



Saved by the
Highland
BEAST

LYDIA KENDALL

SAVED BY THE HIGHLAND
BEAST

A MEDIEVAL HISTORICAL ROMANCE NOVEL



LYDIA KENDALL



CONTENTS

[A Little Gift for You](#)

[Before You Start Reading...](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Extended Epilogue](#)

[Preview: Highlander's Sinful Promise](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Also by Lydia Kendall](#)

[Loved this book?](#)

[About the Author](#)

A LITTLE GIFT FOR YOU

Thanks a lot for purchasing my book. It really means a lot to me, because this is the best way to show me your love.

As a Thank You gift I have written a full length novel for you, called *Falling for the Highlander*. It's only available to people who have downloaded one of my books and you can get your **free** copy by tapping the image below or [this link here](#).



Once more, thanks a lot for your love and support.

Lydia Kendall

BEFORE YOU START READING...

Did you know that there's a special place where you can chat with me *and* with thousands of like-minded bookworms all over the globe?!

Join [Cobalt Fairy's facebook group of voracious readers](#) and I guarantee you, you'd wish you had joined us sooner!

Let's connect, right NOW!



Just click on the image above! ↑

ABOUT THE BOOK

Two people that think they're unworthy of love...meet each other.

Lady Sophia's life is in danger: her stalker, who has been sending her love letters for years, is closing in on her. So, she decides to take a job as a tutor to the most dangerous part of the Highlands: Laird McGill's castle.

Laird Dean's son has driven away five tutors so far. And the man is desperate to find a woman to take care of his offspring. But the Englishwoman he hires makes his blood boil and his icy heart melt...

Dean soon finds himself unable to let Sophia go. And when the threats on her life continue, he knows he must protect her, even if it's with his own life...

CHAPTER 1



THE LETTER FLUTTERED to the ground as Sophia Harrison gasped in shock, her bright green eyes filled with panic.

“What is it, my dear?” Libby Harrison rushed forward and gripped her daughter by the hands before eyeing the letter that lay at her feet. “It was him again?” She searched her face. “What has he said this time?”

Sophia nodded, the color had all but drained from her face. She could feel the bile in her stomach bubbling up high from the realization the letter had brought. “He was at the ball last night.”

“That’s impossible!” Libby dropped Sophia’s hands and came to sit by her side on the violet couch in the center of the family’s morning room. “We knew everyone at the ball last night, it couldn’t have been any of the gentlemen there.” She reached down and scooped up the letter, scanning the page for any kind of clue. Her eyes darted across the page as panic began to set in.

You looked stunning in your beautiful blue dress last night at the ball, my sweet Sophia. I couldn’t take my eyes off you as you danced.

“I could hardly take my eyes off your face when you laughed at one of Lady Rutherford’s jokes,” Libby read aloud as Sophia stood and walked across the room. “The gentle way you smile reminds me of a soft summer breeze. I can’t wait for the day when you, finally, are mine...” Her words trailed off as she suddenly stopped reading. “What do you think he means by that?”

Sophia’s wavy brown hair swayed as she paced, her hands nervously clasped over her stomach. Her eyes filled with tears as she began to panic, her breathing coming in short gasps. “It’s getting worse, Mama. He’s following me in person now.” She raked her delicate fingers through her hair as she cried. “What if he corners me alone one evening at a ball? What if no one will be around to help?”

Libby stood and left the letter on the couch as she walked over to her daughter and hugged her in a tight embrace. “I won’t let anyone lay a hand on you,” she whispered in Sophia’s ear.

The warm smell of flowers filled Sophia’s lungs as she took in the scent of her mother’s long hair, the chestnut brown streaked with waves of grey. Her comfort in life had always come from her mother. “I’m so scared, Mama. I don’t know what to do. I don’t feel safe here in London anymore.”

“I know, my lamb.” Libby gently pushed her daughter back and cupped her cheeks in both of her hands. “I think I have a plan. This matter has gone on for far too long now.”

Sophia gripped her mother’s hands and shut her eyes against the fear that was welling in her heart.

“I think we need to tell the viscount about this.”

“Mama, no.” Her eyes flew open as she stared at her mother in shock. “You know the viscount doesn’t like to be bothered.”

Libby’s grey-blue eyes filled with anger as she removed her hands and balled her fists at her sides. “The viscount inherited us along with the mansion when he came to take your father’s position. He will damn well do his part and protect us, whether he likes it or not. I’ll make him see reason if it’s the last thing that I do.”

Sophia took a deep breath as she regained her composure and dried her eyes. “I just don’t want to cause any more trouble than we already have, Mama. The viscount is good to us despite his lack of interest in our lives. He could have sent us away with a yearly stipend, but instead, he lets us stay here in our home.”

“And we won’t make any trouble, we are simply asking for help.” Libby’s voice softened again. She was known as one of the sweetest widows in London, except when it came to matters concerning her daughter. She could be a formidable firecracker when her daughter’s happiness and well-being were at stake. “I’ll come up with a plan where you can get away for a while. I’ll have to enlist the viscount’s help if the plan is to work.” She took her daughter’s hand and led her back over to the sofa.

Sophia’s father had died the previous year in a terrible accident, leaving them at the mercy of his cousin, who had become the new viscount, inheriting the title as well as the care of them both. He was a kind man and never treated them

with any cruel intent. His only shortcoming was that he never wanted anything to do with them beyond their day-to-day living expenses.

“I’ve been thinking about this for a while,” Libby began. “We can send you away to Scotland, somehow, where you can lay low until this whole thing has blown over.” She gestured toward the letter beside her on the couch. “Perhaps this man will grow bored when he realizes you are nowhere to be seen.”

“But, Mama, we don’t know anyone in Scotland who will be willing to take me on for a few months.”

“No, but it isn’t uncommon for a lady to take on a post as a tutor with a wealthy family. You’re twenty-four now, the perfect age. Nobody would suspect a thing if anyone in our inner circle were to find out the truth,” Libby argued. “You could handle something like that, couldn’t you, my darling?” she asked with a tinge of concern in her voice.

Sophia’s heart beat a little faster as she considered her mother’s words. She’d never so much as been away from the house in all of her years. Her mother and father had always been there to watch over her. “It would certainly be a brand-new adventure,” she conceded when her mother gave her an anxious look. The thought of living on her own and earning her place in the world was frightening and exhilarating all at the same time.

She could be like one of the heroines she had read about in her books. Her mind raced with all the possibilities and adventures she could have.

“It’s decided, then. We will talk to the viscount this evening and tell him everything that has been going on. You still have all the letters, don’t you?”

“Yes, Mama. I kept them in a hot box on top of my wardrobe.”

“Good. Bring them with you to the study this evening after supper, and we can show them to the viscount. I don’t think he would believe us if we just told him of our plan. We need the physical evidence to back things up. He’s more than likely to think that we were making things up, chasing up ghosts like hysterical hens.” Libby paused and looked at her daughter with tears in her eyes. “I’ll miss you. Please be safe out there when we find you a place, because I know we will. You’re a treasure. Some family will scoop you up and take you in.”

“I love you, Mama.” Sophia leaned forward and threw her arms around her mother’s neck.

“I love you too, my sunshine child.” Libby used the name she’d been fond of since Sophia had been a baby. “My life will be slightly less bright when you are gone.”



The viscount sighed as he stared at the stack of papers that lay before him on the desk. His light brown hair was slicked to the side, and the moustache above his lip was neatly trimmed. His long-crooked nose had always reminded Sophia of a hook that had been bent. “How do we know that this... this stalker as you put it,” he asked, gesturing toward the papers with a sweeping motion of his hand, “is in fact a danger to Sophia? Perhaps this young man is simply expressing his affection in an adamant, albeit misguided way.”

“My lord,” Libby began as she tried her best to remain calm. “There is nothing more dangerous than a young man whose passion burns brighter than his common sense. Today he sends letters describing her every move. Perhaps tomorrow he will send locks of her hair that he managed to obtain by some or other nefarious means.”

Sophia swallowed heavily as she considered her mother’s words, shifting uncomfortably in her seat across from the viscount.

Exactly what lengths will this stalker go to if he is allowed to continue with his behavior?

The viscount looked from one to the other with his light brown eyes before folding his hands before him on the desk. “There is another possibility. Consider the fact that one of the ton’s thousands of female rivalries has gotten out of hand.”

“I beg your pardon, my lord?” Libby and Sophia exchanged confused glances. “I’m not sure I quite understand your meaning.”

The viscount sat back in his chair and stretched his long legs out under the desk. “The ladies of London are always at each other’s throats over one duke or the other.” He waved the idea away like a fly that was buzzing in front of his face. “Perhaps Sophia batted her eyelashes at a possible suitor whom one of the other young ladies had already set her sights on. You know how these eager mamas and gullible daughters can get when they think they’ve laid claim to a man.”

“Sophia does not bat her eyelashes at any young men,” Libby said as she rubbed her forehead in an attempt to soothe her growing annoyance.

“If I may add,” Sophia interjected when she saw that her mother was close to her breaking point. “I do not have a very close circle of friends in London Society.”

“That would change if you didn’t have your nose stuck in a book all day long.” He rolled his eyes.

The viscount had often commented that Sophia should have been married by now.

“Be that as it may, my lord, there are currently no gentlemen courting me. None of the other young ladies would have any reason to send me letters like this,” Sophia said with an heir of conviction, hoping that he’d abandon his remarks.

“And no lady would be that subtle with their wording,” Libby added again, not missing a chance to defend her daughter’s honor. “You are used to being around Sophia. She is far kinder and sweeter than any other young lady that I know. If these letters were written by another woman, they would be far more malicious in nature. No, these letters were written by a man who cannot fathom the proprieties of Society at large. A potentially dangerous young man...”

“Fine...” The viscount stroked his moustache before sighing heavily and straightening his back. “What is it that you propose I should do about this matter? I have many things to occupy my time. I cannot play the detective and find the man’s whereabouts,” he said tirelessly with yet another sigh.

“My lord,” Libby began, her jaw twitching, a tell-tale sign of her growing annoyance. “In the full year that you have been here as viscount, we have not once asked your assistance in any matter that does not warrant your immediate attention. Do you not agree?”

“No, you have upheld your end of the bargain,” he acknowledged begrudgingly.

“All I am asking of you, my lord, is that you please keep this matter under wraps and help us to find a position for Sophia as soon as we can.”

“What kind of position?” He chewed his bottom lip as he considered her plan.

“I thought it may be best if we sent her off to Scotland as a tutor.”

“This arrangement would be for a few months to a year?” He seemed to perk up at the notion while ignoring the rest of her words.

“More than likely, yes.” Libby bristled at the fact that he seemed eager to be rid of them. “To sweeten the deal, I will go and live in that little cottage by the sea until Sophia returns. We will both be out from under your feet, and you will have the mansion all to yourself.”

“I see,” he muttered with thinly veiled glee.

The viscount had wanted to ship them off to the country as soon as he'd come to London. Being a distant cousin of the late viscount, he never really took to family life with Libby and Sophia. He was a rake who wanted the place to himself.

The only reason that Libby had never accepted his offer of living in the country was that London had presented far more opportunities for her daughter. A fact that had suddenly changed.

“That is if you are able to help me with my little plan,” Libby added to assert her point.

He stared at them both before stroking his moustache and looking back down at the letters. “I think I may know someone who can offer the opportunity you seek.”

“My lord?”

“I know of a laird who is looking for a young woman to tutor his son. Leave it in my hands. I'll have an answer for you in a few days.”

CHAPTER 2



SOPHIA REINED in her horse near an outcropping of rocks and trees beside a lake that spanned as far as the eye could see, swinging her legs from the saddle and walking around the beast. “There,” she soothed the horse as she ran her fingers over her nuzzle. “You’ve ridden hard, old girl. Let’s have a rest, it won’t be long now.”

The mare snorted and shook her head as Sophia tethered her to a tree, giving her enough freedom to nibble on the fresh grass of the glade. They were both tired and hungry from the long ride across the country. They’d stopped at several inns, sleeping during the day and riding at night.

Walking over to the edge of the lake, Sophia splashed the cool water over her hot skin.

I hope the castle isn’t too far from here.

The sun was just beginning to set over the mountains in the distance, and every limb in her body ached. She wanted nothing more than a hot bath and a meal to eat before she slept.

She hoped the people at the castle didn't think she'd run away. It had been a few days since she'd been expected.

I must have taken the wrong turn at some point.

“What do we have here?”

She whipped around in shock, the voice drawing her attention back to the present. Her heart was beating in her throat when she stared up into the rugged face of a man wearing a bright red British coat.

“Oh, thank goodness.” She let out a breath when she realized the color of the uniform. She had heard many a story of highlander rogues setting upon poor ladies as they travelled alone. An English soldier was a blessing from above.

The man gave her a toothy grin with his yellow teeth, which were broken down into jagged edges. He seemed unwashed and dirty as if he hadn't taken a bath in quite some time. The soles of his boots were worn and beaten, and the bottoms of his breeches were in shreds.

“Is your troop close by, soldier?” she asked as she pushed herself to her feet and dusted off her cloak.

“No, Ma'am, it's just me and the rest of my friends.” The man nodded to the outcropping of rocks as three more men came out of the shadows. They were all wearing their bright red uniforms and seemed unkempt.

Sophia felt a slight amount of unease as the men came walking toward her but pushed it to the back of her mind. “I’m glad I ran into you, gentlemen. Perhaps you could help me by pointing me in the direction of McGill Castle.” She eyed the men as they drew even closer.

“Oh, you don’t know how glad we are to run into a lady out here in the wilderness.” The man’s ugly smile widened. His hair was dirty and matted, with pieces of dirt and debris caked into the strands. “We are the lucky ones here…” The more she looked, the more she realized just how dirty the soldiers were.

She took a step back as the rest of the men joined their friend, advancing on her in a semi-circle, making her feel trapped.

“You didn’t answer my question, soldier.” Her foot squelched in the mud as she backed away, the water behind her making it impossible to escape. “Where is the rest of your platoon? I would like a word with your commanding officer.”

“I think you will find that it will be us that you will be talking to.” The man laughed softly in a menacing way. “We will be having the last words tonight, and we intend on enjoying them too.”

The rest of the soldiers laughed as they looked at her, the same kind of menacing grins on their faces.

She began to panic when she realized that all was not as it seemed with these men. Their clothes were ragged and dirty with blood stains and rips that would have been fixed if they were in a platoon. “Have you wandered away from the

battlefield?” she tried again in an attempt to calm her own nerves more than anything else.

It wasn't uncommon for injured soldiers to stray from the troops during the confusion of battle. The ballroom banter was filled with tales of soldiers that started a battle in Inverness and ended up in the wilderness of Scotland weeks later. Some had been lucky to be found in time, and others had fallen prey to bandits or the elements.

“In a way,” one of the other men answered in a cool voice that sent shivers down her spine. “One might say that we voluntarily decided to lose our way.”

His friends laughed at the joke with mocking derision.

Sophia felt like a fox cornered in the hunt. “You are deserters,” she said in disgust as she walked back further until the water was lapping at her feet. “You've betrayed your country.” The words slipped out before she could stop them, making her realize her mistake when the men's smiles disappeared.

“I see we have an uppity little miss here, men,” the first soldier growled, his eyes darkening with murderous intent. “I don't much care for being accused of treason.”

“What right do you have to be judging us?” the man with the cool voice snapped as he closed the distance between them.

“I wasn't judging anyone,” she said quickly as panic rose in the pit of her stomach. He was close enough for her to smell the stench on his skin. He smelled like a mixture of sweat and

death, and his breath was just as sour and pungent when he leaned in.

“I’ll show you what we do with uppity little Society rats who think they are better than the rest of the world,” he breathed against her cheek as she winced away from him.

“Please, I don’t want any trouble. Just let me be on my way. They are expecting me at McGill Castle. I only wanted some help...”

“You dare accuse us of treason when you’re flitting about the countryside in the pursuit of some bastard Scot?” Their leader spat in the mud as if the mention of Scots left a bitter taste in his mouth.

“We will help you with something all right,” the man with the cold voice suddenly grabbed her wrist in a vice-like grip and wrestled her arm behind her back, spinning her around to face the lake.

“Please don’t hurt me!” she screamed in panic, hoping that someone would hear her.

“Scream all you want, little miss!” Their leader laughed as one of his friends ripped her cloak from her back, tearing the garment in two. “We are in the middle of the wilderness, there’s nobody to help you out here!” His menacing laughter carried across the water.

Sophia began to kick and fight as her captors wrestled her around in the water, making her face the shore as they ripped

her dress.

Her horse began to neigh and stomp in an attempt to break free.

“Calm down there, beast.” The leader continued to laugh, enjoying the panic and fear he was creating. “There will be more than enough time to deal with you once we are done with your mistress—” He suddenly stopped talking, his arms spread wide at his sides as his eyes stared into the distance beyond the lake. His body gave a tiny jerk as he stepped forward.

The men stopped their harassment and looked at their friend. “What’s the matter with you, Charles?” one of them asked with a frown.

The man whom Sophia came to know as Charles dropped to his knees in the water, toppling forward to reveal an arrow protruding from his back. The tip had seemingly pierced through his heart.

“It’s the highland bastards!”

The tight grip on Sophia’s wrist loosened, and the soldiers began to run away as the sound of horse hooves grew nearer.

Five or six men wearing green kilts came riding to the lake as Sophia toppled over into the water, landing on her back. The world disappeared in a splash for a second as she came back up and gulped for fresh air.

The Scotsmen had already circled the men with their horses. One of them jumped from his horse and pulled out his sword, and the rest acted as backups, herding the men in as they were taken down one at a time. Sophia marveled at the skill the man used. He worked his way through the group until one deserter was left. The soldier who wrestled her arm behind her back.

“Ye thought ye gave us the slip back there, did ye nae?” the swordsman growled, holding his stance and swinging his sword in with one hand.

“I’ll never yield to you, Scottish dogs!” the deserter yelled as he turned and ran, breaking through the horses.

Sophia waited for the men to give chase but looked in confusion as they stayed where they were. None of them seemed bothered by the fact that the soldier ran away.

“Dae ye mind?” The swordsman looked at a burly man who was mounting a chestnut horse.

The man shook his head with a sigh, as if the request were tiresome, but reached behind his back and drew a bow along with an arrow. Lifting his weapon with ease, he took aim.

The arrow zipped through the air with expert precision, hitting its target square in the back.

The deserter toppled forward and lay motionless as the man turned his attention back to the group. “I would nae have to do that so often if ye would just get on with the matter instead of making a speech.”

The swordsman shrugged. "I like to have the final say in a matter. I dinnae ken what ye want me to do about that. We can't all be perfect an' to the point like ye, my laird." He looked at the water. "We forgot about the lass."

All heads turned and looked in Sophia's direction, making her take a step back in fear.

"I would nae do that if I were ye, lass," the swordsman said kindly, his voice devoid of the malice she'd heard with the English deserters. "The lake is filled to the brim with muck. We'll be fishing ye out for days if ye go for a swim."

The tallest of them, whom the swordsman called laird, swung his leg from the horse and dropped to the ground, making his way over to her with lengthy strides. The light was too dim to allow her to make out any kind of discernible features, but from his silhouette, Sophia could tell that he was a muscular man with a square jaw and long flowing hair that fell down his back in a braid.

She recoiled again when he came walking toward her through the mud and water.

"Naebody will harm ye, lass," he said gruffly as he reached out his hand to offer his help. "The English bastards are dead."

She took a deep breath and hesitated before placing her hand into his, using her other hand to keep the shreds of her dress over her chest. "Thank you."

He paused for a second in the dark as his warm hand enclosed hers. “An English lass?”

“I was on my way to McGill Castle.” She raised her voice to explain. “The laird is expecting me there.”

“Is that so?” he asked softly. “What is yer name, lass?”

She held back for a second, wondering if she should trust this man, who was twice her size and could wield an arrow with expert precision.

“Is it Sophia Harrison?” he asked when he saw her reluctance to answer.

“How do you know my name?”

“I’m Dean O’Brien, Laird of McGill Castle. Ye wrote the letter to me askin’ if the position as a tutor was still available.”

Sophia perked up a bit when he said he was the laird.

“Yer miles away from the castle, lass. How did ye get out here?”

“I got lost on the way from the last inn,” she replied as her teeth began to chatter. The growing dark was bringing a chill that penetrated through her sodden clothes.

Dean stepped forward and scooped her up in his arms before she had any time to protest. He carried her out of the water and toward the group of men. "This is our new tutor," he said bluntly.

"What is she doin' all the way out here?" the swordsman asked. "She was due to arrive at the castle two days ago."

"It seems she got lost," Dean answered while he lifted her onto the saddle of his horse.

"How can ye get lost out here? The lake is miles an' miles away from any kind of road," another man said as if she weren't there.

"Ye have to be daft to get lost out here."

"Stop yer gossipin' and start gettin' ready. The lass is tired," the laird answered his friend as he swung his leg up and positioned himself behind her.

"I have my own horse," Sophia said quickly when she realized what he intended to do. "I left her over there by the trees." She pointed back over her shoulder.

The men all looked back to the trees where her horse was tethered before turning back in unison to the man with the sword.

"I'm sorry." He shrugged. "I assumed the horse belonged to the English bastards." He quickly turned his head toward her.

“Apologies, lass, nae all English are bad.”

“All of my belongings were on the back of that horse.” She pouted, and she felt the laird tighten his grip on her.

“This would nae happen if ye didnae have to make such a show all the time, Anthony,” one of the other men accused, his large round belly protruding over the saddle.

“Dinnae start with me again, Hamish!” the swordsman growled.

“Never mind all that,” the laird snapped. “Let’s get a move on ‘afore the lass catches a cold. There’s a cabin nae too far from here where we can tend to her wounds and set up camp for the night.”

“I’m not wounded,” Sophia said through her chattering teeth while wrapping her arms around her waist.

“Were ye wearin’ a white dress with streaks of red when ye stopped by the lake?” Dean asked her gruffly as he reached around and grabbed the reins, pulling her closer to his chest.

She felt the warmth of his body against her back as she looked down to see the smears of blood on her clothes. “Oh, I didn’t realize...”

“Dinnae fuss, lass,” the swordsman said as he pulled his horse up beside the laird. “The pain will come. Sometimes, men in battle dinnae realize they are wounded until it’s too—”

“We better get on,” Dean cut him short with a glare, digging his boots into the sides of the horse. She could feel the strength of his muscular thighs with the movement of his legs.

The horses trotted on into the dark as Sophia rested her aching body against the heat of the man who had saved her life.

They rode on for a few moments in silence. Dean tightened his arms around her shoulder and held her steady every time the horse went through a ditch or trotted a little faster. She blushed slightly when she caught him looking down at her thigh through a rip in her dress.

“We’re nearly to the camp.” He cleared his throat when she shifted the scraps of her dress over her leg.

“Won’t we be headed to the castle tonight?” She panicked at the thought of having to camp with a group of strangers.

“Nae, I have to see to the men’s wounds as well as yers. We will make camp for the night an’ head to the castle in the mornin’.”

“What about your wounds?”

“I dinnae have any wounds, lass. But if ye want to see me without me shirt on, we can always arrange that.” His tone was teasing, though he remained stoic when Sophia turned around to look at him.

“I...” she stammered, her cheeks catching fire despite the chill in her body. “I didn’t mean it like that.”

The laird had a playful side to him despite his gruff and serious exterior.

“I ken what ye meant, lass.” His laughter rumbled in her ears, sending waves of goosebumps across her skin.

“Don’t you think I’m in a better position to take advantage of you?” she asked playfully, shocking even herself with her words. Perhaps she had become delirious from the excitement of the whole ordeal and her mouth did not connect with her brain.

Dean smirked at her, looking pleasantly surprised at her boldness. “How would ye be able to take advantage of me, lass?”

“A lady has many tricks up her sleeves.” She decided to play on with the flirtation.

She felt emboldened here in the Scottish countryside, so outside of stuffy England and its rules, that it seemed everything had changed overnight. She had survived all those days alone travelling to Scotland. She had avoided an assault, with the laird as her saving grace. She could be a little bolder if she wanted to.

“You’ll have to show me those tricks sometime,” he whispered in her ear, making her shiver.

Who is this man?

He was gruff and quiet with a penchant for teasing, but what struck her the most was how incredibly handsome he was. She was afraid of him in a way that piqued her interest.

Her stay at McGill Castle was going to be very interesting it seemed.

CHAPTER 3



SOPHIA STOOD to the side as the men untacked their horses, and made a camp for the night. She was cold and wet, but she tried her best to stay out of the way. Her dress was torn and tattered, and she was trying to cover her body.

Dean watched her every move as he gave orders to the men, standing back when he saw that all was underway. Sophia's beauty bewitched him. From the first moment he had seen her fighting against those bastards, he had felt like a fae had cursed him. He was still seething that those men would dare touch her. If they weren't dead, he would kill them again.

She seemed like a gentle-natured woman, unassuming and kind. She hadn't flinched away from the men just because they were Scottish. Given what she had just been through, she was still willing to trust.

He hoped that her gentle ways wouldn't be a weakness, in the end, as his son could send the best of them packing with a glare. None of the previous ladies had lasted, and three of them had been far tougher than Sophia seemed to be, strong ladies with a will of iron that Cillian had broken.

“Would ye care for a drink, milady?” Hamish bowed low in front of her with his flask held out.

“Dinnae offer her yer lip-soiled flask, ye great bampot.” Anthony came forward and clapped Hamish on the back, sending him sprawling into a nearby bush. “The lady doesnae want to be anywhere where yer lips have been.” He reached into his satchel and pulled out a bottle. “Here, milady, have a wee dram of ale. The bottle has nae been opened. Ye will be safe with that.”

Hamish swore under his breath as he picked himself up and out of the bushes. A few twigs had lodged themselves in his mess of red curls. “Bastard...”

Dean watched as Sophia kept her hands clutched to her chest. She was unperturbed by their scuffle and more concerned with her modesty.

“Oh, I beg yer pardon, milady.” Anthony blushed bright red before turning back to his horse and retrieving a blanket from his bedroll. “Here ye are. Ye can cover yerself with this.”

“Thank you.” Sophia accepted the dark-grey blanket and draped it over her shoulders before accepting the bottle of ale and taking a swig.

Her long brown hair was almost dry as the curls clung to the gentle curve of her neck. She was a beautiful woman with bright green eyes and a slender waist. Anyone could see that, especially Anthony, who was fussing over her like a love-sick puppy.

Dean shifted uncomfortably on his feet as Anthony's fingers brushed the bare skin of her shoulders. He felt a sudden irrational urge to knock him off his feet. Taking a deep breath, he leaned against a tree and continued to watch them.

"Please take a seat by the fire, milady." Anthony moved aside and showed her to a stone, where she sat with the blanket pulled tightly around her shoulders.

Anthony Gillies was a known ladies' man with a reputation for teasing the lasses. He was a roguishly handsome man of twenty-eight, or so everyone said. His pale blue eyes, dirty blonde hair and five-o'clock shadow didn't mean much to Dean in the grander scheme of things. It was his swordsmanship and loyalty that mattered most to him in a battle. Dean smiled to himself from the shadows as he watched their interaction. He would have to box Anthony's ears for pestering the poor woman. He told himself it was only because he saw how afraid she had been, and not because he felt an irrational overprotectiveness toward her.

"If ye would like me to see to yer wounds, milady, I could give ye a hand," Anthony offered enthusiastically as he took a seat by her side.

Hamish grumbled and rolled his eyes as he took his seat beside the others. "Leave her alone, ye dirty bastard. She doesnae need yer help. She fought off the English dogs 'afore ye came along."

Anthony whipped around and glared at him. "Dinnae make me throw ye into the bushes again, ye great ape. I'll have ye flat on yer back 'afore ye can wipe the dribble from yer chin. I'll grab ye by that curly mess ye call a beard and throw ye like a hammer."

Hamish jumped to his feet again, making his giant belly wobble. “Say that a bit closer, ye daft fool! I’ll pummel ye into the ground with one hand tied behind me back. I’ve done it ‘afore, an’ I’ll do it again!”

Dean rolled his eyes and sighed when Anthony rushed forward with his finger thrust into Hamish’s chest. The two had known each other ever since they were lads but somehow always managed to get into scuffles after a brief bout of name-calling and threats. The only time that anyone had ever been injured was when Hamish had gotten the jump on Anthony and accidentally pushed him into a wall. A fact that Hamish would never let Anthony forget.

“I’ll say it up yer left nostril if that will make ye hear any better!” Anthony threatened as he poked his finger in Hamish’s cheek.

“Enough,” Dean roared when he noticed that Sophia was beginning to shy away from the pair. It was hard to understand that the pair loved each other like brothers if you didn’t know them very well. Unfolding his arms, he walked out of the shadows and addressed the men, who immediately stopped arguing and backed away, standing to attention. “Has the cabin been cleaned and set to rights for the lady?”

“Aye, my laird,” Hamish said quickly as he shoved his elbow into Anthony’s ribs, making him step to the side. “A fresh bedroll has been placed on the floor. I’ve checked the room for any signs of spiders or wee little animals that may have posed a threat.” His chest puffed out a few inches as he spoke. “The fire was lit beneath a fresh cauldron of water, an’ the herbs the healer sent along have been placed on the table with a change

of fresh clothes from one of the men.” He stood ramrod straight, as if he was reporting to a general.

“Good, man,” Dean said with a nod. “I’ll take the lady into the cabin an’ see that she has everythin’ she needs. Ye sorry lot can stay back here an’ make sure that the coast remains clear,” he instructed as he helped Sophia up and led her away. “An’ mind ye, catch somethin’ to eat, the lady is probably starvin’ by now.”

“Naethin’ will get past us, my laird. Dinner will be ready as soon as we can. I saw a few hares on our way into the forest. I’ll sniff one out an’ have it roastin’ ‘afore too long,” Hamish said proudly.

“Check all of the men an’ see that naebody has any wounds. I’ll come an’ see to them meself when I’m done with the lass.”

“I’ll dae that right away, my laird,” Hamish uttered quickly before Anthony could speak.

Dean nodded as he passed the men on his way to the cabin, leading Sophia by the arm, but not before he heard Anthony whispering under his breath, “Suck up.”



Dean guided Sophia toward the cabin that lay snugly nestled in the center of the woods surrounded by towering birch trees and elms. The men were by the fire, just a stone’s throw away from the cabin.

He pushed open the door and allowed her to enter first before following suit, pulling the door closed behind him.

The inside of the cabin was warm and inviting, albeit a bit dusty, with spiders having made their homes in every nook and cranny. The fire crackled in the grate of the stone hearth that sat at the back of the room. The water steamed and boiled in a small iron kettle that hung from a hook above the flames. Two wooden chairs and a table had been wiped and placed beside the fire with a few pouches of what looked like herbs and bandages on them.

“Ye will be sleepin’ in here tonight,” the laird stated, walking over to the chairs and taking a seat.

“Alone?” Sophia asked a little too quickly, eliciting a glare from him. Was she accusing them of trying to take advantage of her?

“Aye, alone.” He reached over and began arranging the pouches on the table. “Yer amongst decent men now, Miss Harrison. We are nae the English dogs who tried to rob ye of yer virtue. Me men and I will be sleepin’ by the fire.”

“I didn’t mean it like that,” she said apologetically, clutching the blanket a little closer to her chest. “Thank you for saving me back there. I don’t know what I would have done if you and your men hadn’t come along. I owe you a great debt.”

Dean nodded in response and continued to arrange the herbs before standing and retrieving the kettle from the fire with a mangled old cloth, which he tossed to the side. “Dae ye ken

how to dress yer own wounds?” he asked unceremoniously when she remained in her spot without moving a muscle.

“I’m afraid I don’t know much about dressing wounds,” she admitted.

“I can help ye clean your wounds, but if ye fear that it’s improper for me or one of me men to see ye in a state of undress, I can show ye what to do an’ leave. Ye dinnae ken any of us or what we may do. I ken that ladies of London follow certain... rules.”

Her irritation rose slightly at his subtle accusations of her non-existent grandeur. “I would appreciate any kind of help you can give me,” she said pointedly. “I think you and your men have more than proven your intentions to protect my honor and virtue.”

Dean looked up at her in surprise at her boldness once again before gesturing toward the seat in front of him.

Sophia hesitated for a moment.

Why do I always have to be so snappy with my replies?

She admonished herself for wanting to save face instead of asking the laird to simply show her how to use the herbs. Walking across the room, she took the chair he offered to her and sat across from him.

“Ye will have to remove the blanket if I’m to dress yer wounds.”

She panicked for a second but tried her best to not let him see. Carefully lowering the garment, she exposed her shoulders one at a time before letting the cover slip completely to the floor. She blushed slightly when his hot gaze burned into the skin of her bare arms and the mounds of her breasts.

“Is this your cabin?” she asked, turning her head to the room at large in an attempt to divert the attention.

“Nay,” he answered, then reached over to the table to retrieve a fresh stretch of bandage. He placed it in a bowl before sprinkling in some herbs and pouring the steaming water over everything. “This cabin is a halfway point for hunters an’ travelers to rest. We use it every time we come this way an’ make sure to leave it in a good condition for the next group of people.”

“Aren’t you scared vagrants might move in?”

“An’ what if they do?” Sophia noticed how his jaw clenched as he spoke. “They might need it more than we do, I dinnae begrudge a man a roof over his head. Nae when I have a castle an’ food on me table. Tomorrow I might be the one that needs help, an’ I’ll be grateful for a place like this an’ kindness from strangers.”

“I didn’t think of it that way,” she said sheepishly, feeling like a child that got a rap over the knuckles. “It’s a kind way of looking at the world. More people should think like that.”

They sat in silence for a while as the laird dipped a clean cloth into a separate bowl of herbs and water before reaching for her arms and dabbing the cut that ran from her elbow to her wrist.

Sophia watched his face as he diligently worked to clean her wounds. He was a handsome man, there was no doubt about that. The laird had long, thick, black hair that ran down his back in a braid. His body was muscular and chiseled, with a set jaw like a Greek god statue she'd seen in one of London's many art museums. The depths and darkness of his eyes were far more intense than anything she'd ever seen before in her life. They were like hazel pools in the middle of the night.

"This may sting a bit," he said in his rough voice as he reached for the bandages in the bowl and placed them against the wound on her arm.

"Ouch." Sophia winced and gritted her teeth. Despite the sharp pain from the herbs, his touch was surprisingly soft and gentle, his fingertips merely brushing her skin as he worked.

"I told ye it would hurt."

The flickering light from the fire cast shadows across his handsome face, and she felt like she'd stepped into one of the romance novels her mother would read. The setting was perfect for the hero to take the beautiful woman in his arms and... Her thoughts made her blush. She chastised herself. This man had been nothing but a gentleman, albeit a gruff one, and she couldn't stop thinking about him naked.

"Ye will have to lower yer hands so that I can take a look at yer chest."

“What?” she asked quickly in shock and looked down. She hadn’t even noticed that she was defensively clutching at her chest with her arm.

“Ye have some cuts on yer chest. I can leave them until we reach the castle tomorrow, but I cannae guarantee they won’t worsen before then. I’m nae a healer. I can dress me own wounds, but I cannae help ye if a fever sets in in the middle of the night. The water of the lake ye were in isn’t exactly what I’d call a bath. Many soldiers have lost their limbs after washin’ their wounds in a lake. The water is nae fit unless it comes from a flowin’ stream.”

Sophia took a deep breath and gently lowered her arm, allowing the shreds of her dress to reveal the mounds of her breasts above her stained and ruined undergarments.

The laird’s fingers brushed her skin again as he moved the fabric aside, sending goosebumps up her chest and neck.

The mounds of her supple breasts were marred with small cuts that had been crusted with dried blood.

He dipped the cloth into the water once again and softly ran the damp fabric over her cleavage, causing her chest to rise and fall a little sharper with every breath.

“It seems as if ye may have gotten somethin’ stuck in there.” He leaned a little closer until his face was flush with her bosom.

She could feel his hot breath on her skin as he worked to free the piece of debris from her skin. She shut her eyes as mixed emotions flooded her. Never in her life had a man been this close to her. Not even a physician had seen her in such a state of undress. She felt excited and confused at the way his touch ignited a heat in the pit of her belly.

He leaned in a little closer until his head was right beneath her chin, allowing her to breathe in the scent of his hair. It smelled like the earthy musk of freshly cut heather.

She felt the warmth of his breath moving up her neck and stopping at her jawline before moving over to her chin. Her lips parted slightly at the tingling sensations that arose from within as she waited for what came next. Her blood hummed with an unknown feeling that she wanted to explore.

“Ye can open yer eyes now,” he said suddenly. “I got the piece that was lodged in yer skin. It looks like a splinter of wood.”

Sophia opened her eyes to see Dean sitting back in his chair and staring at the herbs on the table.

When had he moved?

She'd gotten so lost in the allure of the moment that she hadn't even felt the pain.

What am I thinking? This isn't the time to be imagining things. He was seeing to my wounds, obviously. He wasn't about to kiss me.

This man was the laird whose son she would be tutoring in the months and possibly the year to come. She had no business being attracted to him. She'd thought for a second that he was about to kiss her, and what's worse, she'd wanted him to.

She shook her head to get rid of the thoughts, chalking her feelings up to fatigue.

"The scratches on yer chest will nae require any bandages," Dean said distractedly without looking at her. "Ye may have a scar or two, but ye can tell yer future husband that ye have battle scars." He gained his feet. "There's a bedroll in the corner for ye with a fresh pair of breeches an' a shirt. We dinnae have any lady's clothes, so ye will have to wear that until we reach the castle tomorrow. Change at yer leisure an' use the rest of the warm water to bathe. I'll have one of the men knock on yer door with some food."

Sophia watched as he left the room and shut the door firmly behind him without saying so much as another word. Looking down, she examined the clean marks on her chest. Her mind wandered back to the gentleness of his touch and the way his breath on her skin had made her feel.

She would have to watch herself while she lived in his castle. Being around a man as handsome and dangerous as the laird could prove to be very difficult, even for a woman as strong and moral as she was.

"You are very tired, Sophia," she whispered to herself. "You can't want a man you've just met, no matter how handsome he is."

CHAPTER 4



THE MEN LOOKED up and laughed as Sophia came out of the cabin. The clothes that Anthony had given her were three sizes too large. The breeches hung on her like a sack, and the shirt fluttered like a sail blowing in the wind. She cut quite the comical figure with the belt pulled tight around her waist. She looked like the urchins that begged for bread on the streets of London and Inverness.

Dean shot the men a scornful look when he saw that she was blushing.

Some of the men coughed and turned their attention back to the belongings that needed to be packed. The horses were ready and waiting after a hearty breakfast of oats.

