac Fortrenn's company very much.

She almost forgot who his father was, or the things he had said about her mother. It was hard to focus on those things when Tad laughed with her, teased her, and talked to her.

She learned that he was The Stag chief's only child—Tad's younger sister had died in infancy, of a fever.

She learned that he enjoyed having freedom and independence, that he sometimes found his father's broch

stifling.

She learned that he loved telling stories. In the evenings, after supper, Erea enjoyed pulling a fur around her shoulders and sitting next to the hearth while he told her tales of their people.

Some she had heard—from her mother—but others, like the one about the female brownie who saved the life of a man before falling in love with him, were new to her.

“That’s a tragic tale.” She said when Tad finished it. “Why was he so cruel to her?”

Across the fire, Tad smiled. He looked roguishly handsome every time he did that, and Erea felt a strong pull of attraction toward him—a sensation oddly like falling.

“He was a fool,” he replied. “And not worthy of her love.”

Erea frowned. “Then why did she throw her life away for him?”

Tad shrugged, his gaze turning thoughtful. “I don’t know ... I never really thought about it.” He paused, thinking upon her question a moment. “I suppose she never saw him as he really was ... she fell in love with a dream.”

Erea considered his words, her gaze shifting to the guttering flames in the hearth. It was drafty in the hovel tonight—Tad had almost finished the roof and had lain a tarpaulin over the gap he would mend the following day.

“What is it?” Tad asked as the silence between them lengthened. “It’s just a story, Erea ... I didn’t mean for it to upset you.”

She glanced up, shaking her head. “It didn’t. I was just thinking, that’s all. I wonder if that’s what happened to my mother.” Erea picked up a log and placed it on the fire, leaning back as a shower of sparks erupted from it. “I think the man who fathered me must have hurt her very much.”

“Who is he?” Tad asked. “A warrior from Dun Grianan?”

“I don’t know,” Erea replied, avoiding his sharp gaze. She was lying—her mother had told her that he was from Dun

Grianan, but little else. All Erea knew was that he had been a big man with blue eyes, a scarred face, and a serpent tattoo on his right arm. Her mother had never given her more than those scant physical details, and when she had revealed those, Erea had seen the raw pain on Olwen's face.

Even years later, her mother had still grieved for him.

Erea had warmed to Tad, but that did not mean she trusted him. She did not want to give him any details about her father—for it was likely he could identify the man from her description. Dun Grianan could not be all that large after all.

Erea decided that she did not want to know of her father. It was best he remained a mysterious figure. She had no desire to learn about the man who had clearly broken her mother's heart.

"She told you nothing of him?" Tad sounded incredulous.

"I think she felt betrayed by my father," Erea murmured, avoiding his eye. "She couldn't bring herself to speak of him."



Tad awoke to find that it had stopped snowing. After breaking his fast with bread and broth, he climbed up onto the roof to finish mending it.

The job was much easier today. The wind had died, and a clear blue sky stretched overhead. The sun warmed his back as he worked, slowly melting the blanket of pristine white that still covered the valley.

It was much more pleasant to work in the sun, but Tad found himself feeling uncharacteristically subdued. With the snow ending, his time here with Erea would come to an end.

Tad heaved the last clump of sod into place and surveyed the mended roof. It had been a difficult job, but he had managed it in the end. At least Erea would be able to stay warm and dry.

Erea ...

Tad paused a moment before descending the rickety ladder to the ground.

I don't want to leave her.

He had enjoyed the past few days: having Erea at his side, sharing meals with her, laughing and talking together.

He would miss the soft lilt of her voice, the way her mouth curved when she smiled. She was not the first woman he had liked—being the chief's son he never had difficulty finding a girl to warm his furs—but Erea got under his skin like no other had.

Climbing down from the roof, he carried the ladder round to the lean-to and checked on Caorainn. The pony looked bored.

Tad stroked his furry neck before ruffling his forelock. “Worry not, lad,” he murmured. “We’ll be off soon.”

“Tomorrow morning if the snow continues to melt at this rate.”

Tad turned to see Erea behind him—a steaming cup of broth in her hands.

“Here.” She held it out to him. “Something to warm you up.”

Tad took the cup, favoring her with a lop-sided smile. “Keen to rid yourself of me, wench?”

She shrugged, although the slight flush that pinkened her cheeks gave her away. “Aye ... you’re always getting under my feet.”

He laughed and took a sip of the rich broth. “Is that the gratitude I get for mending the roof?”

Her mouth curved, and Tad found himself staring at it. He wondered if her lips were as soft as they looked. “I am grateful, Tad.” She said after a moment. “You certainly have your uses.”

He grinned back, although a strange restlessness churned within him. He wanted to be more than merely useful to this woman—he wanted her to need him.



The snow continued to melt, and the next morning Tad readied his pony to ride out. He was in a dour mood this morning, oddly out of sorts, and had barely spoken to Erea since waking. She approached him now, a cloth-wrapped parcel in her hands.

“I’ve packed you some food,” she said with a smile, passing the parcel to him.

He took it, although he did not return the smile “Are you sure you can spare it?”

“Aye ... I can’t have you going hungry on the journey, can I?”

Her voice was teasing. However, Tad saw her gaze was shadowed this morning.

He went still. Was she finding this as hard as he was?

Tad stepped close to Erea, staring down at her.

“I don’t like the thought of leaving you out here alone,” he said gently. “It’s not safe.”

She held his gaze, but did not brush off or make light of his comment as she had on earlier occasions.

“I’m used to this life, Tad ... you don’t need to worry about me.”

He watched her—there really was not a shred of doubt in her eyes. Erea knew no other life besides this one. She was not afraid of living out here in the wilderness.

Erea followed Tad away from the hovel. The snow was melting rapidly now and had turned to slush underfoot.

Tad led Caorainn ahead. The beast swished its tail impatiently and tossed its head, eager to be off.

A few yards on, Tad drew his pony up, tightened the girth to its saddle, and checked his belongings were tightly secured. He wore his bow and quiver strapped across his back, as he had on the evening he arrived at her door.

Tad turned to her then, his face serious. He had been withdrawn all morning, his teasing smile and light hearted conversation absent.

He gazed at her with such intensity that Erea started to feel hot, a blush spreading across her chest.

He was not making this easy. She would miss him, she realized with a jolt. Despite their rocky start, Tadhg mac Fortrenn had somehow grown on her. She did not want to see him go, and yet she knew it was inevitable.

“So this is goodbye?” Her voice sounded forced and brittle, despite her attempts to appear composed.

He nodded and stepped close, towering over her. Erea gazed up at him, resisting the urge to reach up and trace her fingers along his bearded jaw. His curly hair was unbound this morning, covering his shoulders. She wondered if it was soft to touch.

Stop it.

Thoughts like these would not help.

“I’ll never forget these days,” he said, his voice husky. “Thank you, Erea.”

Her mouth went dry, and she tried to smile, but failed. “Thank *you*, Tad.”

He went to turn away then, to move back to his pony, but stopped mid-movement.

To Erea’s surprise, he swung back round to her, caught her around the waist, and pulled her into his arms.

Erea gasped, opening her mouth to protest. However, his mouth silenced her.

She had never been kissed—had never been close enough to another man for him to try. It was a shock to feel his lips on hers, but after a moment she decided she liked it.

His lips were soft and warm, and she inhaled the delicious male musk of his skin.

A heartbeat later, his tongue parted her lips and he deepened the kiss, pulling her hard against him.

Erea's head swam. Her hands, which she had placed on his chest initially—with the intention of pushing him away—clenched. Her body melted against his. The kiss consumed her, made a wild hunger rise up from her core.

The sensation was both exciting *and* frightening—yet she did not pull back from him.

It was Tad who ended the kiss.

Breathing hard, he drew back from her. His eyes had deepened to a midnight blue, and his face had gone taut. He looked pained.

“Goodbye, fair Erea,” he rasped.

Erea did not reply, did not utter a word.

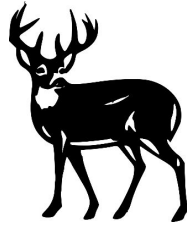
Instead, she stepped back and watched him mount his gelding.

Her heart thumped against her ribs, and she felt out of breath. Drawing her cloak around her, she looked up at Tad, and their gazes fused once more.

A long, tense moment—full of things unsaid—drew out.

And then Tad reined his pony around and headed northeast, toward the line of spruce on the edge of the clearing.

He did not look back.



Chapter Five

Home

THE SUN HUNG low in the sky when Tad reached Dun Grianan at last. Snow still covered the immense bulk of Beinn Edra—the high mountain that rose to the north—although it had melted around the shores of Loch Mealt. The waters of the lake were blue-grey this afternoon, reflecting the color of the sky overhead.

Tad urged Caorainn into a canter along the path leading past clusters of cone-roofed huts and fields still frosted with snow. Smoke rose from the roofs, and Tad inhaled the aroma of stew and roasting meat as he rode by. Night fell early this time of year, and folk were already cooking their suppers.

The path led Tad around the shore of the loch and onto a low promontory. At the end of it rose the bulk of a great stacked stone broch.

Surrounded by water on three sides, with expansive views in all directions, the broch of Dun Grianan perched in an excellent defensive position. The warriors who stood guard on the walls could see if anyone was coming long before they reached the lake itself.

Loch Mealt—often a deep blue in summer—was a salt-water lake. Its mouth stretched east out to sea, to the wide channel separating The Winged Isle and the mainland.

Warriors hailed Tad as he trotted up the causeway to the outer wall.

“I was wondering where you’d got to,” one of Tad’s friends, Callum, shouted down. “Your father’s about to send out a search party.”

“Nothing to worry about,” Tad called back, grinning up at Callum. “Just a dusting of snow.”

Callum snorted. “Aye, explain that to Fortrenn.”

Tad was still grinning as he rode into the stable yard and dismounted. He was relieved to be home—the journey back from the Black Boar Woods had given him too much time on his own, alone with his thoughts. Surrounded by noise and other people, he could distract himself once more.

He had to stop thinking about Erea, and about the fact he had hated leaving her. He kept remembering that kiss, the sweet taste of her; he had wanted much more. It had been a wrench to turn his back and ride away.

In the stables, Tad saw to Caorainn. He rubbed the gelding down and left him with a large net of hay. Then he went to see his father.

The broch seemed overly loud and chaotic after Tad’s time away. He stepped into a warm, smoky space filled with men, women, and children. The chatter and rumble of voices echoed high up into the smoke-blackened rafters. Women prepared the evening meal over the central fire pit while men sat drinking ale at the long tables that formed a square around it. Some of those seated there spied Tad and called out to him.

He waved back but did not join them for a cup of ale, as he usually would. Instead, he stepped up onto the circular platform that ran around the perimeter of the feasting hall and made his way to the far end, to the chieftain’s table, where his father sat. On the way, Tad passed a number of curtained

alcoves—these spaces were where he, and the rest of Fortrenn’s kin, slept.

His father watched him approach. Clean-shaven, with the same curly brown hair—but threaded with grey—as his son, Fortrenn mac Nyle was a huge man. Blue tattoos covered his brawny arms, and a thick scar marred one side of his face: an old wound taken during a violent skirmish against the people of The Wolf many years earlier.

On a shelf behind the chief sat the heavy mantle he wore for special occasions—a russet-colored stag hide with the head and massive pair of antlers still intact. On the wall next to it hung a collection of treasures Stag warriors had brought back from last year’s campaign to the Great Wall in the south: a gold-plated eagle, a centurion’s sword, and one of the pillaged iron helms.

This afternoon Fortrenn wore a stern expression. He lounged back on his carved chair, a horn of mead in one hand. To his right sat Fortrenn’s brother Bevan, and to his left was Colene, Tad’s mother.

“Welcome home, son,” Fortrenn rumbled.

Tad grinned. “I hear you were about to send out a search party?”

“Aye.” His father’s brow furrowed. “Does that amuse you?”

Tad shrugged. “I’ve returned safe and sound, as you can see.”

Next to Fortrenn, Bevan gave Tad a dark look. “You’re too cocky for your own good, lad. One day it’s going to get you into trouble ... I warned you snow was coming.”

“You’re looking remarkably well for a man who’s been living in the wilds for days,” Fortrenn observed.

“I found an abandoned hut in the Black Boar Woods,” Tad replied. “I took shelter there till the weather broke.”

Silence followed Tad’s answer. He was not sure why he had lied—had not told them about Erea. Yet something made him hold that information back.

Both his father and uncle shifted uneasily in their seats, while the warrior seated next to Bevan—a scarred man named Ailig—leaned forward, frowning.

“Did you find anyone living there, lad?”

Tad shook his head, observing Ailig. Did memories of Olwen, the witch woman, still unnerve him, even after all these years?

Silence fell at the chieftain’s table then. Tad took the opportunity to take his place, next to where his mother, Colene, sat quietly winding wool onto a spindle—and helped himself to a cup of mead. He acknowledged her with a nod and a smile, and Colene smiled back.

Tad then glanced over to where his father, Bevan, and Ailig still wore tense expressions. “There was no sign of the sorceress,” Tad reassured them. “If that’s what you’re worried about.”

His uncle Bevan sighed and raised his cup in a silent toast to Tad. “Good to hear ... hopefully The Reaper took her years ago.”

Fortrenn’s mouth had thinned, while next to him a frown marred Colene’s usually smooth brow. Although she had not joined the conversation, Tad’s mother had listened to every word.

“Aye.” Fortrenn raised the horn of mead to his lips and drank deeply. “That woman was trouble. She brought nothing but grief to this broch.” His blue eyes shadowed then, and he glanced over at his wife. “She stole Fenella from us.”

Tad went still. Fenella was his younger sister who had died in infancy. His light-hearted mood dimmed. “I didn’t realize she was one of the five the sorceress killed,” he said.

His father gave him an exasperated look. “You were very young when she died. It pained your mother to mention Fenella so we never spoke of your wee sister again.” Fortrenn paused here. “Yet we’ve never forgotten her ... or the witch responsible for her death.”