Hamish was done as usual and waiting to leave while supervising the rest of the men.

“Yer a sight for sore eyes this mornin’, milady.” Anthony was the first to approach her.

“I’m afraid the clothes are a little too big.” She looked up quickly after pulling at the seams. “I am grateful for them

though,” she added respectfully. Her dirty shoes poked out from the bottom of the breeches.

“Och, dinnae even think on it, milady. It’s an honor for a fine lass such as yerself to be wearin’ a pair of me breeches.”

Sophia smiled warmly at Anthony in a way that prickled Dean’s nerves. The laird didn’t know why, but the thought of his best friend flirting with her made him madder than a bull that had just been branded.

“All me belongings are at yer disposal, milady.” Anthony bowed low. “May I offer me horse this morning as we ride back to the castle? She’s a fine mare, an’ I promise to keep the conversations light as we ride.” He winked at her.

Dean dropped what he was doing and made his way over to the pair. “Yer horse is nae even saddled yet,” he barked. “The lady will be ridin’ to the castle with me. I would nae trust ye to ride straight even with yerself on a horse.”

Hamish stopped what he was doing and sniggered, and Anthony glared at him.

Waiting for the others to leave, Dean took his chance to gauge how she was feeling since last night. “Did ye sleep well enough? The hard floor of a cabin must be far from the comfort yer accustomed to.”

“I slept just fine,” Sophia answered quickly and glared at him. “I may be a lady, but I’m not unaccustomed to adapting to change.”

The laird's irritation grew at the defensive way she spoke to him all the time as if he were one of the English dogs she needed to defend herself from. Why didn't she treat Anthony or Hamish like that? He tried to remind himself that he wasn't the easiest character to talk to.

"The horse is saddled and ready to go. Ye will ride with me again today so I can keep an eye on yer wounds," he barked at her before turning and making his way over to his chestnut stallion.

Sophia hung back slightly and waited for the rest of the men to ready their mounts before coming to his side.

"Are ye ready?"

She nodded in reply, allowing him to place his hands on her waist and lift her into the saddle.

He swung his leg over the horse and positioned himself behind her again, just as he'd done the day before. Dean felt the warmth of her body pressing against his as he reached around and grabbed the reins. Her hair smelt of rain, and her skin was softer than the petals of a mountain even in bloom. Scenes from the previous night flashed through his mind as the men made ready to leave.

Her smooth skin beneath the tips of his fingers. The subtle mounds of her perfect breasts, the long auburn hair that hung down her back like waves of the ocean, and the gentle way her full lips had parted. God, he'd wanted to kiss those lips. He'd

wanted to run the tip of his tongue over the curve of her neck. He'd wanted to tangle those curls in his fingers and...

"The men are ready, my laird," Hamish suddenly said by his side, then winked and smiled at Sophia.

"We can be off, then," Dean uttered, shifting himself in the saddle so that his arousal would not be so evident to the woman who was about to become a tutor to his son.

He gave the reins a tiny nudge and urged the horse on as the men fell into line behind him.

What is happening to me?

He hadn't been interested in another woman since his wife had died. His sudden arousal was puzzling at best.

They rode in silence for a while as the trees thinned out and eventually gave way to the open plains of a meadow. He thought of the tiny English woman that sat in his arms, and the ladies that had tried and failed to look after his son.

Cillian had been a difficult lad to deal with now that he was coming of age. He needed someone who would give him a good education while opening his mind to the world around him. He wasn't a bad bairn, he just needed the right guidance and love, preferably from someone who would be patient with him.

“What is your son’s name?” Sophia’s voice suddenly drew Dean’s attention back to the present.

“Cillian,” he answered bluntly. He’d almost forgotten that she was a real person and not just a figment of his imaginings.

“That’s a wonderful name.”

“Aye. The irony is that his name means bright-headed. His mother gave him the name in the hopes that he’d take to his schoolin’ like a fish to water. She chose the name ‘afore he was born.”

“Does he struggle with learning?”

“He’s a bright lad all right, as smart as a whip. His problem is that he cannae sit still for more than a moment at a time. He always wants to be outside learnin’ to fight. Anthony has a hand in that. The fact that he’s comin’ of age doesnae help either. He’s a strong-headed lad, stubborn as an ox.”

“So, he needs someone to keep his attention long enough with things that hold his interest.”

He raised an eyebrow as the horses rode on. “I dinnae ken what yer plannin’, lass, but many a tutor ‘afore ye has tried an’ failed to keep his attention on the books.”

“I have my ways,” Sophia said, reverting back to her defensive manner. She shifted in the saddle until the full weight of her body was leaning against his chest.

The laird coughed slightly before moving his hips to the side. "I didnae say that ye dinnae have yer ways. I was just givin' ye fair warnin' 'afore ye start."

"Does Anthony often teach men how to fight?" she continued her line of questioning, unperturbed by his warnings.

"Aye. He's the man-at-arms for McGill Castle. There is nae a better warrior this side of Scotland."

"Does he spend a lot of time with Cillian, then?"

He bristled slightly and clenched his jaw at her sudden interest in his friend. "Aye. Anthony is a kind of uncle figure to Cillian. I've kent the man ever since we were lads. I'd trust Anthony Gillies with me life."

She nodded slowly. "I'd like to get to know him a little better in that case. He could give me insight on how better to manage Cillian."

"I already have someone that will be showin' ye around the castle and tellin' ye everythin' ye need to ken. Anthony has his own affairs that he needs to attend to. Yer job at the castle will be to look after Cillian and naebody else."

Sophia kept quiet for a moment before saying, "I'll put Cillian first in all that I do while I am here in your employment, my laird..." She uttered his title with just a hint of sarcasm. "But I'll thank you for not interfering with the way I teach."

Her final words felt like a thinly veiled warning that he shouldn't be telling her what to do.

He knew he'd been slightly harsh with her, but something about the way she took an interest in his friend prickled his nerves and made him come across rougher than he had intended to.

Why does it matter if she takes an interest in Anthony or anyone else for that matter?

He kept questioning himself as the horizon opened up, revealing the high walls and buttresses of McGill Castle.



The horses trotted into the yard of the castle and came to a stop at the entrance to the stables. McGill Castle was large and intimidating, with stone walls, iron fixings, and plenty of people milling about the yard.

Sophia was glad that the journey had ended. She felt as if she'd lose her mind if she had to spend any more time in the company of that pig-headed man. Perhaps he was just tired from the long ride, but she didn't understand why he had to be so grumpy and unpleasant all the time.

“Hamish,” the laird suddenly called after helping her off the horse and back onto her feet. “Go an’ fetch me uncle. Tell him the new tutor for Cillian has arrived at the castle an’ he is to show her around.”

“Duncan?” Hamish asked with a frown, pausing with the reins of his horse in hand. “Are ye sure, my laird? Would ye nae like one of us to show the lady around? I wouldnae mind. She would be far better off with one of us. Duncan cannae hear a team of wild horses comin’ if they were right on his tracks.”

“Do as yer told,” Dean grunted angrily. “I’ve just about enough of yer cheek on this trip.”

“An’ those are pretty big cheeks,” Anthony muttered under his breath as Hamish did as he was told and set off to find the laird’s uncle.

“An’ dinnae think yer off the hook either,” Dean barked at him. “I want these horses patted down an’ seen to properly ‘afore tonight.”

Anthony blinked at him with an incredulous look of disbelief on his face. “It’s nae me job to see to the horses, Dean. The stable boys should be the ones to see to them. Hamish is right, the lady would be far better off if one of us showed her around the castle. I can do it if yer too busy right now.”

“Do I have to explain every decision I make as laird of this castle?!” Dean nearly lost his temper, but he managed to keep his voice steady. His eyes were thunderous, though. They would make a lesser man run for the hills. “Will ye men do as yer told without talkin’ back? Ye’d swear the two of ye were runnin’ a rebellion.”

Anthony raised his eyebrows and shot the laird a questioning look before glancing at Sophia. He looked at her for a second

with a strange expression before taking the horses and leading them to the stables.

Sophia watched the scene with growing interest as she waited for her guide to come to her aid. She hoped that this ‘Uncle Duncan’ was far more pleasant than the laird. She couldn’t stand to be around another man that barked at everyone around him. Her thoughts were quickly interrupted when Hamish came back with an elderly man following behind.

His back was bent and frail as he hobbled along with a walking cane. He was the kind of man that one could tell had been handsome in his youth. Just how long ago that youth was, was open for debate. His hair was peppery grey with long strands of auburn streaks, all pulled together at the back of his head in a braid. His eyes were light brown, and they would twinkle whenever he spoke.

“Is this the lass?” he yelled at Hamish and pointed at Sophia with his cane.

“You’d be surprised if she wasn’t,” Hamish muttered under his breath.

“What? What do ye mean surely she has pies?” the old man yelled again with one hand cupping his ear.

“Nae pies! Surprise!” Hamish rolled his eyes before patiently bending down and speaking in slow syllables. “This. Is. Sophia. Harrison. Duncan.”

“Dinnae yell at me, ye over-bloated goat,” Duncan said as he squinted at him. “I’m nae dead yet, ye only need to speak up.”

Hamish sighed and rolled his eyes before turning to Sophia. “I beg yer pardon for all the yellin’, milady. This is Duncan Murdoch, uncle to the laird and brother to his late mother. Ye will have to speak up, as he’s a wee bit hard of hearin’.”

“What’s that? I dinnae like herrin’, awful fish.” Duncan pulled a face and stuck out his tongue. “I prefer wild salmon caught with me own two hands.”

“Nae, Duncan, nae... Herrin’...” Hamish pinched the bridge of his nose. “I dinnae have time for this,” he muttered under his breath. “Good luck.” He gave Sophia a look before leaving them alone.

“I thought ye were a lass.” Duncan eyed her clothing suspiciously. “Why are ye dressed as a lad? I’ll nae have any kind of funny business here in the castle.”

“Oh, no,” Sophia hurried to explain, “I’m only wearing this because I was attacked. One of the men was kind enough to lend me some clothes. I’ll change as soon as I can find a proper dress.”

Duncan stared at her blankly for a moment with his mouth slightly agape, revealing several missing teeth. “What?”

Sophia stood frozen to the spot, unsure of how to continue a conversation with a man who was not only hard of hearing and

spoke a different language but seemed old enough to be courting methuselah himself.

“Well?” he barked at her again. “Dinnae just stand there lass.” He looked her up and down. “If ye are a lass that is. We need to get on with the tour of the castle.” He turned around and began to hobble away from her. “Come on, Miss Haddison.”

“It’s actually Harrison,” Sophia said quickly as she ran to catch up with him, pulling on the sides of the trousers to keep them from catching on her shoes.

“What? Madison? That’s nae what they said yer name was.”

“No, it’s H.A.R.R.I.S.O.N,” she mouthed the letters in an attempt to help him hear. “Sophia Harrison.”

“Soapy Haddison? Sounds like a sailor’s name to me, or some poorly cooked kind of fish.”

“No, Sophia Harrison,” she corrected, raising her voice a few octaves.

“That’s what I said.” He looked at her with a frown. “Haddison.”

“No...” she said slowly but then decided to let it go.

“Oh.” He paused as if a light had suddenly gone on in the back of his mind. “Are ye a fool? Is that why yer dressed like that?”

He squinted as he eyed her clothes. “Are ye here to provide the lad with entertainment? I thought ye were here to be his tutor.”

“No...”

She strained for the words to try and explain to the old man exactly what had happened to her. Suddenly having an idea, she walked over to a nearby trough and used one of the straw training dummies that had been left outside to illustrate her story.

“I was riding my horse, and stopped,” she said loudly, making galloping motions to try and show that she was riding a horse. “When I stopped.” She took a wide step as if she were climbing down from a saddle. “I was attacked by Englishmen.” She ran over to the dummy and used its arm to try and smack herself in the head. “I tried to fight them off.” She smacked the dummy in the face. “But they tore my clothes.” She pulled on the oversized shirt she was wearing.

Duncan watched her with a puzzled expression on his face when Dean came walking up from behind.

Sophia stopped what she was doing and blushed.

“What’s goin’ on here?” the laird asked with a matching expression of confusion. He looked almost boyish, which made him adorable. Sophia tried to push the thought out of her mind.

Duncan leaned in a bit closer and whispered to his nephew, “I dinnae think the fool ye brought back is any good. She keeps

on mimin' a skit, an' I cannae make head or tails of what she's on about. If I were ye, I'd send her back and ask for a new one."

The laird looked up and cocked his head to the side as he stared at her, waiting for her to explain her side of events.

"I was just trying to explain why I was wearing men's clothing," she said sheepishly. "Your uncle didn't seem to understand when I tried to explain."

Dean shook his head and leaned back down to speak to his uncle. "She's the new tutor that's come for Cillian, Uncle," he shouted in the man's ear. "She's from London. Sophia Harrison."

Duncan looked at his nephew before looking back at her. "Oh, she's English, then. That explains a lot." He nodded to himself as if her behavior could completely be explained by the fact that she was English.

Dean looked at her with thinly veiled amusement as she smiled sheepishly at him. He shook his head with a small laugh. "Duncan, the lass had nae even been here for a day, an' yer already having her jump through hoops."

"Boots?" Duncan squinted at him. "Why would I give the lass me boots? Does she nae have any of her own?"

Sophia noticed the kind glimmer in the laird's eyes whenever he spoke to the old man. He seemed like a rough man, but

there was a gentler side to him that showed up at the most unexpected times.

“I dinnae ken what I am goin’ to do with ye.” Dean shook his head and laughed as he walked away, leaving the pair to fend for themselves.

“Could you just...” She wanted to ask him if he would stay and be the language and hearing buffer between her and his uncle, but he was gone before she could finish her sentence.

Sophia hung her head in shame as Hamish and Anthony passed by with thinly veiled expressions of amusement on their faces. Being a tutor at McGill Castle was going to be harder than she thought.

Her only hope was that Cillian proved to be a pleasant boy that was easy to work with. Perhaps her gentle way of teaching was all he needed to learn.

CHAPTER 5



SOPHIA SHUFFLED the books on the desk in the corner of the study that had been set aside specifically for Cillian's lessons. The papers lay scattered in a haphazard manner that only she could understand.

She was wearing an old grey skirt with a white frilly blouse that one of the maids had found for her. The cut was slim and fitting, but not entirely her style. She preferred looser clothes that gave her room to move. She made a mental note to write to her mother for more clothes as soon as she could. Her hair was tied back with a ribbon, and her overall appearance was that of a schoolmarm.

She'd taken a few days to get settled in at the castle before starting her official position. She was nervous about meeting Cillian but made up her mind to do her best and treat him with as much patience and kindness as she could. It couldn't be easy being raised without a mother. She also tried to take her mind off the irritating laird, whom she thankfully had not seen all these days.

She couldn't say she didn't feel a slight pang of longing at his absence.

Looking around, she tried to familiarize herself with everything she needed to carry out the lessons. The study was lined from wall to wall with novels and instructional books on just about any topic one could imagine. She was impressed with the laird's extensive collection.

“Who are ye?” a small voice suddenly asked, drawing her attention to the study door.

A small boy of about ten stood in the doorway holding a book. His hair was jet black and slicked to the side. His skin was pale, and his stature was small and gangly like most boys of his age, but the most striking feature of all was his penetrating blue eyes, which pierced through her soul.

Sophia swallowed the urge to correct his manners and smiled warmly at him, not wanting to get off on the wrong foot. “My name is Sophia Harrison.” She walked around the desk and came to stand in front of him with her hands clasped in front of her. “You may call me Miss Harrison.”

“Are ye the new tutor?” he asked without bothering to introduce himself.

“I am,” she replied politely. “And you must be Cillian, am I right?”

Cillian looked her up and down for a second as if she were an insect that required closer inspection. “Why did Faither bring a woman all the way from England? What can ye teach me? I dinnae need another tutor.”

“I can assure you that I’m more than qualified to teach you your lessons,” she insisted with a smile.

“Prove it.” He cocked his head to the side in a challenge.

She kept her cool. “Well, I’m rather good at arithmetic. Ask me any question you like.” She widened her smile and clasped her hands behind her back, shifting on her feet.

“Very well, then. What will I have if I subtract five hundred and ninety-nine from seventy-three?”

She did the math in her head for a second before giving him the answer. “Negative five hundred and twenty-six.”

“You cannae have a negative number.” Cillian glared at her. “Besides, I have no use for arithmetic. Where will I ever use that in real life?”

“You can have a negative number if you work in the opposite direction. Temperature takes negative values to denote how cold it is,” she explained. “Arithmetic can be very useful in all walks of life,” she added positively. “For example, when you become laird of the castle one day, you will need to make sure that all of your men’s wages are paid in full and all the taxes collected are fair. You don’t want to be taking more money from people than what they owe.”

“I can hire a man to do those things for me,” he stated triumphantly as if the argument had been settled.

His pointed chin thrust in the air whenever he made a point. Sophia loved the way his knobby knees protruded from his breeches. He was at the prepubescent stage in his life right before his looks really began to develop.

“You could,” she conceded. “But doing the numbers and work yourself will ensure that everything is done correctly. That way, you won’t have to double-check what any of your men are doing,” she countered. “It’s good to have a few trusted people to count on, but it’s even better if you have everything in hand yourself.”

He glared at her for a moment before walking past her into the room and retrieving a book from the shelf.

“Great,” she said happily with a sigh of relief. It boded well for her that he was interested in books. “I can see you are eager to start the lesson. I had something in mind to start with, but I don’t mind if you want to choose a book. We can start with anything you like.” She came up from behind and looked over his shoulder at the books on the shelf. “What book are we looking for?” She bent low with her hands on her knees.

Cillian turned around and glared at her again, with one corner of his cherubic lips raised to the side. “*I* am lookin’ for a book on sword fightin’, an’ *I* will be takin’ it outside where *I* can watch the men trainin’.”

“Oh, well, I think sword fighting is a grand practice. I’ll be more than happy to accompany you once we’ve finished all of our morning lessons,” she said cheerfully. “How does that sound?”

He turned to her with his head cocked to the side as if he was speaking to a person who had trouble understanding. “It sounds to me like yer hard of hearin’, miss,” he said bluntly in the same kind of grumpy manner that his father had. “I said that I would be takin’ the book outside on me own.”

Slightly taken aback by his cool demeanor and unwillingness to give her a chance, Sophia straightened her spine and looked down at him. “While I do think that swordsmanship is a great use of your time, it can definitely be a valuable skill for a man to learn. The laird has brought me here to teach you your lessons. I think we should honor that before we continue with other activities.” She tried a different approach. “We can have fun while learning before we go out to play.”

Cillian shook his head and walked right past her to the door with the book in his hand, clearly annoyed by her persistent stance.

“I beg your pardon, but where are you going?” she asked firmly but politely.

“I am goin’ to the yard with me book to see how the men practice with swords,” he said slowly as if she were hard of hearing and dumb. “I dinnae care for your lessons or anythin’ that me faither says.”

“Cillian...” she began patiently.

“I dinnae have to listen to ye or anyone else that me faither brings to the castle!” He raised his voice and balled his tiny fist at his side. “I hate me faither. He never listens to anythin’ I have to say. I dinnae need another tutor who thinks she kens

better than anyone else!” His eyes shot daggers at her as he glared. “Yer wastin’ yer time at this castle, Miss Harrison!” He turned and stormed out of the room, leaving her stunned and alone.

Sophia briefly wondered what kind of women had come to be his tutors, if they were at fault for possibly being too harsh with the boy, or if he was just too closed off to trust them.

She looked at the empty doorway and wondered what she should do. Cillian was indeed a difficult boy, but there was something else there behind his eyes. She could have sworn she saw the glimmer of a tear when he had said that he hated his father. He was obviously hurting and feeling as if his voice was unheard.

Placing her hands on her hips, she looked out the window at the servants in the yard.

There has to be something I can do to get through to him.

She mulled the options over in her mind as she chewed her lip. Her only choice at present was to approach the laird and ask for his help. It wasn’t something she wanted to do, but she knew that something had to be done. The grumpy oaf would just have to swallow his pride and become her ally. Whether he liked it or not, she was here to do a job.

And to hide.

Her inner voice reminded her of the ordeal she’d left behind at home. All the excitement from her arrival had pushed the issue

to the back of her mind. Somewhere in the recesses of London was a man who knew her name, a man who stalked her every move.

She swallowed the panic that rose in her throat and made her way out the door in pursuit of the man who was her current employer and protector.



“I beg your pardon, my laird,” Sophia greeted politely as she entered the dining hall where Dean was sitting down for his late breakfast.

She felt the heat rising in her collar as she looked him over. Dean cut quite the handsome figure in his traditional red kilt and off-white cotton shirt that made the muscles in his arms bulge through the fabric. She quickly shook her head to force her thoughts away from his appearance.

I'm here for Cillian.

“Miss Harrison,” he returned gruffly. “How is it goin’ with the lessons this mornin’? I hope Cillian isnae givin’ ye too much grief.” He reached over the table and retrieved a pile of bannocks, placing them on his already overfilled plate. “Do ye have everythin’ ye need with all of the books? I can have one of the men send for more.”

“That’s exactly what I wanted to talk to you about,” she said as she took a seat beside him while he sat at the head of the table. “I have all of the books I need, but I’d like to address the issue with Cillian.”

“That didnae take very long.” He sighed and shook his head.

“What didn’t?”

“It’s only yer first day an’ yer already fixin’ to leave,” he growled with frustration. “I dinnae ken what to do with the lad. He chases away every tutor I can find. They never have a chance to start ‘afore they come down here and ask to leave. Four women have come and gone.” He glanced at her with a displeased frown. “An’ now five.”

“No, that’s not why I’m here at all. I don’t wish to quit, nor will I be quitting anytime in the near future,” she clarified.

Dean stopped chewing on his bannock and stared at her. “Go on,” he said after a few moments of examining her face.

“I want your help so that I can figure out a way to gain his trust. I can’t force him into the study to do his lessons. There needs to be a way that I can make him stay long enough to teach him anything.”

He took another large bite of a bannock and sipped his ale. “I can have one of the men stand guard at the study door an’ make sure he stays until the lessons are done. Problem solved.” He turned back to his plate of food.

“No.” Sophia shook her head and rubbed her temples. “That’s not the answer to the problem. Forcing him into the study will only make him resent us even more. We need a gentler way to pique his interest. You mentioned before that he has an interest

in sword fighting. I saw he took a book this morning on the topic. Do you make time to do that with him?"

The laird wiped his hands together, allowing the crumbs to fall into his plate. "Cillian is nae allowed to use a sword, he's too young," he said as a matter of fact. "He can learn how to fight once his schoolin' is complete an' he'd had more experience in life. Lads can easily have accidents with swords at his age. I will nae take the risk."

"I'm sorry, but on the ride to the castle you said that Cillian spent most of his time learning how to fight. Did I misunderstand what you were saying?" She cocked her head to the side in confusion.

"Aye, I permit him to watch the men train with Anthony, but he is nae allowed to fight. He's to focus on his studies first 'afore I'll allow him to use a sword. He learns by watchin' the men and reading those books." He broke another bannock in half and took a bite without looking at her.

Sophia was a little intimidated by his appetite, though he was a huge man, so he needed lots of sustenance. But she felt slightly annoyed at his seeming dismissal of what she was saying. "But aren't there wooden swords that rookies sometimes use to train so that nobody gets hurt? Surely those are suitable for a boy of ten?"

"It's nae about hurtin' himself. I want him to focus on his studies first. He needs education more than he needs to ken how to fight. All of that will come later in life once he's more established."

“I applaud the sentiment behind your efforts.” She tried her best to sound diplomatic. “However, I do feel that we could reach Cillian better by letting him participate in things he’s passionate about, such as sword fighting. It could be a healthy outlet for him, and it can also be used as a bargaining tool. For example, if he completes three to five hours of lessons every day, he could have an hour or two off in the afternoons with Anthony to unwind and enjoy himself.”

“Nay,” Dean said bluntly, his jaw clenched. “The rule is final. I will nae negotiate. Cillian is to complete his education ‘afore he learns to fight. I want him to learn how to be a good man, nae a fighter.”

“But it could be used as a bonding tool between the two of you as well. If you would only listen to what I have to say.”

“That is enough!” He slammed his fists on the table, making the cutlery rattle and shake. “I will nae be told how to raise me own son. Cillian will learn manners an’ education first! I will nae have him raised like some kind of barbarian, knowing naething but how to swing a sword!”

“Do you think of Anthony Gillies as a barbarian then?” Sophia asked defiantly, using the only example she could think of.

Anthony was a well-spoken man and by no means a barbarian, at least from what she could tell.

“Anthony Gillies is different!”

“How so? He uses a sword with expert precision and speaks as if he himself is educated.”

“Anthony Gillies is not my son!”

“There is no need to shout, my laird,” she said calmly as she stared at him, unperturbed by his little outburst. If anything, Sophia was known for her cool head when arguments arose, no matter the size of the person yelling at her.

“I am still the laird and yer employer,” he grunted, but he was slightly calmer. “I will nae have ye comin; in here an’ questionin’ how I raise me son.”

“With all due respect, my laird, you brought me here to help with your son’s education. It is entirely my place to give my opinion if I thought something would benefit your son’s education and, by extension, his relationship with you, his father.”

Dean sighed and raised his hand to touch his forehead, causing his mug of ale to topple over. He quickly stood and righted the mug, placing it neatly beside the plate before retrieving a cloth from the other end of the table and cleaning the mess. He seemed on edge.

Sophia noticed for the first time that everything on the table was neat and tidy, not a single fork or plate was out of place. The table had been laid with expert precision. The queen’s butler could not have done a better job. She noticed for the first time that the laird himself was immaculately clean with not a hair out of place on his head.

Come to think of it, she hadn't noticed it on the night he'd cleaned her wounds, but he'd been meticulous with the pouches of herbs as well. He'd lined them all up neatly in a row before use and placed them back exactly as they had been once he had been done.

He neatly folded the rag into a square and placed it on a tray. He seemed slightly calmer once the mess was gone.

Sophia also felt her breathing quicken as she watched the way his full lips parted whenever he was deep in thought. He had this way of getting her hot when she was in his presence.

"I never had these accidents before," she heard him murmur. He seemed to need to have everything in place, in perfect order.

Was he needing the same for his son?

She knew that there were people in the world that needed order to function. There wasn't a specific name for the condition, but perhaps in a century or two, more light will be shed on it. She was different in the sense that all of her surroundings were often a mess. Her mother had regularly complained to her about this fact.

Order in the chaos is what she called it. She knew exactly where everything was, even if nobody else ever did. There was a method to her madness.

The laird finally spoke again as he took his seat, shifting the mug a few inches to the left. "I would like ye to give Cillian

his lessons without goin' against me wishes," he said calmly but sternly, conveying the message that he was not to be challenged.

"I understand, my laird," Sophia said coolly. "I'll do my best to gain his trust by other means, without going against your wishes." Her voice was calm, without a hint of sarcasm. The battle lines had unknowingly been drawn between them in the sand.

He nodded a response and let out a breath as she stood from her chair.

"Please enjoy the rest of your breakfast, my laird." She turned and left the room, making her way down the hall and back up the stairs to the study.

There are many ways I can come up with a plan for Cillian without going against your wishes... my laird.

There were many things her mother had taught her in life, but one of those things was that men didn't always know best.

CHAPTER 6



SOPHIA HUGGED her arms tightly around her waist as she watched Cillian from afar. The weather was getting colder, and she had yet to receive any new clothes. The letters to her mother had been few and far between, as they'd both decided it was best to go without contacting each other for a while, in case her stalker was watching the house. She still wore the same, thin tutor clothes that she'd worn since she'd arrived a few weeks prior.

The laird had given her a stack of clothes with the promise of more as soon as the weather got colder. He could be rough at times, but he was kind and attentive to all of her needs.

She'd yet to convince Cillian to take one of her lessons, but she was patient and kind while she waited for him to come around. Part of the reason she was out in the cold at present was that she wanted a word with Anthony and possibly even Hamish. She hadn't spent much time with them, as the laird had instructed, but she knew them to be kind men who would surely help.

The boy was wrapped in a warm coat beneath a giant alder tree that bordered the section of ground Anthony used to train the men. He was reading a book about swords, occasionally looking up whenever one of the men yelled some profanity.

“Keep yer head up, lad!” Anthony yelled at one of the youngsters as he swung his sword past his mop of bright red curls. “Yer enemy will chop off yer ear or worse if ye keep looking at yer boots!”

The young lad panted as he tried his best to parry at his teacher, swinging and missing as Anthony stepped gracefully to the side. Anthony in turn swung his sword in a perfect circle, just as he’d done on the night the laird had come to her aid.

“Yer letting yer opponent tire ye out, lad. Ye need to take a step back and watch yer enemies’ every move.” Anthony stepped to the side to illustrate his point. “If ye keep an eye on yer enemy’s movements, ye will be able to see yer chance.” He continued walking to the side, sidling in a perfect circle around the lad.

The boy, who couldn’t have been more than seventeen, picked up his sword again and kept it ready at his side as he locked eyes with Anthony and mimicked his movements, keeping a safe distance between them until Anthony began to swing his sword. He nearly stumbled a few times as he tried his best to copy the steps, but he soon got the hang of it. The boy lunged forward suddenly, with his blade held high.

Anthony quickly corrected his mistake and stopped the blade inches away from his face with a deafening clank of metal. “That’s it!” He laughed approvingly as the boy backed off. “Ye got the hang of it.” He sheathed his sword and strode forward to shake the lad’s hand. “If ye keep that kind of wit about ye, ye’ll be ready for battle ‘afore ye ken. Great work, soldier.”

“Thank ye kindly, Anthony.” The freckle-faced boy smiled, shaking the hand that was offered to him. “I would nae be where I am today if it was nae for ye.”

“Get on home ‘afore yer maither has me hide,” Anthony grunted bashfully before sending the boy on his way.

Sophia noticed how shy he was when the lad praised him. He was a humble man who appreciated it when his skill was recognized, even by someone who wasn’t as skilled as he was. She appreciated that kind of quality in a man.

“Good mornin’,” he greeted happily when he looked up to see Sophia watching him.

She came forward with her arms wrapped around her waist. “Good morning. I see you’re at it bright and early this morning again. You seem to have quite a fan with that young man.”

He lifted the corner of his mouth into a smile as he looked at the ground and kicked a small stone with his iron-tipped boot. “Jamie is a good lad. He’ll make quite the swordsman when he’s older.”

“I can see that.” She smiled back. “You are quite the teacher.”

“Och.” He waved the idea away as a slight blush spread across his cheeks. He kept his face cleanly shaved, unlike most of the men at the castle, giving him the appearance of a baby-faced youth. Sophia preferred the ruggedly handsome look of the laird’s trimmed beard.

“Don’t you think so, Cillian?” She turned to Cillian, flashing him the brightest smile she could manage. “You should have just as much knowledge as Anthony does by now from all of those books you read.”

Cillian rolled his eyes and pushed himself up off the ground before leaving without so much as a second glance in her direction.

“Still nae luck with the lad?”

“I’m afraid not.” She shivered slightly as the wind picked up. “I’ve been trying my best to break through to him, but he doesn’t seem to want to budge.”

“Give him time. The lad never kent his maither. His faither does the best that he can, but there’s a gap between the two of them that cannae be breached.” Anthony paused and squinted at the castle. “Nae by any of us in any case.”

“What happened to his mother?” she asked.

“Aye, now that’s a sad story. She died giving birth to him.”

“Was the laird married for very long before Cillian came along?”

He shook his head. “It was an arranged marriage. They hardly kent each other. Terrible shame.” He smiled sadly. “But keep at it, milady, he cannae be cold toward ye forever.”

“That’s actually why I’m out here,” she said as she hugged her waist a little tighter. “I’m hoping you can help me with something. I have an idea that could possibly help Cillian with his schooling, or at least I hope it will.”

“Oh? I’m afraid I dinnae ken much about schoolin’, nae since I was a wee bairn meself, but I’ll do anythin’ that I can.”

She laughed slightly when she noticed a mass of red curls suddenly poking out from behind a barrel. “You can come and help me too, Hamish. I’m sure this will be your area of expertise as well.”

Anthony rolled his eyes as Hamish poked his head around the corner of the stable doors and grinned, his fat belly following before the rest of his body.

“Glad to be at yer service, milady.” Hamish pushed Anthony to the side as he greeted her, eliciting a growl of disapproval from the man.

“I want a set of wooden weapons that I can use to teach Cillian with,” she explained.

The men exchanged concerned glances.

“I dinnae ken if that’s the best idea, milady,” Hamish began.

“It’s a brilliant idea,” Anthony interjected. “But the laird has specifically forbidden the lad from using any kind of weapons,

especially a sword. Nae until he's older an' finished his schoolin'."

Hamish nodded in agreement, his enormous belly bouncing along with his head. "Specifically forbidden."

"I am aware of the laird's requests, he has put them forth to me as well, but he has also requested that I tutor his son. I cannot do that if I can't pique his interest. So, I am asking you, gentlemen, if you would help me procure the correct items that I require to achieve just that."

"So, you want us to go against the laird's wishes?" Anthony asked with a frown.

"I'm nae saying I won't—" Hamish stopped when Anthony elbowed him in the ribs.

"I'm not asking either of you to go against the laird's wishes. You see, he forbade Cillian from using a sword, but he did not forbid me from using them as teaching props in the study. Cillian doesn't have to wield them in order to learn something from them."

"Oh, I see what yer sayin' now." Hamish was the first to catch on. "Ye want them in the study to lure the lad in, but he doesnae have to use them to fight."

"Exactly." She nodded.

Anthony suddenly clicked his fingers as the penny dropped. “By the Gods, that’s a genius idea. An’ I think I ken exactly what yer lookin’ for. We can use the wooden swords an’ shields we keep to train the lads when they just start out.”

“One of each will do just fine if you can manage that,” Sophia said encouragingly.

“There’s an even bigger selection if we ask some of the lads with bairns. They are bound to have a few toys lyin’ around.”

“An’ if there aren’t any to yer likin’, milady, I’ll make them meself,” Anthony added triumphantly, not wanting to be upstaged by his friend.

“Thank you, gentlemen. I knew I could count on your help.”

“Anytime, milady.” They both bowed and glared at each other when they realized neither of them was getting the individual attention that they craved.

Hamish reached out and pushed Anthony again, sending him reeling to the side.

Sophia laughed heartily and shook her head. “I’ll leave you to your work, then, gentlemen. Thank you so much for your help. I am forever in your debt.”

Hamish straightened and raised his hand to his head in a salute. “Ye’ll have the requested items as soon as we can get them, milady.”

Hugging herself as tightly as she could, Sophia left the men standing beneath the tree and made her way back up to the castle with haste. She couldn't wait to go to her room and pull one of the blankets around her shoulders. Perhaps she could even persuade one of the maids to keep the fires lit in the study while she worked. She stopped on the stone stairs that lead into the hall when she heard a cough.

Dean was standing to the side of the front doors with a folded garment in his hands. "I went to the study, but ye were nae there," he said in the way of a greeting.

Sophia was used to his gruff ways by now and didn't think anything of it. "I just went to find Cillian. I'm still struggling to keep him engaged in the lessons," she explained. All of their interactions to date had been about Cillian and her duties.

"I saw him goin' back up into the study nae too long ago." He coughed again.

They hadn't really spoken to each other since the morning of their disagreement. She knew he could see that his way wasn't working, but he still stuck to his decree that she was to do things as he said.

"I'll speak to Cillian and tell him again he needs to attend the morning lessons."

"That won't be necessary," she said happily. "I have a plan to draw him in. I'm pretty sure it's going to work." She didn't mention that she'd still be using a sword, albeit a wooden one

that Cillian wouldn't be touching, but that was another problem that she'd tackle when the time came.

He suddenly remembered the garment in his hand. "This is for ye." He held it out to her. "The weather is getting colder, and I thought ye might need this. It belonged to me maither."

Sophia searched the depths of his dark eyes before reaching out and taking the pile of soft fabric. "Thank you, my laird." She was touched by his sudden spate of kindness.

Unfolding the cloth, she let the square of velvety grey material with tassels at the ends fall open in her arms as she held it up.

"It's a shawl, it will keep ye warm in the months to come. Winters in Scotland can be treacherous even for the most experienced Scotsmen."

Sophia smiled warmly at him before draping the shawl over her shoulders in one fluid motion. The thin fabric was surprisingly warm and light as it engulfed her in a sense of comfort, immediately blocking the chilly wind from reaching her skin.

The laird rubbed the back of his neck as he said, "I didnae realize until this morning that we never replaced yer clothes that were on the horse. Yer English dresses would have been far too thin for a Scottish winter in any case."

She decided to ignore the slight insult in light of his recent change of heart.

“The dressmaker will be coming up from the village this afternoon to fit ye with a few dresses of yer own. Ye will have more than enough to see ye through the winter. We only use the thickest of wools to make our winter clothes in the highlands.”

“Thank you,” she said more quietly. “I appreciate your concern.” She was seeing a kinder side of him that he hadn’t shown her before now.

“Ye’ve stayed on longer than half of the tutors in the past. I ken that Cillian has nae changed his ways yet, but yer efforts are appreciated.”

She was deeply touched by the sentiment and was about to say as much when the dynamic duo, who was Hamish and Anthony, came walking up the stairs, chattering away as if they were the best of friends. It was only when she was around that they seemed to be in competition with one another.

“Do the two of ye have naethin’ better to do with yer time?” Dean suddenly barked at them, making Sophia jump. His moods could change in the blink of an eye whenever the other men were present. He seemed slightly more controlled when it was just the two of them.

“We were just on our way to take a wee dram,” Hamish said in their defense. “We’ve been working hard all mornin’. Anthony has trained most of the lads, an’ I have done more than half of me duties for the day.”

Anthony remained silent as he looked at Dean and then at the long grey shawl that hung over Sophia’s shoulders.

“See that ye get on with yer duties,” Dean said grumpily before walking back into the castle and leaving them on the stairs.

Hamish frowned as Anthony shot him a knowing look.

“Do ye see what I meant?”

“Aye,” Hamish answered him with a nod of agreement. “It’s a possibility, I’ll grant ye that. He never used to act like that ‘afore. I dinnae think ye are right, but it’s a possibility all right.”

“What is?” Sophia asked with a puzzled frown of her own.

“We think that...” Hamish raised a chubby finger as he began to speak, but stopped when Anthony dug him in the ribs. “We think that the laird may be coming down with a cold,” he added quickly.

Sophia was left confused by the whole exchange but decided to leave it be for now. The laird was a strange man. He was difficult to understand at the best of times. But she had other things to occupy her mind at present, like winning the approval and attention of Cillian.

CHAPTER 7



THE LETTERS FLUTTERED to the ground as Sophia gasped in shock. She brought her hands up to stifle her scream. She turned slowly to see if her mother had noticed the letters, but the room was dark. She squinted and struggled to adjust her eyes to the light for a while before a lamp suddenly flickered on, revealing the outline of her mother sitting on the sofa.

“Mama,” she called, her heartbeat returning to normal. “I’m so glad you are here. I was frightened. Why is it so dark in here?” she asked when her mother didn’t respond.

Libby sat on the sofa. She was wearing a black dress. Her face was turned down and covered in long strands of her hair, while her hands were neatly clasped on her lap.

“Mama, why won’t you answer me?” Sophia began to feel uneasy.

Her head suddenly snapped around as she heard a sound coming from the door. There was a man standing in the doorway with a top hat and cane. His powder blue suit was neatly trimmed and pristine, and his black shoes were shiny. His face was turned to the ground just as the face of her mother had been.

“Who are you?” She began to cry when she could finally speak again. “Why are you doing this to me?! I don’t deserve this!”

The man reached into the breast pocket of his coat and pulled out a folded envelope.

“No!” she yelled at the top of her lungs. “Stop doing this to me! Go away!”

The man suddenly ran toward her as she fell back onto the carpet.

Sophia’s body jerked as she awoke in bed. Her skin was covered in sweat, and the sheets were clammy. Using the back of her hands to rub the sleep from her eyes, she reached over and felt for the matches beside her bed. She ignited one and sat upright, using both hands to light the candle.

The nightmares had been plaguing her for a few weeks now ever since she had come to the castle. The uncertainty of who the man was and being away from her mother for such a long time were wearing on her mind.

She swung her legs off the bed and took a few deep breaths. This evening’s nightmare had been the worst she’d had. Deciding that sleep was no longer an option, she reached for her grey shawl at the foot of the bed and draped it over her nightgown before reaching for the candle. “Warm milk is exactly what I need right now,” she whispered to the room at large.



Dean shoved another bannock into his mouth as he stared at the immaculately clean surfaces in the castle kitchen. He loved the way the copper pots glistened in the flickering light of the candles. Cleanliness had always brought him peace. Even as a child, he had liked order and punctuality. His mother had often commented on the fact and said he would make a grand laird someday with his penchant for details.

He began to panic when he heard footsteps coming down the hall and tried his best to hide his stack of bannocks behind the fruit bowl that lay in the center of the table. His endeavors failed as the baked bread fell out over the table.

Looking up, he saw Sophia standing in the doorway with a candle in her hand. Her nightgown was visible beneath the grey shawl he had given her. She looked from his face to the messy table, and then back at his face again. He felt like a naughty child that had been caught in the act.

“I couldn’t sleep, so I thought I would come and warm myself some milk,” she explained without mentioning anything about the bannocks.

Dean sat in stunned silence for a while and stared at her, unsure of what he should do in a situation like that. In all his years as laird of the castle, he’d never once been caught in the act of stealing bannocks in the middle of the night. Not even the cook or one of the maids had happened upon him in the act.

“I can go back to my room,” she said uncertainly after a while. “I didn’t mean to disturb you.”

“Nay.” He finally came to his senses and stood. “Please come an’ have a seat.” He gestured toward the kitchen table. “Ye didnae disturb me.”

She seemed relieved when he asked her to stay.

“I was just havin’ a bite to eat, but yer welcome to join me. I’ll warm some milk for both of us.”

Sophia smiled and took a seat as he walked around the table and retrieved a small saucepan from one of the shelves. Luckily, the cook had left the milk out after she’d prepared the supper. After filling the pot to the brim, Dean worked on lighting the fire. It didn’t take long, as the coals were still hot from a few hours prior.

“I’m sorry if I disturbed you,” Sophia apologized again when he sat across from her at the table with two empty mugs in his hand.

“There’s nae need to apologize,” he said sheepishly, glancing at the bannocks. “I should nae have been down here, but sneakin’ the fresh bannocks has been a ritual of mine since I was a wee bairn.”

The lightness of her laughter echoed throughout the kitchen. “I did notice that you have a certain fondness for them.”

He rubbed the back of his neck as he felt her teasing tone lowering his barriers. “Aye, I love the taste.”

“There’s nothing wrong with that.” She smiled warmly at him in a manner that tugged at the strings of his heart. “We all have a weakness.”

“What’s yours, then?”

“Fine,” she said after a brief pause. “Since I’ve already walked in on you indulging in yours, I’ll tell you mine.” She lifted a finger and pointed it at him. “But don’t you dare laugh.”

“Laird’s honor.” He made a cross over his heart.

She took a deep breath and looked him straight in the eyes. “Cheese.”

“Cheese?” he asked with a slight smirk.

“Big, fat, yellow wheels of cheese with holes in them.”

He began to laugh at the serious expression on her face. “I thought ye were goin’ to say somethin’ very ladylike, such as tea cakes or scones.”

“No.” She shook her head and pursed her lips. “It’s cheese. I absolutely love the stuff. Always have ever since I was a little girl.”

“In that case,” he said with one eyebrow raised, then stood. Walking back over to the stove, he removed the saucepan from the bright red stovetop just as it was about to boil over. He walked back over to the table and then poured the steaming milk into their cups before placing the pot into the sink.

He glanced back at her with a mischievous smile on his face before reaching up to the top shelf and carefully removing a parcel that had been wrapped in brown paper and twine.

Sophia watched him curiously as he placed the parcel on the table in front of her.

“Here ye are, milady,” he said triumphantly. “One, albeit not so big, fat, lump of yellow cheese with holes in it.”

Sophia squeaked with delight and clapped softly before unwrapping the parcel.

“Enjoy,” he said as he reached for another bannock and took a bite.

He watched as she broke off tiny pieces of the cheese and threw them into her mouth like an eager child. He loved the way her braided curls fell over her shoulder as she ate.

“Do you come down here every night?”

“Most nights, but only when I cannae sleep.”

She nodded as if she understood exactly what he was saying.

“How are ye findin’ things with Cillian?” he asked, taking his chance to broach the subject. He knew things weren’t working and a change was needed. He just couldn’t bring himself to admit that his approach had been wrong.

“It’s a bit difficult,” Sophia admitted as she popped another piece of cheese into her mouth. “I can’t break through to him with the tools that I currently have.”

“I’ve been thinkin’ about ways we could possibly help him become more interested in his studies.”

“Oh?” She perked up slightly as she took a sip of her milk.

“I think it may help if we place a guard at the door,” he suggested. “Just listen,” he said when she rolled her eyes at him. He loved the way she wasn’t afraid to show her displeasure at anything he said. Everyone else at the castle was always too afraid to speak their minds. “I ken that ye dinnae fancy the idea, but a stricter environment would help the boy focus an’ teach him more discipline.”

“Tell me, my laird, were any of the other tutors you hired strict with him?”

“Aye, two of them were very strict. I went to London to choose them meself.”

“And how did that work out for you at the end of the day?”

Dean took a deep breath to hide his amusement at her words. She was more forthcoming with her opinions than any other woman he had ever met. “What would ye have me do then? Let him run around the castle stabbin’ people with a sword?”

“Obviously not.” She paused to consider for a second. “Well, not a real one at least. Just a wooden one.”

He shook his head as a smile crept over her lips.

“On a more serious note, you don’t have to agree to letting him learn how to fight, but please consider letting me use a few props to gain his interest.” She searched his face for a reaction before deciding to take her shot. “Or allow him to train with Anthony using a wooden sword for one hour a day if he agrees to do five hours of schooling in the mornings.”

The laird sat back in his chair and sipped his milk. The sheer look of determination on her face made him want to give her whatever she wanted. He didn’t know why he found her so beguiling. He hadn’t even felt this way about his late wife. Granted, it had been an arranged marriage, but there had at least been a semblance of mutual respect.

“Fine,” he said as he stared at her.

“Fine?”

He watched as her bright green eyes lit up. “Ye can have yer props, an’ I’ll talk to Anthony about trainin’ with the lad for an

hour every afternoon if he finishes five hours of schoolin' every mornin'."

"Oh, Dean!" She was so excited that she forgot to use his title. "Thank you so much! I promise I won't let you down." She reached across the table and placed her hand on top of his, squeezing it.

Dean froze for a second and stared at their hands as the warmth of her skin burned into his.

"I'm sorry," she said after a moment and removed her hand. A slight blush spread across her beautiful porcelain skin. "I think I should go to bed now, there's so much to do in the morning. I can't wait to get started." She stood and pushed her chair back under the table. "Thank you so much again, my laird," she said with a genuine smile on her lips. "You don't know how much this means to me. Good night."

"Good night," he said quietly as he watched her walk down the passage that led to the rest of the castle.

The laird looked down at his hand and slowly unclenched his fist. The warmth of her soft skin still lingered on his. The way she'd said his name had caught him off guard, causing a kind of fluttering in the pit of his stomach that he'd never experienced before.

There was something vastly alluring about the brightness she brought into any room she entered. He wanted to get to know her a little better.

Fear suddenly filled his heart as he recalled the screams of his late wife on the night she had died. The only thing that had made her death even slightly bearable was that he had Cillian to look after.

“No,” he muttered to himself, shaking his head.

I can never get close to anyone ever again.

The pain of losing anyone again was just too much to bear.

CHAPTER 8



SOPHIA LOOKED around the room with a satisfied smile on her face, pulling the woven shawl a little tighter around her shoulders. Dean had been true to his word and provided her with thicker clothes that staved off the icy chill of the harsh Scottish winter. She now wore a grey tweed skirt with a white frilly blouse and heavier undergarments. He had even made sure that the fire was lit before she came up for her lessons after breakfast, ensuring the room was nice and comfortable.

Hamish and Anthony had been true to their word and had brought in a selection of wooden swords, daggers, shields, and various other paraphernalia that would hopefully entice Cillian into a lesson with her. She had them arranged on the carpet in front of the window that overlooked the stables and training grounds, in the hopes that keeping something he loved in view would be a great motivator. She had even gone as far as placing his small wooden desk and chair in front of the fire so he could work in peace without catching a chill.

Glancing at the big clock in the corner of the room, she wondered what was keeping him so long. He usually came into the study before ten, after breakfast to exchange his book. Walking over to the window, she glanced outside and spotted the laird helping some of the other young men load hay into the carts.

Many men in his position would never stoop as low as to do the menial labor around the castle, but Dean was different. He cared about his family and the wellbeing of those who worked for him. Her mind drifted to the night before and the way he had gotten the cheese for her. Sophia could still recall the way his muscles bulged beneath his evening shirt and how his black hair hung down his back in a braid.

He is definitely a handsome man, she thought to herself as she watched him scooping the hay with ease. She found herself biting her bottom lip and playing with the collar of her dress as he laughed and played around with the younger men. She found it surprising that he hadn't remarried after he'd lost his wife.

I wonder what he looks like with his shirt off.

She felt her breathing quicken as new thoughts of the laird entered her mind.

“What is all of this?”

She almost jumped when Cillian suddenly spoke from behind her. He was standing in the doorway with his book hanging in his hand as he stared at the weapons set up across the floor. It took her a minute to refocus her mind, but she quickly recovered and remembered why she was there. Shaking off the guilt of having thought of his father in that way, she began her lesson.

“I'm so glad you asked,” she said with a warm smile as she came forward and stood with her hands on her hips. “What you see before you here.” She paused to throw him a

mischievous smile. “Is what we will be using for your lessons.”

Cillian shuffled on his feet as he brought the book up and held it to his chest in a defensive manner. The mistrust was evident on his face, as he stood rooted to the spot, not even budging an inch into the room.

Her heart broke for him slightly. He obviously wasn't sure if he could believe or even confide in her at this point, or anyone for that matter. His father was out of the question, with their strained relationship. Never knowing one's mother must have a terrible effect on a child. Even if a father cares greatly for his child, there was a gentle touch that only a female figure could provide. Sophia thought of her own mother and how she couldn't imagine her life without her.

Walking over to the props and picking up a sword, she took a deep breath and began her mission of drawing him in. “I thought we could use them to do a little math, and even perhaps some history.” She glanced at him out of the corner of her eye to gauge his reaction.

Cillian didn't seem impressed at all with her, but he did have a curious look in his eyes. He took a small step into the room, but he still seemed reluctant to open up and let go of the book. “Faither says that I am too young to be usin' swords, even the wooden ones.” His eyes were clouded with doubt.

“I have some good news for you on that score then,” she said cheerfully. “I have spoken to your father, and we came up with a compromise together that will help your schooling and allow you to do the things that you enjoy so much.”

“I dinnae believe ye.” Cillian narrowed his piercing blue eyes.

Sophia placed the sword at her side and narrowed her lips. “Do you think the study would be filled with all of this if your father hadn’t allowed it?” she asked and gestured toward all of the props. “He is the laird of the castle, after all. I doubt I could have snuck all of this up here without him noticing.”

Cillian walked over to the table and set his book down. “What kind of compromise?” he asked her, suspicion still cracking his voice.

“Well.” She placed the sword back on the carpet before walking to her desk and shuffling the papers. “Your father has agreed to let me use the props as part of your lessons if you will sit through five hours of study each day.” She straightened the stack of papers, allowing him to think of what she had said.

“Why would I sit through five hours of study with ye an’ wooden swords when I can be learnin’ far more from watching the men fight.” The uncertainty in Cillian’s voice was becoming more apparent as he eyed the weapons. He was slowly losing the battle to his own stubbornness and will.

Sophia knew she had him when he left his book on the table and let his arm fall to his side. All she had to do now was give him the final piece that would seal the deal. “I didn’t think you would want to watch the men fighting anymore, not when your father has given Anthony Gillies permission to teach you how to fight.” She acted as if his response was shocking to her and waited for him to react. “I’m sorry if that was wrong of me to assume.”

“Faither has said that I can learn how to fight?” He seemed unsure yet hopeful about what she was saying.

“Provided you take your lessons seriously and spend the full five hours with me here in the study.” She gave him a triumphant smile.

Cillian seemed to consider her words for a while, but slowly sat down in the chair with his body turned away from the desk.

Her heart sang with joy at the little progress she had made. There was a way to reach the boy, after all. “Does that sound like a fair deal to you?”

“Yer nae playin’ a trick on me?” The veil that had been covering his eyes seemed to drop an inch.

“I give you my word.” She made a cross over her heart and held her right hand up in the air with a serious expression on her face.

“Can I go an’ practice this afternoon already?” he asked hopefully.

“Do you think you can sit through five hours of lessons?” she returned. “That’s a pretty big undertaking for a boy.”

Cillian turned his small body to the desk and pushed his book aside. “Let’s get on with it, then. I am nae sayin’ I will learn anythin’ from ye, but it’s worth sittin’ here if Faither will let me fight.”

Sophia almost jumped for joy but stopped herself just in time. His manners and gruffness were something she would work on in time. For now, she would focus on getting him started with his lessons and then take things from there. "I thought we could perhaps start with a bit of history this morning." She shuffled the papers on the desk and left them in disarray as she found the one she was looking for. "How much do you think you know about swords?" she asked as she walked over to the window and stopped in front of the desk.

Cillian smirked and placed one arm over the back of his chair as he looked at her. "Faither should rather be payin' me instead of ye if yer goin' to talk about things I already ken."

"Humor me," she said patiently. "If you can answer these questions I have for you, I will cut your time down by half."

He sat up straight again and clasped his hands in front of him on the desk. "Go on."

"Great," she said as she began pacing in front of his desk. "Before we get to the history questions, I have a simple numbers equation for you. I said that I would cut your time in half if you can answer all of my questions. How long will you have to stay in the study if you succeed with the quiz?"

Cillian's brow creased with a frown as he brought his thick black eyebrows together. His button nose wrinkled in concentration as he thought. She definitely had his attention now.

“Here,” she said as she walked over to the desk and retrieved a piece of parchment, a quill, and a pot of ink. “Write it out for yourself to make things easier.”

“This isn’t a question about swords,” he said bitterly as he narrowed his eyes at her. “You are trickin’ me.”

“I promise that this question will in no way affect the challenge.” She could see that she still had a very long way to go before she earned his trust. “This is just a simple brain teaser to get us going for now.”

Cillian dipped the quill in the ink and rested his chin on his hand as he began to scribble across the piece of paper.

Sophia gave him his space as she looked back out the window and saw that the laird was no longer there. She felt a strange pang of disappointment that she couldn’t quite explain. A part of her had wanted Dean to still be standing there, but her thoughts were quickly interrupted when Cillian spoke up.

“Three hours,” Cillian answered triumphantly.

“That’s a good try for your first time, but it’s not quite there,” she said encouragingly and walked over to the weapons. “Why don’t you try again?”

He looked at the clock with an overly tense expression on his face.

She walked to the weapons when she could see that he was struggling a bit. “Here, look at things like this.” She knelt down and placed five of the tiny swords in a row. She had originally thought that Hamish and Anthony had overshot, but now she was grateful for their overexuberance. “How many swords do I have here?”

“Five,” Cillian said hesitantly.

“Perfect.” She gave him an encouraging grin. “How many will I have if I take half of them away?”

He looked at the swords for a moment before looking back up at her. “You can’t take half of them away. You would be left with an uneven number. You would either have three or two.”

At least the previous tutors had managed to get something right with the boy. Even if it was just basic counting and vocabulary.

“That’s right,” she said, impressed by how well he was taking to the lesson if weapons were involved. Looking around, she reached for two daggers and brought them closer, taking away the middle sword and placing the daggers above one another in its place. “Now, think of the two daggers as being part of the big sword. It’s still the same sword but just split into sections, just like when an apple is sliced. Does that make sense?”

“I think so,” Cillian answered with a slight frown. “It’s what would happen if a blacksmith smelted the sword down into daggers. It’s still from the same sword, just smaller sections.”

“Exactly,” Sophia said brightly. “That’s a perfect explanation.” She looked back down at the swords. “How many swords and pieces will I have left if I remove half of the swords?”

Cillian bit his lip as he thought before standing up and walking over to the carpet. He stuck his hand out but quickly stopped and looked up at her.

“Go on,” she said encouragingly.

He took two of the swords and one of the daggers, placing them to the side before chewing on his bottom lip. “Two and a half swords?” he asked eventually.

“That’s right!” She beamed with pride at how quickly he’d caught on. “Now, if you think of the swords as being a full hour and the daggers as being half an hour, how many hours do you have if you take half away from five?”

He looked up at the clock before glancing back at the swords. “Two and a half hours,” he said with conviction this time.

“That’s absolutely right, well done!” She stood, using her hands to push herself up. “You may take a seat again, and we can continue with the quiz.”

Cillian quickly stood up and made his way back to his desk without even thinking twice about whether he should be listening to her or not. He seemed to have gained newfound confidence after the display and discussion they had. The veil had completely fallen from his eyes, making them appear brighter blue.

Sophia smiled at him and glanced at the papers she held in her hands before placing them behind her back. “What do you know about swords? How long have swords been around?”

“That’s easy.” He smirked with confidence again. “Swords have always been around.”

“Have they?” She tilted her head slightly to the side.

Cillian seemed uncertain again.

“Daggers actually predate swords by a couple of hundred years. Swords only became popular during the bronze era, when copper and bronze weapons were produced with long leaf-shaped blades and hilts consisting of an extension of the blade in handle form,” she explained as he hung on to her every word.

“That’s nae true. How can daggers predate swords? How would men fight in battle if they had to be so close? Swords allow the soldiers a longer range,” he argued.

“You can look it up for yourself if you like,” she said, then walked over to the shelves to retrieve a small blue book. She laid it on the table in front of the boy. “You like books about swords and fighting. Perhaps you should take a look at this one. I know it’s history and not the usual instruction manuals you like to read, but there are some pretty useful bits of information in there.”

Cillian picked up the book and glanced at the index before quickly turning the pages until he found the section about the bronze age. His eyes flew over the page until they stopped on one paragraph. "I cannae believe it." He looked up at her. "It's right here. Daggers were truly used hundreds of years before the sword."

"I was just as surprised as you." She placed her hands on her hips. "I never even knew there was such a thing as a bronze age. It seems completely mythical to me. I can just imagine how many heroes came out of a time such as that."

He looked at her with a sparkle in his eyes that she'd never seen before. "How do you think they used the daggers in battle?"

"I guess we will have to look that up." She turned and ran her finger over one of the shelves before pulling a second book out and handing it to him. "Perhaps you could look that up. We could both learn something new today." She smiled to herself as he took the book.

Cillian bent his head and began his search for answers, the notion of leaving earlier for his training completely forgotten at present.

Sophia walked over to her desk and leaned against the edge with a triumphant smile and hope in her heart. The laird's son was shaping up to be a very kind and gentle soul. All he needed was a bit of encouragement and patience.

Things were starting to look up again.

CHAPTER 9



DEAN WALKED down the corridor with his hands behind his back. He was deep in thought as he made his way to the study. It was nearly three o'clock in the afternoon, and neither Cillian nor Sophia had been seen or spotted even once throughout the day. He'd expected at least one of them to come down the stairs in a huff. His prediction had been that either Cillian would have stalked into the yard with his book, or Sophia would have come downstairs to complain about how her plan had failed.

Are ye concerned because ye wanted the plan to work, or are ye mad that ye may have been wrong?

Given the argument he and Sophia had when she'd broached the subject, he didn't want to give her the satisfaction of being right.

He frowned as he approached the door to the study. Raucous peals of laughter were coming from within the room. He turned his head and looked down the hall to see if he hadn't perhaps taken a wrong turn. Once he'd established that he was indeed in the right hall, he continued walking until he reached the study.

He swung the door open, and the hinges squeaked in protest, yet it didn't seem to bother Sophia and Cillian, who were completely immersed in a world of their own. The two were locked in what seemed like an epic battle. They were both parrying back and forth with wooden swords as they asked each other questions that he himself didn't even know the answers to.

“And what were swords made of before they were made of steel?” Sophia asked as she gently aimed at Cillian's side with her wooden prop. Her other hand was kept above her head for balance.

Cillian dodged the attack as she parried again. “Swords were made with copper,” he hesitated for a second. “Before other metals were added.” He spun around with a tiny giggle and tried to slash her side but missed. “It made the blade softer in parts and harder in others, giving it more flexibility.”

Dean marveled at the animated way his son spoke to her as they play-fought with the swords. He'd never seen him this excited about anything to do with his schooling. Cillian had not only sat through five hours of studies, but he seemed to be enjoying it. Letting the door swing open slightly wider, the laird leaned against the frame and watched.

“How many kinds of metal are usually used to make blades?” Sophia asked Cillian with a laugh, thrusting her leg out and pretending she was going to stab him.

There was something about the way her laugh floated through the air like a gentle summer breeze that made Dean stand to attention. He caught himself smiling at the scene despite himself. She was absolutely radiant when she laughed.

Cillian thought for a second but quickly aimed his sword at her heart. “Three. Bronze, steel, and iron. But there are many forms of iron.”

“I’m impressed!” Sophia laughed as she danced around the tip of the blade.

Dean watched as she twirled, and her soft curls fell around her face. Her cheeks were pink and flushed from all of the movements, and her chest rose and fell with every breath, inadvertently drawing his attention to her perfect breasts.

“Very quickly.” She struggled for breath. “Our time is almost up. What is three divided by two?”

Cillian watched her sword as his nose wrinkled in concentration. “One and a half!” he yelled as if it were a battle cry and thrust his sword at her side.

“You got me!” Sophia moaned and fell to her knees, faking her very painful death. She pressed his sword to her side beneath her arm as she leaned to the left. “I have lost... the victory of this lesson...” She took a dramatic breath. “Goes to thee, fair knight...” she trailed off as she keeled over onto the carpet amidst the wooden blades and shields, letting her mouth fall open and flopping her head to the side.

The boy erupted in fits of laughter. “That’s the worst death I have ever seen!”

“It is not!” Sophia protested, lifting her head, before lying back down and letting her tongue stick out the side of her mouth.

Cillian cracked up once again before turning to the door and spotting his father. “Faither!” he yelled and ran over.

Sophia quickly looked up and got to her feet, dusting herself off with a sheepish look on her face. “My laird, we were just finishing our lesson.” She clasped her hands in front of her and looked at her feet.

“I can see that,” Dean said with a nod. He was still utterly surprised and taken aback by the fact that his son had taken to a tutor and actually seemed to have learned something in the process.

“Faither,” Cillian asked with a hopeful look in his eyes, “do I really get to go an’ practice swords with Anthony now?”

“That depends on Miss Harrison’s report.” Dean looked at her with his eyebrow raised, using his arm to push himself off the door frame.

“I am happy to report that all five hours were accounted for today, my laird.” She curtsied happily to them both. Her breaths still came in torrents as she spoke. “The soldier is cleared for duty.” She gave a mock salute that elicited another sharp giggle from Cillian.

“I guess that ye can go, then,” Dean said gruffly with the slightest hint of a smile on his lips.

“Thank ye, Faither!” Cillian rushed forward and hugged him around the legs before hurrying to the door. “Faither,” he said as he turned to his father.

“Aye?” Dean answered with caution. He wasn’t used to Cillian speaking so openly to him.

“Did ye ken that daggers were used as the weapon of choice ‘afore they made the blades longer an’ called ‘em swords?”

“That cannae be,” Dean said with a frown. “What kind of range would that have given men in battle?”

“It’s true, Faither! Ask Miss Haddison!” Cillian’s laughter echoed down the hall as he ran off.

“I can see he’s spending time with Duncan.” Dean laughed as he came into the room and shut the door behind him.

Sophia seemed uneasy at first and shifted on her feet. “He was having trouble remembering some of the facts, so I used the swords to engage different parts of his mind,” she explained as she gently swung the sword back and forth in her hand. “He seemed to really remember the facts and even enjoyed himself once we began to play.”

Dean said nothing but looked around the room at the chaos that had ensued. The papers on the desk lay around as if a hurricane had swept through the castle. Several books lay open on Cillian’s desk, and all of the wooden weapons were scattered about the floor. It took every ounce of his willpower

and being not to begin tidying the mess. He didn't want to discourage Sophia now, not when she had obviously gotten through to Cillian at long last.

“Thank ye for what ye are doin’ with Cillian,” he began. “I can honestly say that I didnae expect the lad to take to his lessons so easily.”

“Thank you for allowing me to use the props. That more than anything is what made the difference with him.” She smiled earnestly and tucked a strand of loose hair behind her ear. The fight had left her slightly disheveled and red in the face. Her blouse was half sticking out of her skirt, and the sleeves of her dress had been rolled up to allow for easier movement. “The progress was only made because you were willing to make a change that benefited him.”

Dean felt himself warming up to her again as she spoke. She had a very gentle way about her that made everything brighter, but there was something else about her that had piqued his interest. Dean had found himself dreaming of her after their night in the kitchen. He'd dreamt he'd been with her in a way that wasn't quite befitting of a laird and his son's tutor.

“I'll just start cleaning up then,” she eventually said when he didn't respond at all.

“I'll give ye a hand.” He jumped at the chance to put everything back in its place.

“You really don't have to.” She seemed hesitant as she spoke. “I know that cleaning is probably something that you don't do on a regular basis.” She quickly corrected herself when she

noticed the scowl on his face. “All I meant was that you have maids and hall boys to do the cleaning. With you being the laird, it’s not part of running the castle.”

“Every little chore is part of runnin’ the castle,” he said as he began to pick up the swords, placing them in one hand. “A millwright will ensure that every cog is workin’ in his design if he kens his job well enough.”

Sophia began to pick up the rest of the swords and shields as he spoke, taking his lead and listening to what he had to say. “I never thought of it that way,” she said, looking down at the carpet and reaching for a sword. “I suppose it does make sense to ensure that everything is functioning as it should. It would make running things far easier if you didn’t have to check up on everything.”

Dean kept his eyes on the swords in his hand and didn’t seem to notice when they both reached out at the same time.

“I’m sorry,” she quickly said and retracted her hand when his had brushed hers for a fraction of a second.

Her skin was soft and warm to the touch. He wanted to run his fingers over her wrist and feel the delicate skin of her hands. He quickly shook off the thoughts when he realized where his mind was going. It definitely wasn’t the time to be revisiting his dream of the previous night, not when they were alone in a room with a closed door.

“I guess I should find a place to put all of these swords,” she said with the slightest tinge of a blush on her cheeks. The moment had obviously affected her as much as it had him.

“I think a good place would be the cane stand by the door.” He gestured toward the empty basket. “It’s big enough to hold all of the equipment, an’ naebody ever uses it. Duncan keeps all of the canes in his room.”

“I think that would be a great idea.” She walked ahead of him to the door. Her thin arms were struggling to keep the swords from falling.

Dean watched her hips swaying as she walked. The gentle way that the fabric moved around her skin drove him wild in a way that set his core on fire. He shifted uncomfortably on his feet and cleared his throat with a cough.

“I suppose we could just shove them all in,” she said as she bent over and tried to put everything in the basket at the same time.

He was about to speak up and say that she shouldn’t be doing that when he saw that her foot had hooked on the strap of a shield. “Sophia be careful...” he began, but it was already too late.

She let out a tiny yelp and began to fall, stepping on one side of the strap and causing her other foot to be pulled to the ground.

Dean quickly dropped all of the props he was holding and rushed forward to her aid, gripping her wrist in his hand and catching her waist with the other before she was even halfway to the ground.

Sophia hung in his arms as if he were dipping her in a dance, staring up at him with wide eyes. “I... I’m not sure what happened,” she breathed as her chest rose and fell.

“Yer foot caught on the strap of the shield,” he explained as he looked at her foot and then slowly back up her shapely legs and at her breasts. He could feel the heat rising in his body as he stared down at her.

“Thank you for saving me,” she whispered almost inaudibly.

The breathy way she spoke as he held her in his arms did nothing to ease the tension that was building between them.

“Yer welcome,” Dean breathed as he slowly pulled her back up, locking his eyes with hers. The depths of her beautiful green gaze drew him in and caused an insatiable hunger within his body and soul.

Her eyes were almost level with his when he leaned in closer to her lips, unable to stop himself from quenching the desire that coursed through his veins.

Panicked filled Sophia’s eyes, and she took a step back once he’d released her from his grip.

He saw the hesitation in her eyes as well as a hint of desire.

She wants this too; she is just afraid.

He took a step forward, backing her up against the door.

I'll remedy that fear...

He could see the outline of her undergarments through the sheer fabric of her shirt as she breathed. The little exploit with the swords had left the fabric slightly damp and clinging to her skin. He could smell her natural musk mingling with her perfume. She smelled of flowers and soap.

“My laird...” she whispered.

The color of her eyes darkened with desire. Flattening her hands against the wood at her back, she braced herself but did nothing to push him away.

Placing one hand above her head on the door, he used the other to reach around and turn the key in the lock.

Her lips parted slightly as she stared at him, letting out a gasp of hot breath that mingled with his own.

The length of her eyelashes brushed against her cheeks as she shut her eyes and waited for him to make the next move.

He could see that she was uncertain of the situation, but he supposed that she also had room enough to move away from him if she chose to. Yet, she stood there against the door, with his body looming over hers.

He let go of the key and rested his hand on her hip, gently squeezing it as he felt the shape through the fabric, eliciting the faintest of moans from her mouth.

He nearly growled and had his way with her against the door when she made that sound. His mouth hovered inches away from hers, he could feel the tingling on his lips when he stopped and thought about what he was doing.

I cannae do this.

Clenching his jaw, he slowly leaned back and used his hand to push himself away from her.

Sophia opened her eyes and searched his face. She had an unfathomable look in her eyes. Her chest rose and fell in quick succession as she straightened up and stood aside, bending down to retrieve the swords in a hurry.

Dean began to panic as the blood rushed back to his head, clearing his thoughts.

I have to get out of here.

He quickly reached for the door, unlocked it, then let himself out before she could say anything at all. He quickly shut the door behind him and made his way down the passage, taking the steps two at a time in case anyone was following him. He stopped to take a breath when he was sure that the coast was clear and leaned against a wall.

What was I thinkin'? I cannae get involved with anyone else.

He chastised himself for letting things get out of control. If his heart had been broken when his wife had died, how would he react if something were to happen to someone he genuinely loved and had chosen for himself? The risks were far too great. Not that he hadn't loved his wife, as he had cared for her very deeply. And not that he loved Sophia, as he barely even knew the lass.

Yet, there was something different about her. He raked his fingers through his hair and loosened a few strands from his braid as he tried his best to make sense of his thoughts. Sophia was soft and gentle with a beautiful grace. He wanted her with an animalistic kind of passion he couldn't explain. He'd come so close to kissing her when her back was against the door. The gentle curve of her sensual neck had beckoned him.

There was also the side of him that wanted to protect her at all costs and ensure that no harm ever came to her. He thought of how vulnerable she had looked in the water on the night they had found her, and how jealous he had been when she'd given Hamish and Anthony the slightest bit of attention.

She's leavin' in a few months' time. I cannae catch feelings for this lass or anyone else.

Smoothing his hair back over his head, he straightened his shirt and ensured that everything was in order. He would have to apologize for his behavior, but that was something that could wait until the morning. He needed a stiff drink now. Preferably one that would make him forget about all of his troubles.

CHAPTER 10



SOPHIA PULLED and straightened her undergarments as she dressed behind the partition in her room. Dean had given her a spacious, bright chamber overlooking the fields. Her room had a high ceiling, light grey walls, and a simple bed. She had everything she needed. He'd even gone as far as having a desk brought in with a chair, allowing her to work with ease whenever the need would arise.

Her mind drifted to him and the peculiar man that he was to her at present. He could be closed off and hard to read with his gruffness, yet there was a caring and passionate side to him that she liked. She'd spent the first half of the night dreaming of him and their almost kiss, and the second half running away from the unknown man who had sent her letters in London. No matter how much progress she had made at the castle, there was always the issue with the letters floating at the back of her mind.

She stifled a yawn with the back of her hand as she bent down and pulled up her stockings.

What had actually happened with the laird?

It had seemed as if he had wanted to kiss her, and at that moment, she had wanted him to. Yet, he had changed so abruptly and left the room without so much as a single word or even a glance in her direction. The laird's strange behavior had done little to help her overcome her fear of men, but she had to admit to herself that she wasn't afraid of him. She didn't know if she could truly trust him, or any man for that matter, but she wasn't scared of him.

Reaching for her skirt, she pulled it up over her legs and began to fasten the clips. "Come in," she called when a knock sounded at the door. She stayed behind in the safety of the screen while her maid brought in the jug of water she had asked for. "You can leave the water there on the table. Thank you, Lilly," she called out as she reached for the blouse that was hanging over a nearby chair.

"I didnae bring ye a jug of water."

She froze with the blouse halfway on her body. What was Dean doing in her room?

"I would have brought ye some if I kent, but I came here to apologize," he explained.

"You can't be in here." She panicked and got stuck as she attempted to pull the fabric over her head. The sleeve of the blouse was firmly wedged over her head in her hurried attempts to get dressed.

"I did knock, an' ye said I could come in."

“I said you could come in because I thought you were the maid bringing the water I had asked for,” she grunted, still trying to push her head through a hole where it didn’t belong.

“Should I leave?” he asked hesitantly.

“No.” She let out a sigh and gave in to the situation. “You’re already in here, and you can’t see me. You may as well say what you came in here to say.”

“I just wanted to apologize for me behavior yesterday,” Dean explained again. “I dinnae ken what came over me at that moment.”

Sophia frowned when she finally had the blouse over her head and tucked into place. It sounded to her as if his voice was moving around the room.

“I’m sorry if I made ye feel uncomfortable. I didnae mean any disrespect. Yer doin’ such a good job with Cillian, and I would hate for anythin’ to get in the way of that.”

She struggled with her own feelings as he spoke. There was a part of her that felt disappointed when he said that he hadn’t meant anything by their almost kiss.

But this is right, isn’t it? He shouldn’t be kissing me. Why would I want him to? He’s my employer and nothing else.

“Ye came all the way from England to lend a hand. I’m grateful for that, an’ I dinnae wish ye to think anythin’ bad of

me.” His voice moved farther away again before coming back.

“My laird?” she called before poking her head around the partition.

“Aye?” He froze as if he had been caught red-handed in the act. He held an item of her clothing in each hand.

“Are you... cleaning?” she asked, taken aback as she looked around her room.

The usually messy area was almost tidy. In fact, he had placed her clothes in folded piles at the foot of her bed and even sorted her books and papers on the desk. The bedding had been pulled straight, and the pillows were neatly placed at the head.

“Aye,” he said more sheepishly this time, averting his eyes in embarrassment.

“What would make you think it was all right for you to come in here and touch my things?” she asked incredulously, completely astonished by his audacity. “How will I be able to find anything now that you’ve moved it all around?”

His mouth dropped open a fraction of an inch as he stared at her in shock. “Find anythin’ now?”

“Yes! You have moved all of my belongings around, and now I won’t know where to find anything when I’ll need it.” She

pointed at the pile of clothes at the foot of her bed and then at the neatly stacked books on her desk.

“Find anythin’?” he asked in annoyance this time. “How on God’s green earth were ye able to find anythin’ in here in the first place? Where is the maid, an’ why has she nae been cleanin’ up after ye as she should?”

“I don’t appreciate you insinuating that I need a maid to look after me as if I were a child.” She nearly stomped her foot in frustration. “I asked her to please leave my things as they were so that I could find them again. I don’t have time to search for things when I have lessons that I need to plan.” She took a deep breath before continuing. “And as for finding anything, I knew perfectly well where everything I needed was,” she finished with a vigorous nod of her head as if she had made her point perfectly clear.

Dean continued to stare at her with a look of utter disbelief on his face. “The clothes were draped over there.” He pointed at the chair that stood in front of her dressing table. “Ye have a perfectly good closet.” He tried to make her see the madness of her ways. “Some of yer books were on the floor, when ye have a desk an’ a trunk at the foot of yer bed.” He thrust his arm out again and gestured toward her bed. “Naebody should live like this. It’s maddenin’!” His eyes were fierce with passion.

Sophia bit her bottom lip and suppressed a laugh as he continued to rant about the state of her room. Her mother had often tried to make her change her ways in the past, but nothing had worked. She lived in the kind of organized chaos that she liked. A fact that was currently making the laird turn a shade of the brightest red. She’d never seen a man get so worked up over unfolded clothes before, and she doubted that she ever would again.

“I cannae sleep in me own bed tonight if I ken the state of this room!” he continued his rant.

“Perhaps that is something you should think about and deal with on your own, my laird.” She pushed the laughter down as her irritation began to grow. “You should probably ask yourself why having a messy room is such a problem for you, when you don’t even have to live in it.”

Dean looked as if he were about to hop from being mad. “How does it nae bother ye! That is the question we need to be askin’ here. How can a woman as brilliant at teachin’ as ye so clearly are live in such a state?”