A tense silence settled over the table then. Both Bevan and Ailig looked down at their cups. Observing their faces, Tad wondered if there was more to this tale. However, the grim look on his father's face, and the tense expression on his mother's, warned him from pressing further. He lifted his cup to his lips and took a long draft of honeyed mead.

The news about Fenella discomfited him.

How would he have reacted to meeting Erea if he had known? A few days earlier he would have believed his father's words without question—yet much had changed since then. Erea certainly believed her mother was a victim of hatred, that the folk here had plotted to rid themselves of her.

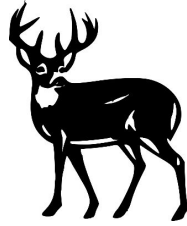
Tad was not sure what to believe. Maybe Erea's mother was guilty after all.

It has nothing to do with Erea, he told himself, pushing aside his sense of unease. I'll not blame her for her mother's crimes.

A few moments later Ailig and Bevan appeared to shrug off the dark mood that had settled over the table. They resumed the conversation that Tad's arrival had interrupted, their words a low rumble.

Fortrenn poured himself some more mead, ignoring his companions. His gaze had turned inward. Tad watched him a moment, curious at his father's mood. The Stag chief was not one to brood.

Meanwhile Colene turned and fixed her grey-eyed gaze upon her son. Putting down her spindle, she reached out and placed a hand over his forearm, squeezing gently. "It's good to have you home, Tad."



Chapter Six

No Ready Answer

THE HOVEL FELT empty and silent after Tad left. Erea went back to her old routine—an endless stream of chores necessary for survival—but she felt oddly distracted and unsettled.

Her thoughts kept returning to that kiss. She had wanted more, but Tad had ended it, mounted his pony and ridden away.

It's just as well, Erea reminded herself as she scooped up a bucket of fresh water from the stream that trickled through the valley, around twenty yards from her hovel. *You're happier on your own anyway.*

A strange sensation settled over her with that last thought. *Am I?*

Erea straightened up and waded back to the bank. She felt an aching hollowness within her and recognized the sensation as loneliness.

She had felt it often when her mother had first died. With the passing moons the ache had dulled, yet now she felt her solitude here keenly once more.

Damn him, this is Tad's fault.

Carrying the pail of water back to her home, Erea set it down beside the hearth. Then she went back outside, squelching across the slushy melting snow, to the stone cairn that sat under the shadow of the trees behind her hovel.

She had built that cairn herself—stone by stone—carrying up rocks from the stream and piling them over her mother’s corpse. It had taken her nearly three days to complete it.

Stopping before the stone mound, Erea’s chest constricted. Six moons had passed since her mother had come down with a deathly fever that had claimed her life. In the matter of a day, Erea’s existence had changed forever. Her mother had been her strength, her purpose. Her loss felt like having a limb removed.

“You warned me about men, didn’t you, ma?” Erea murmured, bowing her head before the cairn. “Now I see why.”

Part of her wished she had heeded her mother’s advice and driven Tad away, yet another part of her felt strangely alive after the warrior’s stay at her home. His laugh, the timbre of his voice, the mischievous glint in those blue eyes, and his virile masculine presence—she missed it all.

Erea let out a sigh. “Enough. He’s gone, and he’s not coming back.”

With a heavy heart, and even heavier steps, she turned from her mother’s cairn and trudged back to the hovel. The light was starting to fade, and she still had half a dozen chores to do.



“We had visitors while you were away.” Fortrenn mac Nyle took a bite of roast boar and cast a glance in his son’s direction. “Aonghus mac Gille came to Dun Grianan yet again, to ask when you will wed his daughter.”

Tad glanced up from where he had been carving himself some meat. “He doesn’t give up easily, does he? I thought both Isla and I made our wishes clear at The Gathering. There will be no wedding.”

His father’s gaze narrowed. “You and Isla would make a good match.”

Tad snorted. “If we liked each other, aye. But she thinks I’ve the manners of a goat, and I think she looks like one.”

His comment brought guffaws from Bevan and Ailig, although his mother went still, and his father’s mouth thinned; a sure sign Tad had angered him.

“She’s not wrong about you,” Fortrenn growled. “However, Isla is a comely lass and ripe for marriage. Her father is one of my most loyal warriors.”

Tad shrugged. He knew where this was heading. His father was desperate for Tad to wed and start fathering children. Being an only child came with a great weight of responsibility. One that Tad did not want.

“Isla will refuse,” he said lightly, raising his cup to his lips and taking a sip of mead.

“She will do as she’s told.”

“My answer’s still ‘no’. Aonghus had a wasted trip.”

“No, he didn’t.”

Tad went still.

Silence fell at the table, and Tad noted that both Bevan and Ailig were looking sheepish. His mother would not meet his eye.

“You weren’t here,” Fortrenn continued. “So I informed Aonghus that you and Isla will wed in the spring.”

Tad stared at him. He was not usually at a loss for words, but his father’s admission stunned him.

“That’s not your decision to make,” he growled. “It’s my life. I’ll choose my own bride.”

His father leaned toward him, his blue eyes narrowing.
“You forget who you are. As my son, you *must* sire an heir.”

“And I will,” Tad countered, his own anger rising now.
“But let me choose my own woman.”

“I gave you that chance—years of chances—but you’ve wasted them. It’s time I made the decision for you ... and I have.”

His father’s words—blunt and humiliating—hit Tad across the face with physical force. He was twenty three, a *man*, and yet his father had just spoken to him as if he had yet to grow his first beard.

The whole broch had gone silent now. The men and women seated at the tables below their platform were all watching him.

For once, Tadhg mac Fortrenn had no ready answer.

Bastard.

Tad slammed his fist into the rough stone wall inside his alcove, welcoming the pain that shot up his arm as he did so.

His father had always been heavy-handed with him, ever since Tad had been a lad. He had been Fortrenn’s great hope, a role he had never quite been able to fill. Early on he had realized nothing he ever did was good enough—and so he had given up trying.

This is his revenge.

Nursing his bruised knuckles, Tad sat down on the pile of furs against the far wall of his alcove and looked around. It was a tiny space, one he did not spend a lot of time in, for he preferred to be outdoors.

Suddenly it felt like a cage, as if the walls were closing in on him.

Muttering a curse, he flopped back on the furs and stared up at the curved stone roof above.

He remembered the awkwardness of last summer's Gathering. It had been the first his people had hosted in many years. Aonghus mac Gille, a warrior from a tiny village far to the north of their territory, had pushed his daughter in Tad's face from the moment he arrived at the gathering.

Isla, proud and stern-faced, had not responded to Tad's teasing humor. His father had pressured him to show her some attention, but she had sneered when he asked her to dance and answered Tad's questions with three-word sentences during the feasting. He had attempted to impress her during the games, but she ignored him.

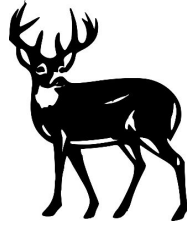
Mercifully, after the eve of Mid-Summer Fire, Isla had made her lack of interest plain: "You're wasting your time, Tadhg. I'll not wed a man with the manners of a goat."

Not remotely offended, Tad had been grateful to her. He had no interest in Isla either. They had both told their respective fathers of their decision and had thought the matter had ended.

Yet clearly it had not.

Tad closed his eyes, blocking out his surroundings. He ran a hand over his face and cursed his father.

Why did I bother to come home?



Chapter Seven

Three Crows

EREA PULLED OPEN the shutters to find Screech sitting on the wooden ledge, waiting to be let in.

She smiled to see the owl—he was her only companion out here, and although he was not able to provide her with conversation, she found his presence reassuring.

“A good night’s hunting?” she asked him.

Screech merely blinked. Still smiling, Erea stepped back and let the owl fly in and settle upon his usual perch.

He would sleep for the rest of the day.

Erea let out a long sigh. It was a bright, cold morning, and the snow had all but melted. In the past, she and her mother had enjoyed days like this. They had spent the day chatting and singing as they went about their chores.

Alone, the day before her just seemed like drudgery. She could not summon any enthusiasm for it.

Throwing a fur around her shoulders to ward off the cold, she went outside to work on the vegetable plot behind her hovel.

There was not much to work with this time of year, although the onions she had planted in autumn were growing well, and her winter cabbage and kale had survived the snow. Erea cut a cabbage—it would be her noon meal, braised with onions, and turnip. She worked in the vegetable patch for a while, weeding amongst the onions and preparing a bed for the garlic she would plant at Mid-Winter Fire. She would then harvest the garlic at Mid-Summer Fire and would hopefully have enough to last the year through.

The sun was warm on her back, but Erea’s mood was still low.

She cursed Tad. He had taken her smile and enjoyment of her simple life with him.

Fortunately, she had Mid-Winter Fire to look forward to—although the thought of spending it alone, without her mother’s laughter and singing, saddened her, dulling her mood further.

Olwen had possessed a lovely voice, and she had known hundreds of songs—one for every occasion. Erea missed the sound of her mother’s voice, and so she began murmuring a song Olwen had often sung in winter.

“Three crows sat upon a wall

Sat upon a wall

Sat upon a wall

Three crows sat upon a wall

On a cold and frosty morning

The first crow he could not fly

Could not fly

Could not fly

The first crow he could not fly

On a cold and frosty morning

The second crow he—”

“That’s a bleak song for a fair day such as this.”

A man’s voice cut Erea off and made her drop her wooden trowel in fright.

Heart pounding, Erea spun round to see a tall figure standing behind her, a stocky bay pony at his shoulder.

“Tad!” She placed a hand over her breast, where her heart was fluttering like a caged bird. “You nearly made my heart stop. Don’t creep up on folk like that!”

He was grinning at her. “That’s a warm welcome. How I miss being scolded.”

Erea glared at him, although within a heat spread through her. The sight of his handsome, bearded face and magnetic blue eyes caused an unexpected joy to flood through her. “What are you doing here?”

He shrugged. “I didn’t have much good fortune last time I went out hunting, so I thought I’d try again while the fine weather lasts.”

“Really?” Her gaze ran over him, taking in the height and breadth of his leather and plaid-clad form. She’d forgotten how big he was, how his nearness seemed to suck the air from her lungs.

He watched her with an intensity that made her feel light-headed.

Erea licked her lips, suddenly nervous. “Are you just passing through then?”

He stepped closer, and she inhaled the smell of leather and fresh sweat. Memories of that kiss he’d given her before leaving returned to Erea then. Her knees wobbled under her. “I missed you, Erea,” he said softly.

They stared at each other for a long moment, before Erea stepped back. Her heart was still racing as if she had just been

running. She did not understand her body's reaction to this man. It was as if her senses were suddenly heightened. Despite the chill breeze that feathered across her face, she felt feverish.

"It grows late," she murmured, pushing aside a lock of hair that had come free from her braid and blown across her face. "Where are you staying this eve?"

The intense look on his face made her blush. She took another step back from him, flustered. "It's too late for you to head home now," she breathed. "You might as well stay for supper and sleep by my hearth."

His boyish smile returned, replacing the look of naked want she had just witnessed. "Thank you, Erea ... I knew you'd not leave a weary huntsman out in the cold."

Logs burned in the hearth, and the smell of turnip and onion stew filled the interior of the hovel. Outside, a misty dusk settled and the air grew icy, promising a hard frost for the following morning.

Erea had let Screech out to hunt before busying herself with preparing supper, while Tad settled upon a stool on the opposite side of the hearth. She could feel his gaze upon her as she worked.

"I didn't think to see you again," she admitted, avoiding his eye as she chopped rosemary and thyme for the stew. "And certainly not so soon."

"And are you pleased you have?"

She glanced up. He was smiling, a dimple in his cheek.

"I'm not sure," she answered honestly. "It's harder to live alone when you get used to having company for a while."

"You don't have to stay here, you know," he replied. "You could live at my fort."

Erea gave him an arch look. "The daughter of a witch-woman? I think not."

His smile faded. “I wasn’t lying earlier ... I really have missed you.”

Irritation flowered within Erea. She wiped her hands upon a damp cloth and turned to face him properly. “What do you expect me to say to that?”

He looked taken aback at her shortness. “You didn’t miss me then?”

Erea glared at him, infuriated by his male arrogance. “Of course not.”

His smile faded, and he rose to his feet. “I don’t believe you.”

Erea snorted. “Gods, you have a high opinion of yourself.”

He walked around the hearth, approaching her. Erea stepped back against the table, but there was nowhere else to go. Tad moved close, his presence overwhelming.

Erea forced herself to tilt her chin and meet his gaze. However, she immediately regretted doing so. The look on his face was so intense it made her breath catch. She preferred his smile; it was less dangerous.

“Don’t stare,” she gasped, trying to ignore the want that thrummed through her.

“Why?” He reached out and brushed a lock of hair from her cheek.

Erea swallowed. Her legs felt weak, and it was suddenly hot and airless inside her home. “You know why.”

His mouth quirked, and Erea found herself staring at it. His lips were full, sensual, and beautifully molded. He traced the pad of his thumb down her cheek, and Erea trembled.

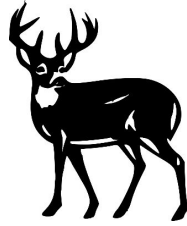
“I probably shouldn’t have come back,” he whispered, “but I couldn’t stop myself. I’m a moth to your flame.”

“You should have let me be,” she agreed shakily. “This can’t go anywhere, Tad.”

“I’ve not thought about anything but you since I left. I had to see you.”

Erea dragged in a deep breath. “That’s not—”

She never finished her sentence—for Tad leaned down then and kissed her hard.



Chapter Eight

Unleashed

THE KISS SWEEPED Erea up in a storm of longing that pushed all other thoughts from her head. She forgot all the reasons why Tad should not kiss her, why she should push him away. Instead, her instincts took over, and she reached up, tangling her fingers in his hair, pulling him hard against her.

He groaned and responded in kind, his strong hands sliding down the length of her back and cupping the curve of her bottom. He pulled her close, so that their bodies crushed together, and deepened the kiss. The feel of his tongue parting her lips, of him teasing her bottom lip with his teeth, made Erea's limbs go weak.

She moaned softly, surrendering to pure sensation.

What kind of magic was this? She'd had no idea that a man's kiss could scatter her wits like this. Unsurprisingly, her mother had never mentioned it.

Eventually, Tad ended the kiss, yet he did not pull away from her. Instead, he stared down, his gaze luminous in the firelight. He then raised a hand and caressed her face with his fingertips, as if he was blind and committing her features to memory.

His touch sent shivers of delight through her, and a need that made it hard to breathe rose up within Erea.

Kiss me again.

And he did. This time, the kiss was urgent, demanding; their tongues tangling, their breaths mingling. Erea placed her hands on his chest, her fingers digging into the leather that prevented her from reaching his skin.

Tad cupped her face for a few moments, before his hands slid down the length of her neck to her shoulders.

Then, he began to unlace the bodice of her leather vest.

A wild excitement reared up within her as he broke off the kiss and focused on removing her vest. Moments later it fell to the reed-scattered floor. Underneath, Erea wore a gauzy tunic. Glancing down, she saw that the material was semi-transparent, that her breasts thrust toward Tad, her dark nipples showing clearly.

Tad's lips parted, and he dropped to his knees before her, pushing the tunic up. His mouth trailed up over her ribs before fastening upon one of her breasts.

The sensation that followed swiftly after made Erea gasp. Her nipple ached as he drew it into the heated cavern of his mouth and suckled her. A strange pulsing began in her lower belly, and she let out a soft whimper. Her hands strayed to his shoulders, where she gripped tightly.

"Tad," she groaned. "I don't ... I can't ..." She appeared to have lost the ability to form coherent speech.

He gave a soft sound of amusement before releasing her swollen nipple and focusing his attention upon its twin.

Erea threw back her head and gasped as pleasure darted through her. *The Mother save me ... I can't bear it.* Her limbs now felt liquid, and if she had not been clinging to Tad, she would have crumpled to the ground.

She had now completely forgotten their conversation just moments before that kiss, and her decision to forget him. She had not known about this—about how he could make her feel.

Then Tad started to unbuckle the belt which held her plaid skirt in place.

Trembling, Erea pulled the tunic over her head. Despite the roaring fire, drafts from the chill evening outdoors feathered across her sensitized skin. She did not care. All she could focus on was that he was undressing her, and that in a heartbeat she would be naked.

Her skirt and belt tumbled to the floor, and Erea looked down to see Tad gazing up at her. The hunger on his face made her already racing heart start to pound against her ribs. She wanted that hunger; she yearned to unleash her own.

Wordlessly, he rose to his feet and picked her up, carrying her the few feet to the pile of furs in the corner of the hovel. Then he set her down upon them and straightened up, before he started to undress.

Erea's gaze tracked every movement. She watched him shed his vest and tunic, her attention sliding down to the bulge in his plaid breeches. He pulled off his fur-lined boots, kicking them aside, and then began to slowly unlace his breeches.

All the while, he watched her, a sensual smile spreading across his face.

Erea could not look away. Captivated, she observed the lazy progress of his supple fingers. The pulsing ache between her thighs was growing uncomfortable now; she longed to reach for him, to tear off the last piece of clothing that lay between them so she could see him in all his naked glory.

A moment later she did, and her breathing stopped.

The sight of him, hard and proud, made a sigh escape her. Nervousness fluttered up from her belly, as he was big—bigger than she had expected. Would he hurt her?

The fear did not have time to settle, for Tad lowered himself onto the furs next to Erea and pulled her into his arms.

The dyke burst. This time Erea held nothing back as she kissed him. Her hands grasped for him, her body entwined with his. The velvet heat of his skin, the rasp of his beard against her cheek, the sheer strength and size of him, all filled

her senses. Her world narrowed, not just to these four walls, but to this pile of furs and the big man who kissed her hungrily and ran his hands over her body as if he was sculpting her.

Erea did not know what to do with a man, yet it hardly seemed to matter. It was as if another woman had taken over; a woman who was greedy for pleasure, knew what she wanted, and would take it without asking.

She spread her legs and wrapped them around his hips, pressing up against him.

A heartbeat later, she felt his shaft pressing against the entrance to her womb.

“Easy, lass,” he whispered, his voice husky with need. “This might hurt you ... let’s take it slow.”

He teased her with his shaft then; edging into her slightly and then withdrawing repeatedly, penetrating a little deeper each time.

Erea groaned, frustration rising within her. She tried to pull him closer with her legs, yet he was much stronger and held fast.

It did not hurt at first—there was just an aching, tingling pleasure—but when he eventually entered her deeper, a sharp pain knifed through Erea, causing her to gasp. She looked up into Tad’s face, to see he wore a fierce expression. His eyes were narrowed with lust, and sweat coated his forehead. She realized then the effort it was taking him to hold back.

“It’s fine,” she gasped. “I’m ready now.”

With a strangled groan he sank into her, sheathing himself fully.

It hurt. His size made her womb ache as she stretched to accommodate him, but the stinging sensation from moments earlier receded. Erea gasped again, and he held her close, his mouth blazing a trail of fire down the column of her neck. “Give in to it, Erea,” he murmured. “Don’t tense.”

She obeyed, relaxing her core, which had clamped around him, and drawing in a shaky breath.

Deep within her, she felt pulsing heat build, like the embers of a forge being stoked at dawn. She whimpered, wriggling against him, and the pleasure grew. Erea started to writhe, her hips grinding against his. She heard herself groan his name, heard the pleading in her own voice.

He gave a soft laugh. “Aye, that’s right. Give yourself to it.” He started to move inside her then, in slow, deep thrusts.

Erea was lost. Her cries echoed through the dwelling, yet she was barely aware of even uttering them. He felt so good, filled her so completely, she did not think she could stand it.

But she did, and Tad’s movements grew increasingly more frenzied as his self-control dissolved. She looked up to see him rearing above her, his muscular body sweat-slicked, his face feral, as he thrust into her. Heat and pleasure flooded through her at the sight of him, and her breathing caught when he threw back his head and gave a hoarse cry, his body going rigid as he spilled within her.

She had never seen anything so magnificent.



“Are you thirsty?” Erea propped herself up onto one elbow and smiled down at Tad. “I made some bramble wine in the autumn.”

Tad’s answering smile made heat rise in her belly. Again. They had coupled three times, and despite that her body was now sore, she still wanted him. Just the sight of him, the curve of his smile, and the hungry look in his eyes, made her body melt. “Aye, thank you.”

Erea sat up, wrapped a fur around her nakedness, and rose to her feet. She padded across to the firepit, wincing at the sting between her legs. She imagined she would be sorer still the following morning, yet she did not care. She threw on another log, watching as the hungry flames caught, and crossed to the bench where she kept her clay bottles of wine.

Her mother had taught her how to make wine from brambles, apples, and sloes; although she had a limited number of vessels to store the drink in.

The night beyond the hovel had fallen silent—a deep silence of the time when only owls and night-creatures stalked the world. Most folk would be slumbering in their furs. Only she and Tad were awake.

As she poured out two cups of wine, Erea was aware of Tad watching her.

She glanced over at him, smiling. “What is it?”

“You’re the most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen.”

A blush crept up her neck at the compliment. “There’s no need for honeyed words now,” she teased in an effort to mask her embarrassment. “You’ve already had your way with me.”

He laughed. “Aye, but a man mustn’t let his woman feel neglected.”

His woman. Warmth spread through Erea’s chest at those words. She carried the cups back to the furs and perched beside Tad, handing him his drink. “So ... I’m your woman, am I?” she asked, her tone light.

He stared back at her, his own smile fading. Her pulse fluttered as their gazes fused. Tad was charming when he was light-hearted, yet irresistible when he grew serious. “Aye,” he replied huskily. “Does that please you?”

She held his gaze. “Aye.”

Silence fell then, as they both sipped their wine. It was dark, spicy, and rich; the best batch Erea had ever made. *Ma would have been proud*, she thought with a pang. She glanced back at Tad and saw he now wore a pensive expression.

“What is it?”

He shrugged. “Nothing ... I’m just wondering how things will work out.”

Erea raised her eyebrows, taking another sip of wine. “What do you mean?”

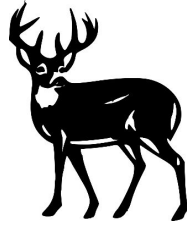
Discomfort flickered across his handsome features then.
“Nothing.”

Erea went still, an oily sensation slithering in the pit of her belly. “What?”

His face screwed up, and he glanced away before replying.
“It’s not as bad as it sounds.”

Erea tensed; now he did have her worried. “Sorry ... what isn’t?”

He loosed a breath, raking his free hand through his hair, before he replied. “My father has betrothed me to a woman from a nearby village. We’re to wed in the spring.”



Chapter Nine

Mistakes

TAD SAW THE change come over Erea's face and tensed.

He had not planned on saying anything about his impending handfasting. Truthfully, the future had been the last thing on his mind. He was not sure exactly why he had told her.

“You're promised to another?”

“Aye, my father organized it while I was away hunting.”

He watched the color drain from her cheeks as she rose to her feet and took a few rapid steps back from him, setting down her cup of wine on the table with a thump. All the softness went out of her. Her eyes glittered. A nerve ticked in her jaw. Wordlessly, she knelt down and retrieved her fallen skirt from the rushes. She then began to dress, her fingers fumbling with haste.

Tad watched, confused. He was not sure why she was even angry. Silence stretched out before he spoke, softly, as if soothing a nervous pony. “I'm a chieftain's son, Erea. I have responsibilities. Surely you realize that?”

Erea's head snapped up, her gaze murderous. “Of course I do.” She bit the words out. “I have no quarry with that. However, you came here today, knowing you were promised

to another. Didn't you think to tell me first ... before we lay together?"

Tad huffed out a breath. "I didn't plan this. I just rode here knowing I wanted to see you."

Her soft mouth twisted. "Liar. Ma always said men were full of falsehoods. I thought her bitter ... that she exaggerated. I didn't want to believe her. But she was right, and you're the worst of them. You turn up here with your melting looks and your honeyed words, and then are surprised by what happens next." She put her hands on her hips, regarding him with a hard stare. "I wish I'd never lain with you."

Tad stiffened. "You don't mean that."

"Aye, I do."

Tad snorted. "You're just angry at the moment ... but you'll calm down soon enough."

Erea's nostrils flared. "Get out."

"What?"

"You heard me. Get off those furs, put on your clothes, and leave now."

"But it's the middle of the night."

"What do I care?"

Tad pushed himself off the furs. "Erea ... listen."

She made a slicing motion with her hand, silencing him. "Not another word. I'm no fool. I see now how things are. You received word from your father about your impending handfasting and thought that, before you were shackled to a wife, you'd have some pleasure. But you miscalculated Tadhg mac Fortrenn. I'm not your plaything. I lay with you because I cared, because I thought you came back to be with me."

"But I—"

"Enough!" Her shout fell like a hammer as tears now ran down her face. "Leave!"

Tad rose from the furs, collected his breaches, and pulled them on. Then he gathered the rest of his clothes and dressed. All the while, he kept his gaze upon Erea.

She watched, arms folded across her chest. Her face was stony, her cheeks wet with tears. However, the look on her face brooked no argument. She looked like she would lunge for the nearest knife and gut him with it if he uttered another word.

Conflicting emotions warred within Tad as he dressed. Shock at the strength of her reaction. Hurt that she so readily saw the worst in him. Anger that she would not be reasoned with—that she would not listen to him.

His father and uncle had warned him of fiery women. His own mother would never have spoken to Fortrenn in such a manner. He would have knocked her across the room if she had. However, Tad had no intention of raising a hand to Erea. He had never hit a woman, and never would. Erea was beautiful and fierce in her outrage. A sickly feeling rose within him. He did not want to be turfed out into the night; he wanted to stay with her.

Tad pulled on his boots and made his way toward the door, picking up his fur mantle as he went. Erea said nothing, only watching him with a cold gaze.

Tad opened the door and gelid air breathed in. He turned, catching Erea's gaze for a long moment. He wished he knew the words to put things right, but they eluded him. Truthfully, he was having trouble understanding her behavior. She had completely overreacted.

He stepped outside, closing the door firmly behind him.

Erea crumpled to the ground, the grief that she had been holding in finally tearing free. Anger was so much easier to deal with. It had burned bright and fierce when faced with such male arrogance; it had protected her from pain.

Yet as soon as Tad left, her shield slipped.

Erea placed a hand over her mouth, in an attempt to stifle the sobs that clawed up from her chest. She had not lied to

Tad. She had not lain with him on a whim; she had given herself to him body and soul.

Yet for him it had merely been an urge—the act of a man who was about to have his freedom curtailed and wanted to enjoy himself.

Erea squeezed her eyes shut. Tears scalded her cheeks, and her body convulsed as grief swamped her.

No wonder her mother had carried scars with her for so many years.

No wonder Olwen had hated men.

I loathe him.

I loathe him.

I loathe him.

She repeated the sentence over and over again, hoping she would convince herself of its truth. And yet it just made her feel worse. She was only lying to herself. The truth was she had fallen in love with Tad while he had stayed with her during the snow storm. This moment had been inevitable.

Hiccoughing, Erea picked herself up off the rushes and staggered over to the furs, throwing herself down upon them.

That was a mistake, for the furs were still warm from their bodies. She could still smell him.

Erea rolled over onto her back and glared up at the newly patched rafters above her head. “Bastard!” She yelled, hoping it would make her feel better, would ease the pain of betrayal.

But it did not.



Tad found his mother sitting with the other women, preparing holly wreaths for Mid-Winter Fire, when he returned to Dun Grianan. His father was out on an overnight hunting trip with

his men, and there were few folk about inside the fort; something Tad was grateful for.

He did not want to see his father right now.

A black mood plagued him as he strode into the broch and headed for the chieftain's table, where a row of empty cups and a jug of wine sat waiting, ready for the noon meal.

Tad helped himself to a cup of wine, draining it in a few long gulps, before pouring himself another. Then, carrying it, he strode across to where Colene sat finishing a wreath, her expression serene.

Irritation surged through Tad. His whole life, his mother had been little more than a pretty shadow. She offered no opinion, rarely showed emotion, and spoke only when spoken to.