Sophia walked toward him and yanked one of her skirts from his hand. “If you will forgive me, my laird,” she said angrily as she folded the skirt in a haphazard manner before flinging it back over the chair. “I was hired to teach your son, and teach your son I shall!” She yanked the other item of clothing from his hand and tossed it over the skirt. “But I will be damned if I’ll allow you to come in here and tell me how I should be living in my bedchamber! Respectfully, Sir, that is none of your business!” She stomped her foot to make her point.

His face darkened slightly as he came walking toward her. “Dae ye ken what, lass?”

“No, Dean, I don’t ‘ken’ what. Would you please enlighten me and explain all of this madness where you think it’s fine to come barging into a lady’s bedchamber first thing in the morning and tell her how to live?!”

“I’ll...” he began to stammer as he glared at her. He seemed at a loss for words.

“You will what? Come into my room and tidy my things for me some more?” she challenged, standing her ground.

She took a step back when he suddenly came striding toward her. He took her face in his hands and pressed his lips against hers tenderly yet somewhat angrily.

He continued to kiss her lips and moved his hands down to her waist, where he angrily gripped her hips, pulling her closer to his body until she could feel the hardness of his muscles.

Her brain fought for a response, but the suddenness of his actions left her nearly paralyzed. She brought her fists up in protest but left them hanging in mid-air as he slowed the pace and gently parted her lips with his tongue. Her hands came down as if they had a life of their own and gently touched his shoulders before making their way to the back of his neck and caressing the skin.

Dean let his hand wander down the sides of her thighs before coming around and firmly cupping her bottom with a gentle squeeze.

Sophia felt the strength of his hands pulling her into his body as she melted into his kiss, allowing him to take the lead and freely search her body. She let out a gasp when his lips left hers and kissed a path to the nape of her neck, where he nipped the tender flesh in a manner that made her lose her mind. All she could think of at that moment was that she was

his. He could do whatever he wanted with her, and she wouldn't protest.

She wrapped her arms around his neck and pulled him in closer as he licked and trailed kisses up her throat and back up to her mouth.

He moaned with pleasure as she bit his lower lip and sucked it into her mouth. It was as if something or someone had taken over her body and mind. All she could do was give in to the carnal instincts that were driving her on.

Dean suddenly placed his hands on her hips and lifted her with ease, carrying her to the edge of the desk, where he placed her down and ran his hands up her legs over her skirt.

Her hands sought his chest as they continued to kiss, feeling the tautness of his muscles through the fabric of his shirt before working their way down and going under his shirt. His chest was thick and muscular, and her fingers traced the sculpted contours.

He gently used his thighs to push her slightly back on the desk, but he froze with his hand on her abdomen when they suddenly heard Cillian's voice calling from down the hall.

"Miss Harrison!" his tiny voice called urgently to her. "Are ye still asleep? Ye are late for our lesson! I hope ye are nae ill?"

The laird pulled back and stared at Sophia for a second with a strange look in his eyes, which were almost wild with passion

and lust, before helping her from the desk. His breathing had quickened, and long strands of his hair had come loose.

“I’ll be out soon,” she called out loud and hurriedly fixed her blouse as a tiny knock sounded at the door. “Go up to the classroom and set up all of the weapons. I’ll be right there. I’m just busy getting ready.”

“All right!” Cillian said excitedly and ran away from the door. They could hear the pattering of his feet.

Dean fixed his shirt without saying a word. It seemed as if he were about to say something, but he quickly stopped and left the room, pulling the door shut behind him.

Sophia straightened her skirt where his hand had just begun to pull it up before they had been interrupted. She lifted her hand to her mouth. Her lips were tingling from his kiss. Leaning back against the desk, she felt a mix of emotions that she didn’t quite know what to do with. She had enjoyed the kiss, as intense and passionate as it was. She’d even wanted him to go on, feeling disappointed when he’d stopped.

Yet, parts of her were still terrified at what the future held. There was still a man somewhere in London who wanted to know where she was. Her trust in men was still at an all-time low, and here she was kissing a man in the privacy of her bedchamber. And not just any man. The man who had offered her a job along with a safe place to live.

What if things go horribly wrong? What if he ends up hurting me?

Straightening herself, she walked over to the mirror and fixed her hair. There would be time enough to think about all of this later on. Right now, she needed to carry out her lesson and act as if nothing had happened.

She left the safety of her room and shut the door firmly behind her, then made her way to the study, where Cillian was patiently waiting for her to repeat the lesson from the day before.



Dean spurred the horse on, digging his heels into the mare's flanks as she galloped even faster over the moor. He'd saddled his horse and gone for a ride in an attempt to clear his head, yet Sophia remained at the back of his mind no matter how far he rode. She was there with her messy room and perfect lips, begging him to kiss her again.

He gently eased his horse into a trot before stopping beside a stream and letting her drink. His body was hot and clammy from the sudden burst of speed. He'd left the castle with no idea of where he was going. He dismounted, then knelt by the water and splashed the cool liquid over his face. It did little to ease his conscience as he thought over what had driven him to kiss Sophia.

Why did I kiss her?

The mare neighed and stepped to the side as she waited for him to mount her again. The drifts of snow created a blanket on the ground as he stood and looked around, his breath visible as he exhaled.

He had gone to her room in an attempt to apologize for his behavior the day before, but he had only ended up making things worse. He should have left her room when he realized that she was dressing behind her screen, and not stayed to clean. God, that room needed to be cleaned. He smiled to himself as he thought of the argument that had ensued.

The way she had stomped her foot at him made him want to laugh. She had cut a comical figure when she had pointed her finger accusingly at him.

Sophia was messier than anyone he had ever met, and he wasn't sure what he would do with her. She had driven him insane with the chaos, yet she was proving to be a fantastic tutor for his son. Cillian was livelier than he'd ever seen him before and was even excited to learn.

It's more a question of what will I do without her at his point.

Dean reached for the reins and froze at the sudden realization of what he was thinking. In just a few weeks, Sophia had become irreplaceable in his life. Shaking his head, he tried to reassure himself that it was only in terms of his son. She could be replaced, but then his son would suffer.

And I would miss the way she brightens a room whenever she enters it.

He lost his temper and kicked at the snow, sending white powder flying through the air in a pure white arch. The woman was maddening to him in a way that infuriated his habit to control everything around him. He'd struggled with the idea of not being in control of his emotions for his entire life. Even as

a child, he had not wanted to cry because he hated the tears. Sophia presented a very real problem to him where he would lose control.

Letting out a deep breath, he mounted the mare and urged her on. Riding away from the castle was the only thing that helped at present.

CHAPTER 11



“IT’S HAMISH’S TURN!” Cillian yelled gleefully as Anthony put down his wooden sword, his breath making a small cloud in the icy air.

“Aye, aye.” Anthony laughed as Hamish came forward swinging his sword. The prop seemed like a dagger in the man’s chubby fist, but he did the exercises with a smile on his face as Cillian laughed. They had become quite the team in the past few weeks.

Strutting over to the fence, Anthony leaned against the post and shot Dean a beaming smile. “The lad is makin’ great progress with the lessons. He’ll be takin’ me place as the man of arms soon,” he said light-heartedly.

“I can see that,” Dean admitted with a smile. “The boy is a right genius when it comes to matters of battle.”

“It’s nae just battle,” Anthony added with his eyebrows raised. “Have you seen the boy work with numbers? The other day, he came into the barn an’ showed the lads a quicker way to calculate the amount of hay the horses should be eatin’ per day. He will be runnin’ the castle on his own ‘afore too long.”

Dean's smile broadened. It was true that Cillian was making excellent progress with his studies. He could count, read, and remember facts like nobody Dean had ever seen before, and it was all thanks to Sophia.

Things had reached a peaceful state between the laird and Sophia. They would joke and tease each other, but they would not put themselves in any situations where they could be alone together.

A few days had passed, and things at the castle had been quiet. Dean had first thought that the reluctance was coming from his side and his side alone, but Sophia had seemed slightly relieved when he had not cornered her again. He felt certain that there was something she wasn't telling him, but he didn't know what it was.

Why does it bother me so much?

"It's all thanks to Sophia." Anthony's voice suddenly broke through his thoughts.

"Since when do you call her Sophia an' nae Miss Harrison?" Dean asked, suspicion and jealousy rising in his chest again.

"She asked me to," Anthony quickly defended himself. "She said that we have kent each other long enough for us to use our first names." His voice became strained as he tried to explain. "It's also nae as if we spend all of our time together. I only see the lass when she comes down to see how Cillian is doin'." He rubbed the back of his neck as he looked at the ground. "It's nae just me. Hamish addresses her by her first name now as well."

Dean felt slightly guilty for the way his friend was trying to defend himself. It was obvious that nothing had ever happened between the two of them. “Ye dinnae have to explain yerself, Anthony. I ken that Sophia is just yer friend. She’s friends with everyone in the castle.”

Anthony breathed a sigh of relief as he leaned back against the post. “Thank goodness. I can tell Hamish that we dinnae have to worry about being stabbed if we greet her anymore.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Dean asked sharply.

“Naething, naething.” Anthony quickly put his hands up in surrender. “Just that ye seem to be a wee bit sharp wherever she is concerned.”

“I am nae sharp,” Dean barked. He was slightly annoyed that Anthony and Hamish got to call her by her first name when he was still calling her Miss Harrison.

Anthony tilted his head to the side and gave him a knowing glance.

Dean took a deep breath and turned his attention back to Cillian, who was stabbing Hamish’s oversized belly with his sword. “I am nae sharp where Miss Harrison is concerned,” he said more calmly.

“It’s all right to be a bit sharp where that lass is concerned.” Anthony bumped his arm and laughed. “She is a fine lass.” He winked.

“Dinnae wink at me, ye bampot. I dinnae see her as anything’ more than a friend an’ Cillian’s tutor.” He folded his arms over his chest and leaned against the post.

“I thought Cillian was the one learnin’ geography, my laird, nae ye,” Anthony pointed out.

“What do ye mean?” Dean asked with a frown.

“Cillian is the one learnin’ geography, but ye are the one who seems to be in another country.”

“Have ye been sippin’ the ale when naebody is looking?” Dean enquired with a quizzical expression on his face. “What are ye blatherin’ on about?”

“The Nile is a river in Egypt, my laird, nae in Scotland. You’re being in de-nial about yer feelings.”

Dean glared at him without saying a word. Anthony was like a dog with a bone. When he’d set his mind to something, there was no use in arguing. Dean had also come to notice that the men were a lot sharper with their wits since Sophia had been around.

“Speakin’ of the fine young lass,” Anthony added as he jerked his head to the side, “I think we may have said her name too many times.”

Dean felt his heart skip a beat as he looked at his friend and then to the side.

Sophia was coming down the castle steps with Duncan by her side. The two had not quite brought themselves to understand one another.

“It’s Harrison,” she said loudly enough for the entire yard to hear.

Several of the men who were going about their chores stopped what they were doing and turned to watch with smiles on their faces. The duo had become quite well known for their antics in the castle.

“What?” Duncan turned his head and stared at her, his mouth hanging slightly open, revealing his gums.

“My name, Duncan, it’s Harrison, not Haddison.” She cupped her hand at the corner of her mouth to make her words more audible.

Duncan frowned as he hobbled toward the men. “Dean, I dinnae ken if this tutor ye hired is right in the head. She keeps shoutin’ at me about fish,” he complained.

Sophia let out a sigh and shook her head in exasperation as the others laughed.

“Why are ye all laughin’?” Duncan asked with a frown. “I dinnae see what is so funny about fish. Has the entire castle

lost its mind?”

“Dinnae worry about Sophia, Uncle.” Dean laughed. “She’s just fine in the head.” He glanced up at her with a reassuring smile.

His heart beat slightly faster when she returned his smile with a sweet look in her eyes. She had all the time and patience in the world when it came to Cillian and people like Duncan Murdoch. A fact that endeared her to him even more.

Duncan squinted up at her before looking back to the laird. “I ken ye say she’s well in the head. But what about all of the fish?”

The men erupted with laughter, eliciting a scowl from the old man.

“What is all this?” a voice suddenly spoke, making everyone turn around.



Everyone stopped laughing and turned to see an older woman staring at them. She had wisps of grey in her long black hair and wrinkled skin with age spots over her hands. Sophia could see that she was tall and proud, despite the fact that she was leaning on her cane. The most striking feature, however, was her piercing blue eyes.

“Amalthea,” Dean said happily and jumped over the fence using one hand. He walked up to the lady and kissed her cheek before taking both of her hands in his. “I didnae ken ye were

comin'. Ye should have sent word, I could have prepared things for ye."

"I didnae think I needed permission to visit me grandson and his faither," Amalthea said haughtily with her nose in the air.

Sophia took an instant dislike to the woman, and she looked at the others to gauge their behavior. Amalthea seemed sweet and kind enough, but there was something in the way she spoke that set Sophia's teeth on edge.

Anthony rolled his eyes as he unfolded his arms and walked away from the post. He was clearly not a fan of the lady either, but the reaction that stood out to Sophia the most was the scowl on Duncan's face as he glared at the woman through narrowed eyes.

"Amalthea," Duncan said in an ominous tone.

"Ah, Duncan. Still alive, then, are we?" Amalthea drawled as she looked over the laird's shoulder. "I thought ye would have been feedin' the worms by now."

"As alive as the dust runnin' through yer veins," Duncan retorted.

Sophia bit her bottom lip in an attempt to keep herself from laughing as the woman glared at her.

"And who is this?" Amalthea barked at Dean. "Have ye taken a second wife in me absence?" Her voice held a heavy note of

accusation and concern.

“Nay, nay,” the laird answered hurriedly.

Sophia was surprised at how hurt she felt at his hasty answer.

I am not his wife.

“This is Sophia Harrison,” Dean explained, “the new tutor from England. She’s made a real difference in teachin’ Cillian his lessons.” He beamed with pride.

It did Sophia’s heart well to hear him speaking of her like that.

The laird turned to her with a warm smile on his face. “Miss Harrison, this is Amalthea Doyle—”

“Grandmaither to the future laird.” the old woman answered before Dean could even finish, sticking her nose in the air.

Sophia suddenly noticed that the reason the lady had seemed so familiar to her was that Cillian bore a striking resemblance to his grandmother. They both had the same dark hair and striking blue eyes. “Pleased to meet you, Lady Doyle.” Sophia curtsied lightly as was accustomed to a lady of her rank.

“Bah,” Duncan muttered, then made a sound as if he were clearing his throat and pulled a sour face.

Amalthea shot him a derisive glare before turning back to Sophia. “Are you of noble stock or a common teacher from London?” she asked pointedly.

Dean chuckled awkwardly and answered for Sophia when her mouth hung slightly open. She wasn’t accustomed to people being so direct or rude with their questions. “Miss Harrison is the daughter of a viscount, Amalthea.”

“A lady, then.” Amalthea seemed to be disappointed and impressed all at the same time.

“I am.” Sophia nodded curtly. There was something very false and off-putting about the old woman that set her teeth on edge.

“Hmf.” Amalthea pulled her nose up at Sophia but quickly brightened when Cillian came running into her arms.

“Grandmaither!” he yelled with glee as he wrapped his scrawny arms around her legs.

“There ye are, me wee one. I’ve missed ye so much.” Amalthea pushed him back slightly and looked at his face. “Yer all rosy an’ out of breath. What have ye been doin’?”

“Anthony an’ Hamish have been teachin’ me how to fight!” Cillian’s eyes shone as he relayed the news to his grandmother.

“Fight?” Her head snapped up as she glared at Dean. “What kind of fightin’?”

The laird seemed sheepish as he rubbed the back of his neck. “I agreed to let Cillian practice with swords if he got through five hours of schoolin’ each day,” he explained.

“Swords... fightin’...” Amalthea was flustered and clearly at a loss for words. “I suppose ye have somethin’ to do with this.” She narrowed her eyes and glared at Sophia. “Lettin’ a child play with a sword at his age. Do ye nae ken he’s goin’ to be laird someday?” she asked incredulously. “What if somethin’ happens to him?”

Sophia was about to defend herself when Dean suddenly jumped in again. “It’s nae real swords,” he explained. “An’ Sophia has had a remarkable impact on Cillian’s schoolin’. He can do arithmetic an’ remember facts better than any of us here at the castle.” He beamed again with pride.

“Is that so?” Amalthea looked down at her grandson without as much as a glance in Sophia’s direction. “That’s just because me wee grand bairn has always been clever. He just needed some time to blossom.” She bent down and kissed Cillian on the crown of his head.

Cillian giggled and ran off again after giving his grandmother’s legs a gentle squeeze.

“Well then,” Amalthea barked as she straightened her back, “I am tired after receivin’ so many shockin’ surprises this mornin’ upon my arrival.” She glared at Sophia before smiling at Dean. “I would like to go to my room now and unpack.”

Sophia breathed a sigh of relief when the woman turned to leave. Even after a few short minutes, she could tell that

Amalthea Doyle was one of the most odious women she had ever met in her life.

“An’ Sophia.” The old woman suddenly turned and addressed her again. “Perhaps ye could come an’ see me in me room. Ye can help me unpack me things.” Her suggestion seemed like an order more than anything else.

“Amalthea,” Dean began, a little more sternly this time. It was apparent he was tired of playing the gracious host already. “Sophia is the tutor. One of the maids can help ye unpack, just as they have always done.”

“No,” Sophia interjected, growing tired of having the woman talk down to her and Dean answering in her place. “I would be more than happy to help Cillian’s grandmother unpack her things.” She returned the woman’s gaze with every ounce of self-worth that she had. “I think we would have a lot to talk about. We have a common interest, after all.” She held Amalthea’s icy stare without blinking or looking away. “The well-being and education of her grandson.”

Amalthea stuck her nose in the air as she turned and left them standing by the fence.

Dean quickly trundled after her while Duncan motioned with his finger for Sophia to bend down.

Lowering herself to his level, she brought her ear closer to his face. “Good luck with that one, Miss Haddock,” he whispered. “Never did a more venomous viper slither across the earth than Amalthea Doyle. She’s only nice to those who can

advance her station in life.” He nodded as they both looked up and watched the way she laughed at something Dean had said.

Everything was beginning to make a lot of sense to Sophia.



Sophia reached into the oversized case and retrieved two more lavish brown dresses before hanging them in the cupboard. Amalthea had more fancy dresses than her mother did in London. The only difference was that Amalthea’s dresses seemed to match her personality with the different shades of brown and grey.

“I have ye summed up, Miss Harrison. Dinnae think that I haven’t cottoned on to yer schemes already,” Amalthea said icily from her place at the foot of the bed.

Sophia clenched her jaw and finished hanging the dresses before turning to the woman. “And what schemes would those be? To give your grandson a better education perhaps?” Her words elicited an angry scowl from the old woman.

“I can see that ye were never taught that talkin’ back to yer elders is in poor taste,” Amalthea said with disgust. “Very well, then. I can see that ye an’ I will be very straightforward with one another. Cillian is to be laird of this castle when the time comes, an’ when that time comes, I will be movin’ in here on a permanent basis.” She narrowed her eyes as she got to the crux of her accusations. “No fortune-seekin’ lady who could nae find a husband in London will come after the faither of me grandson.”

Sophia could feel her blood boiling in her veins as she waited for the old woman to finish what she was saying.

“I dinnae ken what has happened between the two of ye up until now,” Amalthea continued accusingly. “But I can assure ye that naethin’ will happen beyond this point.”

“Are you quite finished?” Sophia asked with her head held high.

Amalthea seemed taken aback at being spoken to in that manner but nodded to show that Sophia should go on to say whatever it was that she needed to say.

“I can assure you, madam, that I am neither a fortune seeker nor am I looking for a husband.” Sophia paused to let her words sink in. “I understand how someone like you wouldn’t comprehend why a lady would come all the way to the Scottish highlands just to tutor a young boy.” She looked her over and glanced at her suitcases. “It’s very obvious that you have known nothing but the care of those around you,” she said kindly without saying what she really wanted to say.

Amalthea opened her mouth to speak but was quickly cut off when Sophia continued. Her heart was pounding in her chest as she spoke. Sophia had never had to defend herself against a tyrant before that clearly didn’t want her around. “I will be leaving the castle once the laird is no longer in need of my services,” she stated boldly. “And not a moment before.”

“Well, I’ve never realized... that such a young woman could be so insolent—” Amalthea cut herself off and pasted a smile on her lips when Dean came walking into the room. “What

took ye so long?" she asked sweetly and offered her hand to him. "Miss Harrison an' I were just reachin' an understandin' between the two of us regardin' Cillian." Her voice dripped with honey as she spoke. "We understand each other a lot better now, don't we, Miss Harrison?"

"Perfectly." Sophia returned her false smile when Dean shot her a questioning glance. "We know exactly where we stand with each other."

CHAPTER 12



SOPHIA PULLED the collar of her thick black shawl higher over her neck until the bottom of her face was hidden behind the fabric. The laird had ensured that she had gotten even thicker clothing when winter was reaching its peak. Her shawl had fur lining that pushed away the cold better than any coat she had ever worn in the past.

Snow fell like a fine mist from the sky as she walked around the castle gardens. Her breath was visible, yet there wasn't a single part of her that wanted to go back inside and face the two-headed dragon that was Amalthea Doyle. The old woman had been at the castle for a full twenty-four hours, and Sophia already wanted to run and hide whenever she saw her coming.

Amalthea made it a point to be as nasty and condescending to Sophia as she possibly could, and just as sweet and loveable whenever Dean entered the room. Everyone else in the castle seemed to see right through her games. Duncan would make snide remarks to her face, and Anthony and Hamish would make themselves scarce whenever she was around. A tactic that Sophia herself had decided to adopt.

Sophia had attempted to clear the air and make it known to the old woman that she was merely there for Cillian, but try as she may, Amalthea stuck to her guns. She lived under the

assumption that Sophia was there to seduce her son-in-law and for no other reason whatsoever.

Sophia shivered slightly and hugged her arms around her waist as she trudged through the snow.

What do I feel for Dean?

There was definitely something there between the two of them, as was made clear by their inability to be left alone in a room with each other, but that was the end of it. It wasn't as if they could ever be together. Life had dealt them both different paths. They were becoming very good friends if nothing else.

Yet, there was still so much standing between them. Sophia missed her mother and how she had always been there for her. She hated the fact that she couldn't even return home for a visit.

"Why are ye out here at this hour?" Dean suddenly asked, making her jump with fright.

"I... I was just going for a walk after dinner to clear my thoughts," she stammered as she tried her best to still her pounding heart. She had thought she was being attacked by a bear or some other kind of ferocious animal that stalked the Scottish highlands.

"Aye, we had the same idea then," he said, looking at her face.

She felt herself blushing under his gaze but quickly continued. "I didn't think anyone else would be out here in the snow."

"I like the open air." He stepped closer to her. "Even if it's as cold as arse out here."

Sophia laughed. "You better not let Amalthea hear you speak like that, my laird."

There was something in the way Dean looked at her before he spoke again that she couldn't quite put her finger on. A kind of hurt that emanated from his eyes. "So, you address her by her name, then?" he asked.

"Should I not use her first name?" Sophia hesitated, thinking that she had overstepped her place. She was essentially his employee, even if they were beginning to become friends.

"Nae." He shook his head. "I ken that the two of ye have an understandin' between ye. I'm glad about that."

She searched his face, puzzled by the strange way that he was acting. "I am going to walk to the end of the grounds. Would you like to join me?" she offered sweetly in the hopes that he would share with her whatever was bothering him if they walked for a while. It seemed as if there was something he needed to get off his chest.

Dean perked up slightly at her offer. "Aye, I would like that." He turned to face the direction she was going and waited for her to start walking before matching her strides.

They walked side by side in silence for a moment or two as the snow began to fall a little harder. The atmosphere was tense as Sophia stole glances at his handsome face. He seemed to be deep in thought as he brooded over whatever problem he was having.

“Is there something on your mind?” she finally asked, unable to withstand his distant behavior anymore.

He glanced at her face before looking ahead again. “Ye’ve been here for a while now,” he noted.

Sophia’s heart sank slightly as she imagined what he was about to say. The arrangement had only been for her to stay a few weeks until she found her feet. It was entirely possible and reasonable for him to say that her work with Cillian was done and that she should be returning home soon. She suddenly realized at that moment that as much as she missed her mother, she would miss the castle, Cillian, and Dean even more. A fact that shocked and stunned her slightly.

“I have,” she said when he didn’t say anything again. “I have been here for a few weeks already. I’ve really grown attached to Cillian.” She quickly stole a glance at his face again to gauge his reaction.

Dean kept a stony expression on his face. “An’ others at the castle?” He looked slightly panicked as she shot him a quizzical look. “I just mean that I hope ye are fittin’ in with everyone in the castle, an’ nae just Cillian. I would hate to think that the rest of us were bein’ inhospitable.”

Her lips broke into a smile. It was always touching to see how much he cared about her well-being. He seemed gruff and irritable on the surface, but he was a truly caring man deep down.

“I have made a lot of friends here that I will truly miss when the time comes for me to move on,” she said, testing the waters to see how he felt.

“Like Anthony an’ Hamish?” He seemed like a small child that was trying to gather information but didn’t quite know how to be secretive about it.

“They do make me laugh,” she admitted. “Their friendship is something to behold. I hope you don’t mind that they use my first name?” She swung her arms at her sides to ward off the cold. “I just felt like it would bring us all closer to helping Cillian if we were on a first-name basis with each other. I can ask them to call me Miss Harrison again if you like.” She searched his face from the corner of her eye.

“Nae,” Dean said with a slight smile on his lips. “I ken that ye put Cillian first in everythin’ ye do.” He hesitated and coughed into his hand before continuing. “Ye can also call me Dean... only if ye wanted to.”

Sophia felt her heart fluttering as the pit of her stomach did a strange kind of flip. “I would like that.” She bit her lower lip in an attempt to hide the quiver in her voice. She wasn’t sure what had suddenly come over her, but she felt so giddy. “I’m not sure that Amalthea would like that very much,” she teased.

“Amalthea isnae the laird of the castle.” He laughed in a manner that tugged at her heart.

I think somebody should tell her that.

But Sophia decided to keep her opinions to herself. The laird seemed to be oblivious to Amalthea’s two-faced nature, and the last thing Sophia wanted was to cause any family strife. “Very well. Then you may call me Sophia.” She hesitated in the same way that he had. “Only if you wish to, of course.”

“I would like that very much, Sophia,” he said with a bright smile.

She rehearsed his name a few times in her mind but decided to say it when it seemed more natural. “I hope you are pleased with the progress that Cillian has made,” she began as a way of breaking the tension again. Her nerves were all a flutter at being so close to the laird for some reason or the other. She felt her giddiness growing the farther they walked from the castle. Being alone in his presence definitely affected her in a way that she couldn’t understand.

“I think he’s makin’...” Dean began but stopped and placed his arm in front of her to stop her from stepping into a hole. “Watch out.”

Sophia looked down but couldn’t bring her foot up quickly enough to avoid toppling forward. She gasped in shock but quickly felt the laird’s arms going around her and holding her up as she twisted and stared into his eyes. One of her hands had gripped his shoulder while the other was grasping his waist.

“Are ye hurt?” His eyes searched her face.

“No,” she breathed as her heart began to beat even faster. The intensity with which he looked at her made her take a deep breath. His dark eyes were always filled with emotions, whether it was anger, irritation, or whatever emotion he had felt right before he had kissed her. “Thank you, Dean.” She breathed his name as if it were a secret that only she could whisper.

“Yer welcome, Sophia.” His breath billowed out in small clouds around her face.

Sophia felt her eyes widen at the way he said her name as he pulled her up until she was standing in front of him. She could almost see her own reflection in his eyes as she stared at him. Their bodies were closer than they had been just minutes before. She suddenly remembered that one of her hands was resting on his shoulder and the other was gripping the side of his coat. “I’m sorry,” she said and quickly let go.

Dean kept his arms around her, not making any attempts to move.

“Dean,” she whispered his name again.

“Aye?” His voice was deep and thick. He brought his face closer to hers until their lips were inches apart.

“Do you hear that?”

“What?” He frowned as his eyes darted over her face.

“I can hear somebody cryin’,” she explained and gently pushed him away until he loosened his grip on her.

Looking around, she tried to pinpoint the noise until she saw a tiny movement beneath a nearby bush. The underbrush rustled as whatever it was tried to hide.

“Sophia, dinnae go an’ look. It could be a wild animal,” he cautioned as she walked toward the area.

The bush was situated just a few steps away from the forest that spread out behind the castle.

“I’ll be careful. I just want to make sure that it isn’t an animal that needs our help,” she said as she quietly approached the bush. The whimpering grew louder the closer she got.

Dean swore under his breath and followed behind just as she lifted one of the snow-covered branches and peered beneath it.

“You poor thing,” she cooed sympathetically. “You must be so cold out here all by yourself. Don’t you have a family to go home to? Dean, look.” She turned around and gestured for the laird to come closer. “The poor thing is cold and all alone. He’s probably hungry too.”

Dean peered over her shoulder at the tiny dog that was curled up into a ball. Its long grey hair was matted and dirty as its

tiny body shook from the cold.

He pulled a face and placed a hand on her shoulder in an attempt to draw her away. "It's an Aberdeen Terrier. He probably just lost his way. I ken a few lairds that breed them for hunting."

"That's awful," she breathed. "He's just a sweet little baby. He can't kill anything."

He tightened his hold a little more in an attempt to coax her away. "He will soon find his way back to where he came from."

"But we need to help him." She shrugged off his grip and reached for the dog. "He doesn't have anyone else."

"Sophia, don't touch him. He could bite ye or give ye some kind of disease," he warned her again.

The dog yelped and jumped to its feet just as she reached for it.

"Oh, no," she said with concern as he backed away even further. "Don't be scared, little angel, I only want to help you."

She ignored everything Dean had said and reached out to touch the dog again, but it turned on its heels and began yelping as it ran through the snow and into the forest beyond.

“Sophia, no!” Dean gripped her shoulders, spinning her around when she attempted to go after the dog. “Ye cannae go into the forest with snow like this!” he yelled. “Do ye see how the snow is fallin’? There’s a blizzard on the way. Ye will surely die out there.”

Sophia froze in his grip as he gently shook her back and forth. The anger in his eyes frightened her. “But the dog might die out there all by himself.” She sniffled as tears filled her eyes.

Dean loosened his grip on her arms and softened his voice. “Ye cannae go after the dog, Sophia. I ken that ye care, but it’s far too dangerous.” He gently rubbed her arms in an attempt to soothe her. “Come here,” he said as she began to cry. “The dog probably has a home he can go to,” he explained as he pulled her against his chest and hugged her tight. “He probably just wandered a little too far from his home. Dogs are resilient creatures.” He stroked her hair.

“I just want him to be all right.” She sniffled again against his chest. The warmth of his arms around her shoulders brought her comfort but did little to stop her from crying.

“I’ll tell ye what.” He placed a finger under her chin and gently tilted her face until she was looking at him. “I’ll send some of the men to search for the dog in the mornin’.”

“But he’ll be out here all alone and cold for the night—” she began, but Dean silenced her by shaking his head and pursing his lips.

“Sorry, lass, I cannae risk people’s lives to find a dog.”

She took a deep breath and swallowed, resigning herself to the fact that the dog would not be going home with her. “All right,” she said and dried her eyes.

“That’s my girl.” Dean nodded and turned her around to face the castle. “We can have another look in the morning.”

Sophia felt her heart sinking as they trudged through the snow in the fading light.



Sophia opened her eyes and stared up at the ceiling. Day had broken and the snow had eased, but she knew in her heart that there was little hope of finding the tiny dog. The poor thing had probably frozen to death in the night. Pushing the thoughts aside, she swung her legs off the bed. She was tired and groggy from lack of sleep, having spent the entire night worrying about the dog.

Yawning, she was about to stand when the door to her bedroom suddenly burst open. “Dean?!” she gasped as she placed her hands over her mouth.

“Here is the blasted beast,” Dean said with a wild look in his eyes. He was covered from head to toe in melting snow, and he had a wild, disheveled look in his eyes as if he had been up all night.

The dog under his arm whimpered and looked at her for help as he attempted to escape, flailing his tiny paws in the air.

Her eyes followed Dean as he stalked toward the bed with the dog under his arm.

“Ye will be responsible for looking after the beast,” he barked, placing the very wet dog beside her on the bed.

The poor creature quickly scurried away from the bed and buried itself beneath the blanket at Sophia’s side.

“I spent all night lookin’ for the wee bastard,” Dean said accusingly. “I nearly got meself bitten an’ eaten by a pack of wolves,” he spat bitterly before stalking back over to the door.

Sophia bit her lower lip as she placed one hand on the trembling bundle that was the dog and looked at Dean.

“An’ I dinnae want to see any mess around the castle!” he growled before slamming the door shut behind him. “I am goin’ to sleep, an’ God help the man that wakes me up!”

Sophia could hear him yelling all the way down the hall. She sat in stunned silence for a while before looking from the door to the dog, who poked his tiny grey head from beneath the sheets to see if the coast was clear. She suddenly burst into fits of giggles as she lifted the dog in her arms. Dean had cut quite the comical figure as he raged at her about the poor creature. Yet, he had stayed up all night and braved the elements to find the dog she’d wanted to save.

“You are something else entirely, Dean O’Brien,” she whispered to the closed door with a smile on her face as she

hugged the dog to her chest. “There isn’t another man out there like you, that’s for sure.”

CHAPTER 13



DEAN GRUMBLED to himself as he entered the corridor. He'd only had a few hours of sleep, and the sun was about to set again. He could hear voices and laughter coming from the great hall as he made his way down the stairs. He didn't know why he had gone after the blasted dog, but he couldn't have gone to bed knowing that Sophia was worried. He had braved the elements, and he even had to hide from a pack of wolves until God only knew how late in the morning.

It had taken him hours to track down the silly thing, and then several hours more for him to bribe it with food and gain its trust. He wanted a very large mug of ale and something to eat before he slapped the next person he saw for no good reason.

Why did I go after the blasted creature?

What was it about Sophia that made him want to keep her happy all the time? It wasn't as if he could have a relationship with the woman who tutored his son. He froze when he realized the direction his thoughts were taking.

Why am I thinking of what could go wrong with Sophia? It's not like I want to have a relationship with her... Do I?

He brushed off the thought in annoyance and continued walking toward the great hall.

The voices made his head hurt as he pushed open the door and stepped into the hall. Dinner was already on the table, and Duncan was tucking in as Sophia played with the dog. Seeing the scene before him, he was glad he had rescued the blasted puppy.

“Look, Faither!” Cillian squealed with delight and clapped his hands. “Miss Harrison found a splendid little dog for us to play with!”

Dean grunted in reply as he watched the dog jump on its hind legs in an attempt to reach a treat that Sophia dangled over his head. Cillian was beginning to sound like an English child the more time he spent with Sophia. A situation that annoyed him at present because of his lack of sleep, but one that he chose to ignore. It was better to keep his head down and only speak when he once again felt rested. It would have been counterproductive to cause problems now that he'd saved the dog and gotten into her good graces.

“Actually,” Sophia corrected Cillian in her sweet manner, “it was your father that found little John. He stayed up all night looking for him in the snow and brought him back.”

Cillian's eyes lit up as he ran to his father and wrapped his arms around his legs. “Did ye really, Faither? Thank ye ever so much, Faither! Yer a hero! Wee John's life has been saved because of ye!”

“Who decided to name the dog John?” Dean asked grumpily under his breath. He could have thought of a hundred other names for a dog other than John.

“It was Miss Harrison,” Cillian said proudly as he beamed up at him. “Ye should see all the tricks he can do, Faither!”

Dean felt his heart warming slightly, and a part of his grumpiness faded away as he embraced his son. Things had definitely changed since Sophia had come to the castle. Cillian was more open and loving with him, and the atmosphere in general had taken on a lighter tone.

The boy ran off again and continued to play with the dog as Sophia smiled at him. The laird pulled out a chair at the table next to Duncan and reached for the jug of ale, watching her play as he poured himself a mug.

“Mighty good dog that Jove,” Duncan said through a mouthful of roasted chicken, spraying tiny pieces of food over his plate. “I used to have one just like him when I was a lad. Very intelligent dogs those Aberdeen Terriers.”

“Nae, Duncan, his name is John, not...” Dean shook his head and decided to pick his battles. Duncan was not someone he was currently willing to fight. “It doesnae matter.” He lifted his mug and allowed the warm and frothy liquid to wash down his throat.

“What in God’s name is that thing?!” Amalthea screeched as she entered the hall.

The dog immediately began to growl as soon as he caught sight of her and rushed to her feet, snapping his tiny jaws.

“Oh, my goodness!” she screeched again. “Control the wee beast! Dean, do something!” she yelled as both Cillian and Sophia rushed forward in an attempt to catch the dog and stop him from attacking the older woman.

Dean sighed heavily and rubbed his temples as he shut his eyes. The incessant noise was only proving to make the dull ache in his head even worse. Amalthea’s screeching wasn’t helping either as she continued to make a scene, lifting her skirts and kicking at the small dog as it attempted to fight back.

Duncan snickered as he watched the scene with increasing joy. “Good dog that Jove.” He laughed quietly to himself and picked up another piece of chicken, taking a bite with a massive grin.

Sophia finally caught the dog and held him as Amalthea made her escape, walking to the table with haste. She was flustered and out of breath by the time she pulled out her chair and sat down. “Dean,” she said tearfully as she sniffled and looked at him, “did ye see what that horrid governess has brought this time?” She shot a nasty glare at Sophia and the dog. “You must make her get rid of the animal. He attacked me! A creature like that doesnae belong in a castle.”

“Faither, ye cannae send John away!” Cillian suddenly rushed forward and gripped his father’s arm. “Please, Faither, he’s only just gotten here. He will freeze to death if ye leave him out in the cold!” He pouted, and his bottom lip trembled. He reminded Dean of the way his grandmother pouted whenever she wanted anything from him.

“Stop that now, Cillian,” Amalthea said sternly, suddenly losing the victimized tone. “That dog has nae place here. Sophia should have never brought him in. Dean?” She turned to the laird, awaiting his response. “The dog is clearly disruptin’ Cillian’s routine. Make Sophia take him back to wherever she got him from in the first place.” She waved her hand in the air as if she could make the animal disappear.

Dean let out a heavy sigh as Cillian began to fuss again. “The dog willnae be going anywhere. I brought him here, it was nae Sophia,” he explained as he stifled a yawn with the back of his hand.

Cillian trundled back over to Sophia with a triumphant look on his little face as his grandmother sat stunned at the table. Dean knew that he was about to get an earful, but he didn’t quite feel up to the task.