Fortrenn liked Colene that way; he had praised her for it often enough. Yet her passivity had always gotten on Tad's nerves. Other women at Dun Grianan had a spine—why could his mother not show one? There had been plenty of times over the years when Fortrenn had plainly been wrong, when Colene should have spoken out against him. But she never had.

“Tad,” Colene greeted him with a soft smile. “Back from hunting so soon?”

“Aye,” Tad replied, his gaze shifting to the women surrounding her. They all watched him eagerly, perhaps picking up on his mood. Of course they all knew about his impending marriage to Isla. They had all witnessed his humiliation.

Tad scowled at them, and some of the women dropped their gazes. One or two of them continued to stare boldly though, not put off by his frown.

Turning his attention back to Colene, Tad met her steady, grey-eyed gaze. “Mother ... will you take a brief walk with me on the walls.” He cast a dark look at the other women, who now wore wolfish expressions. “Alone.”

His mother arched her finely drawn eyebrows before giving a slow nod. “Of course. Let me get my cloak.”

A short while later two figures climbed the stone steps onto the high wall surrounding the broch of Dun Grianan: one tall, bearded, and broad-shouldered with wild brown hair; the other small and slight, huddled under a heavy fur mantle.

Tad walked alongside his mother, his gaze taking in the wide expanse around them. The waters of Loch Mealt were still and dark this morning, and the sky was pale, almost pink in hue.

“A snow sky,” Colene murmured. “Another blizzard is on its way—just in time for Mid-Winter Fire.”

Tad grunted. He cared little for the weather right now. He could not have cared less if it had started raining toads. A moment later, he sensed his mother’s gaze upon him and turned to meet her eye.

Her smooth brow was furrowed slightly, her eyes clouded. “Something troubles you, Tadhg,” she observed. “What is it?”

Tad frowned. “You know what the issue is ... this impending marriage. I don’t want it.”

Colene let out a long slow breath. “You sound like a child.”

Her reprimand, said with a gentle voice, was like a slap across the face. “So I’m to accept this match then?” he growled back.

She gave him a pained look. “It’s the way of chiefs. Do you think your father and I chose each other?”

Tad had never given his parents’ meeting much thought. He had assumed they had both wed willingly. “So you didn’t want to wed my father?”

Colene sighed. “I was in love with another ... but that didn’t matter to our fathers. I was to wed the elder son, not the younger.”

Tad stared at her, realization dawning. “Bevan ... you were in love with him?”

His mother favored him with a soft smile. “Don’t look so aghast. It was a long time ago. It almost seems like another life.”

“Did father know?”

“Maybe ... if he did, he never said anything. Bevan wed a year after I did, and everything was forgotten.”

Tad watched his mother carefully. Outside in the watery winter sunlight, he could see the signs of age upon her, the fine lines in her milky skin. But it was more than that; he saw the disappointment on her lovely face, the melancholy in those grey eyes. Something deep inside his chest twisted; it was as if he had never looked at his mother properly before. Never seen her as an individual in her own right.

“You’ve never been happy with father, have you?” he asked softly.

Her smile turned taut. “Does it matter?”

“Aye, it does.”

“I told you ... not all of us can choose whom we wed. We just have to make peace with it.”

Tad clenched his jaw. “That’s not what I want.”

Silence fell between them then. A breeze gusted in off the loch and tugged at their cloaks. The rumble of men’s voices in the stable yard below reached them, followed by the far-off bleat of a goat.

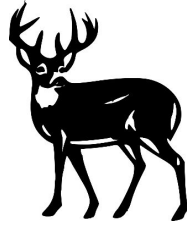
Colone broke the silence. “There’s more to your ill-mood than that.”

Tad, who had been staring out into the distance, turned to face her. “What do you mean?”

“I may not speak much, but I’m a great observer. You haven’t been yourself since you returned after the snow. You met someone out there didn’t you?”

Tad stared at her. He had not spoken of Erea to anyone. How did she know?

“Don’t worry,” his mother said, her mouth quirking. “No one else pays enough attention to you to note the change ... but a mother senses these things.” She paused then, her gaze searching. “Who is she?”



Chapter Ten

Speak to Your Father

EREA HACKED OFF the pine branches and let them fall onto the ground. Standing under the sheltering boughs of a large tree, she inhaled the resinous scent of the spurs she would use to decorate her hovel for Mid-Winter Fire.

She slid the small hand-axe into her belt and stepped away from the tree, gathering up the fallen boughs. The tree was a short walk from her home, yet she was reluctant to return to her hovel. It was easier to immerse herself in preparations for the 'Long Night'. Home brought back too many raw images and memories. However, the day was drawing to a close and the first flutters of snow were starting to fall. Erea needed to get back and stoke the embers in her hearth; she did not want the fire to go out.

A sense of hopelessness assailed her as she walked. What was the point? Why was she even bothering? She had no one to spend Mid-Winter Fire with. Her mother, who had made the festival so special, was gone. What joy could be found staring into the dancing flames, stuffing herself with honeyed oatcakes and rich meat stew, if she could not share it with someone she loved?

Stop it. Erea shook her head, in an attempt to keep her despondency at bay; it risked dragging her down like a deadly

undertow in a deep, cold loch.

This is my life, I have no choice.

She could let life beat her, go to her furs and stay there, not hunt for food, not garden nor forage. She could just give up on it all. Indeed she had felt like doing exactly that after she had sent Tad away. She had lain upon her furs and wept until she felt ill; yet something deep inside her had eventually rallied. Like her mother she was a survivor. She would not let life beat her.

Yet her chest still ached from grief. Loneliness dogged her with every step.

Hold onto anger. Yes, that was easier. Erea summoned her memory of Tad's face as he had blithely informed her that he was betrothed, his arrogance when she grew angry with him. Of course, he had gotten what he wanted; he had casually mentioned his impending handfasting as if commenting on the weather.

Conceited turd. If she had been a man, she would have broken his jaw for that.

It still stung that she had wasted her affections on a man who was not worthy.

Erea's hovel loomed up ahead. Holding onto her anger, she stomped up to it, flung open the door, and strode inside. The trick was to keep herself busy. Mid-Winter Fire was just a day away now, and she had plenty to do to prepare for it. She would pretend her mother was still alive and make the day a special one.

She had precious ingredients that she had been setting aside for many moons in preparation for the Long Night. She would make a batch of honeyed oatcakes and a sweet cake containing dried plums. Erea's mouth watered at the thought. Winter was such a lean time of year, except for this one special day when she could allow herself some treats.

Setting to work, Erea placed pine boughs around the interior of her hovel, alongside sprigs of holly and drualus—mistletoe. She and her mother had always loved this part of

Mid-Winter Fire: making the interior of the hovel scented and beautiful like a forest glade.

Next to the hearth, she had rolled in a large log for the Long Night. It was the biggest she could manage, although not large enough to burn for the entire twelve nights expected.

Once she had finished decorating, she stood in the midst of her hovel and surveyed her work. Despite her resolve to stay strong, Erea's eyes filled with tears.

"I wish you were here, Ma," she whispered. "I need your help, more than ever."

Yet only silence answered her. Her mother had once said that the souls of the dead often remained behind to watch over loved ones, but Erea felt her mother's had not. Olwen's soul had moved on, shortly after her death, leaving her daughter to face the world alone.

Across the room her tawny owl watched her sleepily, its golden eyes half-open. Erea managed a tearful, tremulous smile, dredging deep to find her strength.

"Looks like it'll be just you and me this year, Screech."



When Fortrenn Mac Nyle, chieftain of The Stag, returned home from his hunting trip—his men riding in a single column up the causeway behind him—his son was waiting for him.

Tad stood under the shadow of the great broch, arms folded across his chest, his gaze not shifting from the massive, broad-shouldered figure astride a sturdy dun pony. Fortrenn carried a quiver of arrows and a bow across one shoulder, and led another pony alongside his stallion. This pony did not carry a rider, but the corpse of a mighty stag. The snow had started to fall in earnest, delicate flakes fluttering down from the pale sky. Tad paid it no mind.

The sight of victory on his father's face made him tense. Fortrenn was the best hunter this tribe had ever known. This Mid-Winter Fire, the broch would ring with his boasts for days, after bringing down such a magnificent stag. Tad had rarely seen a bigger beast; it had a thick russet-colored coat and spreading antlers.

This close to the Long Night, Fortrenn would insist the stag was roasted for the festival.

Tad let out a long breath. Usually he loved this time of year, yet today he could dredge up little enthusiasm for it. He had deliberately left the broch, which was a hive of activity. His mother was overseeing the baking while the other women and children hung garlands and wreaths all over the interior. Earlier, he had helped a group of other strong men heave the great oaken log inside. The log now lay next to the main hearth, waiting for tomorrow eve.

On the night of Mid-Winter Fire the feasting would begin—platters of roasted meats and rich stews, and sweets and cakes dripping with honey and butter. Yet Tad had no appetite for any of it. His belly had closed, his mouth felt sour.

A dark mood had descended upon him, and he could not shake it off. This was new to him, as he was usually an even-tempered man not prone to brooding and terse silences. Now, he barely recognized himself.

His conversation with his mother the day before had not helped.

He had been unnerved by the fact that she had known what was truly bothering him. In the end he had told her of Erea. Yet he had immediately regretted his candor, for she had maddeningly shown very little response. Her gaze had widened slightly when he revealed Erea was the daughter of the sorceress of the Black Boar Woods, yet Colene made no comment on it. When Tad had finished his brief tale, she had said nothing. Her gaze then softened, and she had given him a pained look that had made Tad's ire rise. He did not want his mother's sympathy. He did not need it.

In the end, she had offered him just one brief sentence of advice. “You need to speak to your father of this when he returns.”

And so here Tad was, awaiting the return of the mighty Fortrenn mac Nyle—a man few questioned, and even fewer opposed.

Tad was not looking forward to this conversation.

He watched his father pull up his stallion and dismount from its back. The chief was smiling as he met Tad’s eye. “Have you seen that beauty I brought down?”

Tad forced an answering smile. “I would expect nothing less.”

“Taking credit for the whole hunt ... as usual,” Bevan grumbled as he halted his pony alongside Fortrenn.

“Aye, you’d think he’d taken the stag down on his own,” Ailig called out from behind them.

“Don’t listen to those old women,” Fortrenn replied, still grinning. “While they were fumbling for their arrows, I’d already loosed mine.”

Tad listened to their banter, his tension rising. He did not want to speak to his father about this with Bevan and Ailig listening in. However, asking to speak to the chief alone would only draw more attention to him.

He needed to speak now or the moment would be lost. Better here, outdoors, rather than at the chieftain’s table with the whole hall looking on.

“I need to speak to you, father.”

Fortrenn who had been loosening his pony’s girth, glanced over his shoulder. “What of, lad?”

Lad. His father seemed to forget that Tad was a man, and had been for years now.

“It’s about that betrothal to Isla.”

Fortrenn’s good humored expression faded. “Aye?”

“I’ll not wed her.”

A chill that had nothing to do with the falling snow settled over the yard. Bevan and Ailig stopped unsaddling their ponies and turned to stare at Fortrenn and Tad.

“That isn’t for you to decide,” Fortrenn replied. His voice was low, dangerous.

Tad held his gaze. “I can’t wed Isla, father ... I’m in love with another woman.”

The words were unexpected, unrehearsed. They shocked Tad. He had not realized till this moment that he felt this way. Suddenly, the smothering darkness lifted, and he saw the truth of it.

He loved Erea—and he had been a great fool not to tell her so.

However, Fortrenn appeared unimpressed by his son’s admission. “Aye ... and why does that change things? Do you think your mother and I loved each other? I don’t care if you’ve gone all soft-eyed over some maid.”

“Who is she?” Bevan asked from behind Fortrenn. “I haven’t seen you with anyone here.”

Tad inclined his head. “That’s because she doesn’t live at Dun Grianan. When I was out hunting in that snowstorm, it wasn’t an abandoned hut I found refuge in, but the home of a young woman who lives alone in the Black Boar Woods.” Silence followed this admission and so Tad continued, emboldened. “Her mother was the woman you cast out. She died a few months ago ... Erea now lives alone.”

The look on their faces was almost comical. Fortrenn, Bevan, and Ailig all looked as if he had just proclaimed that he was The Warrior himself in human form. They gaped at him, stunned.

Fortrenn was the first to recover. “You’ll not wed such a woman.”

Tad shook his head. “If I don’t wed Erea, then I’ll wed no one.”

His father's mouth twisted. "You'll not bring that witch's spawn into my broch."

"Fortrenn ..." Bevan's voice held a warning note, yet his brother ignored him.

"Erea's not responsible for her mother," Tad countered. His own vehemence surprised him. Why had it taken him this long to go head to head with his father? Recklessness caught fire in his veins. Now that he had made a stand, he would not back down.

"Maybe we should let the past go, chief?" Ailig spoke up. "If this lass is living out in the woods alone, it's not safe for her."

"Quiet!" Fortrenn roared, his face turning red. He advanced on Tad, two long strides bringing them nose to nose. "Whelp," he snarled. "You have responsibilities to this tribe, to me. How easily you forget them."

Tad did not flinch. "I'm still your son—surely it doesn't matter which woman I choose?"

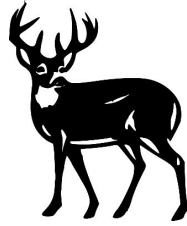
"You have no choice. Isla will be your wife."

"No."

"Defy me again, and I'll knock you out."

Tad sucked in a deep breath. "I'm going to marry Erea—and not you, nor anyone else will stop me."

A heartbeat later Fortrenn's huge fist shot out, slugging him in the face.



Chapter Eleven

On Bended Knee

NIGHT WAS SETTLING over the Black Boar Woods in a snowy veil when Tad reached the lonely hovel. Smoke rose from the roof, indicating that its occupant was home.

He had ridden fast from Dun Grianan, Caorainn bearing him swiftly despite the thickening snow.

By now it was a route the pony knew well.

And all the way here, Tad had tried not to think about the reception that awaited. Erea would not be happy to see him.

He also tried not to think about the uproar he had left behind. His jaw ached dully from the heavy punch his father had delivered.