“Oh!” Amalthea’s face wrinkled into a sour expression as if she had eaten a lemon. “I can see that me advice is no longer needed here. That is to be expected when one gets as old as I am,” she said with a hurt tone in her voice. “What do I ken about discipline an’ raisin’ a bairn?” she muttered loud enough for Dean to hear. “But mark me words, Cillian has never once gone against anythin’ that I have said. This is the start of a very slippery slope that will ultimately lead to anarchy.”

“I respect yer opinion, Amalthea,” Dean began as calmly as he could. “But Sophia is in charge of the dog, an’ he will nae be going anywhere. She will see to it that Cillian is nae distracted from his studies, or that he disrespects ye in any way.”

“Sophia?” Amalthea looked even more taken aback by his use of Miss Harrison’s first name than she had done about the dog. Dean half expected her to jump up and start screaming again. “Are we on a first-name basis now?”

“Aye, an’ I have asked Sophia to address me as Dean,” he said before taking a sip of his ale. “We have kent each other for a while now, an’ everyone in the castle calls her by her given name. She’s practically part of the family.”

Dean thought for a second that the old woman was about to faint as she stared at him and then glared at Sophia, who quickly looked down and continued to play with the dog.

“I see,” Amalthea said to Dean’s great surprise. “At least see to it that the beast receives a bath. I could smell the stench from outside the hall already.” She returned to her usual haughty demeanor as she reached across the table and poured herself a glass of wine.

“Dinnae talk about yerself like that, Amalthea,” Duncan, who seemed to have a selective hearing only reserved for Amalthea, quickly said. “We’ll have a bath sent up to yer room, an’ ye will be smellin’ right as rain in no time. It’s probably just from the journey down here,” he uttered, adding insult to injury. “An’ yer age.” He looked at her as he chewed and waited for her response.

“What? I never!” Amalthea gasped as she glared at him.

“It is very clear that ye have never, my good lady.” Duncan raised his eyebrows as he took a sip from his mug and shot her a nearly toothless grin.

“How dare ye talk to me like that!” she sneered and turned to Dean again. “I’m sorry to say that I am utterly disappointed to find the castle in such a state upon my return. Everythin’ was perfectly fine last time I was here, and now utter chaos has ensued,” she said accusingly as she glared at him. “What do you propose to do about these problems?” she demanded angrily.

“Sendin’ ye back to the hole from which ye crawled out would be step number one.” Duncan cackled.

“I thought ye were deaf, ye daft old bampot,” Amalthea retorted, turning red in the face. “How is it that you seem to have perfect hearin’ when ye can’t even hear a drum beside yer head at other times?”

“I could be as deaf as a doornail and still hear every single word that comes from that shrill mouth of yers.” Duncan closed one eye and squinted at her. “Ye can lead the men into battle with a voice like that, an’ the enemies would run for the hills. It’s just a pity that I am nae blind, because I still have to look at ye.”

Amalthea glared at him from across the table as she clutched a fork in one hand and dug the back into the wooden surface of the table. She looked as if she would have eaten him alive if she were permitted.

Dean took another sip of his ale and tried his best not to laugh as he glimpsed the look on Sophia’s face as she watched the interaction. She too was trying to hide her mirth but failing miserably, as a giggle escaped her throat.

“I’m sure Sophia will be able to bathe the beast?” He turned to her with one eyebrow raised in an attempt to end the argument.

“Of course,” Sophia said quickly as she scooped the dog up in her arms and straightened. “I have already asked for a bath to be taken to my room this evening. I will ask for a smaller tub to be filled as well and bathe little John first,” she added obediently.

“There,” Dean said, still trying to hide his smile. “The dog will be bathed, an’ we can all live as one big great-smellin’ family.”

Amalthea let out a grunt as Duncan laughed, and Sophia bit her bottom lip.

Their conversations were interrupted when Hamish and Anthony came walking into the hall, laughing and joking as they usually did.

“An’ who is that wee bastard?” Hamish was first to speak as he bent down and held out his hands.

The dog suddenly leapt from Sophia’s hands and ran full speed into the man’s open arms. Hamish scooped him up and held him close to his chest. “I had a dog just like ye when I was growin’ up.” He laughed and allowed John to lick his face.

“All the best men did,” Duncan agreed and nodded his head. “It will serve Cillian well to have a dog like that.”

“So disgustin’.” Amalthea bristled again as she watched the scene.

“We are nae longer talkin’ about ye,” Duncan drawled before Dean could do or say anything.

Cillian ran to Anthony and tugged at his hand. “Did ye see me new dog, Anthony? Do ye nae think he’s the best?” he asked excitedly.

Anthony eyed the dog as it continued to lick Hamish’s chubby cheeks. “Yes... very interestin’,” he said but quickly made his way over to the table.

“See, young Anthony agrees with me,” Amalthea said triumphantly. “The dog should not be allowed to stay in the castle. It’s a disgusting beast.”

“I didnae say there was anythin’ wrong with the dog,” Anthony pointed out, not wanting to agree with Amalthea.

“Come now, Anthony, you dinnae have to lie out of loyalty. Ye can tell the truth. I saw the disgusted way ye were looking at the dog as it licked Hamish’s face. Ye be the voice of reason here. Tell everyone that the dog should nae be allowed to stay in the castle.”

A hush fell over the table as all heads turned to look at Anthony, who cleared his throat. “I was nae talkin’ about the dog,” he said defensively and played with his mug, swirling the bottom over the surface of the table.

“Who were you talkin’ about, then?” Amalthea stuck her nose in the air and waited expectantly.

Anthony glanced from the dog to the pleading look on Cillian’s face and finally to the rest of the party, who were watching him with curious expectation. “I was talkin’ about Hamish,” he suddenly said and sat back in his chair after gently banging the mug on the table.

“Hamish?” Dean asked, now fully fascinated by the direction that the conversation had taken.

“Aye, Hamish,” Anthony confirmed. “I found it very interestin’ that the dog is the only livin’ creature that has ever kissed Hamish like that. It made me question the dog’s moral character, but I dinnae think the dog should go.”

“Ye can fly right into hell, ye wee bastard.”

Dean nearly spat his ale over the table as Hamish held the dog away from his face and swore at his friend. “Ye have a right nerve to speak of me like that when ye have a face that only a maither could love.”

Amalthea sat back in disgust as the hall erupted into fits of laughter.

“In fact,” Hamish continued, “I think yer maither would rather kiss this dirty dog than the likes of ye.”

“At least yer maither is a good kisser,” Anthony retorted with a sly smirk on his face.

Dean shook his head as he sat back in his chair and watched the scene unfold. He wasn't sure what was worse: Amalthea making a fuss about the dog, Duncan flinging nasty comments at her, or the two daft imbeciles who were now making a scene.

“Wait,” Hamish said with a frown. “That's nae an insult. An' how would ye ken if me maither was a good kisser or not? Ye have never spoken to me faither.”

“I didnae have to speak to yer faither.” Anthony winked at him. “I went to visit yer maither, an' she confirmed it for me.”

“Why, ye bastard,” Hamish spat through his teeth and handed the dog to Cillian. “I will teach ye to bring me maither into this!” He suddenly charged across the table as Anthony jumped and began to run around the table, laughing as his friend chased him.

Sophia and Duncan laughed along with Cillian as John barked happily at the pair as they ran around the table like children.

“Absolute chaos,” Amalthea muttered in disgust.

Dean leaned his chin on his hand and watched with a tired sigh as the men he relied on to run his castle acted like children.

Duncan was brandishing a chicken thigh in one hand and swinging it in the air like a weapon as he rooted for Hamish.

The dog had jumped from Cillian's arms and inevitably joined the chase to ensure that Anthony paid for what he had said.

How did wanting to make Sophia happy by rescuing a daft dog end up like this?

The laird swore that making this woman happy would be the death of him. Yet, he smiled to himself as he noticed the way she was laughing at his friends.

Sophia bent over double as she snorted with laughter, unable to stop herself anymore.

Perhaps rescuing the dog wasnae such a bad idea after all.

CHAPTER 14



DEAN YAWNED and stretched as he made his way down the corridor that led to his chambers. Dinner had been long and arduous, with Duncan poking fun at Cillian's grandmother every chance he had gotten. The old man had succeeded in making her storm off in the middle of dinner, causing John to snap at her heels as she yelled.

He could already see that it was going to be a long visit until she decided to go back home again. Dean respected his mother-in-law. She was, after all, the mother of his late wife. But he knew how possessive and overbearing she could be, especially when it came to matters of her grandson.

He stopped and frowned as he heard a scream and a splash coming from Sophia's room. She had taken the dog and gone to her room at least an hour ago. He had thought she would have been done with bathing the dog by now.

"Sophia," he said as he gently knocked on her bedroom door. "Is everythin' all right?"

The door quickly opened to reveal a drenched Sophia. Water and bits of dirt that looked strangely like dog hair dripped

from her face. “Everything is in hand,” she said quickly with a smile and attempted to shut the door.

Dean quickly held out his hand and gripped the handle, stopping her from closing the door. “It doesnae sound as if everythin’ is in hand,” he said with raised eyebrows.

“Oh, all right,” she conceded and then opened the door. “Come in quickly, but close the door. I do not want Cillian’s grandmother to see what is going on in here.”

Dean quickly stepped inside the room as she shut the door and locked it behind them.

Her room was in a mess just as he had expected it to be, with the addition of a very wet dog sitting in the corner. John was wagging his tail and panting as he happily looked at them. Dean’s eyes fell on the section of the room where the carpet had been rolled back to make room for the large tub and the smaller one beside it. Both tubs were steaming with water. The only difference was that half of the water from the smaller tub had been spilt over onto the floor.

“The bath is proving to be a little more challenging than what I had expected,” Sophia said sheepishly as she wrung her hands.

Dean shook his head as he looked at her. “How did ye make such a mess? He’s such a wee dog.”

“He’s strong and fast!” she protested. “You don’t understand just how slippery he can be!”

He shook his head again and laughed. “Go an’ grab the wee pest, an’ I’ll give ye a hand.”

“Would you really?” Her eyes brightened with hope. “That would make things so much easier!” She quickly turned and ran toward the dog before he had a chance to change his mind. “Here.” She returned and held the dog out to him.

Dean hesitated for a second but took the dog, holding it at arm’s length as if he could bite him at any minute.

John cocked his head to the side and stared at the laird as if to ask what he was about to do next.

“Right,” Dean said as he walked over to the smaller tub and began to lower the dog into the water. “This cannae be that hard.”

Sophia stood back and watched in anticipation with a towel covering half of her face.

The dog froze and stared into Dean’s eyes as soon as its back paws touched the water.

“There,” Dean said triumphantly with a grin. “This is easy—”

The words had just left his mouth when John began to wriggle and slip in his hands with an unstoppable force, creating a spray of water that soaked him and all of his surroundings.

“Grab his hind legs!” Dean suddenly yelled.

Sophia sprang into action and dropped the towel before rushing over and gripping the dog’s legs.

They both held him steady for a minute or two until he eventually calmed down.

“There, ye wee bastard,” Dean said. “Now, I will hold him, an’ ye can get the soap an’ start washin’ him.”

Doing as she was told, Sophia grabbed a bar of soap and quickly started washing the dog as he lay on his back in the little water that was left. “I should have asked for help in the first place. I just didn’t want to give Amalthea the satisfaction of thinking that she was right,” she explained.

Dean listened to her talk as he stared down at the dog’s stomach. There was something amiss with the dog as the water began to wash away the dirt and soften the clumps of hair. “Sophia?” he eventually said.

“Yes?” She looked up with a soapy paw in her hand.

“How did ye settle on the name John for the dog?”

“He just seemed like a John to me,” she replied as she looked back down and continued to wash the little creature.

“Did ye check first?”

“With the dog?” she asked in confusion. “I’m not in the habit of asking animals what they would like to be named,” she said and frowned at him. “Is that a Scottish custom?”

Dean rolled his eyes before glaring at her. “Look at the dog’s stomach, for pity’s sake!”

“Why, what is the matter with his... Oh!” she exclaimed after a brief examination. “It seems that I should have checked first. Our little John is, in fact, not a John at all. Do you think we should change her name now?”

“Aye, I think that would be the right thing to do.”

“What do you think we should name her? Jane, perhaps? It’s not too far from John.”

Dean looked at the dog before glancing at the mess that lay around the tub. “I think we should choose a name that suits her feisty character. Something more Scottish.” He thought for a second before coming up with an idea. “What about Nessie?” he finally suggested.

“Like the Loch Ness monster?” Sophia asked cheerfully. “That’s absolutely perfect! I love that name. It suits her spirited nature.”

“Nessie it is, then.” Dean laughed and held the dog above the water as Sophia fetched the towel.

“There you go, little Nessie,” she cooed as she took the dog from his hands and swaddled her in a towel. “You’re nice and clean now. I’ve prepared a comfy bed for you here in front of the fire where you can dry off.” She knelt beside the pillow and blanket as she laid the dog down like a baby.

Dean watched as Sophia rubbed the dog with the towel until she was no longer fussing.

Nessie settled down and began to lick her legs and paws as Sophia straightened and walked back over to him with a smile. “I think that will about do it,” she said and placed her hands on her hips. “And it’s all thanks to you.”

“Aye, she looks mighty comfortable in front of the fire. I didnae ken she was white. I thought she was grey,” he said honestly.

“Me too.” Sophia laughed. “Well, I guess we better get cleaned up and go to bed. I suspect you will want to have a bath now.”

He looked down to see that his clothes had been soaked from head to toe. “Ah, I think it’s a bit late for me to be askin’ the servants to heat more water,” he said, glancing at her bath. “I’ll just have to share yers.”

“Mine?” Sophia took a step back and clutched at her chest. “I can’t share a bath with you.”

“I cannae walk back to me room drenched in water like this lass,” he argued.

“Well, sharing a bath is completely out of the question.”
Sophia’s face was beet red.

“I didnae mean it like that, lass. But if ye wanted to...” he teased.

“Stuff and nonsense,” she quickly fired back.

Dean let out a laugh. “The tub is big enough for both of us, lass, an’ the water is deep an’ soapy. I promise I will nae lay a hand on ye.” He paused to consider. “Unless ye ask me to.”

“Ugh!” She stomped her foot in the manner that he’d come to cherish. “One of these days, your teasing is going to get you into trouble!”

He laughed again. “We are both adults, lass, I cannae walk in the halls with me clothes all wet.”

Sophia seemed to consider his words as she wrapped her arms around her chest in a defensive manner as if she were already naked. “I don’t want you to catch a cold,” she said uncertainly.

“Well then...” He lifted his hands to gesture that there was no other option available to them at present.

“Fine,” she said with a heavy sigh. “You promise you won’t look?”

“I swear.” He held his right hand up as if he were taking an oath.

“Turn around and undress. I’ll do the same. Get in the water, and then I will,” she said and then quickly raised her finger to his face. “But don’t look!” she said sternly.

“Aye, aye.” He turned his back and began to undress as she did the same. “Ye ken that ye dinnae have anythin’ that I haven’t seen ‘afore,” he said with a smirk as he lowered his breeches to the floor.

“Dean!” she scolded him.

“I’m just havin’ a bit of fun, lass.” He laughed as he pulled his damp shirt over his head and kicked his clothes to the side before stepping into the tub of steaming water. His skin instantly felt warmer as he lowered his body into the tub. “I’m in,” he said with his eyes shut tightly.

He listened as she let out a deep breath and stepped into the water. He could feel the water sloshing around him as she sank into the tub.

“You can open your eyes now,” she eventually said.

Dean opened his eyes and looked at her as she blushed. He could see her bare skin up to her shoulders as she sank even lower. “Ye dinnae have to be so shy, lass. Like I said, it’s naethin’ that I haven’t seen ‘afore,” he said more seriously this time.

“Well, I haven’t,” she said hotly as her cheeks caught fire.

“Oh...” He raised his eyebrows. “I didnae take into account that ye had never—”

“I’m a lady!” she hissed. “I would never!”

“Dinnae bite me head off, lass,” he said. “I didnae mean to imply anythin’. Ye came here for a safe place to stay for a few months. At least that’s what the letter yer maither wrote to me said. Now ye’ve been here for a few months. I can see that ye are nae with child, but that doesnae mean that naethin’ else happened.”

“Have you been thinking that I was a lady that had fallen from grace this entire time that I’ve been here at the castle?” she asked in disbelief, her mouth hanging slightly open.

“I didnae mean to imply anythin’ of the sort,” he said with his hands raised in surrender. “I just meant that I dinnae ken why ye needed a safe place to stay for a few months.”

“Well, it had nothing to do with any of that.” She tilted her head to the side.

He examined the angry way she wrinkled her nose before saying, “Sorry, lass, I didnae mean to insult ye. Anyone that spends any time with ye at all will see that ye are a fine and virtuous lady.”

Sophia pouted slightly as she moved as far away from him in the tub as she possibly could.

“I mean, ye nae havin’ seen anythin’ ‘afore would explain why ye thought that Nessie was a boy.” He bit his lower lip as he waited for her response.

Her mouth curled into the faintest of smiles despite her best efforts. Slowly bringing her hand up, she splashed him with water.

“Ye will make an even bigger mess, lass.” He laughed and wiped the soapy water from his face.

“Thank you for giving me a place to stay for a few months. I really needed to leave London, but I can assure you that my virtue is very much intact,” she said honestly.

Dean searched her face as she averted her eyes and looked to the side, debating in his mind if he should ask her why she had to leave London. Deciding that he shouldn’t pry and that she would probably tell him of her own accord when the time was right, he reached for the bar of soap and began to wash himself. They bathed in silence for a few minutes as he tried his best to avert his gaze. Sophia’s naked form was making him feel dangerous things.

“What’s that?” she suddenly asked in a panic as she stared at a spot in the water.

“What is what?” He followed the direction of her gaze. There was nothing visible in the water that he could see.

“There it is again!” she suddenly screamed and flew toward him, making the water splash over the sides of the tub.

Dean caught her in his arms and moved her defensively to the side as he strained to see what it was.

“Oh my God, it is moving!” she squealed and hid her face in his neck.

Dean suddenly caught sight of something swimming and thrust his hand into the water, holding her body close to his with his other arm as she clung to him for dear life. He brought his hand up when he clutched the object in his fingers. Throwing his head back, he let out a laugh and shook his head.

“What are you laughing at?” Sophia asked as she lifted her head but quickly covered her face with her fingers again.

“Ye can look, lass. It’s just a clump of matted hair from the dog. It must have come loose an’ landed in the tub when ye were fightin’ with her.” He continued to laugh.

She breathed a sigh of relief as she peered through her fingers at his hand. “That is disgusting,” she said, wrinkling her nose and lowering her hands.

“It came from yer dog,” he pointed out as he brought the clump of hair a little closer to her face.

“No, no, you can throw that out of the tub,” she said and pushed his hand away from her.

Chuckling, Dean rolled the strands of hair into a ball and flung it across the room. It landed in the smaller tub. “There.” He laughed and placed his other arm around her again. “It cannae hurt ye nae more.”

Sophia laughed, but she stopped when she realized that she was still clinging to him with her naked body. She suddenly took a deep breath and gazed into his eyes.

Dean was greatly surprised when she stayed where she was and made no attempt to move away. He became aware of their position with sudden clarity as his eyes stared into hers.

Her shapely legs were wrapped around his thigh, and her breasts were pressed to the side of his body. He was even more surprised when she leaned down and kissed him on the lips for a second.

She drew back and opened her eyes as if she couldn't even believe what she had done.

His breathing quickened as he drew her closer to him and deepened the kiss, taking his time to search the innermost part of her warm mouth with his tongue as his fingers explored her body.

He slid his hands over her buttocks and squeezed when she let out a moan. Drawing back slightly, he looked into her eyes, which were clouded with desire.

She wants this as much as I do.

“Have ye really never been intimate with a man?” he asked her in a whisper.

“No.” She shook her head and placed her hands on his chest. “I never trusted any man.” She let her gaze fall to his chest before looking into his eyes again. “Until now.”

His heart skipped a beat as he drew her closer to him again and nipped her neck.

She moaned again and tangled her fingers in the length of his hair before he suddenly turned her around and pressed her back against his chest.

“Then yer goin’ to like this very much,” he said as he nibbled on her ear. He used one of his hands to cup her breast while massaging a path down her abdomen with the other.

She gasped slightly and parted her lips as he squeezed her supple breast and rubbed the inner part of her thigh with the palm of his hand.

He took his cue and nipped her neck again while gently pinching her nipple between his thumb and forefinger. Her breathing quickened when he placed his hand between her thighs and gently parted her legs.

“Dean...” she whimpered as he began to explore the most delicate folds of her body with his fingers.

“Aye?” he teased her and gently bit her ear.

Sophia brought her arm up and over her head as she tangled her fingers in his hair once again. Her body began to move with his fingers as they sought even deeper pleasures within the depths of her warmth.

Dean’s arousal was pressed against the small of her back, growing even bigger as her body moved against his.

“Do ye like that?” he whispered in her ear as she began to pant.

“Yes,” she breathed and whimpered as her head fell back on his shoulder, allowing him an open view of her breasts as he played with them and stroked her between her legs.

He picked up the pace and moved his hand from her breast to her mouth to stifle her moans as her pleasure began to build. “Just let go,” he breathed in her ear. “Let yer body do what is natural.”

Sophia cried out, her scream muffled against the palm of his hand, as her body shook and stiffened for a moment before falling back into his arms.

Dean took his time and kissed her face from her jawline all the way down to her chest until her body finally stopped

shuddering and her breathing returned to normal. He wanted to do so much more to her body, but he knew that he had to wait. It wasn't the time to take things further right now.

Her eyes fluttered open, and she gazed at him as she ran the tips of her fingers over his beard. "That was incredible," she whispered.

"Aye, it was," he whispered back before leaning down and kissing her with passion again.

CHAPTER 15



SOPHIA FIXED her hair in front of the vanity mirror before glimpsing the full tub of water that still sat in the middle of her room. The maids had yet to come and take it away. She blushed and bit on her lower lip thinking of what had happened between her and Dean.

Her heart beat a little faster at the thought of what had transpired. He had made her feel things that she never even knew were possible. It was as if her entire being had caught fire and exploded in wave after wave of sheer bliss and ecstasy. She'd never imagined that being with a man would feel like that. It had felt right in a way that made her want to be around him even more.

Dean had sat with her in the tub for a while until her tremors of pleasure had subsided, kissing her neck and whispering sweet nothings in her ear until the water had almost cooled. He'd carried her to her bed in the early hours of the morning, carefully tucked her in and left after she'd fallen asleep. The thought of how tender he had been made her blush despite the fact that she was alone in her room.

Her hand froze over the brush as she suddenly realized that she was feeling more for her employer than she should.

What will happen now if I fall in love with him?

She looked at her reflection in the mirror.

Am I already in love with him?

Panic suddenly gripped her heart as she realized that Dean meant more to her than what she'd admitted to herself.

Nessie barked at her and turned her head to the side in a questioning glance, drawing Sophia from her thoughts.

"I know, girl. You want to go outside pretty badly, don't you?" Sophia fixed her grey skirt as she stood and pushed the chair back under the table. Her questions and self-reflection would have to wait for now. "I'm sure Cillian is already waiting for you." She nodded her head toward the door. "Let's go."

Nessie hopped excitedly in a circle while yapping and tapping her tiny paws on the floor as Sophia made her way to the door.

"All right, all right." She laughed. "Calm down, it won't be long." She reached over and grabbed the handle of the door before looking at the dog. "Mind you, don't run down the hall. I don't think that Granny Amalthea likes you very much." She considered her words. "Then again, I think she might like you a little more than she likes me."

The dog yapped again and bounced on her paws.

“So have at it, girl.” She opened the door and gestured with her arm. “Run as free and as fast as you like.”

Nessie was out the door and down the corridor before Sophia could even finish her sentence.

“John!” Cillian yelled with glee as the tiny white dog came running into his arms. “Ye look so different, boy!” He hunkered down and let the dog lick his face as she jumped into his arms.

Sophia smiled at the scene and giggled. “I’m afraid that the color isn’t all that changed,” she said to Cillian with a smile. “It turns out that our little boy is actually a little girl. Your father decided that Nessie would be a suitable name for her.”

Cillian stopped playing with the dog and narrowed his eyes in suspicion. “I hope she can still do all the tricks now that she’s a girl.”

“No, Cillian,” she began. “That’s not how that works. She didn’t change.” She paused as she thought of a suitable way to explain to the boy that the dog had been a girl all along and hadn’t, in fact, changed. “You know what?” She chose her battle. “I’m sure she will be able to do the tricks even better now that she’s a girl.”

“That would be amazin’!” Cillian said happily, fully placated by her response. He and Nessie both jumped up and run down the hall at lightning speed.

Sophia shook her head and smiled to herself at the innocence of a child.

“Bah!” Duncan let out a yelp and clutched at his chest just as he came around the corner, Cillian ran past with Nessie in tow, nearly knocking him over. He leaned against the wall with one hand on his chest as he spotted Sophia. “Is it just me, lass, or was that dog a different color yesterday?” he asked with narrowed eyes.

“We gave her a bath, Duncan,” Sophia explained.

“This is a hall, not a path.” He looked at her in confusion.

Sophia mouthed the word bath until he understood what she was trying to say to him.

“Oh, a bath, aye.” He nodded. “I nearly thought that the old bat had killed the wee beast an’ Cillian was playing with a ghost.” He chuckled to himself. “I’m glad the dog is nae dead. He’s a good boy.”

“Actually...” Sophia began but quickly shook her head. She would leave it up to Dean to explain to Duncan that the dog was not male. “I was just heading down for breakfast.” She gestured down the stairs.

“Very well, Miss Haddison!” Duncan called after her as she descended the stairs. “Watch out for the old bat! She may nae have killed the dog, but she still has her dirk out for ye!” He chuckled.

Sophia shook her head and laughed. There was plenty to do today without having to explain complicated matters to small boys and old men that were hard of hearing. She smiled to herself as she reached the bottom of the stairs and made her way to the dining hall. She rather liked Duncan the more she got to know him. He was a feisty old goat, albeit a bit hard of hearing.

She quickly spotted Dean at the head of the table and took a deep breath as she walked into the room. She hadn't been expecting to see him so early this morning. He usually had his breakfast later than everyone else, as he usually saw that everything was in order before he ate.

He quickly stood when he spotted her. "Good mornin'," he said almost awkwardly.

"Good morning." She made her way to the table as he pulled out the chair adjacent to his for her. It seemed as if neither of them knew how to act after what had happened the night before.

"I thought I might join ye for breakfast this mornin'," he explained as he pushed her in once she had taken a seat.

The heat rose in her cheeks as the tips of his fingers gently brushed her shoulders. Visions of his hands all over her body made her slightly flustered as she tried her best not to let him see what she was thinking about. The worst part was that she desperately wanted him to touch her again.

"This came for ye," Dean said, drawing her away from her thoughts. He seemed to be even more caring and attentive to

her needs as he walked around the table and retrieved a silver tray with an envelope before handing it to her. “The postmark is from London.”

“Thank you,” she said hesitantly as she reached for the envelope. She hadn’t had time to think of her stalker in the past few days. There was every chance that he had found where she was and had sent her another note. Her hands trembled slightly as she broke the red wax seal and retrieved the letter. “Oh, thank goodness.” She breathed a sigh of relief when she saw her mother’s handwriting.

Dean looked at her with one eyebrow raised.

“It’s from my mother,” she quickly explained and turned the letter over. But her relief faded, and she raised a hand to her mouth.

“I hope it’s nae bad news?” Dean asked as he reached for a bannock.

“My mother is very ill,” she said as tears filled her eyes. “She’s asked that I return to London at once. She would never ask me to come if it wasn’t absolutely necessary.” She began to cry, unable to hold the tears back any longer.

Pushing his chair back with his knees, he quickly stood and made his way to her side. “I’m sure everythin’ is fine,” he said soothingly as he placed a hand on her shoulder. “Yer maither probably just wants to see ye again. Ye should go,” he added reassuringly.

“But what about Cillian’s schooling?” She wiped the tears from her cheeks with the back of her hand.

“The lad has more than enough reading to keep him busy while ye are gone. He can also focus a bit more on his sword skills until ye return.”

“Oh, Dean...” She stood and threw her arms around his neck.

He pulled her against his chest, drawing her closer. “Yer family must come first. We will wait for ye to return. Take as much time as ye need.”

Sophia took a deep breath and inhaled the scent of his skin as he held her tight. “I’ll try and be back as soon as I can.”

“Aye,” he said softly. “The castle will be waiting for ye.”

Sophia wondered if he meant that *he* would be waiting for her, or if he had only meant that Cillian and her position would still be here. What would time apart mean for them both? They hadn’t even had time to discuss what their evening together meant for the future.

She battled with her feelings for the laird and the fear that was bubbling up in the pit of her stomach. There was a nagging feeling in her heart that said she felt more for him than she was willing to admit.



Sophia lifted her skirts as she ran up the stairs two at a time, not even bothering to stop and greet the butler or any of the servants as she made her way up to the gallery. Sweat beaded her brow as her heart beat in her ears. Her only concern at present was her mother.

Stopping at the door that led to her mother's room, she took a deep breath and willed her heartbeats to return to normal. She'd cried and prayed during the arduous ride back to London, begging God to make her mother well again.

"Mama," she whispered as she pushed open the door and stepped into the dimly lit room.

She was met with a deafening silence that made her heart sink into the pit of her stomach.

The drapes were drawn almost all the way shut, the only sliver of light coming through a tiny gap in the curtains, giving just enough light for her to make out the figure that lay beneath the bed covers.

"Mama," she whispered again as she neared the bed. Again, she was met with no reply.

Sophia began to cry as she reached the side of the bed. Her mother lay motionless with her head on the pillow, the sheets neatly tucked under her sides as if she hadn't moved in a while. Her face was pale and drawn.

"Oh, Mama." Sophia wept as she fell to her knees and buried her head in the crisp white sheets.

I was too late. Why did I run away in the first place? Why didn't I just stay here and face my problems?

“Sophia?”

Her head snapped up as she heard her mother's voice calling to her.

“Mama!” she exclaimed in shock and reached for the frail white hand that poked from beneath the blanket. “I thought I was too late!”

Libby smiled at her. “I was just resting, dear. I'm already feeling much better. You know how Anderson is when she tucks me in. A tornado from the East wouldn't be able to move the sheets,” she said with a gentle smile, her voice still laced with sleep. “No matter how long she's been my maid, she will still fuss and cluck about like a mother hen.”

Sophia felt a wave of relief as she pulled herself onto the bed and sat at her mother's side, holding and kissing her pale hand. “I was so scared, Mama. Are you really better?”

“Much better. I'm sorry if I scared you, dear.” Libby pulled herself up and lay against the mountain of pillows that the maid had doubtlessly propped up behind her. “I only asked if you would come home because I thought your presence would cheer me up. It was just a cold. I thought at one point that death would be a better fate.” She winked. “But I'm fit as a fiddle now. I'm only in bed because Anderson thinks I need more rest.”

“I agree with her.” Sophia leaned down and kissed her mother’s cheek. “You need to get enough rest, so the cold is completely gone.”

Libby rolled her eyes and shook her head with a smile. “That’s enough about me now. You must have so many exciting things to tell me.” The color began to flood her cheeks again as the excitement grew in her eyes. “Have you been down to the Loch Ness? I hope you have. I always wanted to go as a child. I had this silly notion in my head that I could spot the Loch Ness monster.” She laughed. “I hope the laird’s castle isn’t too far from there. I guess you could always make a day out of it and travel by horse if it isn’t too far,” she prattled on excitedly.

Shaking her head with a laugh, Sophia stood and made her way across the room. She pulled open the drapes, allowing the afternoon sun to fill the room. “I can’t say that I’ve had time to visit the Loch, but I do have a small Scottish Terrier named Nessie,” she said as she turned back to her mother.

Libby blinked a few times and shielded her eyes before saying, “Anderson has had me in this bed for so long that I swear I’ll burst into flames if I go outside again.”

“Stop your griping, Mama,” Sophia said gently as she placed her hands on her hips. “You need someone who will fuss over you and make sure that you are taking care of yourself.” She used her stern face that worked on Cillian whenever he was being difficult.

“Oh, all right,” Libby conceded. “I forgot what a bossy boots you can be. I see that being a tutor has only worsened that

trait!” She narrowed her eyes and gave her daughter a cheeky grin. “Are you tidier with your things these days?”

Sophia pursed her lips and looked to the side. “Now, that really would be too much of a change, Mama,” she said sheepishly.

Libby threw back her head and let out a light laugh that filled the room.

It did Sophia’s heart good to hear her mother laughing like that again. They’d left things in such a worried and uncertain place that she’d forgotten how pleasant her mother’s laugh could actually be. Her thoughts suddenly went back to her stalker and the reason she’d left London in the first place.

Looking over her shoulder, she glanced out the window at the building across the street. She froze when she thought she’d seen a man quickly step into the shadows of an alley.

“Sophia?” her mother asked her in a gentle voice. “What’s the matter?”

“I thought I saw...” Sophia hesitated as she stared back out the window. There was nothing there besides normal people going about their daily business. “Nothing.” She shook her head and let out a breath.

“Come and sit here.” Libby patted the sheets beside her on the bed.

Shaking off the feeling of dread and fear that had suddenly taken over her mind again, Sophia made her way back to her mother and carefully sat on the edge of the mattress.

“No letters came while you were gone, dear. I think the man has given up. Whoever he is, he got the message that you were no longer here.” Libby reached up and stroked her daughter’s cheek. “You were gone for two months, there’s no need to fear anymore,” she said encouragingly with a smile.

“Thank you, Mama.” Sophia pressed her cheek into her mother’s warm hand with a sigh. “I’d forgotten how scared I’d been before I went to Scotland. The safety of the castle had pushed those feelings far away.”

“Good.” Libby nodded. “You needed that distance. But now, we can all return to our lives as normal. You can come back home. I’ll write to the laird at once and ask for you to be released from your post.”

Sophia blushed as her mother took her hand away from her face. “I think I would like to stay on in my position for a bit longer, Mama,” She bit her lower lip. “Cillian is doing so well with his lessons, and Dean has even allowed him to practice fighting with swords. They have a real bond as father and son now.”

“Dean?” her mother asked with a frown.

“The Laird Dean O’Brien. He asked me to use his given name.” Sophia blushed even deeper as her mother examined her face. “We became friends.” She began to panic when her mother kept her eyes fixed on her face, scrutinizing her every

move. “I made a few new friends at the castle. Anthony, Hamish, and even a very dear old man with a hearing problem named Duncan,” she hurriedly explained with a laugh. “He keeps calling me Miss Haddison instead of Harrison.”

Libby’s smile broadened as she looked at her daughter. “Not to mention a dog named Nessie.”

“Yes.” Sophia blushed. “Nessie is a very special dog. Dean rescued her for me on a stormy night.”

“Dean seems like a very kind man,” Libby noted with a knowing smile. “You seem to have built quite the life for yourself over there with all of your new friends.”

“I did miss you, Mama,” Sophia said more quietly when she noticed the way her mother was looking at her.

“Don’t mind me, dear.” Libby chuckled. “It does my heart good to see the adventurous young woman you’ve become in such a short amount of time. I’m sure that the laird wouldn’t want to part with you just yet.” She winked, making her daughter feel a bit guilty because of the night they’d spent together before she’d left.

Sophia suddenly brightened when an idea came to her mind. “I know, Mama!” she said more cheerfully. “Why don’t you come back to Scotland with me? You will see how beautiful it is there. I know Dean won’t mind. He will welcome you with open arms. I’m sure of that!”

“If you’re sure, dear,” Libby responded hesitantly.

“Of course!” Sophia bounced to her feet. “It would be amazing if you could come. Things would be even more fun! You can rest for a few more days, then we can both go to Scotland.” She nodded as if everything had been decided before walking back over to the window and staring out. “The weather should be a little warmer in a few days, but I shall keep you nice and snug in the carriage in any case.”

Libby laughed and shook her head. “Who am I to argue with you once you’ve set your mind to something?”

“Exactly!” Sophia said happily and looked back out the window.

She quickly felt a sense of unease when she spotted a man with light blonde hair walking down the street. He seemed to be in good spirits as he swung a cane in one hand, yet there was something about him that seemed vaguely familiar and unsettling at the same time.

She pushed the thoughts aside and chalked it up to paranoia as she turned back to her mother.

CHAPTER 16



DEAN LEANED against the door jamb as he watched Sophia unpack her luggage. She'd taken a week to see to her mother before returning to the castle. He'd heard from Anthony and Hamish that she'd brought her mother along with her. He'd felt a sense of relief and hope that she'd stay a little longer now that her mother had come along.

"Dean!" she said in surprise as she turned around with a dress in her hand. She was just as lovely as he'd remembered. "I'm sorry I didn't come down to greet you. I thought you were busy on a hunt." Her cheeks filled with color as she smiled at him, making his heart skip a beat.

"Aye, I was busy," he said and straightened. "But ye should never think ye are botherin' me, Sophia." He felt his confidence faltering slightly in her presence. "I'm glad ye are back." He rubbed the back of his neck.

"I'm glad to be back." She held the dress a little closer to her chest. "I'm sorry I didn't ask if it was fine for my mother to come along, I just..." she hesitated. "I just thought she would love the castle as much as I do."

“Aye. I met yer maither on the way up the stairs.” He smiled.
“She seems to be a very protective...”

“Oh, goodness.” Sophia gripped the dress a little tighter.

“She did mention somethin’ about having me drawn an’ quartered if I let anythin’ happen to ye,” he admitted with a laugh.

Sophia suppressed a giggle. “I’m sorry, she’s always been overly protective, sometimes to the point where she would forget her manners.”

Dean felt his breath catch in his throat as he stared at her beautiful face. He’d missed her more than he had realized he would and wanted to tell her exactly how he felt about her, but he wanted to wait until the right moment so that nothing was forced.

The night they’d spent together in her room had broken down his barriers in a way he’d never expected. He found himself thinking of her when he woke up and when he went to sleep. During all hours of the day, he was thinking about her.

“She suggested that I return home,” she continued when he didn’t say anything.

His eyes quickly searched her face in panic.

“But I said that I wanted to stay here as Cillian’s tutor.” She seemed to search for the right words. “I’d hate to leave him

now that he's doing so well."

Dean breathed a sigh of relief. "I dinnae want ye to leave either," he said with a smile. "Ye have made quite a difference at the castle, an' I dinnae mean just with Cillian." He looked her in the eye as he spoke, willing her to understand what he meant.

Sophia's chest rose and fell as her breathing quickened. She quickly turned to her cupboard and hung her dress. "I'm flattered that you appreciate my efforts," she breathed.