Fortrenn would have landed many more if Callum and Ailig had not leaped forward and hauled their chieftain back.

His father had still been incensed when Tad rode out of the fort a short while later. The roar of Fortrenn's voice still rang in his ears: *Don't come back unless you're ready to wed Isla.*

Tad clenched his jaw and immediately regretted it as a pain lanced up into his ear.

Now—more than ever, he was determined not to do his father's bidding. Instead, he would wed Erea—the woman he

loved.

If she'll have me.

Tad's belly contracted as he pulled Caorainn up and swung down off his back into ankle-deep snow.

What if she hates me now?

He would soon find out.

Erea stood in the doorway and raked her gaze over the tall man standing before her. Snow had settled upon Tad's broad shoulders, his peat-brown curls, and even his eye lashes. Behind him the bay pony, Caorainn, tossed its head, snorting in greeting.

Tadhg mac Fortrenn favored Erea with a lop-sided smile. "Good Eve, Erea."

She did not smile back. In fact, she found that she could not do anything for a few moments but stare. A chill settled over her limbs that had nothing to do with the icy wind or the swirling snow before her open door.

"Go away," she eventually replied. The fingers of her right hand clasped around the edge of the door.

His smile faded, and his blue eyes widened slightly.

"Please, Erea," he said softly. "I'm sorry for upsetting you ... I never wanted to hurt you."

Erea let go of the door and reached for the bone handled knife at her waist. She drew it, clutching the handle so hard her fingers hurt.

"Leave," she growled. "I'll not hear more of your lies."

"I'm not here to deceive you." His gaze tracked her knife as he spoke. He was wary of her. "I've ridden here to tell you I love you ... that I've told my father I'll wed no one else but you." The words rushed out of him, as if he sensed he was running out of time.

Erea gritted her teeth. “More lies,” She ground out the accusation. “You’ll stop at nothing.”

Panic flared in the depths of his eyes. “I’m not lying, Erea. I only want you, and I’ll break with my kin if they don’t accept my choice.”

Horror washed over Erea as he dropped to one knee in the snow. “Will you be my wife?”

She stared at him, numbness swiftly following on the heels of horror. The words meant nothing. They were empty, spoken too easily. She had trusted him too readily before—she would not do so again.

Erea advanced toward him, her booted feet sinking into the fresh layer of snow.

“Lying dog.” She thrust her knife out, the pointed end coming to rest upon his chest, where only a strip of leather separated iron and flesh. “Get off your knees and leave. I’ll not listen to this any longer.”

But he did not move, did not heed her. Instead, Tad merely looked up, his gaze fusing with hers. “I love you, Erea.” His voice was barely above a whisper. “And if I have to die to prove it, so be it.”

“Dolt,” she snarled, panic rising in her breast. “Just go.”

He shook his head before reaching up, his cool fingers fastening around her wrist. “If you hate me ... then do it.” He pulled her hand closer, the iron point piercing his leather vest. “If I’ve hurt you that much, I deserve to die.”

Erea stared at him, and despite her fury and outrage, she felt tears prick. A heartbeat later her vision blurred.

“I hate you,” she said between gritted teeth. “You came here and shattered my world, my happiness. How dare you return now and say these things?”

“I dare because they’re true,” he replied. There was no trace of humor on his handsome face, no playfulness in his eyes. “I know I’ve been thoughtless, but all I want now is to make you happy, to see you smile and know I’m the cause.”

“It’s too late for that.” She spoke those words so quietly that the wind almost whipped them away. Yet Tad heard them.

His full lips quirked into an unhappy smile. “Is it, Mo ghradh?”

My love.

How dare he? And yet when she stared into his eyes, she saw no lie, only a desperation that mirrored her own.

“I hate you,” she whispered again, and yet the words held no force. “You’ve ruined my life.”

He shook his head. “Then I’ll spend the rest of mine making amends.” His breathing hitched, and Erea glimpsed something raw and fierce flicker in the depths of his eyes.

Erea released the knife. It fell with a soft thud onto the snow between them.

What am I doing?

She could not kill Tadhg mac Fortrenn.

She would take her own life before ever harming him.

The realization made grief grip her ribs, squeezing hard. Her love for him had made her his prisoner. Tears flowed then, scalding her cheeks. Erea bowed her head and tried to pull away from Tad—yet he still held her wrist.

Wordlessly, he pulled her down onto the snow before him. His fingers gently cupped her chin, tilting her face up. A moment later he kissed her.

Tad felt as if someone had just slammed that knife to the hilt in his chest. It hurt to breathe, to think.

The sight of Erea’s tears twisted the blade.

He could not stand to think of being the cause of such pain. He had not realized how deeply he had hurt her.

Tad kissed Erea softly, tenderly, cupping her face with his hands. She was trembling, tears still running down her face.

Tad kissed those tears away, tasting salt. He never wanted to upset her like this ever again. He wanted to see her smile, to see love in her eyes. He would make that happen—by any means possible.

His mouth sought hers once more, and this time his kiss was more urgent. His tongue parted her lips. He heard her groan of submission as she leaned into him, her fingers spanning out, digging into the leather of his vest.

Tad reached up, his own fingers tangling into her thick brown curls. She tasted sweet—better than honey, or fresh bread, or bramble wine at the end of a cold day.

The snow fell silently around them, and Caorainn's bit jangled as he tossed his head again, impatient now for a feed of warm mash and a net of hay.

Tad would see to the pony's needs shortly, but first he would make sure Erea was left in no doubt of his feelings for her. Words were not enough. He would show her how much he loved her.

Tad rose to his feet, gently pulling Erea to hers. Then he lifted her into his arms and strode into the hovel, kicking the door shut behind them.



Erea stirred and stretched languidly in the furs.

A few feet away the fire burned low, a chill now filtering through the hovel. Reluctantly, Erea slid out of the warmth of the furs and crossed to the hearth, placing another log upon the glowing embers. Then, shivering in her nakedness, she darted back to the warmth of the nest she had made with her lover.

Tad lay sprawled on his back, sleeping deeply. His long hair fanned out across the furs, his sculpted chest rising gently. He was exhausted.

A smile spread across Erea's face. So was tired too, yet she had never been happier.

What had begun as the worst evening of her life had transformed into a magical night she would treasure till the day she drew her last breath.

Tad had carried her inside, stripped off her clothes, and worshipped her body as if she were The Maiden brought to life.

He had taken her gently, murmuring words of love as he moved inside her. Erea had wept, and so had he.

Afterward he had been forced to don his clothing and venture out into the snow to retrieve his now ill-tempered pony. Once the gelding had been stabled, he'd returned to her, ripping off his clothes the moment he'd set foot through the threshold.

Erea's breathing caught, her gaze hungrily devouring her lover's naked form, as she relived what they had done then, the things he had taught her.

Erea flushed at the memory, heat pooling between her thighs. She wanted to wake him so he could teach her some more.

Reaching out, she traced a finger down his breast bone.

Tad sighed and shifted against the furs. A moment later his eyes flickered open. A lazy smile curved his lips when he saw she was sitting there watching him.

"Lusty wench," he said, his voice husky. "Why aren't you sleeping?"

"I'd prefer to watch you," she murmured, suddenly shy under the heat of his gaze.

His smile widened, and he reached up, cupping her cheek with a hand. Erea felt the roughness of calluses from his palm, at odds with the gentleness of his touch.

"You didn't answer me earlier," he said, his thumb stroking her chin. "Will you be my wife?"

Her breathing hitched at the question. Things had been too fraught earlier for her to even consider it. However, she knew the answer now.

“Aye,” she whispered. “I will ... I love you, Tad.”

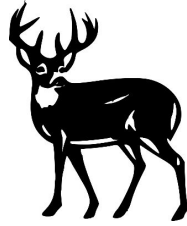
His eyes glittered. “And will you come back with me to Dun Grianan to spend Mid-Winter Fire together? It’s not a time to be alone.”

Erea stiffened, the blanket of happiness enshrouding her slipping slightly. “But what if your father ... your people ... don’t accept me?”

Tad’s smile faded, and his expression hardened. “Then I will give up that life and return here with you to make one of our own.”

Erea watched him, blinking back tears. What was wrong with her? She was always weeping these days. “You’d really do that?” she asked, her voice hushed, “for me?”

He nodded. “Gladly.”



Chapter Twelve

The Mark of the Serpent

TAD AND EREA rode into Dun Grianan on the eve of Mid-Winter Fire.

Perched behind Tad, Erea had a clear view over his shoulder at the coastal fort. She had only seen the sea a handful of times in her life, when her mother had taken her farther afield to barter at villages to the south-east of their home. Erea had deliberately avoided straying from home after her mother died, in fact she had hardly strayed from the Black Boar Woods since.

Yet the beauty of this place made Erea catch her breath now. To the northwest rose massive carven peaks, completely covered in a blanket of pristine snow. They appeared like the canines of a giant wolf. The waterfalls that usually flowed down the rocky sides of the mountain during the summer were now frozen giant icicles.

Erea's gaze swept away from the mountainside, traveling south to where a dark loch stretched to the mouth of the channel beyond. Out on a promontory, rising against the fluttering snow, was a great stone tower. Smoke rose from its roof—as it did from the roofs of the dozens of huts clustered around the icy shore of the loch.

Wordlessly, Erea squeezed Tad around the waist; her arms were wrapped around him. A moment later she felt his hands squeeze hers in wordless support.

“Are you ready?” he asked.

“Not really,” she replied truthfully. Despite her awe at the surroundings, she was beginning to question the wisdom of agreeing to this. The past day had been magical. It was as if she had drunk her fill on honeyed mead, but she was only just starting to emerge from the fog of bliss that had enshrouded her and Tad over the past day. She didn’t doubt him now; she believed in his love, and she felt the same way. Over the past day, he had shown her just how much he cared. And she had responded in kind.

No, her doubts had to do with the future looming before her at Dun Grianan. Would love be enough?

Erea took a pragmatic approach to life. She knew love did not fix everything. It had not been enough to stop her mother from succumbing to illness. Perhaps it would not be enough if Tad’s father opposed them.

“My father is likely to be in a foul mood,” Tad warned her. “He won’t be welcoming, but I’m hoping my kin will step in if he gets stubborn ... it’s Mid-Winter Fire after all. A time for new beginnings.”

“Maybe we shouldn’t have come,” she replied hesitantly. “We could make a life for ourselves in my home.”

“Aye, we could,” he replied, squeezing her hand once more, “and if this goes ill, that’s exactly what we shall do.”

They rode the rest of the way in silence, each of them lost in their own thoughts, their own worries. The closer they got to the great stone tower, the more nervous Erea grew.

She was not used to folk. She had spent years living alone with only her mother for company, and then she had only spent time with Tad. Crowds of people made her uneasy. She had never liked accompanying her mother to the markets, and had always been relieved when they returned home.

Erea hoped panic would not assail her inside the broch before anyone said a word.

Caorainn's heavy hooves clip-clopped over the icy stone pavers that led up the causeway. The pony made his way between two banks of snow that had been shoveled out of the way to allow travelers to approach the broch.

The snow fell gently from a dusky sky. The light was growing dim; night would shortly fall. The icy air had chapped Erea's cheeks. Her fingers were numb with cold. She longed to wrap her hands around a cup of mulled wine and soak in the heat from a roaring hearth. Yet she could not focus on that—she could only think about the confrontation that lay ahead.

The aroma of cooking greeted the pair as they drew up outside the stables, drifting down from the broch itself. Erea's belly growled as she smelled roasting mutton, rich stew, and the scent of something buttery and sweet baking.

Tad dismounted before helping Erea down. There was no one around, for everyone was gathering inside for the feast of Mid-Winter Fire Eve. There would be another, even bigger, feast tomorrow at noon, but this evening the great oaken log would be set alight to call back the sun.

After leaving Caorainn unsaddled and rubbed down, with a pail of mash, Tad took hold of Erea's hand and led her up the stone steps to the entrance of the broch. He did not speak, and when Erea glanced his way she realized why. Tad was as nervous as she was; his face was set in determined lines, his eyes narrowed. He was not looking forward to this any more than her. Tenderness and love surged within Erea; he was doing this for her. He would defy his father for her.

They entered the broch. A wall of heat, smoke, cooking smells, and the chatter of voices hit Erea. Blinking from the blaze of light that assaulted her eyes, she stumbled as she followed Tad inside. She had never seen so many people in one place. The decorations in here put her own efforts to shame. Great boughs of fir and pine decorated the stone walled interior of the tower. Clumps of drualus and ivy hung from the rafters, as did sprays of holly covered in blood-red berries.

This was the beginning of the ‘Long Night’, the night the folk of The Winged Isle beckoned back the sun. This time of year the grimmer gods—The Hag and The Reaper—ruled, whereas The Mother, The Warrior, and The Maiden dominated the warmer months when baby animals were born and crops grew.

It did not take the folk of the broch of Dun Grianan long to spot the return of the chieftain’s son, walking hand-in-hand with a woman they had never seen.

Erea felt their gazes settle upon her.

She squeezed Tad’s hand tightly and heard the bones creak. However, he did not flinch, his own grip firm and unwavering. Gaze forward, he guided her across the rush-strewn floor, threading between long tables that were being set up for the feast. He wound his way to where a table perched upon a raised platform at the far end of the hall.

And there Erea saw Fortrenn mac Nyle for the first time. An impressive sight, he wore a stag’s head mantle that made him look like a hunter god brought to life.

Erea wet her lips nervously. How would he react to her?

Fortrenn had been talking to the dark-haired warrior next to him, laughing over something, when the woman to his left—a faded beauty with a gentle face—leaned in close and said something to him. Her gaze was upon Tad and Erea as they approached.

The chieftain’s blue-eyed gaze snapped up, spearing them both.

Tad and Erea kept moving until they stood at the foot of the platform. The chatter and rumble of conversation that had intensified upon their arrival now died to a whisper. Erea could still feel the weight of their stares upon her, yet she ignored them. Instead, she kept her attention focused upon the man who held their fate in his hands.

“Evening, father,” Tad greeted the Chieftain of the Stag. “Merry Mid-Winter Fire.”