Dean smiled to himself at how flustered she became whenever he gave her a compliment. It gave him hope that she felt the same way he did and that everything wasn't just in his head. Her gentle manners and humble personality were two of the things that attracted him to her the most.

She turned back to the cases that were open on her bed. "I was hoping that..." She gasped and lifted her hands to her mouth.

"What?" Dean quickly came to her side. "What's the matter?"

Her hands shook as she held a note in one hand. The fear in her voice was palpable as she spoke. "He found me again." She held the note out to him. "I found this on the bed. It must have been slipped in between the cases on the coach."

Frowning, Dean reached for the piece of parchment and gently took it from her hands.

My darling Sophia, you have returned at last! My world was empty without you in it. I promise to never take my eyes off you again! Not even for a second.

“Who is this?” He felt his anger growing as he clenched his jaw.

“Dean...” she began, trembling.

Pushing his anger to the side, he placed his hands on her shoulders and tried his best to calm her down. “Take a deep breath and tell me what happened,” he commanded as gently as he could. The sting of betrayal gnawed at his mind.

Is she married and just didn't want to say?

Her lips quivered as she stared at him with wide eyes. “The reason I left London and came here to Scotland is that there was a man that was sending me letters. It started out innocently enough with letters that seemed as if they were written by a secret admirer, but it quickly became apparent that the writer was watching my every move. My mother thought it best if I got away for a while. I didn't get another note until...”

“Until you returned to London,” he finished for her, breathing a sigh of relief that she wasn't married.

She slowly nodded with her eyes shut. “He must have found a way to slip the note between the cases while we were leaving home.” Her voice broke with fear. “I'm afraid he might have followed me here to the castle now.”

Dean crumpled the note in his fist. "I think the chances of that are more than likely," he said hotly. "Why did ye nae tell me about this 'afore?"

Tears fell down her cheeks as her trembling turned into shaking. "I'm so sorry, Dean, I know this was incredibly irresponsible of me. I never thought that he would follow me to Scotland, and now I've gone and placed your family in danger." Her voice caught in her throat as she cried. "This is all my fault."

"Sophia..." he whispered as he took a step forward and drew her into his arms. He felt a pang of guilt at the way she was crying. He hadn't intended to blame her for what had happened. "Look at me." He drew back slightly and lifted her chin with his finger. "I dinnae blame ye for anythin'. I only meant that I would never have let ye go back to London by yerself if I kent about this."

Sophia looked into his eyes, her body still trembling as he held her close.

"My only concern is for yer wellbein'. I dinnae ken what I will do if anythin' happens to ye." He swore under his breath and shook his head. "I promise that the devil will nae lay a hand on ye, nae now that yer under me roof. Ye will be safe, I promise." His voice grew husky and thick as he stared down at her in his arms.

"Dean..." she whispered through her tears.

"Aye?" He searched her face.

“I... I love you.”

Dean thought his heart would explode as he stared at her in disbelief. “I love ye too,” he finally said as he brought his lips down to hers and drew her into his embrace, his tongue hungrily searching her mouth.

He realized at that moment that the protectiveness he felt toward her was because he loved her more than he’d ever loved anyone before.

Sophia sighed as she kissed him back, then drew a few inches away. “I was so afraid that it was all in my head and that you didn’t feel the same way that I do about you,” she whispered with her eyes closed. “I was so scared that if I told you how I felt you would push me away.”

“How could I nae love ye?” he asked. “When ye came into me life with yer messy ways and turned everythin’ the right side up? I may not have realized it before, but I’ve loved ye for longer than I knew. I think I was just afraid that ye would feel obligated to say ye love me too because yer in my employ.”

She laughed and kissed him again. “I’ve never felt more at home than when I’m with you. I would never feel obligated to tell a man that I love him if I didn’t.”

“Aye, I ken what ye mean.” He pressed his lips to hers once again and raked his fingers through the auburn curls that hung down her back. “Yer safe here,” he whispered again before pushing her gently against the cupboard and kissing the tears from her cheeks before returning to her mouth.



Dean looked at the men seated around his table before glancing at Sophia's anxious face. He'd called Hamish and Anthony into the great hall to inform them of the problem he now faced. The woman he loved was in danger, and they needed to do everything they could to protect her at all costs.

"I'm sorry to pull ye away from yer work," Dean began. "But a problem has arisen, and we need to address it immediately."

Anthony and Hamish exchanged worried glances.

"It has come to me attention that Sophia has gained the unwelcome interests of an unknown man."

The men both frowned as they looked to her.

Dean did his best to explain what had happened in London before she came to the castle and the note she had found hidden in her luggage.

"The bastard!" Hamish suddenly exclaimed as he banged his fists on the table. "I will tear him apart with me own two hands if he dares come within the reaches of this castle's walls."

"Calm yerself, Hamish," Anthony said with anger in his voice. "Dean obviously has a plan if he's called us here."

“Aye, I do.” Dean nodded. “I will go into the village this afternoon and see if any strange men have been seen. I’ll check all the inns and even scout the forest.” He turned to Hamish. “I will entrust ye to secure the perimeter an’ ensure that naebody enters this castle without ye knowin’ about it.”

“Aye, nae so much as a bird will fart in this direction,” Hamish asserted.

Anthony rolled his eyes but quickly looked serious again when Dean turned to him.

“I will ask ye, Anthony, if ye will stay close to her side an’ ensure that naethin’ happens?”

“Sophia will nae be left alone even for a second,” Anthony said with a clenched jaw.

“An’ I will cut down any man that dares come near us!” Cillian shouted as he jumped up from under the table and brandished his wooden sword.

“Cillian!” Dean shouted. “This was a private meetin’. Ye were nae supposed to be listenin’,” he admonished.

“But, Faither! Ye didnae even ken I was here. I’m small enough to protect Miss Harrison with stealth an’ cut down any man that crosses her path!” Cillian said with conviction and waved his sword in the air.

“Very well,” Dean relented with a sigh. “Anthony an’ Cillian will protect Sophia while Hamish patrols the borders.”

Nessie yapped as she too bounded from beneath the table, and Cillian whooped.

Dean shook his head as the others stood to leave, their chairs scraping across the floor. He hadn’t wanted to involve Cillian in the plans, but it seemed as if he wouldn’t be having a say in the matter.

“I’ll go and prepare the men for patrols,” Hamish said.

“An’ I’ll go an’ get someone to train the lads while I’m busy protectin’ Sophia,” Anthony added. “I want to be sure that all of me time is free.”

“Good men,” Dean praised them as Cillian bounded after them and left the hall with Nessie on his heels. “Ye didnae say much,” he said to Sophia as she stared at the table.

“I’m just touched that everyone wants to protect me,” she admitted almost tearfully.

Leaning down, Dean pressed a tender kiss to her lips before drawing away. “We all love ye, Sophia. Naebody in this castle will ever let anythin’ happen to ye. I promise ye that.”



Dean surveyed the throng of people in the village square as they went about their daily business. He’d checked with all the

local inn owners and even stopped at every stall to ask if any visitors had come to the village, citing the excuse that he wanted to keep a closer eye on the well-being of his people. Nobody had seen anything besides a few people staying at the inn.

He busied himself by looking at stalls while he kept an eye on the passing crowd. The village square was slightly emptier than usual due to the snow that was still falling, but there were more than enough people to hide his presence.

“Good day, my laird,” an elderly woman with a grey shawl greeted him as he passed her stall of herbs. “I trust that the herbs I sent to the castle are all still in good supply? Or will ye be needin’ some fresh ones today?”

“Mornin’, Maggie,” he greeted in his gruff manner. “The herbs are all fine. I was just checking the village to see if everythin’ is in order. Have ye been makin’ a lot of sales of late?” he asked in a roundabout way.

“Mighty kind if ye, my laird. Business has been good. What with this cold weather an’ all, everyone has some ailment or the other that needs fixin’.”

“Aye.” He nodded. “Any visitors to the village come by for any herbs?”

“Just a family travelling.” Maggie paused. “There was one gentleman that came by an’ asked for something to soothe his dry skin. It seems the gentleman left home in a hurry an’ wasnae prepared for the harsh Scottish winter.” She looked up

again. “Very nice man. I think he said he was headed to the bakers after here.”

“Thank ye, Maggie,” Dean said gruffly before turning to face the other end of the street. He quickly spotted a man with blonde hair in a bright green coat coming from inside the bakery. Walking fast, he made his way across the snow-covered road and past the stalls, gaining ground on the man. “I’m sorry!” he exclaimed as he bumped into the man, gripping his arm before he slipped. “I didnae see ye there, lad.”

“That’s quite all right,” the man said in an English accent, smiling. He had bright blonde hair, piercing blue eyes and a pleasant face.

Dean watched his every move to try and gauge his character.

“Luke Johnson.” The man stuck out his hand with a smile.

“Dean O’Brien, Laird of McGill Castle.” Dean relaxed a little and shook the man’s hand. It was highly unlikely that a stalker would be so friendly and introduce himself to a stranger if he was trying to keep a low profile, he reasoned. “What brings ye to these parts of Scotland?”

“Just passing through on my way to see my betrothed,” Luke said openly. “My father is the Earl of Montgomery. We often pass through Scotland and visit some of the castles. Perhaps you have met my father before?” he asked with a quizzical eyebrow.

“Nay, I cannae say that I have,” Dean admitted. “I may have met him once at a feast, but it’s hard to remember.”

“Of course,” Luke said politely. “I’m sure you must meet many people as a laird. It’s understandable that you wouldn’t remember every single person you met.”

Dean let out a breath of relief. “Well, I dinnae want to keep ye any longer. I hope ye enjoy your stay in the village.”

“Thank you, I’m sure I will.” Luke smiled again. “I have one or two things to see to before I go on my way again, but it was a pleasure making your acquaintance, Laird McGill.”

Dean listened with half an ear as he spotted a man wearing a dark hooded cape coming from behind the tavern.

“Perhaps I could look in at the castle on my next visit?” Luke asked cheerfully.

“Aye, that would be fine.” Dean clapped him on the shoulder as he kept his eyes on the man that was swiftly making his way in the direction of the woods behind the village.

“I’ll be sure to look in then. Until next time,” Luke called as Dean began to walk down the road.

The laird picked up the pace and followed the man who was walking away with increasing speed. He seemed to be in a hurry to get away from the village, as he kept glancing over his shoulder. The man kept his hood pulled over his face and

set out at a trot as he reached the perimeter of the village, circling a building before ducking in the direction of the castle.

Feeling the hairs on the back of his neck stand on end, Dean kept to the shadows and followed behind for a while to see if the man was truly headed toward the castle. It quickly became apparent that his motive was to remain unseen as he wove in and out of alleys.

Gaining ground, Dean quickly caught up with him once they were beyond the village. Creeping up from behind, he quickly gripped the man's arm and spun him around.

"Hey!" the stranger yelled as he fell on his back in the snow.

"Jamie!" Dean growled in anger when he recognized the freckle-faced lad with his mass of red curls. "What in the devil's name are ye doing sneakin' around like that?"

"I only had one ale! I swear, my laird, please," Jamie begged. "Dinnae tell me maither. I was headed to the castle to continue me lessons with Anthony," he continued to plead almost tearfully. "I swear I only had one!"

Swearing under his breath, Dean gripped the boy's arm and pulled him to his feet. "Get back to the castle, lad. I'll deal with ye later," he barked.

"Aye, my laird!" Jamie quickly complied and ran in the direction of the castle.

Taking a deep breath and shaking his head, Dean walked back to the town and watched the people go about their day.

Perhaps the man changed his mind and went back to London.

He attempted to reassure himself that there wasn't anyone in town that raised his suspicions or even gave him the impression of someone that would stalk a woman. Luke had seemed honest enough with the fact that he was here to see the woman he was set to marry.

He set out toward the forest to see if he could spot any signs of a campsite, just to be sure.

CHAPTER 17



SOPHIA HUGGED her arms around her waist as she watched Cillian playing with Nessie. The sun was about to set, and the evening chill was setting in as her breath billowed out in small clouds in front of her face. There was a blizzard on the way, as was evident by the thick curtains of snow that were forming around the walls of the castle.

He said he loves me.

She hugged herself a little tighter, biting her bottom lip to prevent a smile. In all of her wildest dreams, she'd never imagined that a man like Dean O'Brien would say he loved her too.

What does this mean now? Are we going to get married?

Her mind raced with all of the possibilities that a life as Dean's wife could hold.

"Here, girl!" Cillian called as he held his wooden sword in the air.

The tiny white dog yapped as she jumped for the blade while Cillian held it just out of reach.

Sophia's heart grew with warmth as his little cheeks grew brighter like two little apples in the fall.

I'll be his mother...

She started. Cillian liked her, but would he accept her as a motherly figure? She'd always wanted children, but it had seemed so unreal as a possibility, until now.

“Sophia?”

She jumped and nearly fell into a pile of snow when a voice suddenly spoke at her side.

“Sorry, I didnae mean to scare ye,” Anthony apologized as he came up by her side and caught her arm before she fell, holding her steady as she regained her footing.

“No matter.” She laughed. “I was just deep in thought.”

Anthony frowned as he saw Cillian playing with the dog. “You should nae be out here so late. It's nae safe, given the current circumstances,” he said with concern. “Perhaps ye should go back inside. There's a nasty blizzard on the way by the looks of things.” He nodded toward the castle walls and worsening wind.

“I know,” Sophia said a little more seriously. “I just wanted to bring Cillian and Nessie out for a bit. They will bounce off the walls inside if I don’t at least give them a little time outside.”

“Aye, I understand.” Anthony nodded. “Just dinnae go beyond the gates. There are men patrollin’ the perimeter, but it’s better to be safe than sorry.”

“I promise we won’t go outside,” she said with a warm smile. “I wanted to thank you for agreeing to look out for me. I know you must have a lot of work. I never meant to be a burden. I should have told Dean about the letters and my situation before I came and accepted the position.”

“Aye, ye definitely brought us all more work,” Anthony returned with a teasing glint in his eyes.

Sophia’s smile broadened as she looked at him. She liked the way Anthony and Hamish had become comfortable whenever she was around. They treated her as if she were one of their friends, teasing her and making light of situations. “I’m just grateful for friends like you.” She looked back at Cillian, who was getting closer to the gate as he played with Nessie. “Don’t go too far, Cillian!” she yelled.

“Aye! We willnae,” Cillian yelled back.

Anthony turned to her, the corner of his mouth tilted up in a smile. “Besides, I think the laird will skin us alive if anything were to happen to ye.” He winked. “It’s nae like we have a choice in the matter.”

Sophia turned scarlet red. She hadn't been aware that anyone else knew about the feelings that she and Dean shared.

"We've all noticed the way he looks at ye," Anthony continued. "Yer the first woman I've ever seen him look at like that, as if ye were the most important person on the face of the earth."

"I..." She struggled for words.

How do I explain the relationship and feelings I have for Dean when I don't even know where things are going?

"Ye dinnae have to say anythin'," Anthony said after a while. "I ken Dean. He was scared to love 'afore ye came along, but all of that changed because of ye. Hamish an' I saw a difference in him from the start." He turned and placed a hand on her shoulder. "Just be careful out here," he said and gave her a gentle squeeze. "An' never apologize for coming to the castle. All of our lives are far better when ye are around." He smiled at her warmly.

"I have to go an' see what the guards at the back of the castle need. Hamish said there was a problem with one of the patrols. It's probably naethin', but I need to go an' check. Will ye promise nae to leave the castle grounds?"

"I promise," Sophia said with a smile as he turned to leave.

Her heart felt as if it could burst with happiness as she turned back to Cillian and Nessie. Dean loved her, and everyone around them could see it happening.

“Cillian!” she suddenly yelled as she watched the boy leave the gates and run after Nessie, who was chasing something in the wind. Her voice became lost in the drifts of snow that were being blown about by the wind.

She lifted her skirts and followed Cillian out of the gates, leaving the safety of the castle walls behind.

“Cillian!” she continued to yell as she strained her eyes through the growing blizzard that was making it difficult to see. They had wandered off beyond the walls, disappearing entirely from view.

Contemplating whether or not she should fetch a guard to help her look for them, or simply go after them alone, she decided that the blizzard was far too strong to turn back now.

They could get lost outside the walls if they wandered too far.

She squinted and tried to see where they had gone as she used her gloved hand to shield her eyes.

“Sophia...”

Her body froze beneath the confines of her warm clothes as a slick voice called out to her through the wind.

“Fate has brought you back to me when I thought I would never see you again.”

She backed away in an attempt to escape as she struggled to put a face to the voice that was talking to her from beyond the drifts of snow. The curtain of snow was becoming so thick that she could barely see her hand in front of her face. “Who are you?” she called out, stumbling over a log that had been hidden in the snow as she backed away.

The outline of a man began to emerge through the blizzard as she struggled to move, the depths of snow beneath her body preventing her from standing again.

“Do you not recognize my voice, my sweet Sophia?” the man asked as he stepped closer and towered above her, his features still hidden.

Sophia could feel her heart beating in her throat as she struggled to see who he was.

“I had hoped you missed me so much that you’d recognize my voice as soon as I spoke, my sweet.” He stepped a little closer, revealing his bright blonde hair, piercing blue eyes and boyish looks. He gave her a toothy grin, revealing a row of perfectly white teeth.

“I... I don’t know you.” She frowned up at him.

His eyes grew dark with anger as he glared at her for a second before he sighed and smiled again. “That’s all right, you’ve had a fall. Of course you wouldn’t recognize me,” he said in an oily voice that set her teeth on edge and made every nerve in her body stand on end.

The man seemed harmless enough as he spoke, but there was something about him that was off.

She quickly gained her feet and backed away from him in the snow.

“Let me refresh your memory,” he said, taking a step toward her and bowing. “My name is Luke Johnson, second son of the Earl of Montgomery. We met a few years ago at a ball, and I haven’t been able to keep my eyes off you ever since. You are all that occupies my mind, day and night,” he explained as the hunger grew in his eyes, giving him the look of a wild animal as his tongue snaked out and licked his lips.

“I’m afraid I don’t—” She stopped and frowned at him. “You are Johnny’s younger brother? I remember he danced with me at Lady Eldridge’s last ball.” She quickly realized her mistake when he advanced on her with a murderous look in his eyes.

“I am more than just Johnny’s younger brother!” Luke growled. “I am the man whom you will marry and live happily ever after with! Was my love not apparent to you with every note that I sent? Was it not enough to show you that I’m the one!?”

Sophia quickly realized that Luke Johnson wasn’t playing with a full deck of cards as he stopped to smooth back his hair and straighten his cuffs. Her mind sought an escape as her eyes darted around. She was surrounded by thick banks of snow on every side.

“Never mind that,” he muttered as he sniffed and straightened his back. “You’ve clearly hit your head, otherwise you would have recognized me.”

“Why did you come here?” she asked, attempting to keep him talking while she came up with a plan.

“Why?” He laughed in an unhinged manner that made the pit of her stomach tumble with fear. “I’m here to take you back to London with me so that we can get married.” He looked at her as if she were the one who was daft and not him. “I came all the way to Scotland to save you.”

“Luke...” she began, feeling sorry for the man, who was clearly not in the right frame of mind. “I’m sorry, but I can’t marry you. I don’t even know who you are.”

Luke paused and frowned at her. “But the notes? I must have sent you hundreds of notes declaring my love for you. Of course you know who I am.”

“Why didn’t you come and introduce yourself when we were all at the ball?” she asked in an attempt to understand him.

Luke shook his head and grinned at her. “I was far too awkward and shy. How could I approach someone as beautiful and elegant as you? It was only when you went to Scotland that I realized I had to make you mine officially so that you would never leave me again.” His eyes darkened again as he stared at her. “You were always mine, Sophia. I just have to make it official, and then you can stay by my side forever.”

“Luke...” she began again.

“Yes, my sweet?” He advanced on her, closing the distance between them as she backed up against the castle wall. “It’s such sweet music to my ears when you say my name.” His grin widened until he looked mad with glee.

“I’m afraid I can’t marry you, Luke. My heart belongs to another. It wouldn’t be fair to you if I pretended to love you,” she explained as best she could.

“Who?!” Luke yelled bitterly as he glared at her, before looking up at the wall. “Do you mean the laird?” he asked incredulously. “Dean O’Brien? The great big jerk I met in the village? You can’t be serious!” He shook his head. “No, that can’t be right. He must have used some kind of magic to make you believe that you love him instead of me.”

“Magic?” She began to panic as she realized just how unstable he was.

“Yes. Don’t you know about the fairies and the changelings of Scotland? They use ancient magic that can make people believe they are something they aren’t.” He pursed his lips and shook his head, waving the notion away with his hand. “It doesn’t matter now. I’m here to make things right. Come with me, and everything will be set to rights,” he said as he reached for her hand.

“No!” She attempted to slip away to the side, looking around and wondering why none of the guards on patrol was coming to her aid.

“There’s no need to worry, my sweet,” Luke said as he looked around, following her gaze. “I created a diversion at the back of the castle to ensure that nobody gets in our way,” he explained triumphantly. “I even lured that silly little boy and his dog away. This marvelous blizzard has also provided cover for us to escape. It’s as if the universe wants us to be together.”

Luke blocked her body with his own just as a wooden sword came flying through the air, knocking him clean off his feet as it connected with the side of his head.

“Run, Sophia!” Cillian yelled triumphantly. “I have the bastard now! Ye can escape!” He stabbed Luke in the side with his wooden sword as hard as he could.

Luke groaned and rolled onto his side but quickly got back up.

“No! Cillian, come with me!” Sophia yelled and held out her hand to the boy as he stood his ground and glared at Luke.

“I can handle him!” Cillian yelled back at her.

“I’ll teach you, you meddlesome little fool!” Luke growled as he pulled a dagger from his coat and advanced on the boy.

Sophia screamed and tried to rush forward just as Nessie came running from the side out of nowhere and bit hard on Luke’s ankle.

“Get off!” Luke screamed as Nessie dug her teeth into his leg. “Get the beast off!” He frantically shook his leg until Nessie

let go and flew through the air with a yelp, landing with a thud in a pile of snow.

“Ye dinnae dare hurt Nessie!” Cillian cried again and rushed at Luke before Sophia could reach them. He gripped Luke’s arm in an attempt to pull him down. “That’s our dog! I’ll kill ye for hurtin’ her!”

“Let him go, please!” Sophia screamed as Luke caught Cillian by the hair and held him at arm’s length, eliciting a cry of pain from the boy. “He’s just a boy, don’t hurt him!”

Luke looked at her before flinging Cillian across a pile of snow.

Cillian cried out in pain and gripped his arm just as Luke was about to advance on him again.

“I’ll go with you!” Sophia yelled in panic.

Luke turned to look at her with his head cocked to the side.

“I’ll go with you. Please, just leave him alone.”

Luke stared at her for a minute before placing the dagger back in his coat with a smile. “I knew that you would see sense again, my sweet. Let us leave now and begin our happily ever after,” he said as he advanced on her and gripped her wrist.

“No! Sophia!” Cillian cried as he attempted to stand, falling face first in the snow as Luke dragged her away.

Sophia felt the hot tears stinging her eyes as the boy lay motionless in the snow. Her heart cried out as she looked on helplessly.

Dean! Help us! We need you...

CHAPTER 18



DEAN PULLED the dark grey cloak a little tighter around his shoulders as he tried to shrug off the chill of the blizzard that was quickly surrounding the castle. The day had been long and unfruitful. He'd tried his best to scope out the woods as well as the town, but nobody stood out or looked suspicious. He'd thrown in the towel and returned to the castle.

Sophia seemed more at ease with the situation and had taken Nessie and Cillian for a walk, promising not to leave the safety of the castle walls.

He tried to ease his mind with the thought that the man could have gone back to London, but a nagging feeling at the back of his mind told him that it was best to remain vigilant and not let anything slip through the cracks. It was that feeling that had him come to the front steps and check to see if everything was in order.

“Everything is clear, my laird,” Hamish said as he stopped at his side. “The perimeter has been checked and guards have been stationed in the towers to keep an eye out during the storm tonight.” His nose and cheeks were a bright red as he blew into his ham-sized fists in an attempt to warm his pudgy fingers.

Turning his head, Dean looked at Hamish, who was wearing a black fur cloak, not unlike the one the laird was wearing. The only differences were the color and the way the thick fabric hung on the men. Dean's was snug and covered his body, while Hamish's large belly protruded from the front.

"Aye, that was a good call, Hamish. I doubt there will be a need for patrols tonight. The guards can stay in the towers an' at the front doors to the entrance hall. Naebody will be getting through that blizzard." Dean turned back to the gates and nodded at the sheet of snow that was already obscuring the view and partially hiding the massive wooden gates.

"Everythin' has been seen to. Anthony has nae left her side all day," Hamish said and rubbed his hands together in an attempt to keep the blood flowing. The chill in the air was worsening by the second. "Ye can rest easy now, my laird. Sophia is safe."

Dean nodded without taking his eyes off the gates. Something was nagging at the back of his mind. Sophia and Cillian should have been back from their walk already, unless they had slipped past him on their way back into the castle, which wasn't likely, given the current situation. He hoped that Anthony was still with them.

"Ye really love her," Hamish said as he tucked his arms inside his cloak. "I've never seen ye this bent out of shape 'afore."

"Aye, that I do." Dean nodded. There was no use in hiding his feelings anymore.

The whole castle would soon know that he intended to keep Sophia at the castle as more than just the tutor to his son. Amalthea presented a problem to the equation, but she'd have to come to terms with the arrangement.

“Anthony an’ I could see that ye loved her from the moment she came to the castle,” Hamish continued. “She brings out a softness in ye that wasnae there ‘afore.” He paused, shifting on his feet. “There’s nae shame in the love of a good woman, my laird, an’ Sophia is that.”

Dean cleared his throat in an attempt to stifle a laugh. Neither Anthony nor Hamish had ever spoken to him in such a manner before, yet he had to admit that he'd changed since Sophia had come to the castle. Even he knew that there was a side of him that wasn't the same anymore. He walked around with renewed hope in his chest. “Get inside an’ have some ale ‘afore I knock that silly smirk off yer face,” he said with a serious expression. “Naethin’ beside yer face is soft around here.”

Hamish gave a deep chuckle as he turned to leave. “Aye, my laird,” he responded. “All I meant was that happiness looks good on ye. Ye deserve to be happy, even if it means I have to stand by that great bampot Anthony’s side an’ run the castle while ye honeymoon with yer bride.” He shut the doors behind him as he mumbled curses under his breath.

Dean shook his head as the man he entrusted the running of his castle to left. Hamish and Anthony would feud no matter what the circumstances were. He made a mental note to be tougher on them in the future, just in case they thought he'd gone soft because of Sophia. The last thing he needed was for the two of them to think they could slack off because he was distracted. His smile turned to a frown as he spotted something small struggling through the snow toward him.

The tiny speck seemed to be bounding up and down in a frantic manner as it fought through the heavy snow.

He made his way down the steps and approached as he realized that Nessie was trying to come in. “Where are the others, girl?” he asked as he knelt down at the bottom of the steps and allowed her to jump into his arms.

The poor creature was covered in snow as the ice clung to her matted fur. Jumping into his open arms, Nessie barked at him before leaping to the ground again.

“What are ye doin’ out here? Did Cillian forget to brin’ ye inside?” His fear began to grow as he watched the dog. It was highly unlikely that Cillian would have left her alone. The boy was, after all, completely enamored with the creature.

Nessie barked at him again and gripped his sleeve, tugging him in the direction of the gates with relentless force.

“What’s out there?”

Dean squinted through the snow when the dog refused to leave him be. Pushing himself to his feet, he straightened and followed the dog as she pounced like a jackrabbit through the white heaps, back toward the gates.

They slowly made their way out as Dean strained his ears to hear. There was something in the distance that almost sounded like a cry for help. He picked up the pace and kept close to the dog as he just began to make out the small figure that was

lying in the snow. He broke into a run when he suddenly realized that the figure was just the right size to be his son.

“Cillian!” he yelled as he fell to his knees at the boy’s side. “What happened, son? Are ye hurt?!” Panic set in as his heart raced.

Cillian groaned as he turned in his father’s arms. “Me arm...” He was covered in snow from head to toe as he held his right arm against his chest.

Dean quickly placed him back on the snow as he gently checked his arm, lifting it and turning it from side to side. “I dinnae think it’s broken, it’s just a sprain.” He breathed a sigh of relief but quickly tensed up again when he realized that Sophia was nowhere to be seen. “Where is Sophia?” he asked, searching his son’s face.

Cillian began to cry and sob hopelessly as he recounted the events to his father. “I tried so hard, Faither. There was a man. I tried to fight him, but he was just too strong.” He continued to wail.

Dean picked Cillian up again as he felt his heart being gripped by fear and held him close against his chest. “It’s all right,” he whispered. “It’s nae yer fault.” He gently pushed him away, looking at his tear-stained face. “This is very important, Cillian,” he said with a serious expression. “Where is Sophia now?”

“The... The man took her,” Cillian managed to say through his sobs.

Dean could feel the breath leaving his body as Cillian's words confirmed his worst fears.

"He kicked Nessie an' threw me to the ground. None of this would have happened if ye let me learn how to fight sooner! I would have been able to save her!" Cillian cried accusingly. "I didnae have enough experience to fight him off!"

Dean shook his head and lifted his son with him as he stood. "Ye did her best, Cillian, and I'm very proud of ye. Which way did they go?"

Cillian stopped crying, but his bottom lip was quivering., Lifting his left arm, he pointed to the woods in the distance, where a trail of footprints was beginning to disappear into the snow.

Dean's heart sank into the pit of his stomach as he hoped and prayed that he'd find Sophia in time. Who knew what the man who had taken her was capable of. The thoughts rushed through his mind as he considered all the possibilities.

"My laird!" Anthony suddenly yelled as he came up from behind. "My laird! I cannae find Sophia an' Cillian." He stopped and looked at Dean with a panic-stricken face. "I left them in the yard, but I cannae see them anywhere." His eyes filled with fear as he looked at Cillian in his father's arms.

"Aye," Dean quickly said as he turned to him. "Sophia has been taken." He nodded in the direction of the footprints. "Assemble the men, we will leave at once. There's nae time to lose. We ride in the next few minutes—"

“Nae,” Cillian interrupted him with a note of urgency in his voice. “Go after her now, Faither.” His eyes were serious as he spoke. “Sophia belongs here with us. Go after her an’ brin’ her back. It has to be ye. She’s going to be me maither after all, isn’t she?”

Dean searched his son’s eyes. “Aye.”

“Then go after her now, Faither. Make sure that man doesnae take her away from us. I heard him saying that he loved her, but I dinnae believe he does. Sophia loves ye, an’ we love her,” Cillian said tearfully. “She made us a family.”

“I must first see to yer arm—” Dean began but stopped when Cillian shook his head.

“Anthony can see to me arm. Go, now, Faither!”

Dean’s heart clenched as he looked at the desperation in his son’s eyes. He’d wished for years that his son would say the very words he was saying now.

I cannae lose her, for all of our sakes.

“Yer right.” Dean quickly handed his son to his friend. “I cannae waste any time.”

Cillian went into Anthony’s arms, turning his body to look at his father again.

“Cillian is right. I will take one of the horses an’ go after them meself. Take Cillian an’ Nessie to the healer an’ have his arm seen to.” The laird set out at a run as he called over his shoulder. “Watch the castle until I return with Sophia!”

“Bring her back to us, Faither!” Cillian yelled after his father as he ran toward the stables.



Dean hurried into the warmth of the stables as he brushed the snow from his shoulders and cloak. There was no time to waste, given the fact that he didn’t know how long Cillian had been lying in the snow before Nessie had come to his rescue. His only hope was that an Englishman wouldn’t know the lay of the land as well as he did.

Jamie stared at him with wide eyes as he led a saddled black stallion to its stall. The day was coming to an end, and all of the horses were being brushed down for the night. “I was just about to finish for the night, my laird,” he hurried to explain. “I swear I was nae doin’ anythin’ I shouldn’t.” He fidgeted with the reins in his hands. “Crofter is the last one that needs his oats.”

“There’s nae time for that now,” Dean barked as he took the reins from the boy’s hands and led the horse toward the stable doors. “Go inside the castle an’ see if Anthony needs any help. He’s taking Cillian to the healer,” he explained as he pulled on the straps to ensure that the saddle was fixed in place.

The pure black horse snorted as he bobbed his head up and down, shaking his main.

“Did something happen, my laird?” Jamie asked as he backed away from the neighing horse. The black stallion was well known for being a difficult mount that kicked and nipped without warning.

“There’s nae time for questions, lad! Go an’ do as yer told!” Dean pulled himself into the saddle, swinging one leg over the beast and adjusting his position.

“Aye, my laird!”

Jamie ran from the stables, swinging his gangly arms in the air.

Dean clucked his tongue and led the horse out into the snow, then he hurriedly dug the heels of his boots onto the horse’s flanks, urging the creature into a gallop as they made their way through the gates. Icy crystals whipped him in the face as they passed the area just outside the walls where Cillian had been lying in the snow.

Leaning down low, the laird gripped the side of the saddle as he strained to see where the footprints were headed. Spotting the general direction, he straightened in the saddle and clucked his tongue once again, forcing the stallion to pick up the pace as they followed the barely visible trail into the blizzard across the frozen meadow that led to the woods.



Dean pulled on the reins as he brought the horse to a stop in front of a snow drift that almost came up to the horse’s flanks. Breathing heavily, he swung his body from the saddle and dropped to the ground with a muffled thud as his boots sank into the snow. His breath billowed out in white clouds in front

of his face as he hunkered down and searched the snow with one hand.

The passing blizzard had all but covered the tracks. He swore under his breath as he straightened again.

I should never have allowed her to go for a walk.

The woman he loved more than any other was missing. He hated the feeling of helplessness that took over his body. Losing his temper, he kicked at the snow and shouted profanities. “Sophia!?” he called out into the empty white plain that led into the woods.

His voice disappeared into the distance as it was carried away by the icy wind. Quickly catching the reins of the horse, he soothed the stallion and held it steady as it neighed and backed away from him. “What am I goin’ to do?” he whispered to the horse as he looked around. Turning back to the forest, he surveyed the line of willow and rowan trees that created the border. The tops were covered in snow as they towered high above him and the horse.

It was more than likely that the man had taken her into the trees in an attempt to find a hiding place until the storm had passed.

Only a madman would brave the open plains in weather like this.

Dean pondered the thought for a brief moment, but then again, how sane was a man that sent notes to a lady that didn’t even

know who he was? It was possible that the man had taken a horse and raced across the snow and out into the open.

The wind howled and whipped the branches back and forth as the laird stood with his thoughts. Frowning, he brought the horse forward as he spotted something on one of the branches of a nearby tree. Reaching out, he pulled a piece of grey fabric and rubbed the rough material between his fingers.

“Sophia,” he whispered as he suddenly recognized the material.

The fabric had come from one of the winter skirts he’d given her. He’d personally gone and ordered the fabric from the dressmaker to ensure that she was warm. Scanning the trees, he searched for any other signs that she had been in the woods. His eyes quickly fell on a white piece of fabric hanging from the branches a few feet away.

Pulling himself back into the saddle, he nudged the horse toward the tree and retrieved the slip of cloth. The silk was cold and jagged around the edges as if someone had hastily ripped it from a blouse. Lifting the piece to his nose, he sniffed the fabric and immediately got the scent of lavender. The same scent from the oil that Sophia kept in her room. He’d smelled it on her clothes when he’d tidied her room and when they’d spent that night together in the tub.

“Clever girl,” he whispered as he lifted his head and spotted a trail of fabric that led down the path into the heart of the woods. “Walk on,” he commanded the horse as he eased the beast down the trail, hope growing in his heart as he shoved the pieces of cloth into the bag that hung on the saddle.

The trees grew denser as he carefully guided the horse into the forest. The snow-covered trail was wide enough to comfortably fit two horses if they rode abreast. Slowing the pace whenever he saw another piece of cloth, he leaned over and placed the scraps in the bag.

Hang in there, I'm coming.

His kissed a scrap of silk before holding it against his heart.

Ye will be back where ye belong, soon. Just hold on a little longer.

He urged the horse on into the darkness of the woods, following the trail that Sophia had left.

CHAPTER 19



SOPHIA YANKED on the bottom of her blouse and tore another piece off as Luke rounded a bend that led to a clearing. The tips of her fingers felt as if they were ready to bleed as she struggled to tear the fabric off. Her wrists were raw and red as the roughness of the ropes cut into her skin.

To make matters worse, Luke had stuffed a handkerchief into her mouth to ensure that she didn't scream and draw any undue attention to them.

Luke had led her all the way to the edge of the forest and tied her to the saddle of a horse after they'd left Cillian in the snow. She hoped and prayed that someone had happened upon the boy and that no further harm had come to him. She'd never forgive herself if he was hurt or left in the snow to freeze.

Waiting for Luke to look ahead again, she quickly flung the piece of her blouse onto a nearby branch. Being almost certain that Dean would come after her, she had begun leaving a trail as soon as she was tied to the back of the horse.

She began to rip another piece of her skirt when Luke looked back and glimpsed her hands that were bound at the wrists.

“What are you doing?” he asked with a frown, bringing the horses to a sudden stop along the path.

Sophia quickly tried to hide her hands and act as if nothing were amiss, shifting her legs in an attempt to hide the torn sections of her skirt where her thigh and undergarments were fully exposed.

Luke swung his leg over the horse and dismounted before coming around to her side. “Why were you fidgeting like that?” He glared up at her.

She lifted her hands and shrugged with an innocent expression on her face, the handkerchief almost suffocating her as she choked.

“Oh, all right,” Luke said in annoyance as he undid the rope that held her in the saddle and pulled her down, placing her squarely on her feet in front of him. “Do you promise not to scream if I remove the gag?” he asked and narrowed his eyes at her.

Nodding, Sophia signaled her willingness to cooperate if he removed the handkerchief.

Leaning over, he ripped the gag from her mouth in one smooth motion, causing her to cough and splutter as cold air filled her lungs, the dryness of her mouth making it hard to breathe. She would have given anything for a sip of warm ale or even wine to wash away the nasty taste.

“Thank you,” she finally managed through labored breaths. Her throat was raw and stinging from the long ride with the handkerchief in her mouth.

“I’m sorry that I have to put you through this,” Luke said with his chin tilted to the side. “I can’t be sure that I can trust you just yet. You’ve been brainwashed by the laird, it will take some time before you see the truth again.”

Before he can trust me? That’s rich coming from a man taking me against my will!

Taking a deep breath, Sophia decided to buy some time before he set off again. If Dean had found her trail, he would need a few minutes to catch up.