“I swear you’ve grown deaf, lad,” Fortrenn growled back. “I told you not to come back unless you were willing to wed Isla. That wench at your side is not your betrothed.”

Erea felt a gentle squeeze of her hand. Things were going as expected. Neither of them thought this would be easy.

“We’ve come to appeal to your kindness, father,” Tad replied. “This is Erea of the Black Boar Woods. She is the daughter of Olwen, whom you cast from the fort years ago. But whether or not her mother was guilty of the crimes she was accused of, Erea is not.” Next to him, Erea shifted uncomfortably, her gaze narrowing. “She sheltered me from a storm, and she has stolen my heart. She is a good woman and a brave soul. I would be proud to name her my wife ... but I would like your blessing, father.”

The whispers in the broch had now died completely. It was so quiet in here that Erea could hear the ragged inhale of her breathing, the thunder of her heart against her ribs.

“And if I don’t give you my blessing?”

“I will wed Erea anyway.”

Fortrenn’s expression darkened. “If you don’t need my blessing, then why are you here? You wish to grind your insolence and disobedience in my face?”

“No ...” Tad was deliberately not rising to his father’s challenge. “I don’t need your blessing, but I wish for it. I’m your only son. I have no wish to be estranged from you. All I have done is fallen in love. Why should I be punished for it?”

His father’s mouth twisted. “You’re good with words, lad. You’ve always been able to charm your mother and uncle into seeing things your way, but there are some of us you can’t convince.” Fortrenn’s gaze shifted to Erea then, and she nearly wilted under its force. He had the same blue eyes as his son, but they were harder, more ruthless. “This is the spawn of the witch woman. Do you know what your mother did here, lass? Did Tadhg tell you that she took my daughter’s life as well?”

Erea went cold. His words intimidated her, yet she held his gaze and refused to shrink away. “My mother was innocent of

those crimes,” she replied, surprised at how calm she sounded. “She did not deserve to be exiled.”

Fortrenn’s expression did not change. “She was a murdering witch.” He leaned back in his chair, the back of which had also been carved into a stag’s head, and picked up a large wooden cup.

It was then that Erea noted something that made her breathing still.

Most of the men here, including Tad, wore leather bracers covering their forearms, yet the Chieftain of the Stag did not. Erea’s gaze slid from his hand, down his forearm, to where the blue tattoo of a snake coiled its way from wrist to elbow.

The mark of the serpent.

Time rolled back, and she was sitting with her mother by the fire. Olwen had drunk two cups of bramble wine and was in a melancholy mood.

“Tell me of my father?” Erea asked.

Olwen had shaken her head. “Best you know little of him.”

Frustrated, Erea huffed. “Can’t you tell me what he looked like at least? Was he handsome?”

Her mother had sighed then, her gaze riveted upon the dancing flames of the fire, unfocused and distant. “He had eyes as deep blue as the Pools of the Fairy Folk,” she had murmured. “A great warrior with the scars of battle upon his face and the mark of the serpent upon his right arm.”

Erea had not even noticed the chieftain’s facial scar till now—a deep slash down one side of his face.

No, it can’t be. Her mind refused to believe it—and yet she was staring at the evidence.

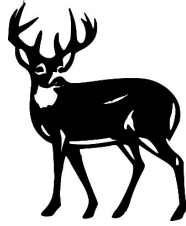
Erea tore her hand from Tad’s and stepped back.

Tad turned. “Erea ... don’t listen to him. I believe you, that’s all that matters.”

But Erea was not listening. Her heart was beating so loudly she could not hear anything else. She had to get out, fly from

this place, and never return.

She turned, dodging the hand that Tad put out to restrain her. Then, she fled as if pursued by wolves from the Broch of Dun Grianan.



Chapter Thirteen

Ruined

EREA RUSHED OUT of the broch, nearly slipping over on the icy steps in her haste to be free of the place.

The snow fell thickly now, in blinding plumes that obscured the surrounding loch and mountains, and turned the whole world white.

Gasping for breath, as panic assailed her, Erea clutched her fur cloak.

Her happiness with Tad was forgotten, replaced by a sickly horror that made her want to retch.

Moving out of instinct rather than purpose, Erea stumbled across the yard at the front of the steps and into the stables. The shaggy heads of ponies greeted her, accompanied by the scent of hay, and the dusty, pungent smell of the animals themselves.

Erea fled along the aisle between the stalls, ignoring the ponies, until she reached Caorainn's stall. The gelding nickered a soft greeting, and Erea went to him, burying her face in the thick winter coat of his neck.

Her heart thundered, and her mind raced.

I can't stay here. I have to run ... now.

And yet for the moment she was rendered immobile, traumatized by her discovery and the awful things it implied.

Things she could not bear to contemplate.

Ma ... you should have told me. She silently railed at her mother as tears leaked from her closed eyes. *I needed to know.*

If her mother had revealed her father's identity, Erea would never have set foot in the Broch of Dun Grianan.

"Erea." A male voice intruded, splintering her spiraling thoughts. "What's wrong?" Why did you run?"

Scrubbing away tears, she pushed herself off Caorainn's neck and turned to see Tad standing at the entrance to the stall.

The concerned look on his face made her chest hurt. She longed to reach out to him, to find comfort in the circle of his arms, but she did not.

She could never seek love, tenderness, or solace there ever again.

"I'm sorry for my father's rudeness," Tad continued. He took a tentative step toward her. "He was even more obnoxious than I expected. Mind though ... he bellows like a sea lion at times but will calm down eventually." Tad broke off here, his gaze searching her face. "Will you not come inside ... we can start again."

Erea shook her head. "I'll never go back in there, Tad ... ever."

His brow furrowed. "Why? I told you ... father's just—"

"You don't understand," she gasped. "Your father ... he ..."

She could barely get the words out. With each breath, it felt as if an iron fist squeezed her heart.

"Erea ..."

Tad moved toward her, reaching for her. "I'm so sorry the bastard upset you. I won't let him speak to you like that again."

Erea shrank back from him, cowering against Caorainn's side. Tad halted, his face tensing. "What have I done?"

“It’s not you,” she replied, clinging against the pony for support.

“What then? You stare at me as if I’m The Reaper.”

Tears flowed down Erea’s face as she looked up at him. “You can’t touch me, Tad.” She choked out the words. “We can never be together again.” She saw his look of utter confusion, before the words, the ugly truth, rushed out of her. “We are brother and sister.”

Tad jerked back as if she had just slapped him. A moment later though he shook his head, disbelief flooding his features. “That’s ridiculous—we are not.”

“My mother only spoke to me once about my father,” Erea countered, ignoring his denial. She too did not want this to be true. “She said he was a great warrior—a man with scars and a serpent tattoo wrapped around his right forearm. A man with blue eyes. When I saw Fortrenn, I knew.”

She watched the blood drain from Tad’s face. He took a step back from her, and the gulf of icy air that blew in between them made Erea swallow a sob.

It was done—now Tad knew the truth too. The precious bond that had just forged between them shattered.

Brother and sister.

It was sickening to contemplate—especially after what they had shared.

Bile rose in Erea’s throat, and she swallowed.

The Hag curse us ... what have we done?

“This can’t be the truth,” Tad whispered. His voice held a rasp as the full implication of what Erea had just told him took. “I won’t accept it.”

Erea merely stared at him and shook her head. Denial would only make this situation worse.

Tad’s mouth thinned. “Wait here, Erea. Stay with Caorainn. I will go and speak to my father.”

Hysteria bubbled up within Erea. “And what if he denies it? Men lie, Tad. He won’t want you and your mother knowing that he plowed ‘the witch woman’. That explains why he cast her from Dun Grianan; she never had anything to do with those children’s deaths.”

Tad shook his head, stubborn now. “I won’t believe it till I hear the words from him. Stay here—I won’t be long.”

And with that he turned, his fur mantle swishing, and strode away from her.

Erea watched him go, noting the rigid set of his shoulders and the way he bowed his head. He might need further proof, but she did not; she already had all the evidence she needed. The missing pieces of the puzzle all slid into place. She now knew why her mother had been secretive all these years.

She had not wanted Erea to know that she was the daughter of the Stag chieftain.

Tad disappeared from sight, and Erea sagged against the pony, burying her wet face against him.

What a mess.

She could not stay here, could not bear to see the horror on Tad’s face after he had spoken to his father and confirmed the truth. She could not bear to see the revulsion on his face—the same horror that made her own belly roil.

I have to go.

Erea pushed herself off Caorainn, and the pony snorted, stomping a heavy feathered foot. She then turned and retrieved his saddle from where it sat perched on the wooden division between two stalls. She had no idea how to saddle a pony—and had not paid much attention when she had watched Tad do so.

However, she had to learn quickly now. Tad would return soon, and she wanted to be well away from Dun Grianan when he did.



Tad re-entered the broch, hands clenched by his sides, and strode through the midst of the folk taking their seats for the Mid-Winter Fire Eve feast.

The cheery notes of a harp stopped as he crossed the floor, and heads swiveled, tracking his progress.

Tad ignored them all.

His gaze was fixed upon this father, who was in the process of downing a horn of mead.

Fortrenn did not see his son approach, yet Colene did. His mother went still, her gaze narrowing.

His father lowered the drinking horn and passed it to Bevan, before he wiped his mouth with his forearm. Then he belched.

“So, you’re back again—and without that witch’s whelp this time,” he greeted Tad. “Scared her off, did I?”

Tad ignored the question. He wanted to leap up onto the platform and flatten his father’s nose with his fist. He would not bandy words now. It was taking all his self-control to hold onto his temper as it was.

Erea had to be wrong—they could not be siblings.

He met his father’s eye and suppressed a shudder. If she was right, then both their lives were ruined.

“Erea took fright,” Tad said, his voice carrying over the now silent hall. His gaze traveled down to the serpent that curled its way lazily up his father’s arm. He’d had the tattoo for as long as Tad could remember—it was a symbol of rebirth or awakening among their people. For the first time, Tad studied the marking closely.

“Skittish wee bitch,” Fortrenn replied with a smirk. “Is that the kind of woman you like, son?”

“She left because she was upset. She thinks you are her father.”

The smirk froze on Fortrenn’s rugged face.

Around them Tad heard muffled gasps, whispered oaths. Next to Fortrenn, Colene went rigid, her eyes widening.

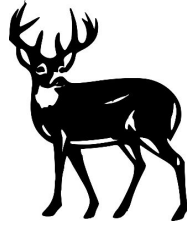
Fortrenn was the first to recover. “Well, she’s wrong. I never touched her mother.”

Tad leaned forward, his hands clenching and unclenching at his side. “Erea believes differently. A blue eyed warrior sired her. A man with a scarred face and the mark of the serpent up his right forearm.”

Tad stared at his father’s shocked face, his stomach twisting as all arrogance drained from Fortrenn’s eyes. *The Reaper take me ... tell me it’s not the truth.*

Ignoring the roaring in his ears and the cold sweat that now sprang up across his skin, Tad took a menacing step toward his father. Anger rose in a red haze, as did the desire to pummel Fortrenn’s face into a bloody pulp.

When he spoke, Tad’s voice came out in a low growl. “So, tell me, father—does Erea lie?”



Chapter Fourteen

The Wrong Man

A BREATHLESS SILENCE settled over the interior of the Broch of Dun Grianan, a shocked hush.

Tad stared his father down, so angry now that it would take nothing for him to lose his temper. It hung by little more than a spider's web. Disappointment and despair clawed their way up from his gut.

He had wanted Erea to be mistaken.

They could not be brother and sister.

And yet the look on his father's face made him feel queasy. Suddenly, his world was unravelling.

"No ... the girl doesn't lie," Fortrenn spoke, his voice a low rumble in the silence. "Only, she focused her attention on the wrong man." The chieftain shifted his gaze to the dark-haired, heavy-set warrior who sat to Bevan's left. "Ailig mac Falan is her father."

Tad straightened up, for he had been leaning toward his father, ready to reach out and throttle him. He looked over now at Ailig, waiting for the warrior to deny the chieftain's words.

But he did not.

Instead, Ailig stared back at Tad, resignation settling across his scarred features. His bright blue eyes held a look of sorrow, and his hands were clenched before him.

He had the *look* of a guilty man, yet Tad needed to hear the words from Ailig's mouth. Widowed years earlier, Ailig had never remarried. Although he had been young when she died, Tad remembered Ailig's wife, Bradana, as a bitter, sharp-tongued woman.

"Is it true, Ailig?"

The warrior's mouth twisted into a harsh smile. With a jolt, Tad realized Erea had the same shaped mouth. Ailig unlaced the leather bracer covering his right forearm. Then he raised his hand, revealing the tattoo of the serpent that marked his pale skin. "Aye, it's the truth."



The snow blinded Erea. It fell in a thick curtain, swirling around her and Caorainn as they rode west. Despite the settling snow, they had made good time. The towering shadow of Beinn Edra, and the icy waters of Loch Mealt, lay far behind.

Only, now Erea had lost her sense of direction.

Caorainn snorted as she drew him up, tossing his head to dislodge the snow that was rapidly settling upon his head, frosting his ears. Erea reached forward, patting his furry neck, murmuring to him.

Despite her need to flee from Dun Grianan, and the grief that clenched her throat in a trap, Erea was not a fool. She could drive the pony on, blind in the snow and darkness, but it would not end well.

She did not want the gelding to come to any harm, and even though her thoughts were scattered, her eyes raw from

weeping, she had not ridden out into this blizzard in order to end her life.

She wanted to go home, to her little hovel in the Black Boar Woods—the only place she had ever felt safe.

“We’re going to have to make camp for the night, lad,” she murmured to Coarainn, blinking as snowflakes settled on her eyelids. “Where exactly ... I don’t know.”

She cast her gaze around, aware that despite the fur-lined boots she wore, her feet ached with cold. She could not even feel her fingers. The last of the faint dusk light had faded a while back, and she had no idea where they were. On the journey to Dun Grianan, Tad had followed a path for most of the journey. However, the snow now obscured it.

At the thought of Tad, of the anguish and stubbornness she had seen on his face before he had marched out of the stables to confront his father, Erea’s breathing hitched.

She could not dwell on him—not tonight. A union between them was impossible, and once he had calmed down, he would realize that too.

What if I’m with child?

The thought chilled her to the marrow even more than the blizzard did. The thought of carrying her half-brother’s child, and giving birth alone in the wilderness, made her feel ill.

For the first time, she truly understood what her mother had been forced to endure. No wonder Olwen had carried such bitterness with her. She had been a strong woman indeed, to bring Erea up on her own.

Heaving in a deep breath, Erea urged the pony forward, up the slope where they had momentarily halted. To her left, dark shapes loomed out of the snow: pines, their bristling outlines dark against the blizzard. They had reached the eastern edge of the Black Boar Woods.

Erea pulled Caorainn to a halt and swung down off his back, her boots sinking into a thick crust of snow. “Come on, lad,” she said to the pony, injecting a hearty note in her voice she did not feel.

They trudged into the midst of the pine stand. Snow frosted the dark, resinous boughs, some of the branches drooping under the weight. Erea took a handaxe from Tad's saddlebag and, choosing a large pine, hacked her way in to the center of the tree, creating a shelter out of the snow.

There was just enough space to wedge herself in against the trunk and lead the pony in after her. It was not warm in here—but it was out of the wind. Caorainn's bulk also gave off some heat. It would not be a pleasant night, Erea reflected, but at least neither of them would freeze.

Seated upon a nest of pine branches, Erea leaned against the rough, spiky trunk. The scent of pine resin was almost overpowering, yet at the same time it soothed her. It was the smell of home, and this time tomorrow she would be tucked up in her furs listening to the crackle of the hearth. She would celebrate Mid-Winter Fire in her own way.

Caorainn snorted and shifted his weight, resting on his left back hip. The pony's nearness also calmed Erea. After the shock she had endured today, her nerves felt shredded, yet Caorainn's company made her feel a little less alone.

Erea pulled her heavy fur mantle close about her, relaxing against the pine trunk. She would likely not be able to sleep tonight, and yet her makeshift shelter was surprisingly comfortable. Around her the wind whistled through the pines while the snow continued to fall in a silent blanket.

She dozed for a while, drifting in and out of wakefulness and losing track of time. Erea was on the brink of letting sleep claim her when a man's shout jolted her awake.

“Erea!”

Heart hammering, she bolted upright.

“Erea!”

Tad. The Hag take me ... how has he found me?

Next to her, Caorainn snorted and stamped a heavy feathered foot. Erea reached out to soothe him. Now that the fog of sleep had receded, her wits returned. She was not sure

how Tad had managed to track her this far. The snow was still falling and should have masked her path to this tree.

If I keep still and quiet, he won't find me.

She waited, scarcely daring to breathe. A yelp and a muffled bark intruded, and Erea bit her lip. He was using dogs to track her.

“Erea!” The shout was farther off now, and Erea dared hope that the dogs had lost the scent.

Tad. Her chest twisted to know that he was out here searching for her. She felt wretched not calling out to him in return—yet she could not.

“Erea!” The shout was fainter still. Caorainn shifted once more—and then the pony threw back his head and gave a shrill whinny.

Erea’s heart leaped into her throat. She sprang to her feet, reaching out to try to soothe the pony.

It was too late.

The dogs started baying, and a short while later the glow of a pitch torch intruded upon her shelter.

Tadhg mac Fortrenn appeared, two grizzled wolfhounds at his heel. His hair and clothing were encrusted with snow, his face drawn and pinched with cold. However, his blue eyes blazed.

“For the love of the Gods, Erea—why did you run?”

She held his gaze, trying to ignore the tattoo of her heart against her ribs. “I had to,” she whispered.

“But I told you to wait.”

She lifted her chin, anger rising. She was not his dog. “I couldn’t stay at the fort,” she replied, her tone chill, “not after what I learned. Surely you understand that?”

He shook his head and moved toward her. The heat from his torch enveloped them both in the pine-scented bower. “You misunderstood,” he said, his voice low. “Fortrenn isn’t your father ... we aren’t siblings.”

Erea's lip curled. "He lied to your face, did he? Of course he did."

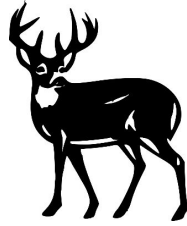
Tad shook his head. "No ... there is more than one man in the broch with dark hair, blue eyes, a scarred face, and a serpent tattoo ... a warrior named Ailig is your father."

Erea stared at him, his words barely registering. Her breath hitched. "What? ... Who?"

Tad's face softened. "He admitted it, Erea ... and when we return to Dun Grianan, he will explain himself." He took another step toward her, concern in his eyes. "Come on ... let's go. You'll freeze your innards out here."

But Erea was not listening. It was all too much. She could not take anymore. Tad said something else, but she could not hear him over the roaring in her ears.

A moment later, she toppled forward against the hard wall of his chest.



Chapter Fifteen

Let the Past Lie

AILIG MAC FALAN sat across the table from Erea, his face strained, eyes gleaming.

“I’m sorry, lass.” His low voice had a rasp to it. “Not a day goes by when I don’t think of Olwen ... of what I did to her.”

He and Erea sat at the chieftain’s table, but they were not alone. Tad sat at Erea’s side, and the chief, his wife, and Tad’s uncle Bevan had taken seats farther down the table—within earshot, but far enough away to give Ailig and Erea a little space.

There was no privacy, not in this hall where a sea of sleeping bodies carpeted the floor around the great hearth, in which the Mid-Winter Fire log now smoldered.

For once though, Erea did not want privacy. She had no wish to be alone with this stranger—and was glad of Tad’s silent, steady presence by her side.

“Did you know my mother was with child when she left here?” she asked finally.

Now that the shock—and relief—at learning Fortrenn was not her father had subsided, anger had filled the void. She had not come with Tad to Dun Grianan with the intention of searching for her father. After what her mother had suffered,

she'd wanted nothing to do with the man. And yet here he was before her, struggling to control his emotions as he apologized.

Erea clenched her jaw. His apology had arrived too late anyway. It was her mother who had needed to hear it.

Ailig shook his head. "No. I hadn't any idea ... I ..." His voice trailed off here, and his gaze dropped to his hands, which were clenched around an untouched cup of ale.

Watching the man who was supposed to be her father, Erea found herself searching his face, as if looking for something in it that would make her warm to him.

He had a worn, tired face that would have once been handsome. Thin white scars crisscrossed over one cheek, although he had grown a beard to mask them. The serpent tattoo that curled down his right forearm was impossible to miss, however. Thick dark hair threaded with grey fell to his broad shoulders. He was a big man, even taller than Fortrenn and Tad, although of a stockier build. His eyes were easily his most striking feature—a vibrant dark blue.

So this is the man my mother gave her heart to?

"Ailig." Tad's uncle spoke up. Bevan was frowning. "Start at the beginning. The lass deserves to know the whole story." This declaration drew a snort of derision from the chief, but Bevan ignored his brother, his attention upon Ailig unwavering. "Go on."

Ailig drew in a deep breath and shifted his gaze back to Erea. "You're so much like her," he murmured. "When you entered the hall earlier, I thought I'd seen a ghost." He broke off there and took a fortifying gulp of ale. "Olwen and I grew up together. She was orphaned as a child so my parents took care of her. We were close, even as bairns, yet I'd already been promised to another. As soon as I was of age, I wed my betrothed—my parents saw to it—for they realized that my heart belonged to another."

Ailig broke off here, and he spared Tad a rueful glance. "I should have stood up to my father like you did ... but I lacked the spine."

His attention returned to Erea. She stared back, waiting for him to continue. So far she had not heard anything that made her like him any better.

“Olwen was different to other women,” he continued after a lengthy pause. “She was free-spirited and wild. She learned to be a healer but also showed skill as a bandruí too. Our fort’s seer had recently died, and she hoped to take the woman’s place.”

Grief constricted Erea’s chest at this news. She imagined what her mother would have been like as a girl, practicing her gifts of healing and far-sight in the village. She thought such abilities were treasured by folk—but obviously not in Dun Grianan.

“My betrothed was Fortrenn’s sister,” Ailig said, his voice changing as he shifted his focus away from Olwen. “She was a proud, vindictive woman who resented the bond Olwen and I shared.”

“Careful.” Fortrenn’s warning echoed down the table. “You will not speak ill of my sister ... especially now she’s no longer here to speak up for herself.”

Ailig cast the chief a hard look, his jaw tightening. “Don’t pretend you didn’t know of her character,” he shot back. “Bradana hated Olwen ... and it was her who started the rumors.”

A chill feathered across Erea’s skin. Finally, she was on the cusp of learning the truth about her mother’s exile. The mood at the table had changed; a tension now hung in the air. Beside Erea, Tad wore a frown, his gaze wary as it flicked back and forth between Fortrenn and Ailig. Fortrenn’s face was thunderous, his wife looked nervous, and Bevan wore a weary, resigned expression.

“What rumors?” Erea asked.

Ailig dragged a hand over his face. “Bradana and I were never happy together. She had not long given birth to our first bairn, a son, when we began to argue constantly. During that

time, Olwen and I became even closer, and our relationship changed.” Ailig broke off, swallowing. “We became lovers.”

A long silence stretched out before Ailig ventured on. He stared down at his cup, a look of self-loathing upon his face. “We tried to hide our love, but in a fort this size it was impossible. When word of us reached Bradana, she never challenged me over it—instead, she mounted a campaign against Olwen. A sickness raged through the fort that winter. It claimed the lives of five bairns—my son’s included. Bradana was a clever woman—she used her grief as a weapon. She spread tales of Olwen being an evil sorceress who had cast a spell over Dun Grianan.”

Ailig broke off here, his gaze shifting back to Fortrenn. The chieftain was glaring at him, arms crossed defensively over his broad chest.

“She used you too.” Ailig said, his gaze unwavering as he stared the chief down. “Your daughter died of that sickness and Bradana preyed upon your grief. You wanted someone to blame for wee Fenella’s death. Your sister gave your rage a focus ... Olwen.”

“The witch was to blame,” Fortrenn growled back. “You were just too besotted to care ... she killed your first born son, but you didn’t want to see the truth.”

“The truth is that a *sickness* killed my son,” Ailig shot back. “I held my tongue all those years ago. A craven dog, I let you cast the woman I loved from the fort, let you turn everyone against her—but no more. There was no dark spell that raged through the broch that winter, just lies, blame, and hate.”

Ailig turned his attention back to Erea. Breathing shallowly, she held his gaze. Her heart pounded in her ears. She had known her mother was innocent, but Ailig’s story made her feel queasy.

She felt as if the world had just tilted, as if she was teetering on the edge of a precipice. She wanted to get to her feet and run, yet her limbs would not obey.

“I never spoke up,” Ailig continued quietly. “I let them cast Olwen out, and for a while I grieved ... and then I told myself it was for the best.” His mouth twisted as he said those words. “But I’ve paid for my cowardice ... many times over. Bradana bore me three more sons in the years that followed, but none survived past their first year. Bradana would have blamed Olwen for that too, if your mother had been here. Instead, it was my fault: I had brought ill-luck upon our family. Bradana herself died giving birth to the last bairn. My lingering memory of my wife is her cursing me with her last breath.”

Silence followed his words. Erea was sure many of the folk stretched out beneath the dais had heard every word and were now only feigning sleep. Heart pounding, she let her gaze shift to the three figures seated farther down the table.

“Did you know any of this?” she asked Tad, her voice barely above a whisper.

“I had no idea ...” he replied, his tone subdued. “I would never have thought my aunt capable of that.”

“If she was angry with Ailig, she had the right,” Fortrenn cut in. “He made a fool of her.”

“So you don’t deny what she did?” Ailig challenged.

“I do!” Fortrenn roared back, slamming one heavy fist on the table. The noise woke all those who were not already awake. Folk sat up, blinking like sleepy owls, their gazes swiveling to the scene now playing out upon the dais at the far end.

“Fortrenn.” Tad’s mother, Colene, spoke up for the first time. Her pretty grey eyes were wide, frightened. “Please, don’t—”

“Silence, woman!” Fortrenn did not bother to look his wife’s way. Instead, his gaze was fixed upon Ailig. “Listen to you ... even now that woman has a spell over you.” Fortrenn leaned forward, lip curling. “My sister could have done much better than you, but since our parents organized the match, she was forced to go through with it.” The chieftain’s gaze, hard

with anger, swiveled to Erea. “Your mother ruined lives. She had to go.”

Erea stared back at Fortrenn, hating him in that moment. He knew the truth, she could see it in his eyes, yet he clung to the tale he wanted to believe. Her poor mother had never stood a chance against such prejudice.

“Fortrenn,” Colene interrupted once more, reaching out this time to put a cautioning hand upon his forearm. “Stop ... please. You can’t—“

“Still your tongue.” Fortrenn rounded on his wife. “I’ve already warned you.”

“No, I won’t!” In an instant Tad’s mother transformed from a timid, soft-spoken creature, into a stiff-backed, outraged woman. Her face was bloodless, her gaze glittered. “You’re a blind fool, Fortrenn mac Nyle.” Her voice was shrill yet powerful. “I knew what your sister was—only, you refused to see her true nature. She caused endless trouble while she was alive ... and even now, ten years buried, we aren’t allowed to speak the truth about her. I held my tongue then, but I won’t now. Open your eyes!”

Fortrenn gazed at her a moment, but as shock faded, anger kindled in his eyes.

Fear pricked within Erea, making her feel light-headed. She tensed, awaiting the moment the chieftain would lash out at his wife.

Perhaps sensing this, Tad’s uncle stepped in. Since forcing Ailig to speak openly earlier, Bevan had held his tongue. He broke his silence now. “Colene’s right,” he rumbled turning to Fortrenn. “We all stood back and let you cast Olwen out. It was far easier to blame those deaths on sorcery and not on the will of The Reaper. Olwen was causing a rift inside the broch—you just wanted rid of her, and Fenella’s tragic death was just the excuse you needed.”

Fortrenn glared back. “So the pair of you finally unite against me,” he snarled. “I always wondered when it would happen.”