“The truth? What do you mean by the truth?” she asked in a scratchy voice. Her fingers and toes were numb from being in the cold for so long.

Luke shook his head and tutted as if her line of questioning only served as proof of her altered state of mind. “That you and I belong together, my dear Sophia,” he explained. “And I am going to make sure that the spell the Scottish rogue cast over you is broken before the sun sets tomorrow,” he said confidently with a nod.

The hairs on the back of her neck stood on end at the way he looked at her. “What do you mean by that?” She felt a sinking feeling in her stomach.

His lips broke into a sickening grin as he stared at her. “I wanted our proposal to be more romantic than this. I’d always envisioned myself going down on one knee with a bunch of red roses and my grandmother’s ring.” He sighed. “But I guess that beggars can’t be choosers. This will have to do in light of our circumstances.”

Her stomach flipped and churned with nausea as he knelt down in the snow and stared up at her.

“Sophia, I don’t expect you to say yes right now, given your altered state of mind, but I know you will realize once we are married that you and I were meant to be. That is why I am taking you to Gretna Green to marry you.” He paused with a smile. “We shall wed as soon as the sun comes up tomorrow.”

Sophia felt the blood draining from her face as she realized what he intended to do with her. Couples eloped in Gretna Green all the time.

Surely, they won’t force me to marry a man against my will.

“Don’t worry,” he said as she continued to stare at him in horror. “I’ve taken into account the fact that you aren’t at your best. I’ll find a priest or vicar who would be more than willing to marry us with the understanding that you are currently ill and not in the right frame of mind. My cousin once married a girl who hit her head and couldn’t remember that they’d been engaged. Things like this happen more than you would think. The peerage is more corrupt than most criminals when it comes to gold.”

Sophia continued to stare at him in disbelief as he spoke. Luke was clearly a man who lived in a world all of his own. She couldn't decide whether he was spoilt or just not in possession of all of his mental faculties. She'd run from him if it weren't for the ropes that held her feet and ankles together.

“What's that?” he suddenly asked as he spun her around, nearly causing her to fall into the snow. “Why is your skirt ripped like that?” he demanded as he examined the shreds of fabric that hung down the side of her leg.

“My skirt hooked on the saddle and ripped while we were riding,” she lied and quickly tried to close her skirt with her hands that were still bound.

Luke stood and spun her around again. “That doesn't seem like a single rip,” he said, suspicion in his voice. “That seems like several rips.”

“I think the fabric continued to hook on the saddle as the horse trotted on,” Sophia tried again, racking her brain for a way to escape.

Reaching around her waist, he yanked the blouse that she managed to only partially tuck back into her skirt. “Then, how did your blouse manage to tear and tuck itself back into your skirt?” he asked angrily. “I suppose the bouncing motion of your horse neatly tucked it back in for you after ripping it up?” His voice dripped with sarcasm.

Sophia shrugged for a lack of anything else to say.

“For Pete’s sake,” he swore under his breath as he spotted the piece of cloth hanging from a nearby branch. “Was this your plan all along? To leave a trail for your precious laird?” he spat bitterly. “I knew I couldn’t trust you just yet!” He walked over and snatched the piece from the branch before returning and towering over her.

“I didn’t—” she began but froze when Luke raised his hand in the air.

With one single blow, he brought the palm of his hand across her cheek and sent her reeling into the snow. Her ears rang from the force. She’d never before been slapped in her life, but the blow had been even more painful than she’d imagined.

Sophia coughed as she lay in the snow, completely stunned by the dark turn that Luke’s personality had taken. All traces of kindness had left his eyes after the piece of fabric had been retrieved from the branch. The man was more than just a little unhinged, he was dangerous. She shivered as the realization of just how dangerous the situation she was in came crashing down on her like a ton of bricks.

I need to escape!

Her breaths came in quick succession.

“I’m sorry you had to see that side of me,” he uttered coolly as he came to her side and lifted her onto her knees. “I was hoping that things wouldn’t have to come to this, but now that it has,” he said, looking down at her as a dark shadow fell across his face, “I hope you can see that I am a man who is not to be trifled with. My patience will only go so far and no

more.” He sniffed and let out a breath. “People often underestimate me because of my kindness. A horrible mistake that many have made.”

Her heart beat uncontrollably in her chest as he hunkered down beside her, fear gripping at her very being.

“A mistake that your precious laird made when he met in the village.” He laughed. “To think we wouldn’t be here if only he’d taken the time to question me a little more instead of walking off after that stupid boy.”

“What are you talking about?” Sophia asked as her ears continued to ring. The snow was seeping through her clothes and chilling her skin down to the bone.

“Never mind.” Luke shook his head. “It doesn’t matter now. I have already won.”

She winced as she tried to move, only succeeding in making the rope cut deeper into her skin.

“Your little stunt has altered our plans a bit.” He gently reached out and tilt her face up until she was looking into his eyes. “You will have to ride with me as I alter our course to get away from your precious laird.” His expression changed again as he uttered the name with disgust. “Dean O’Brien will never see that pretty little face of yours again. The Scottish bastard will rue the day he set eyes on you. I hope he rots from the despair of missing you. Him and that insolent little pup he calls his son.”

Sophia could feel the hot tears stinging her eyes as she glared at him. “Dean O’Brien is twice the man that you will ever hope to be,” she said through gritted teeth. “And Cillian will grow up to be just as formidable and respectable as his father.” She looked him up and down with a glare. “Not something that I think you will ever understand.”

“I see there is more fire in you than I originally thought,” Luke drawled with a nasty smirk. “No matter, I like my women with a little feistiness.” He straightened again before reaching down and pulling her back up to her feet. “You can ride with me now,” he said as he freed her hands. “And don’t think I’ll tolerate any more of your little tricks,” he breathed in her ear before bending down and loosening the ropes that bound her feet.

Realizing that her chance had come, Sophia held her breath and waited for Luke to untie the knots. It felt to her as if an eternity had passed before he straightened again with the ropes in his hands.

“I think we—Oof!” he cried out in pain as Sophia lifted her leg as quickly as she could and kicked his groin with her knee.

Luke fell to his knees in the snow with his hands covering his groin. His face had turned a shade of bright red as he gasped for breath.

Lifting the remains of her torn skirt, she turned around and ran as fast as she could in the direction that they had come from, using the torn pieces of fabric as a guide in the hopes that she would run into Dean on his way to rescue her.

“You won’t get very far!” Luke called to her as she ran through the bushes, branches smacking her in the face as she pushed and shoved her way through the snow and overgrown trees. “You need me! Sophia! You need me!” he continued to yell.

She was almost out of breath when she was suddenly yanked back down. She landed with a thud on her bottom in the snow. She fought with all her might against the force that held her back, feeling her skin being scratched from every angle.

He couldn't have caught up with me so soon!

It wasn’t until she stopped and opened her eyes that she realized she’d left the path and stumbled into a thicket of thistles that were snagging her clothes and scraping her skin. The force that had brought her to the ground had been a large hanging branch from a willow that towered over the patch of thistles. The sharp ends had hooked on the opening in her skirt over her thigh.

She hurriedly freed her clothes from the thorns and sought a way out from the plants, trying her best to reach the trail once again. She had to make it back to the path before she lost her way. The chances of her surviving the night in a forest during a blizzard were slim to none.

Her heart leapt in her chest as the sound of hooves in the distance quickly grew closer. She whipped around and tried to ascertain where the sound was coming from but quickly realized that the acoustics of the forest were throwing her off. She’d gotten herself turned around in the thicket of thistles and didn’t know the way out.

The pounding hooves drew nearer as she panicked and sought a way out. The sound could mean that Dean had found her trail and was well on his way to save her from Luke, or it could also mean that her captor was on his way to take her back.

She froze as the sound suddenly died down. Whoever they were, they had stopped their horse. Shutting her eyes in fear, she chose a direction at random and began to run, praying that Dean would find her soon.

Branches scraped at her flesh and cut her skin as she blindly ran. The world suddenly faded to black as she collided head-first into what seemed to be a wall.

CHAPTER 20



STUMBLING BACK, Sophia felt herself being caught just before she fell to the ground. “Dean!” she said breathlessly as she opened her eyes and threw her arms around Dean’s neck, holding on tight with every ounce of her strength.

“I’m here now, lass,” he said against her hair as he kissed the top of her head and held her tight. “Yer safe now.”

“He’s still coming after me.” Tears of relief and panic flowed down her cheeks as she stared up at the laird. “I left him by the horses, but he will find us here. Please, let’s leave now!” she pleaded urgently. “Before he comes back. Let’s go!” She gripped his arm and tried to pull him along, but he stood firm and pulled her back.

“Wait.” Dean guided her back into his arms and gently ran the back of his finger over her cheek, where the red mark of a hand was clearly visible under the scratches. “What happened here?” he asked gruffly, his jaw clenching in anger.

“I fell into some underbrush when I was trying to get away,” she hastily explained. “I’m sure I’m covered in scratches and cuts, but we can see to that later. Let’s please just leave before he comes back. He’s probably gaining on us as we speak!”

“I mean the red mark beneath the scratches,” Dean asked while narrowing his eyes and completely ignoring her protests to leave.

“Oh.” She suddenly remembered and raised a hand to her cheek. “Luke slapped me,” she said. “He’s very unhinged. Please, Dean, let’s just leave now. We can alert the authorities and have him thrown in prison where he belongs once we get back to the castle.”

“I’ll kill him,” he growled in anger. “The bastard will never lay another hand on ye again. Did he do anythin’ else to ye, lass?” he asked with great concern as he examined her torn clothes.

“No.” She shook her head. “I tore my skirt and blouse to leave a trail for you to find me. Luke only slapped me after I was bound and gagged.”

“Luke?” he asked with a frown. “Why does that name sound so familiar?”

“I’m not sure,” she answered with increasing panic and clutched at his arm again when the sound of galloping hooves drew nearer through the thicket of trees that surrounded the clearing where they were standing.

“I will nae run from an English dog that doesnae deserve to be called a man,” Dean said angrily as his eyes filled with venom.

Sophia had never seen him like that before. She felt a strange sense of pride and love at the way he wanted to protect her, but her feelings were quickly replaced by fear once again when the sound of boots in the snow reached their ears.

“Stay behind me,” he said gruffly as he gripped her and pushed her behind his back, stepping in front of her like a shield.

“Well, well, well,” Luke drawled, clapping his hands as he stepped into the tiny clearing where the couple was standing. “I see you are far more competent than I gave you credit for,” he said sarcastically. “I didn’t think that a barbarian such as yourself would have the nerve to come after me.” He glared at Sophia as she stood behind Dean with her hand placed on his arm. “Of course, you did have the help of a disobedient little witch.”

“You?” Sophia felt Dean’s muscles tense under her hand as his body stiffened with tension. “How is it you?”

“Yes. Shockingly, it was me,” Luke answered with a slimy grin. “I thought it was over for me when you bumped into me in the village, but lucky for me, you didn’t suspect a thing.” He shook his head and laughed. “You didn’t even stay long enough to have a decent conversation with me. You immediately just assumed that the polite Englishman couldn’t be the man that was brazen enough to follow the woman he loved all the way to Scotland in the middle of winter,” he hissed.

“Ye have seen that Sophia has made her choice,” Dean gritted out, his anger rising by the second. “Leave now, and things dinnae have to end for ye here. Ye can return to England an’ live yer life.” He paused and balled his fists at his sides. “If ye

promise to never return to Scotland again an' never so much as look in the same direction as Sophia."

"I'm afraid that won't work for me," Luke said as he drew a hidden blade from behind his back, the steel glinting in the quickly fading light. "Sophia is mine, you see. So, never seeing her again will present a bit of a problem for me." He held the sword out in front of him and twisted the blade as he pointed it at Dean. "I don't know what kind of spell you have cast over her, Laird McGill, but I'm here to break it and save her life. She will come to her senses again once we are married in the morning."

"I will never go with you! I love Dean," Sophia suddenly yelled and stepped forward. "I don't even know you!"

Dean stretched out his arm at his side and held her back. "You see that the lady has made her choice of her own free will," he said, taking a step forward. "Let's settle things here an' now. Leave, or I will nae be responsible for what happens next," he warned. "But understand this." He drew a sword from his hip and pointed it at Luke. The tips of the blades nearly touched across the space between the men. "Ye will never lay a hand on me wife ever again," he threatened as his voice deepened.

Sophia felt her heart soaring as Dean stepped forward in her defense.

Did he just call me his wife?

Her questions from earlier were answered in a single sentence.

He wants to marry me!

Luke pulled his lips back in a menacing grimace. “She will be *my* wife!” He lunged forward and brought his blade down on Dean’s, the metallic clank reverberating through his arms.

Dean quickly pushed him back with ease and swung his sword in a circle with one hand, just as Sophia had seen Anthony do on countless occasions, before gripping the sword in both hands and advancing on Luke with a fierce battle cry that echoed through the forest.

The hairs on her arms prickled and sent waves through her body at the way the laird fiercely fought to defend her honor.

Luke’s eyes suddenly widened with fear as Dean’s blade bore down on him with such force that it sent him reeling back into the snow. He fell on his back, bringing his blade up just in time to stop the sword just inches away from his face.

“Sophia is mine,” Dean hissed through clenched teeth as he put the full force of his weight behind the blow. “She chose me of her own free will.”

“Never!” Luke suddenly yelled as he used his legs as leverage to gain the upper hand and kick Dean off.

Sophia gasped and brought her hands to her face as Dean stumbled back on his feet and nearly fell into a heap of snow.

“She is mine! She always has been!” Luke yelled at the top of his lungs, running forward and bringing his blade down with a wild look in his eyes.

Dean quickly stepped to the side and dodged the blow with expert precision before using the butt of his sword to land a blow on the back of his assailant’s head. A dull thud filled the air.

Luke went sprawling head-first into a nearby oak tree, where he once again received a blow that knocked him unconscious, as was evident by the way his body flopped to the ground. He lay motionless, almost covered in snow that fell from the branches.

Walking over, Dean hurriedly kicked the sword from Luke’s hand, bringing his own blade above his head while sneering down at his unconscious form.

“Wait!” Sophia yelled as she ran forward and placed her hand on Dean’s arm. “Don’t kill him, Dean, please.”

The laird clenched his jaw and looked at her in confusion, lowering his arms slightly but keeping the sword in the air. “Sophia, the man isnae in his right mind. He’s a danger to ye as long as he lives.”

“I don’t believe he is bad. I truly believe that he thought he loved me.” Her eyes pleaded with him as she gently squeezed his arm. “Please, Dean. Luke is a very misguided man, and he needs to be locked up where he can’t harm anyone ever again, but I don’t believe he deserves to die.”

Dean looked at her face and back at Luke before lowering his sword entirely and letting his arms fall to the side.

“Thank you.” She breathed a sigh of relief and flung her arms around his neck once again. “Thank you so much, Dean. I knew you weren’t a heartless man.” She kissed his cheek as his arms came around her waist and drew her closer to his body.

“I was so scared I would lose ye,” he breathed into her hair before kissing her neck. “I just never want to lose ye, lass. I’d kill any man that came in the way of me lovin’ ye.”

“You won’t,” she said as she drew back and held his face in her hands. “You could never lose me, Dean. I am yours. I love you endlessly, with all of my mind, body, and soul.” She frowned as his body suddenly jerked forward, his eyes filling with pain. “What’s the matter?” she hurriedly asked as she bore the weight of his body in her arms.

“You haven’t gotten the best of me just yet,” Luke groggily hissed as he stumbled on his feet, holding the back of his head with one hand and his sword in the other.

Dean shut his eyes and tightened his grip on Sophia as they almost fell forward. “Bastard,” he hissed and whipped around.

Sophia quickly stepped back and leaned against a tree as the men once again engaged in battle, swinging their swords and lunging with an animalistic ferocity that made her recoil.

“Do you see now? She chose me! She doesn’t want me to die!” Luke yelled mockingly. “She won’t let you take my life because she needs me around.”

“She took pity on ye like a wounded animal!” Dean said breathlessly as he swung his sword again and blocked a blow. “Me wife would spare the life of the lowliest of creatures if she had the choice!”

Sophia placed her hands on the tree behind her back and shimmied to the side as they came a little closer, nearly stumbling against her.

Luke cried out in pain as Dean slashed his arm, and a trail of crimson blood gushed from his wound. “Ye will pay for that, you common dog!” He wailed in pain and came at Dean with his sword aimed at his heart.

Dean used his own blade to send Luke’s sword flying into the air with a single blow before lunging forward.

They tangled in a flurry of arms and legs as steel flashed through the air like a bolt of lightning.

Time stood still for Sophia as the men fell forward and disappeared through a thicket of overgrown heather that was covered in snow. “Dean!” she yelled through a sob.

Rushing forward she beat the bushes out of the way and looked to see what had happened. Her heart stopped beating as she spotted the men lying on their backs in the bottom of a ditch, both still and lifeless. A single trail of blood ran down

the embankment along with the tracks they had left in the snow. Their blood-covered swords lay between their bodies.

“Please no,” she gasped as she climbed then stumbled down the steep incline that led to the bottom, nearly falling on the bodies. “Please no, please no,” she continued to whisper frantically as she made her way to Dean’s side. “My love, please answer me,” she begged through her tears as she lifted his still head in her hands.

The patch of blood spread between the men and colored the snow a bright red, making it impossible to see where and whom the blood was coming from.

A metallic smell filled her nostrils as her body turned to ice. “I’m so sorry,” she whispered in defeat when Dean lay still in her arms. “I should have let you kill him.” She wept. “I choose you. It’s always been you. From the moment I saw you on top of your horse, there has never been and will never be another man for me.” She buried her face in his neck and cried until her tears of anguish echoed through the woods.

“Sophia.” She looked up with a tear-stricken face as Luke stirred. Dean still lying motionless in her arms. “Sophia,” Luke repeated quietly when she didn’t respond. “Please come here.”

“No!” she cried in anger and held on tighter to Dean’s body. “I will never go near you ever again! Or forgive you for taking the man I love away from me!”

Luke shut his eyes as a trickle of blood ran from the side of his mouth. “I’m sorry, Sophia,” he said quietly. “I never meant to

hurt you. You have to believe me. My only intention was to love you the way you deserve—” He coughed, spraying drops of blood over the snow and his face. “I thought I was being romantic with the notes I sent to you. I never meant to scare you or make you think that I wanted to harm you in any way.”

Sophia struggled to feel sorry for the man as he uttered his last words. How could she, when the man she loved lay still in her arms? Luke’s sincerity was lost in the depths of her own grief and sorrow.

“I truly believed that I was doing the right thing by fighting the laird for your hand.” Luke turned his head to look at her and Dean. “I can see now that your heart belongs to him.” He managed a smile as his breathing slowed. “I’m sorry, Sophia. I love you, even if you will never love me back.” His breathing stopped with a final gurgle as his head flopped to the side.

Hot tears ran down Sophia’s cheeks as the wind once again picked up, blowing strands of her dark hair over her face. Looking down, she stroked the stubble on Dean’s cheek as she whispered, “I love you,” and shut her eyes.

Her eyes suddenly shot open as she felt the warmth of his hand covering hers.

“I love ye too,” Dean whispered with a faint smile on his lips. “From the moment I saw ye playin’ around in the water like some kind of beautiful Selkie. There never was and never will be a woman as enchantin’ as ye for me.”

“I would hardly call fighting off men as playing in the water.” She laughed and cried as a wave of relief poured over her

body.

Sophia wasn't sure if she was shaking from the cold or the mix of emotions that ran through her body.

"Why is it that I'm always fightin' off men where ye are concerned?" he asked with a groan as he stirred in her arms.

Laughing again with relief, she kissed him deeply.

Dean returned her kiss, wiping the tears from her cheeks. "I think I'm going to keep ye locked in yer room until we are wed, an' then I'll make sure that ye have the biggest ring anyone has ever seen in their life. Men across the Atlantic will be able to see that ye are mine."

"Lock me up for as long as you like," she said happily and gripped his hand in hers. "As long as I'm yours, you can lock me away for the rest of my life if you like."

"In a tidy room?" His smile broadened as he looked into her eyes.

"That might be asking for a bit much." She laughed happily and helped him sit up. "I was so scared that I would lose you, Dean," she said more seriously as the tears continued to roll down her cheeks. "I thought I would die of a broken heart when I saw you lying there in the snow beside Luke."

Dean turned his head to the side and looked at the lifeless body of Luke Johnson.

“No,” she quickly said and gently turned his head back to her. “All that matters is this now.” She placed his hand over her heart and held it tight with hers. “You and me, nobody else.”

“I don’t think Cillian will agree with that.” Dean smiled. “He begged me to come after ye an’ bring ye back so that our lives could be complete again,” he teased. “Ye might have a hard time explainin’ to him an’ Nessie that it will only be ye an’ me.”

“Of course, Cillian will be there too.” She laughed happily and leaned in for a kiss. “You, me, Cillian, Nessie, Hamish, Anthony, Duncan...” She paused with a grin. “And even Amalthea. That’s the lengths I am willing to go to for you, my laird.”

“Maybe not with Amalthea.” He pursed his lips and shook his head before drawing her down for another kiss, gently parting her lips with his tongue and searching the depths of her mouth. “My Sophia forever,” he whispered against her lips.

EPILOGUE



DEAN LED Sophia into the castle as Libby came rushing forward with the rest of the family at her heels. “What happened?” she asked frantically as she gripped her daughter’s hands in hers. “You look as if you’ve been attacked by a pack of wolves!”

“I am all right, Mama,” Sophia said as soothingly as she could. “It’s just a few scratches. I ripped my clothes when I was trying to escape.”

Libby let out a breath. “I was terrified when Anthony came in and said that Dean had gone after you,” she said tearfully as she drew her daughter in for a tight hug.

“Glad yer back in one piece,” Anthony said as he came forward and grasped Dean’s hand in his. “I was about to go after ye, my laird.”

“Ye of little faith,” Dean said with a smile but lowered his voice so that only they could hear. “There’s a body in the forest. Send the men in the mornin’ to retrieve it. We will notify the man’s family that we have his remains.”

“Understood, my laird.” Anthony nodded with a solemn look.

“Thank you,” Sophia mouthed to him over her mother’s head.

Dean nodded and winked at her as Libby drew back and gently touched his arm. “Who was the man that had been sending the notes?” she asked with concern, looking from one to the other.

“Luke Johnson, Mama,” Sophia answered. “I don’t remember him personally, but he professed to be in love with me.” She shrugged. “I never even noticed him at any of the balls.”

Libby thought for a second before covering her mouth in shock. “You don’t mean the earl’s son? But he seemed like such a pleasant young man. Why did he not just come forward and court you then? He came from a respectable family,” she said incredulously as her questions tumbled over one another in quick succession.

Sophia took a deep breath and shut her eyes before looking at her mother again. “I think Luke was a very misguided soul, Mama, but I never want to speak of him again.” She reached for Dean’s hand and took it in hers. “All that matters now is our future together.”

“I understand.” Libby smiled at Dean and placed her hand lovingly on his arm. “Please let me take care of writing to his family. The two of you can carry on with your lives and leave this whole debacle behind you. We shall never speak of any of it again.”

“Thank ye, Libby, I appreciate that.” Dean gave her a grateful smile.

“I assume you will be staying on here at the castle?” Libby gave them a knowing look.

“Ah...” Dean and Sophia both searched for words as they blushed and exchanged an awkward glance. They hadn’t had any time to discuss the future and lay out any kind of solid plan.

“Faither! Sophia!” Cillian yelled as he ran into their arms, his right arm bound to his chest with a bandage. “I thought ye were never comin’ back!” he cried.

“Saved by the bell,” Hamish whispered to Anthony.

Dean scooped Cillian up in one arm as he held Sophia to his side with the other. “We never have to be apart again,” he reassured them both with a warm hug.

“Do ye promise?” Cillian asked with tears in his eyes. “Because Grandmaither said that Sophia would be returnin’ to London soon once me schooling’ is complete.” He sniffed. “I dinnae want her to go, Faither.”

Dean shut his eyes and shook his head. “The only person that will be leaving this castle is yer grandmaither,” he said reassuringly. “She can go back home an’ visit again in a few months.”

“Or a year,” Sophia whispered sheepishly at his side.

“Aye.” Dean laughed. “Or that.”

The notion seemed to cheer Cillian up as he smiled at them both.

“Now, that was one thin’ that I heard loud and clear,” Duncan said with a huge grin as he came around the corner with Nessie happily bounding at his feet. “Please, can I be the one to tell her?” His eyes sparkled with a mischievous glint.

“Leave it to me.” Dean shook his head, suppressing a laugh as he placed Cillian back on the floor.

“What?” Duncan cupped his ear. “Ye hurt yer knee?”

The hall erupted with laughter as Dean took Sophia by the hand and led her away from the group and up the stairs. “I will see to our wounds ‘afore we come down for supper,” he called over his shoulder. “Tell the cook to heat the bannocks an’ keep them comin’!”



Sophia stared down at Dean as he used a cloth to clean the scratches on her arms and legs.

They’d shared a hot bath to soothe their aching and frozen bodies before calling up for herbs and rags. He hunkered down in front of her with a towel wrapped around his waist, beads of

hot water dripping down his bare chest. She admired the way his thick black hair clung to his head.

“This reminds me of the night we met,” she whispered. She wore a simple white nightgown to cover her body, and her damp hair hung in strands around her face.

The fire had been lit in the hearth, crackling as the warmth filled the air.

“If I knew then what I know now,” Dean said huskily as he turned her wrist over in his hand and dabbed a cut, “I would have devoured ye there in the cabin in front of the fire.”

Sophia felt her cheeks turning red despite the fact that they’d seen each other naked and touched before.

“That reminds me,” he said as he threw the cloth on the table and stood. “There is somethin’ I have to ask ye now.” He walked over to the fireplace and retrieved a small green box before making his way back over. He kneeled down in front of her and took her hand in his.

She felt her heart racing again in anticipation as he searched her face with his deep black eyes.

“Sophia, I think ye ken by now that I want to make ye me wife.” He shot her a dashing smile. “I’d like to ask ye formally now if ye would do me the honor of accepting me hand in marriage an’ becomin’ me wife?”

She felt her eyes filling with happy tears as she began to tremble.

“I dinnae think there is a better woman in all of Scotland an’ England that would make a more suitable wife to me or maither to me son,” he continued.

Her breathing quickened as she held back her tears and bit her lower lip.

“Even if ye are the most messy woman on the face of God’s green earth.” He chuckled.

Laughing, she shook her head as he held her hand up.

“What do ye say?”

“Yes,” she answered through her tears. “A million and one times yes, Dean. I will be your wife!”

Dean slipped the ring on her finger as the bright red stone caught the light of the fire and sparkled. The simple gold band with the ruby set in the center was far more beautiful than any ring she’d ever seen in her life.

Leaning over, Sophia kissed him deeply with her hands on either side of his face.

Dean placed his hands on her hips and drew her to the edge of her seat as they kissed, bringing her bare legs up to his sides as

he guided her around his waist.

She let out a soft moan when he stood and lifted her with him, his towel falling to the floor as her legs locked around him.

“I’m sorry,” he said breathlessly as he held her in his arms. “I cannae wait for the weddin’ night.”

“I don’t want you to,” she breathed against his lips before parting his mouth with her tongue and kissing him passionately, burying her fingers in the strands of his hair.

Dean carried her over to his bed and laid her down on the crisp white sheets as she guided him down along with her, sinking their bodies into the comfort of the pillows.

“I’m a bit nervous,” she whispered, searching his face.

“Ye don’t have to be,” he whispered back, lifting her nightgown over her head and letting it fall to the side of the bed.

She quickly covered her breasts with her hands, but he gently moved them away, placing them on the mattress on either side of her head.

“Do ye remember the bath we took together in yer room?” he asked as he used the tips of his fingers to draw a path between her breasts and down her abdomen until he reached the bottom of her navel, where he flattened his hand.

“Yes,” she said breathlessly, relishing his touch as her excitement grew.

“It will feel like that.” His hand wandered down a little more. “But even better, it will feel as if ye an’ I are one.”

He watched her gasp and part her lips in a silent moan as his fingers sought the depths of her most intimate parts, feeling just how aroused she was by his touch.

Her breathing quickened as he dipped his head and took her rosebud nipple in his mouth. “Dean!” she gasped in pleasure and pressed her breast even deeper into his mouth as he nipped and suckled.

“Do ye like that, lass?” he asked, then continued to lick and suck her breast while stroking her core, alternating between breasts as she whimpered for more.

“Yes, please don’t stop...” Her moans grew louder until she almost growled.

“But, what comes next is even better than this.” He smiled down at her with an intensity in his eyes that took her breath away as he withdrew his hand.

Sophia felt a rush of disappointment as he drew away from her and repositioned himself above her. She wanted his touch to carry her into the depths of pleasure she had experienced on the night they bathed together. Her loins ached in desperation, pleading for more of his touch.

Her perfect breasts rose and fell with every breath as he parted her legs with his own and positioned himself between her shapely thighs. She could feel the warmth seeping from her core as he gently slid into her with a slight moan, gripping her hips with his rough hands and guiding her moves. Gasping in pain, she turned her head to the side and shut her eyes as he moved in steady strokes.

The pain was quickly replaced by pleasure as the rhythm of her body matched his with every stroke, her breaths coming in short gasps as they made love to the sound of the crackling fire.

His fingers intertwined with hers beside her head as they locked eyes and moved in a way that made their bodies one, her breathing matching his as if they shared the same pair of lungs.

“My beautiful Sophia,” he whispered urgently when she closed her eyes, “look at me. I want you to see what you do to me.” He picked up the pace and grunted in pleasure as his hips moved against hers.

She looked up, almost screaming his name as waves of pleasure took her away. “Dean!”

“I want ye to release the tension just like that night in the tub,” he commanded in a deep voice as she tried her best to hold back the flood of pleasure that threatened to overwhelm her. “Let go an’ show me how much ye love me. How good does this make ye feel.”

Her back arched in pleasure as her ecstasy reached its peak. “Dean!” she yelled breathlessly as she panted through the spasms that rocked her body.

Dean’s moans grew louder until he too cried out and collapsed on top of her with a shudder as his muscles tightened before release.

With their breathing synchronized, they lay in each other’s arms until Dean rolled over and placed her head on his chest, allowing the warmth of the fire to soothe their naked bodies.

“That was somethin’,” he said and kissed the top of her hair.

“It sure was.” She giggled and placed her hand with the ring over his heart.

“How are you feelin’ now?” He tilted her chin up and grasped her hand in his.

“Different,” she said after a moment of consideration. “But in a good way. Like I’m the same person, but different somehow. I know exactly what it means when you say we are one. My heart is so full that I don’t think I could ever bear to be away from you ever again.”

“That’s because we are one now, joined together in flesh,” he whispered and kissed her lips. “We never have to be away from each other ever again.” He brushed the strands of her hair from her face. “We can begin preparations for the weddin’ and be married within the week.”

“I would like that very much.” She smiled at him before snuggling back down into his arms. “Now, we just need to decide where we shall live.”

“What?” he asked after a pause. “What do ye mean where we will live? Aenae we goin’ to live here?”

“Well.” She propped herself up on her elbow and looked at him as she traced a path down his chest with her finger. “We could stay here, or we could live in London. There’s always my father’s house. The viscount wouldn’t mind if we moved our things in. We would keep out from underfoot.” She bit her lower lip as she waited for his response.

“Sophia... I’m the laird of the castle. People rely on me. I cannae move to another country.”

“Well, that was something we should have discussed before you invited me into your bed, my laird,” she said, mimicking his accent as she glared at him. “You’ve made an honest woman out of me, and now we don’t even know where we shall live.”

“You’re teasin’ me?” he asked after a few minutes of silence.

Sophia rolled her eyes and smirked at him. “Of course I’m teasing you.”

He breathed a sigh of relief before suddenly tickling her sides. “I’ll teach ye nae to tease me.” He laughed as he grasped her arms.

Sophia erupted in a fit of giggles before her breathing returned to normal. "I never want to live anywhere else," she said. "I want us to stay here in the castle and live happily ever after." She smiled up at him with her arms pinned above her head.

Dean gave her a peck on the lips before staring down at her. "Now, that is somethin' that can be arranged."

The End?

EXTENDED EPILOGUE



Eager to learn how **Sophia and Dean's** relationship evolved?
Then enjoy this complimentary short story featuring the
beloved couple.

Simply **[TAP HERE to read it now for FREE!](https://www.lydiakendall.com/xdsu18ar)** or use this
link: [go.lydiakendall.com/xdsu18ar](https://www.lydiakendall.com/xdsu18ar) directly in your
browser.

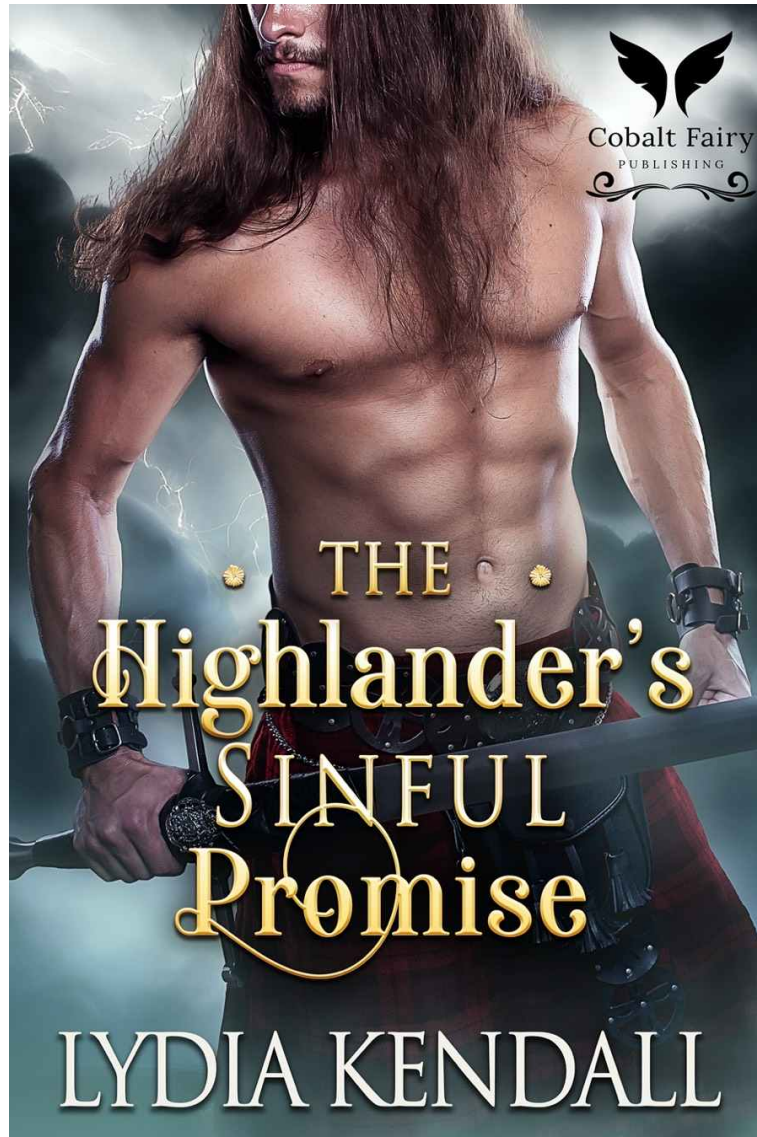
I guarantee you, that you won't be disappointed ♥



But before you go, turn the page for an extra sexy and wild
Scottish treat from me...

MORE SEXY HISTORICAL ROMANCE

Turn on to the next page to read the first chapters of *Highlander's Sinful Promise*, one of my best stories so far!



PREVIEW: HIGHLANDER'S
SINFUL PROMISE



CHAPTER 1



“IT IS SOMETHIN’ ye should look forward to, Lily, nae be blinded to,” Kate addressed her sister as she laid across the bed, one arm hooked under her head.

Lily looked uncomfortable standing in Kate’s chambers and having this very conversation. “I am nae blind, Kate, just decided.”

“Wrongly decided if ye ask me.”

“I am nae wrong, Kate.”

Lady Katherine sighed and struggled to sit up. Her pregnancy visibly disturbed her at every turn. “Nae, ye arenae wrong. That means ye can make the right choice in a man.”

“I am done with men, Kate. Is there anythin’ else ye want to talk to me about apart from makin’ a family with the love of my life?”

“That is yer future I am tryin’ to paint, Lily. And ye donae want to change yer mind and make it colorful.”

“My mind changed some time ago when I discovered men werenae to be trusted.”

“But I trust Reuben,” Kate delivered her last defense, her emotions heavy due to the pregnancy.

“He was yer first. I trusted a man once, and he dallied with my heart, and that isnae happenin’ again!” Saying this, Lily stormed out of the room and eventually, out of the castle.



The bloated evening skies took on a grey color. Broad leaves from the forest trees swayed in the breeze, whispering issues of the woods to one another.

Lily Sweeney absentmindedly massaged the herbs she had collected at the bottom of the twin trees which now lay in a basket hanging from her arm. Lily became deeper in thought with each step she took closer to the MacDonald castle.

She did not dote on arguments, especially when she was the topic of discussion therein. Her sisters had been biting at her shell, trying to pull down her decision to remain a spinster, since they all were married. They were concerned about her. Pitiful eyes were bent on Lily, and comments were made about her wish to remain unmarried and how she could also find the love of her life like they did. Such talks wearied Lily.

They meant well, but she also had her reasons. After her abuse from Uncle Max Sweeney and her betrothal to that awful man, Lily made up her mind that she couldn't be too trusting with men any longer. Her focus became affixed to healing arts which she learned from Clara Buchan, the MacDonald castle's healer.

There, she could keep herself out of trouble. But Kate was just too concerned, and even when the emotions from her current pregnancy made her cry at every turn, the Lady of MacDonald would not stop talking. Lily felt guilty, but what could she do? How could she avoid Kate, cognizant of the fact they both resided in the same castle?

Pellets of rain began to fall, and Lily, deep in thought, did not realize its growing intensity until she was soon drenched. Looking yonder, one arm shielding her face, Lily became aware that she had not covered much distance — the castle still stood a goodish step from her. She held her dress up, the hem swishing across her calves, and headed for a tree, hoping to wait out the storm. The chilly wetness of grass sticking to her bare legs made her feel very uncomfortable.

Suddenly, the forest morphed into a deep, husky voice calling her name.

“Miss Sweeney.”

She looked up to see a man, one she recognized as Laird Cairns, sitting up on his tall horse and wearing a short-sleeved leine and kilt that showcased his muscled thighs. He is an allied Laird that had visited Reuben a few times before, trying to do business with the Laird MacDonald. Everyone was always left whispering after he left, talking about how handsome he looked, but it’s a pity he was so dangerous.

He had powerful, muscular arms that glistened with the rain. His biceps were large, telling of the hard training the man had undergone, resulting in a well-defined figure. His muscles bugled against his clothing, working perfectly with his strong jawline and piercing gaze. As they locked eyes, she shuddered for a moment. He stared right at her with eyes the color of Reuben’s whiskey.

“Gorgeous weather for a walk,” Christian Barnett, Laird Cairns, pointed out with dry amusement.

Lily blushed and shot back, “Well, My Laird, that makes two of us, doesnae it?”

He said nothing to that, simply smirked and approached with his horse and offered his hand. Lily was a tad bit intimidated, but she shook her head. “I appreciate yer kind gesture, Laird Cairns, but I cannae sit with ye on yer horse. I would rather wait out the storm under this shade.”

“Are ye blind, lass? Dinnae ye look at the ferocity of the weather? This storm doesnae seem content to pass right now.”

“And I am nae in any hurry, My Laird. Maybe ye should hasten up before ye get yer boots wet.”

The Laird did not budge nor give any reaction that he was retracting his offer. Hand still held out, his brows furrowed, “Ye cannae wait out this storm. We shall ride together to the MacDonald castle. Donae make me get down to drag ye up meself.”

The command in his tone was not mistaken.

Reluctantly, Lily took his offered hand, and the Laird pulled her up on the seat in front of him. Then he bent to pat the horse's neck and urge the animal forward. The proximity of his body against hers made Lily flush with heat. She watched the veins in his hand flex as he gathered the reins and urged the horse into a trot.

They moved up a path canopied by branches and leaves which subdued the intensity of the pouring rain. The forest was old, older than even the MacDonald castle. The cold air smelled of wet grass and dead leaves, but the man behind her smelled heavenly. Like roses mixed with woodsmoke.

His strong hands were around her waist, holding the reins, and she felt a bit awkward about how her body felt. The Laird seemed to feel comfortable that he was in charge, moving the horse with an easy grace that she knew was born in a man and could never be taught. They rode for some way before Lily asked, "Do ye always get yer way like this?"

"Nae always," the Laird replied. "But whenever I do, I figure it is one of the rewards for bein' a rich Laird."

"Do ye need any other reward if ye are already rich?" Lily asked him in surprise.

"Aye," he tersely affirmed.

"Why?"

There was a moment's delay as he seemed to consider the question. Then he smirked, mischief glinting in his eyes as Lily turned around to see his face. "Because I'm also handsome?"

Lily scoffed at his insolence but couldn't help the laugh that bubbled in her throat.

Lily could not calm herself. As time passed, her proximity to this dangerous man made her seem agitated. She could not place the feeling which intruded into her heart, but she did not want to think she would be interested in Laird Cairns. She was not even interested in anyone at all. He was a dangerous Laird, and that was the reason for her being uncomfortable. Or that's what she said to herself.

They rode for a few moments in silence. Then she asked in a casual tone, “Ye were on yer way to Reyben’s Castle, Laird Cairns. What are ye goin’ there for?”

“Business,” was his sole reply.

Lily rolled her eyes, and she had the strange feeling that he realized what she had done. He actually had.

“Did ye just roll yer eyes at me, Miss Sweeney?”

“What if I did?” Lily turned, and the look of shock on his face made her giggle.

“Never do that again in front of me,” the Laird said, trying to put venom into his words but failing palpably. Even his horse grunted in mock appraisal.

“It was yer idea to ride with a drenched lady ye found standin’ alone under a tree. Now that ye have her on yer saddle, please, be accommodatin’ enough to tolerate her mischiefs.”

“Are ye now tellin’ me to expect trouble on me own steed?”

“Must men always be so vague when it comes to business?” Lily asked, regarding his previous statement, carefully avoiding the mischievous tone of the Laird’s last question, a hint of exasperation in her tone.

“What does it matter, Miss Sweeney? Donae tell me ye are suddenly interested in learnin’ about me affairs,” challenged the Laird, an invitation wrapped within.

Lily made a little gesture which was very eloquent, despite the fact that she still held her basket of herbs. “Far from it. Yer business would bore me to death.”

“And pickin’ grass is nae somethin’ that bores ye?” he enquired mockingly.

She said nothing in reply to this, and they rode the remaining stretch in silence till the castle grounds was underneath them. The Laird climbed off his horse and helped Lily down.

“Nae more walks in the outpourin’ rain, Miss Sweeney.”

Lily scoffed then almost rolled her eyes before she remembered the Laird’s threat. She thanked him for the ride

with a curtsy and went on her way. As she turned her back to him, Lily did not catch the Laird's eyes darkening.

CHAPTER 2



“So, what is this business of yers? Good or bad?” Reuben asked him, motioning for Christian to sit on the chair in front of his desk.

Christian demanded a map of the Scottish highlands in reply. When a servant brought one from the shelves, Christian splayed it across a table and traced one finger over the contour lines, making a point on the unoccupied space far beside the clan of MacDonald.

“That is the Little Mirch,” Reuben said, quite unnecessarily.

“Aye. It connects the Highlands to the Lowlands, apart from the North Sea. Well, since the North Sea is the main trajectory for trade, I would like to offer a novel proposition.”

Reuben looked from the map to the Laird of Cairns and positioned a hand under his chin. “And what might that be?”

“Trade,” Christian announced.

“Trade?”

“Aye, trade.”

“But that has been goin’ on for eons.”

“It has,” Laird Cairns admitted. “But that is made possible only through the North Sea as the sole channel for transport. Now, if we could open the Little Mirch, I am certainly sure we would double the inflow and outflow. By buildin’ watchtowers for ships on the shores of clans closer to the Little Mirch, we shall take inventory of our tradin’ vessels. All that is left is findin’ out which clans are strategic for this.”

“I see,” Laird MacDonald said, only to show he was paying attention.

“What are ye thinking about?”

Reuben turned the map upside down and drew a straight line from the clans up North to the ones down South. “Everythin’ up and down here. And if ye can spare a vessel or two and convey yer proposal to the Isles far West, it could work.”

“It isn’t just the proposal. Cannae work because this is only one half of the complete plan.”

“And what is the other half?” Reuben asked, bracing both hands on the table and leaning forward to assume an attentive but cautious stance.

“Gettin’ the various clan heads to give their genuine assent.”

“That goes without sayin’,” Reuben interposed as if such a remark had just occurred to him that moment.

“So I would need an ally,” Laird Cairns declared, holding Laird MacDonald’s curious state until the man smiled.

“Are ye suggestin’ that I help ye convince these clan heads to build watchtowers on their shores, so they could all improve trade through the Little Mirch?”

Christian rose to his full height, not really towering over his counterpart, and rested both hands on lean hips. “I would rather see it as some form of alliance, wouldnae ye?”

“Seems odd that a powerful man like ye would visit the MacDonald castle on horseback under such disaster of a weather askin’ fer an alliance with its Laird,” Reuben said.

“I chose to travel alone, and I am no seer of the weather’s cruel nature.”

“Absolutely. So, since ye have taken much pains, verily, in journeyin’ to me castle for this subject, what do ye stand to gain from it, Laird of Cairns?”

“Why do ye care what I gain?”

“Why wouldnae I?” Reuben returned, unavoidably liking the direction his tete-a-tete with Christian was veering now. “If I

dinnae, one of the other clan heads will. Or all of them will. Those Lairds are nae bairns, mind ye.”

“Are ye agreein’ to an alliance with me then?”

“I cannae say I am certain of that. However, if I am to become yer ally, ye must let me ken what ye stand to gain from all these troubles. Or is there anythin’ else ye have come for?”

Christian regarded Reuben for a moment, candle flame dancing in his eyes, making him appear like some guard of Helldom. His biceps glowed at an angle from the lighting, and at a glance, he looked divinely positioned. The darkness was relenting its hold on the castle as servants lit candle sticks and burned torches and right-hand ladies carried lanterns.

“I’m Laird of Cairns,” Christian said in hackneyed introduction. “We have nay shores and nay vessels. We would need to wait for goods or traders to reach us late or rely on payin’ fares to use other ships to sail out our own commodities. I am a ruler like ye. It is me responsibility to ken what is good or bad for me clan. And this donae sit well with me. Ye shore owners have access to trade more than we do, yet ye havenae thought about expandin’, somethin’ which I already have, and I foresee more accomplishments in the nearest future.”

Reuben was clearly impressed by his speech. “So why have ye come to me, Laird Cairns? Why nae some other clan head?”

“I hear ye have people all over the Highlands and even the rest of the Isles, so it is easier gettin’ into their good books through ye.”

Christian watched Reuben nod. Laird MacDonald was obviously quite impressed that he cared to know much about his influence. But how much did he think he knew?

Reuben looked at the map once again. “Cannae say I am entirely sure, but I donae ken if it is really somethin’ for yer clan ye want or if it is more power for yerself. Maybe I should let ye stay for dinner to get to know ye better?”

“What’s troubling ye, Laird MacDonald? This offer should be very easy to decide on.” Christian said, cocking his head to

one side in meticulous observation.

“That is settled, then,” Reuben announced, avoiding the question. “Ye shall stay for dinner. Me servants shall see ye to yer quarters where ye shall wait until I come to ye again.”

“Am I nae allowed to move around, like a prisoner?” he asked, his voice coming in a low growl.

“Nay harm will come to ye, Laird Cairns. Ye have me word on that,” Reuben responded, and Christian saw the Laird doing his best to seem unfazed.

A duo of male servants in red plaited kilts promptly appeared and escorted Christian to his room. On the way through the halls, he watched to see if he would set eyes on Lily Sweeney, but he had no such luck.



Outside, the storm had passed for quietude to reign. Lily was changing her dress for dinner when there came a knock on the door. She dropped the brush in her hand and stood to pull back the bolt. Katherine stood in the hallway. She was in a gown of sky blue trimmed profusely with Scottish embroidery. “Kate?”

“Who else? Help me in, I pray ye.”

The short walk brought whiplashes of pain across her face, intent on slowing their pace. When Lily finally eased her onto the bed, sweat beads reflected the glow of a lantern on the wall.

“This just gets better day by day,” Katherine complained sarcastically, weary of her situation.

“I thought this condition would relieve ye of yer wittiness, dear sister, but it seems I was wrong.” Lily took a seat beside the Lady of MacDonald.

“Oh, have ye been hopin’ on that, Lily?” Kate gasped incredulously, her face changing its countenance. Lily was unsure if the cause was terror of pain or actual skepticism.

“I dare not. But yer humor is sometimes marked by mockery which is not at times sincere, and that makes me feel like I should start takin’ ye serious.”

Katherine said nothing and focused on steadying her frantic breaths. Lily took the break to tie her hair and cover her left wrist with a gold bracelet.

“Did anyone catch yer interest of late?” Katherine enquired as she always did. It was a harmless question but one Lily feared with much trepidation.

“Anyone, ye mean a lady? Aye, old lady Clara catches me interest oftentimes and I almost cannae leave her side.”

“That wasnae what I was askin’ about, Lily, and ye ken it.” Katherine seemed offended now.

“Of course, I ken what ye mean, Kate,” Lily said; the words seemed to be dragged from her. “But as I have always told ye, marriage is nae what I wish for any longer. And I cannae understand why ye donae see reason with me. Are we nae that much of sisters? Ye ken what I have been through in the hands of a man. Donae ye pity me?”

“Ye ken the answer to that is yes, Lily, and it does upset me the way it doesnae perturb ye. I have always had hopes for us sisters; that we would never run from men but regard them as equals to us.” Her fingers grazed Lily’s face. “Surely, someone like ye would be almost perfect, kind at heart, generous, and truthful.”

Lily admitted that she hated seeing Katherine become too emotional about her decision to remain a spinster. It was difficult because it was not about what she wanted but what her sisters wanted for her. The only thing Lily got away with during each altercation with Kate was her newfound avocation in the practice of healing herbs. No one disputed that nor rebuked her for it. Not even Reuben.

“Will ye think about this?” Lady Katherine asked in mild distress, her eyes beginning to water. “It is nae good for my present condition.”

Lily lifted her eyes. "I will," she replied with a cheerless smile then reiterated, "Positively, I will."

"Do promise!" Katherine charged.

By this time, Lily seemed to have a feeling that she wouldn't leave it, so she said half-heartedly, "I do promise."

Pulling the curls around the waist of her dress free, Kate wiped her eyes with the back of a hand and shifted on the bed. She caught Lily staring at her curiously.

"Are ye cryin' because of me, Kate?" Lily asked, seemingly alarmed.

"Nay. It is nae ye but me. Trust me, Lily, what I am carryin' is nae a child but a stone gettin' bigger!"

And they both laughed.

There came a familiar call at the door. "It is dinnertime, me beloved!" Reuben cried invitingly.

"On our way, me dear," Katherine called back, lifting herself up as Lily caught an arm. At the door, they met Reuben, and the dangerous Laird Cairns was at his shoulder.

He looked the way she had left him, some factors unmistakably different. He was dry and had a sheepskin cape over his shirt. The Laird and Lady of MacDonald paired and led the way leaving Christian to pair with Lily with guards in tow. He offered his hand again, and this time, she took it without complaint, allowing his other free hand to rest on the hilt of his sword.

"Ye cannae keep yer hand off that weapon even when attendin' dinner?" Lily asked.

"Donae be too concerned about me takin' this piece of metal to an eatin' table. Worry about Yer Lady. Why does she look a mess?"

Lily told him that she was partly the cause of it. Her decision to remain a spinster was rubbing strong on her sister's bloated stomach worse than the baby's legs.

"A spinster?"

“Why?” she quickly asked. “Do ye also find somethin’ wrong with me decision?”



He regarded her from that close with the mind of someone trying to read a person. Then not wanting to make her feel uncomfortable, he said, “It is just rare.”

To tell the truth, there could be nothing wrong with such notion on the Laird’s part. He felt some weird satisfaction after hearing that Lily Sweeney was not interested in any man. It was so unlike him to care about the interest of any lady, yet he was intrigued by this woman under his arm who had teased him for being barbaric.

He was more surprised to hear himself venting support, “It is nae a bad decision ye have made, Miss Sweeney. Wantin’ to be uninterested in any man at the moment. I would nae judge ye for that.” He kept his face away from her as he said this, so she would not notice the discomfort etched across his visage like a map.

Dinner comprised a variety of courses including slices of roasted sirloin of Scottish beef served with pan gravy and Yorkshire pudding. They drank wine in cups made of clay and ate bare bannock from silver trays. The Laird and Lady of MacDonald left the eating room for their bedroom earlier as Kate could not stand on her feet any longer, leaving Christian and Lily together.

“I said that I wouldnae judge ye, but I am longin’ to hear why ye have chosen to remain alone.”

Lily gave a little sigh. She told him about her ordeal in the hands of her ex-betrothed during their betrothal feast. She did not think any other man could be trusted after that.

Christian was leaning backwards in his chair, arms folded over a broad chest, looking relaxed like the world could not get any worse than it already was. The Laird’s whiskey-colored eyes were locked on her face, and he spoke with palpable urging,

“Can ye tell me exactly what this ex-betrothed of yers did that has made ye so bitter?”

“Do ye see this as bein’ bitter, Laird Cairns?” Lily asked, trying to sound not too regretful.

He shrugged, expression unchanged, and waited for Lily to speak.

“He laid with a maid on the day of our betrothal feast, but that’s only the smaller part. The biggest part was that he was at fault for my sister being kidnapped — in my stead — and even though it turned out well, the whole ordeal was very taxing,” she finally let out, her eyes challenging him to place judgment.

He did not, instead he simply asked, “Is he dead yet?”

“Yes,” she replied. “He is nae alive anymore.”

“It is a good thin’ he isn’t,” Christian said, a sententious edge to his voice. He would have had his sword take the man’s cheating head off.

“What is wrong with everybody else?” Lily cried desperately. “Why cannae they seem to understand like ye have?”

Christian unfolded his arms and placed them on the table, making a single fist with all ten fingers. “Well, some people daenae like the truth, Miss Sweeney,” he said cryptically.

Lily mulled over his words for a few moments and swiftly an idea got into her head. Laird Cairns was right in his words; nobody liked the truth, which means that nobody had to know it. If she could tell a lie and make it seem like the truth by acting as if she were in a betrothal when she wasn’t, then people would let her be for quite a while.

Most betrothals were kept for at least a year anyway. And who better than this man who had no feelings and had firmly stated, hand on hilt, that he was not ready to be the celebrant in any conjugal rite? Her thoughts seemed to jump on him as he could not help asking,

“What is going around within the walls of yer mind, Miss Sweeney?”

“It is what ye said about people and the truth...”

Laird Cairns raised an eyebrow. “And...?”

Lily leaned forward in her chair, gesturing the Laird to do same. When their faces were some inches apart — and Lily had to shake her head to clear her mind from his intoxicating proximity — she spoke conniving, saying, “I would like to devise a plan for a false betrothal.”

“A pretense!” he exclaimed, rearing backward in amazement.

Lily quickly motioned for him to keep his voice low. He appeared apologetic, but there was an instant replacement — one of concern. “Is it me conjecture that ye, Miss Sweeney, are plannin’ to have yerself be betrothed to a man just for the sake of yer sister’s happiness?”

“Aye, indeed,” she responded in the affirmative. “Though, I have...ye in mind as the...better half; I ken nae what ye might think of it.”

He was tempted to say yes to her plan; any man faced with such an offer would gladly give in. Having access to a beautiful lady like Lily Sweeney could only be termed a feat. But how dangerous could this pretense of a plan be for them? Yes, it may ease the current pressure and divert attention off her back, but what happens after? What happens when everyone finds out they all had believed a lie?

“I donae think it will be good for us if we were falsely betrothed,” he finally said in a show of dissent.

On hearing this, Lily’s face became crestfallen and grew shades of pale. Her eyes turned downward, and she played nervously with her hands. And it killed him to see her like this. Christian didn’t understand what came over him, but at that moment, he realized that whatever Lily asked of him, she would get. And that terrified him, for he never cared what anyone wanted.

“Alright, fine,” he grumpily accepted. “I take back me words. You can...trust in me.”

He saw the flash in her eyes when he said this. Just a moment’s hint of brightness, and it was gone. But that small

brief second of happiness he saw on her face made his heart clench.

“But we must have rules,” stated a relieved Lily.

“Enlighten me then, noble lawmaker.”

Lily made a sound in her throat which could have passed for a laugh. “One, no physical contact except when it is necessary in public eyes. Two, no fallin’ in love — at all. Lastly, no gettin’ with other women or men in public eyes, and ye ken what that means.”

Christian bubbled with laughter.

“What is it?” Lily wanted to know.

“That last rule, Yer Highness,” he said, wearing a sly smile.

“And what of it?”

“Did ye have to impose that? It sounded unnecessary. I donae cheat, never have. Not even in false situations.” Then with a direct threat. “And ye better not be gettin’ with another man.”

“They are me rules,” she stated firmly. “I shall nae think of thwartin’ them, Laird Cairns.”

“Call me Christian now.”



She smiled. “Very well, then. Christian.” It was the first time in her life she was attempting such deceit. She never realized it would ever come to this. Or dealing with a powerful Laird like Christian Barnett. Sitting across from him, his dark hair refusing to tint golden even under the relentless glow of torches, eyes bent on her, skin pulled strong over a body that looked like a prize, Lily felt as if she had just signed a deal with the Devil.

“So what do ye get out of this?”

The Devil spoke, “I shall need ye whenever there is a feast or some meetin’ to attend with other Lairds. Ye shall take yer place under me arm, so yer beautiful presence can give me

power over them all.” But Lily felt there was more to what he was getting, even if he didn’t say it.

CHAPTER 3



THE FOLLOWING day saw guards and servants struggle to clear out passageways which the storm and rain had obstructed with mud. Some roads which led to the market and out the castle were rendered almost unpassable, neither on foot nor horseback. Roofs clinched to posts in market stalls the day before had been blown off during the debacle, and some unfortunate traders had to walk a goodish step to find remnants of their stall or forgo the quest and erect another.

It was even more perturbing when villagers came to find some of their wares upset, flooded out of the castle, or destroyed altogether. And as market stalls reopened at a slow pace, passersby who were not traders made witty remarks.

It was also on this moody morning that Lily Sweeney decided to announce her betrothal to Christian Barnett, Laird of Cairns.

“That is quite a choice,” Kate commented. She took a breath, allowing Lily to see the outline of her face. Kate had grown so much in the last few years, becoming even wiser in her time. Regardless of the trials that had come their way, Kate had kept them together. She had been the glue when their parents had passed, and even now, she held the sisters.

“But one I cannae say I am entirely comfortable with.”

“Why nae, Kate?”

“Laird Cairns? Dear sister, there arenae good words ’bout him abroad.”

“Does it matter?” Lily demanded.

“I guess it does,” Katherine said.

“So are you rejecting me choice of a betrothed?”

Katherine looked at Lily through concerned eyes. “Almost. But let’s wait for Freya and Willow to get here. That might have a different opinion on the matter, or they may agree with me.”

When Lily got time with Reuben, she enquired from him what he thought about her betrothal to the Laird of Cairns.

Reuben adjusted his shirt and smoothed his kilt. “First, do ye ken what sort of man Laird Cairns is?”

“Ye mean how dangerous he is? Is that nae what everyone says?” Lily asked.

“He is nae one to be trifled with, Lily. Ye have spoken to the man how many times? Two? Three times? And ye think he is the right match for ye?”

“I ken he is,” Lily replied with vehemence, hoping he would not notice the uncertainty underlying.

“For yer sake and ours, think about this one more time. He shouldnae play with yer heart. I shall leave ye now to attend to some clan affairs.”



The next day saw Freya arrive with Darragh. When word of Lily’s betrothal first reached her ears, she scurried over with much haste. And Freya, who knew much about warrior men, quickly found distaste in Lily’s choice of a better half.

“How did ye fare on yer journey?” Kate asked Freya when the sisters came together in her chambers.

“Very well. The roads were nae as horrible as we thought they would be. Ye look ghastly, Kate.” Freya reached out and gripped Kate’s hand in support.

“I am in pain, Freya, as ye can clearly see. Feels like I have a rock in me,” she said in dark humor.

“The news of Lily’s betrothal to the Laird of Cairns dragged me out of the castle.” Freya looked to Lily, her countenance distressed by the weight of such decision. “What is this I hear?”

“It is as ye have heard, Freya. I wish to be betrothed to the Laird of Cairns.”

“Oh — that man is a walkin’ block of ferocity. As dangerous as a wolf who shall strike at the slightest attempt to attack him with yer feelin’s.”

“Nae matter,” Lily said flatly. “Kate, was this nae the same thing we all thought of Reuben? That he murdered our parents, and we loathed hearin’ his name in our ears? But ye went ahead and fell in love with him? Did that nae make ye happy?”

Kate looked cross with her younger sister. “That wasnae even true in the first place.”

“Then why pass verdict on Christian so quickly?”

“The man has a very dark past which may resurrect to haunt ye both. He killed off many innocent villagers of an enemy clan in a battle while his men stood by and watched in surprise. They say that when he gets angry sometimes, he takes that anger of his out on the prisoners in his dungeons. Does very horrible things to them. Surely, ye donae wish to spend the rest of yer life with such a man?”

Lily wasn’t sure about the certainty of Kate’s remark on Christian’s dark past, but she did not want to let on whether she knew if it was true or not. It was better to play the ignorant fool for the present. Even if she did know, the deal was already on. There was no going back now.

“Ye were never too trustin’ with men; how can ye be so naive this time?” Freya demanded, annoyed.

“How can ye call this naive, Freya? Ye were the ones who told me to get a betrothed. I found him, and he has been treating me well.” Lily looked hurt.

“Ye should ken that we are very concerned about yer decision,” Kate said, her forehead in wrinkles. “Reuben sees ye as a sister. Why do ye think he would let ye make a wrong choice?”

“Why bring yer husband into this? A lot of villagers need his advice more than I do,” said a stubborn Lily.

“Oh, Lily! Ye have become more strong-headed than I thought,” Freya said disconsolately.

Lily reached for a tray filled with apples and busied her mouth with one. She watched Kate and Freya agitate in genuine dismay. Her mouth filled with the fruit; she offered no response. It was quite a show to watch her sisters banter over her freakish betrothal to a man they found unsafe to be around with. Lily had no doubt Christian was that sort of person, but if only they knew the truth behind her lie.

After a while, Freya relented and wished to rest with Darragh. “But this is nae over, Lily,” she wagged a finger. “We shall converse more on this. Hopefully, when Willow arrives to see yer misconduct.”



It took Willow a whole four days to arrive at MacDonald castle which constituted Lily’s hours of restless reproach. Christian remained in the castle during these days, though Lily could not find his whiskey-colored eyes anywhere. Katherine and Freya both inspected her with interest, taking repeated outlooks at the forest road through an arched balcony. Freya was the first to see specks the size of caraway seeds on the far line of the ridge where the sunlit white of the road met the blue of the sky.

Then the remaining parts of a wagon pulled by horses became visible, and then the whole vehicle, end on until it seemed they could hear the dry rattle of wheels above the hullabaloo in the castle on the muddied road. Kate and Freya received a tired looking Willow at the castle doors with Lily a tad behind.

“Ye look a mess!” Freya exclaimed by way of greeting.

“It was a tree, and we had to go around it,” Willow explained, not cheerily. “Took us a day longer. Ye look like two people, Kate. How is the other half?”

Kate, who supported her bloated stomach with a hand, replied, “Kickin’ like a horse.”

Willow smiled and put her hands around Katherine’s neck in a light hug. “It has been a while, dear sister.”

“Verily,” Kate replied.

Freya hugged Willow and kissed her on the cheeks. “Good to see that Scott isnae too busy to take care of ye.”

“Oh, please, Freya. I havenae changed a bit, have I?”

“Ye daenae look bad to me, so I should give him some credit.”

“Neither do ye. Ah...Lily!” Willow embraced her with a smile which Lily returned. “I guess I should start callin’ ye Lady Lily, hm?”

Lily kept her smile on. “Now, ye are being too hasty, Willow.”

“Sure. I have waited for years. I can probably wait this one out too.”



Christian appeared as the ladies were leaving. He talked to Lily as they forged ahead.

“Is this sisterly reunion what I think it is?” Laird Cairns asked, a smug look on his face which was instantly slapped away the moment he noticed her features. His face became suddenly fixed, and his eyes looked anxiously all over her face, seeking to find what disturbed her.

Lily turned weakly to him and demanded, “And where have ye been, Laird Cairns?”

“Have ye been looking after me?” he enquired.

“Ye have been out of reach. I had thought ye ran away and left me stranded with no betrothed.”

He smiled. “And why would I dae that?”

She folded her arms. “I have nae idea, Laird Cairns. Will ye answer the question now?”

“Had some training time with the clan warriors.”

“Did ye also spend the night there?”

“No, I did nae. What is that supposed to mean?”

She raised her hands in gesticulation. “Well, our warriors dae. Practice on the training ground during the day and sleep on it at night.”

“My men only dae that when they get intoxicated.”

“These last three days have quite upset me. I am on me last nerve, and I donae feel well.”

He squinted at her, eyes roaming over her body like a lover’s needful hands. “Are ye ill, Lily?”

“It is nae that. Kate and Freya daenae like ye at all. Now, Willow is here.”

“Are ye bein’ judged?” Christian asked.

“Ye make it sound like they ken the truth beneath me lie.”

“Then daenae be upset this way. If they have waited a long time for ye to make yer choice, they wouldnae reject this now. Just initial complaints.” Though Christian tried to make Lily feel better, he couldn’t help his own anxiety taking over. Despite this being Lily’s idea, the thought of ending their false betrothal before it even began somehow sat like a stone in his stomach.

What if she agreed with them too? Would this all have been a mistake?

Outside the castle walls, down market stalls and hamlets, word was carried about in the breeze that the heart of Miss Sweeney had been stolen by the Laird of Cairns.

They began to talk about it after dinner. Katherine and Freya replayed their agitations as Willow and the youngest sister,

Lily, sat to listen. At the end, Willow looked more tired of their bickering than the journey made her.

She said, “I chose to have this discussion now, regardless of the obvious fact that I am weary from me travels. Lily’s future means more to me as to ye both. In as much as ye all have reproached Lily’s choice of betrothed, I find no reason to condemn her.” Willow’s defiance made the sisters speechless for only a moment. Then Freya was at it.

“Are ye sayin’ that there is nothin’ wrong with her gettin’ betrothed to Laird Cairns?”

Willow looked at a hopeful Lily. “We all have been perturbed her to find the love of her life and stop bein’ a spinster. Lookin’ the other way round, it is much a fault of ours than it is of hers.”

“But we dinnae choose the man for her,” Freya admonished. “That was her alone.”

“But we pushed her, dinnae we? That was us,” Willow replied defensively.

Freya and Kate said nothing for another moment, uneasy, and unable to chastise Willow for having a different opinion from theirs. To Lily, it was an utmost show of solidarity from the arriving traveler.

“What about the Laird of Cairns?” Kate said. “He is a vicious man. Unsafe to be with.”

“Let Lily be the judge of that. I am sure she is very mature over the years now and wise enough to make her choices without us intruding.” Willow was trustful. “If she has chosen the Laird, then she must have a reason. Let’s nae pamper her. But if the Laird is foolish enough to treat Lily unkindly, then he shall have an army of four strong clans come upon his. A wise warrior should ken when the odds are wholly nae in his favor. Also, let’s not forget that neither of our husbands had the sternest reputation before we married them. Granted, Laird Cairns has been rumored to have killed and maimed left and right, but at least his reputation with the ladies has been more than stellar.”

Kate and Freya were quite allayed by Willow's fierce statement, but they did not drop the topic so easily as their little skepticism got the better of them, so Willow had to take Lily aside. At a corner just beside the door, there was a makeshift pantry, and they stood beside it.

"Lily, my dear. If this is yer choice, I shallnae stop ye, but I want ye to be sure ye ken what ye are gettin' into."

"Yes, Willow, I do ken what I am doin'," said a grateful Lily, taking her sister's hands in assurance.

"Very well, then. I shall try to persuade Freya and Kate to see reason with me."

"Will they?"

"Of course, they will. Have ye forgotten so soon? We cannae be divided amongst ourselves."

Lily thanked Willow, and true to her word, she was able to calm Freya and Kate. It was even Katherine who announced that there was going to be a betrothal feast.

Lily groaned. "Can we please avoid a feast?"

"Nonsense!" she interjected, adamant. "Every betrothal has a feast, and so will yers."

"Did Christian disagree with having one too?" asked Willow, and Lily shook her head, not wanting to risk showing them that she didn't know Christian's opinion on this. They hadn't talked much these days, and if her sisters found out, they would have even more complaints on him. Lily thought about breaking off the betrothal since it created so much trouble, but then she would have to actually find a man to marry, or

"Whatever. It is settled. We shall have a feast," Kate resolved.

"Donae worry yer head, Lily," Freya sympathized. "We shall keep it small in case what happened the last time tries to repeat its ugly self."

Alone in her room, Lily Sweeney recalled how in her first and last betrothal feast, her betrothed spent his time with another woman, a maid. It was dishonorable and seen as condescending low, but Lily knew that men hardly cared about

the status of a woman as long as they sweetened their loins. The worst of it, Willow had been taken hostage by the Laird in the North, and though everything went well in the end, Lily couldn't help but feel that if her betrothed was there with her in that moment, Willow would have been saved.

Men could comfortably cheat and not take the whip later. And Lily had to wonder if Christian would do the same thing to her, despite his declaration that he would not cheat. But wasn't that the same thing her ex-betrothed said? Even swore on his own mother's tongue? Part of her wished the Laird would be different, even though their betrothal was a sham act. So what if he was? What then? Would her rules still apply or not?

If this was some other circumstance, she wouldn't have bothered, but Lily knew she needed to meet with him again before the betrothal feast.



The place where the MacDonald clan warriors trained was as large as a jousting ground with tents for storing practice weapons and fighting garb. However, most of them ignored the fighting garb and preferred to train with just trousers tucked into tight boots, leaving their broad chests open. It was just practice, so the armor for protection didn't feel right, but careless warriors got injuries, nevertheless.

"Take yer arse off the ground and fight me!" bellowed one of the men who had just knocked his opponent down with a kick. A couple of men wielding swords made a full circle around the sweating fighters.

Lily waved motes of dust away from her face and searched for the Laird Cairns. She knew he wouldn't leave MacDonald castle so suddenly like that. There was a contract binding him to stay until the betrothal feast then whatever happened after that depended on what direction the wind of fate blew them towards.

The opponent quickly scurried up on his feet and thrust his sword forward twice. The man swerved away from each of

them by just moving his neck, squatted, and swiped at his opponent's legs.

Lily moved beside the tents, listening for his voice. She did not want to start looking into each compartment. She had no right to even do that.

A man came from around the corner of a tent, holding a spear in one hand and a helmet in the other. When he saw her and recognition hit, he stopped on his tracks and bowed. "Miss Sweeney. Didnae know ye had sights for warfare."

"Oh, aye, Duff. Have ye seen the Laird Cairns?"

"Aye. He is with the archers. Ye ken the place?"

"I do, Duff. How do the young ones fare?"

A fatherly smile crossed his face. "They fare well, Miss. It seems that noisemaking keeps them healthy."

"Ah, the banter the better, I see. Well, thank ye for yer assistance, Duff."

"Happy to help, Miss Sweeney." He bowed again and went on his way.

The archers were better dressed than the swordsmen and obviously knew something about decency but not much about making bullseyes. Arrows were hitting the larger circles like it was their birthright.

Lily saw Christian standing at the aim line, one hand on the hilt of his sword and the other on one lean hip. He stood straight, facing the archers, a hint of amusement on his face. After all the archers had taken aim, it was Christian's turn. He managed to land all three of his arrows in the middle of the target, eliciting gasps from all the men around him.

Lily walked over, clapping. "Ye sure ken how to impress a woman, Laird Cairns."

He made a face. He wasn't expecting her to be there. "Lily? That wasnae to...well, I didnae ken ye were here."

"I ken that. Wanted to talk to ye about something."

“Looks important from the way I see ye here. Let’s walk. These bowmen are disgustin’.”

Lily smiled wide, holding back a laugh. They walked together, back the way she had come. There was a new round of sword fighting between two different opponents who looked ready to tear each other apart. She brought him to a quiet place in the castle’s grounds. It was deserted except the flowers which gave credence to the probability that it wasn’t entirely abandoned. She sat on a stone bank of what was once a fountain and bid him to do same.

Christian looked around the place and sat down. “Is this the garden?”

She would have nodded. but he wasn’t looking at her that moment and wouldn’t have noticed. “It is. Ye donae seem to like gardens, do ye?”

“Compared to the place we just left? The noises, bragging, and insults are far lively than here. People can look for ye here if ye are lost or get into trouble.”

“But we are not lost, neither are we in trouble, Laird Cairns. I only brought us here to discuss.”

Now he looked at her. “Discuss?”

“The terms of our contract.”

“Ye want to review it.”

“I guessed we should. Not changin’ anything from it or addin’ somethin’ to it per se.”

“I’m followin’,” he said, attentively.

“They agreed on our betrothal,” she began. “Willow played a huge part in that.”

“The last straw,” he said proverbially.

“Seemed to be. So, Kate said we are havin’ a betrothal feast.”

He looked at her, face like a sour grape. “Is she serious? What was yer response?”

“I disagreed, but it was in vain.”

“Are these good tidings or bad tidings?” he demanded.

“Ye tell me,” she said. “Yer face didnae look too good when I mentioned the possibility of a betrothal feast. Did ye nae expect this, Laird Cairns? I mean, we are nobles, and this cannae go unnoticed. I seemed to figure that out afterwards. But considerin’ what we are about to do, I tried to disagree on one, knowin’ at the back of my mind that I wouldnae win.”

He didn’t seem to hear her, and she had to repeat her words to him again.

“It might not be awry if we just act it right. Obviously, we cannae call it off now, can we?”

She shook her head. “It would look like a joke to them, and I donae want to let my sisters down.”

“Even if ye were to go down for this later?”

She put on a stubborn face. “Ye arenae excluded either, Laird Cairns, remember?”

He thought of that. “So...we take the bull by the horns, Miss Lily?”

She smiled, and it looked seductive in his eyes. “Nae, Laird Cairns. Ye take the woman and make everyone else besides the both of us believe that she is yers.”

He stared at her with his whiskey-colored eyes for a spell then he left his sword for once and took her hand in his.

The touch sent a ripple down Lily’s spine, and she shivered. She had not been expecting that gesture from the Laird Cairns, neither had she been expecting his touch to make her feel this way.

His eyes held hers like a magnet, and he spoke, that deep, husky voice of his doing naughty things to her insides, “Be careful what ye wish for, Miss Sweeney. Ye might just get it.”

Want to know how the story ends? Click the link:

[My book](#)

Thank you!

ALSO BY LYDIA KENDALL

Thank you for reading *Saved by the Highland Beast!*

I hope you enjoyed it! If you did, may I ask you to **please write a review [HERE?](#)**
It would mean the world to me. Reviews are very important and allow me to keep writing the books that you love to read!

Some other best sellers of mine:

Highlander's Sinful Promise

Wedded to the Wicked Highlander

Highlander's Twisted Love

The Beastly Highlander

Married to the Mysterious Highlander

The Highlander's Weakness

Also, if you liked this book, you can also check out my full **[Amazon Book Catalogue HERE.](#)**

Thank you for helping me do what I love!

Lydia Kendall

LOVED THIS BOOK?

If you loved this novel, click [here](#) to choose from a variety of books like this one by this author!



Just click on the image above! ↑

If this wasn't your cup of tea, you can select another trope more to your liking [here](#)!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lydia Kendall has always been passionate about medieval romance. Having traveled to the Scottish Highlands several times as a young girl, she has always been drawn to their unparalleled beauty and history. A history that inspired stories of love and passion, mixed with tradition in the most appealing way for every hopeless romantic - much like herself.

Born in Denver, Colorado, Lydia Kendall has a degree in English Literature and Creative Writing, and over the last decade she has been writing non-stop for several clients - that is until she decided to start publishing her own work. When she isn't writing, Lydia loves spending her time on the beautiful outdoors with her loving husband and baby daughter.

Follow Lydia on this sensational journey of hot highlanders, bonny lassies and fierce passion...and find sheer pleasure in the magnificent world of the Scottish countryside - one that will sweep you off your feet and keep you begging for more!

Lydia is part of **Cobalt Fairy's** team of authors! Visit **cobaltfairy.com** for new, bargain and free deals for every dedicated bookworm there is out there!