Bevan did not reply, for the words were deliberately inflammatory. Instead, he steadily held the chieftain's gaze. Watching them, it dawned on Erea that this meeting between her and Ailig had uncovered things that had long festered within this broch, things that had nothing to do with Olwen. It was a boil that needed to be lanced.

"Let the past lie, Fortrenn," Colene said softly. The fire had gone out of her voice, yet her face still held an iron-hard determination. "None of this will ever bring our daughter back."

Fortrenn shifted in his carven chair and met his wife's eye. They stared at each other for a long moment, and Erea saw the tension in his broad shoulders slacken. "Fenella was my light," he said, his voice suddenly rough, "my fairy lass. The world turned grey without her."

Erea heaved in a deep breath. Her thoughts were in turmoil, and her belly had clenched in a hard ball. She glanced over at Tad and saw the shock and simmering anger in his eyes. Silently, she reached out and took his hand, squeezing it gently.

Tad swallowed. "You were right," he murmured, his voice a growl. "I'm so sorry for the ignorance of folk ... we were all so happy to blame your mother."

Erea swallowed and favored him with a brittle smile. "Aye ... but the truth has now been freed. My mother's name has been cleared."

"Will you ever forgive me, lass?" Ailig's softly spoken question made Erea shift her gaze to where the warrior still sat opposite her. Like everyone else at the table, he looked on the verge of tears. "I understand if you hate me ... I deserve it."

Erea blinked and reached up, brushing at the tears that now trickled down her cheeks. She wanted to snarl at this man, rage at him for his cowardice. Instead, she asked him a question. "After your wife died, you could have sought my mother out ... you knew where to find her. Why didn't you?"

He gave a sad smile. “I thought she’d hate me. After what I did to Olwen ... after what I let my wife do. I didn’t deserve her.”

Erea held his gaze. Ailig’s weakness had disgusted her. How could he have let everyone turn on her mother like that? Yet staring into his eyes, still reeling after the conversation she had just observed, Erea felt something unexpectedly shift in her.

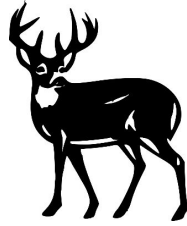
If there was a lesson to be learned from this tale, it was that things should not be hidden. Lies should not be allowed to take root and become the truth. Hatred was a venom, and she would not let it poison her life as it had the lives of so many others.

She had a choice to make. She could curse Ailig mac Falan, and continue the spiral of resentment that had led them all to this point—or she could attempt to understand him. Forgiveness might come later—if at all—but she would gain nothing by hating him.

She would only ultimately harm herself.

Silence stretched out a while longer, before Erea finally replied. “It’s Mid-Winter Fire Eve.” Her voice, although soft, carried in the stillness. “The Hag is looking down, watching over us all. It’s a night of new beginnings.” She watched a tear trickle down Ailig’s face. The pain in his eyes made her chest constrict. No, she could not hate him, despite what he had done. Instead, Erea reached out, placing a hand on his forearm. “Maybe we can start afresh ... *father?*”

Ailig favored her with a soft smile. “I’d like that, lass.”



Epilogue

The Promise

THE BROCH OF Dun Grianan celebrated Mid-Winter Fire with enthusiasm the following day. Women sang to the sun as they prepared the noon feast, their songs beckoning the warmth and light back into the world and chasing away the darkness. Erea, who had shyly asked to help them, joined in. The songs soothed the turmoil of the last day, reminding her of happy times with her mother.

The interior of the broch was warm and welcoming this morning, a vastly different place to Erea's first impression of it. The oaken log burned high in the hearth, and every cresset along the walls had been lit, burnishing the stone walls in gold. Boughs of fragrant green draped from the rafters and decorated the entrances to the alcoves, and the scent of baking honey oatcakes blended with the aroma of roasting venison for the feast that was to come. Many of the women wore garlands of ivy through their hair, and Tad's mother had gifted Erea one.

At the noon feast, Erea sat in between Tad and Ailig, at one end of the chieftain's table—as far as possible from where the chieftain sat. Fortrenn's mood was dark today, in contrast to the laughter and joy that echoed through the broch. He sat, drinking horn in hand, wearing his magnificent stag's head cloak, and spoke to no one.

Erea stole an occasional glance at him as she ate and drank, regretting the act each time. Anger rose within her, making her breathing quicken and her jaw clench. She wondered if she could ever bring herself to soften toward him. Unlike Ailig, he was not sorry for what he had done.

In contrast to Fortrenn, both Tad and Ailig smiled throughout the feast. Her father was shy with her at first, yet as the feast progressed, he slowly relaxed.

Tad let them talk. He sat close to her, an arm loosely wrapped around Erea's shoulders. At times she would glance at him and catch him watching her, his gaze soft, a faint smile curving his lips.

Once the feasting was done, the folk of Dun Grianan pushed back the tables, and two musicians started to play upon the platform next to the chieftain's table: a woman played a harp, while her son accompanied her with a bone whistle. Men and women rose to their feet and started to dance.

After a while Tad leaned in close to Erea. "Would you like to join them?"

Erea flushed, suddenly embarrassed. "I don't know how to dance."

He took her hand and stood up, gently pulling her to her feet. "Then it's time you learned. Come on."

Sleep eluded Erea that night.

Careful not to wake Tad, she rose and silently dressed in the light of the single cresset that burned on the wall of his alcove. Wrapped up in a thick fur, she ducked past the hanging, and tip-toed around the edge of the floor. She then pushed her way through a heavy oaken door into the night.

The snow fell silently, fluttering down from a dark sky. A row of peat braziers burned around the base of the broch, illuminating the drifting snow flakes and the dun-colored stone of the round tower.

Alone with her thoughts, Erea drew her cloak tightly about her and skirted the edge of the fort. The braziers threw out just enough light to touch the frozen edge of Loch Mealt. The world seemed so different when it snowed—so quiet.

Erea stopped and gazed east, at where the sky was beginning to lighten. Dawn was approaching.

“There you are.” A man’s voice intruded. Erea glanced over her shoulder, back toward the broch’s entrance, and saw Tad walking toward her. Like Erea, he was bundled up in fur. His breathing steamed in the freezing air. “It’s as cold as a cairn out here, mo chridhe.”

My heart.

“I couldn’t sleep,” Erea replied with a tired smile. “After all that’s happened, my mind won’t rest.”

Tad smiled back and stepped close, wrapping an arm around her shoulders. He drew her close, and Erea leaned into his warmth, his strength. Tad placed a kiss on the crown of her head. “Are you sure you wish to remain here?” he asked. “I wouldn’t blame you for wanting us to leave Dun Grianan.”

“The thought had crossed my mind,” Erea admitted with a rueful smile. She reached for his hand, tangling her fingers with his. “Every time I look at your father, I want to rage at him.”

Tad snorted. “I’ve felt that way about him for years. He’s a stubborn old goat, especially when he knows he’s in the wrong.”

Erea loosed a breath, watching it steam before her. “I was thinking about what I said to my father,” she admitted. “It’s a time of new beginnings. We could go back to my hovel in the Black Boar Woods ... but I’m not sure I could settle there now.”

“Why not?”

She craned her neck up to look at him. Bathed in the golden light of the brazier, Tad’s face made her breathing catch. His blue eyes looked dark in this light, his expression tender. She knew that whatever she decided, he would stay with her. She

no longer doubted his feelings for her. In standing up to Fortrenn—to all his kin—he'd proved the depths of his love.

"It's only a day since we left the woods," she replied after a brief pause, "and yet it feels like a year. I don't want to retrace my steps ... I want to be brave ... to move forward—even if that means living in your father's broch."

His mouth quirked, giving him that boyish look she loved so much. "You're already brave ... I've never met a more courageous woman."

She arched an eyebrow. "I was impressed by your mother yesterday. That was some spine she showed your father."

Tad huffed a laugh. "Aye ... I've never seen her stand up to him before—not even once. It was about time."

Erea's brow furrowed. "He and I will never be friends—you do realize that?"

Tad's face grew serious. He let go of her hand and reached up, cupping her cheek tenderly. "Aye, and I don't blame you for disliking him. I can organize for us to move into one of the roundhouses in the village. It'll give us some space."

Erea smiled, relief flooding through her at the suggestion. "I'd like that." She gazed up into his eyes. "Thank you, Tad."

"You've had to put up with much from the folk of this broch," he replied. "I'll never hurt you again, Erea—and I will not tolerate any of my kin to do so. Ever. That's my promise."

His words made warmth seep through her, despite the winter chill that reddened their cheeks. She smiled. "Then I shall hold you to it."

He smiled back before reaching up and brushing the snowflakes off her hair. "We shall be handfasted tomorrow, at noon ... if you are willing?"

Erea's smile widened into a grin. With everything that had happened, she had almost forgotten that she had agreed to wed him. Almost. "Aye," she replied.

His smile turned mischievous. "And shall you wear drualus in your hair?"

“If you wish it?”

“I do.”

They stared at each other, their mirth fading. The sky around them was lightening now as dawn crept in from the east, illuminating the frozen landscape. Standing there on the shore of the loch, while the rest of Dun Grianan slept, Erea felt as if they were the only two people alive.

Tadhg mac Fortrenn would soon be her husband, and together they would begin a new life together—a life of their own choosing. The future stretched before them, as wide as a winter’s sky. Excitement flooded through Erea at this thought. Darkness now lay behind them; she could hardly wait for their life together to start. Standing on tip-toe, she wound her arms around Tad’s neck and drew him into a passionate kiss.



The End.

From the author

WINTER'S PROMISE started a little differently to my other works.

Back in May 2018, I started writing and publishing the first drafts of each chapter of the novella and then sharing them with my mailing list. As an added bonus, I did audio recordings too (narrated by yours truly!), which I also shared. It was a fun way to write a first draft, and I enjoyed seeing readers' responses to the story. However, my intention was always to publish the story as a complete work—a novella for the festive season—and so here it is!

For those of you who've read my WARRIOR BROTHERS OF SKYE series, you may have noticed that both Fortrenn and Tadhg made cameo appearances in BATTLE EAGLE (Book #3). So far I'd focused my stories on the tribes of The Eagle, The Wolf, and The Boar. I felt as if The Stag needed a little love too!

This is a Christmas novella, but of course the Picts didn't celebrate Christmas! However, they did celebrate the mid-winter solstice. It was one of their most important festivities of the year as it called back the sun and warmth into the world. You will notice many modern Christmas traditions have their origins in ancient times: the burning of the Yule log, the use of ivy, holly, and mistletoe in decorations to name a few! We're not sure what the Picts of The Isle of Skye might have called this celebration, but it could have been Mid-Winter Fire ... so I have used that term.

Jayne x

Historical and background notes for WINTER'S PROMISE

Glossary

Aos Sí or Fair Folk: fairies

bandruí: a female druid or seer

broch: a tall, round, stone-built, hollow-walled Iron Age tower-house

Caesars: the Ancient Romans

drualus: mistletoe

Place names

Dun Grianan: a broch located on the north-east coast of Skye, on the shores of Loch Mealt.

The four tribes of The Winged Isle*

The People of The Eagle (south-west)

The People of The Wolf (north-west)

The People of The Boar (south-east)

The People of The Stag (north-east)

Gods and Goddesses of The Winged Isle*

The Mother: Goddess of enlightenment and feminine energy—the bringer of change

The Warrior: God of battle, life and growth, of summer

The Maiden: Young goddess of nature and fertility

The Hag: Goddess of the dark—sleep, dreams, death, winter, and the earth

The Reaper: God of death

Festivities on the Isle of Skye*

Earth Fire: Salute to new life and the first signs of spring (February 1)

Bealtunn: Spring Equinox

Mid-Summer Fire: Summer Equinox

Harvest Fire: Festival to salute the harvest (Aug 1)

Gateway: Passage from summer to winter (October 31/November 1)

Mid-Winter Fire: Winter Equinox

* Author's note: I have taken 'artistic license' when it comes to the names of the tribes, festivities, and gods and goddesses upon the Isle of Skye. The historical evidence is very scant, making it a challenge for me to get an accurate picture of what the names of the tribes living upon Skye during the 4th century would have been. Likewise I could not find any references to their gods and festivities. The Picts were an enigmatic people, and we only have their ruins and symbols to cast light on how they lived and whom they worshipped. To make my setting as authentic as possible, I have studied the rituals and religions of the Celtic peoples of Scotland, Ireland, and Wales of a similar period and have created a culture I feel could have existed.

The culture, language, and religion of the Picts is one largely shrouded in mystery. Unlike my novels set in 7th Century Anglo-Saxon England, which is a reasonably well-documented period, researching 4th Century Isle of Skye proved to be a challenge. Pictish culture is largely an enigma to us. However, they did leave behind a number of fascinating stone ruins, standing stones, and artifacts, as well as a detailed collection of symbolic art.

I created the four tribes of The Winged Isle from Pictish animal symbols. This is not a far-fetched idea; many Iron and Bronze-age peoples identified themselves with animal symbols. The clans we identify with Scotland did not appear until a few centuries later.

Cast of characters (in alphabetical order)

Ailig mac Falan: Stag warrior

Bevan mac Nyle: Fortrenn's brother

Bradana: Ailig's wife (deceased)

Colene: Fortrenn's wife

Erea: young woman who lives alone in the Black Boar Woods

Fenella: Tadhg's sister (deceased)

Fortrenn mac Nyle: chieftain of The Stag

Isla: Tadhg's betrothed

Olwen: Erea's mother (deceased)

Tadhg mac Fortrenn: son of The Stag chieftain

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Check out my printable reading order list on my website:

<https://www.jaynecastel.com/printable-reading-list>



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Multi-award-winning author Jayne Castel writes epic Historical and Fantasy Romance. Her vibrant characters, richly researched historical settings, and action-packed adventure romance transport readers to forgotten times and imaginary worlds.

Jayne is the author of a number of best-selling series. In love with all things Scottish, she writes romances set in both Dark Ages and Medieval Scotland.

When she's not writing, Jayne is reading (and re-reading) her favorite authors, cooking Italian feasts, and going on long walks with her husband. She lives in New Zealand's beautiful South Island.

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