



Cobalt Fairy
PUBLISHING



Highlander's
SCARRED
Bride

Maddie MacKenna

HIGHLANDER'S SCARRED BRIDE

A MEDIEVAL HISTORICAL ROMANCE NOVEL

TROUBLES OF HIGHLAND LASSES

BOOK THREE

MADDIE MACKENNA



CONTENTS

[Join our amazing group](#)

[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](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Extended Epilogue](#)

[Preview: Her Vow with the Highlander](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Also by Maddie MacKenna](#)

[Loved this book?](#)

[About the Author](#)

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ABOUT THE BOOK

“She’s under me protection... I’ll kill anyone who hurts her.”

One look at Laird Dominic’s scarred face is enough to terrify anyone. Except one: a beautiful healer who doesn’t shy away from his gaze when they meet. And now images of her on his bed start haunting him...

Violet’s hard work as a healer is not enough to raise her siblings. Until her cruel, beastly Laird comes to her with a proposal she cannot resist...

To get everything she desires, Violet must stay with him for a year.

Yet the moment her heart starts yearning for him, rumors of how she bewitched the Laird start circulating. And Dominic would rather burn everything to the ground than see her get hurt...

BEFORE YOU START READING ...

When Violet is brought to Dominic's castle, rumors start spreading that the healer is a witch. But what about real witches? What happened to women in the past when they were believed to be involved with witchcraft?

Here is a **Historical Fact Sheet about women that were deemed witches in Medievals Scotland** which will help you understand and visualize the story inside my book better.

Many of my readers requested it and that's why I am giving it away for free! I believe you will LOVE IT!

It's not mandatory to read it, but it will be really helpful if it's your first time with this book.

Read all about **Witches** [here](#).



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*I*t was late spring in the Highlands. A spate of early morning rain had passed, and the sky was now blue, with the sun appearing between the clouds, its rays rapidly drying the land below, making it glow with deep greens, golds, and the misty sheen of heather.

Dominic, Laird of McGunn, rode easily in his saddle, the reins loose in his hands, looking out over the surrounding rocky hills and heather-covered moors. He breathed in deeply, relishing the unencumbered view and the fresh air as he traveled further away from the continuing squabbles of his council members back at Castle McGunn.

All that could be heard was birdsong and the steady jingle of the horses' harnesses as their hooves thumped rhythmically on the packed earth of the track beneath their feet.

Beside Dominic rode his faithful man-at-arms, Archer Chapman, the expression on his square, tan face one of concentrated concern as he glanced repeatedly at his laird as they progressed towards their destination, the small village of Dalmuir.

“’Tis a fine bit of land,” Archer said suddenly, breaking the silence between them for the last few miles.

His laird only grunted his assent.

Archer persisted. “Ye did well out of Keegan’s defeat, eh, Dominic?”

“Well enough,” Dominic spoke at last but grudgingly.

“That damned Clan Farlane should count themselves lucky to have ye as their laird now instead of that cowardly betrayer Keegan.” Archer paused to spit on the ground in contempt for the man who had plotted the downfall of Clan McGunn and paid with his life. “Ye’ve taught them a hard lesson or two since then, eh?”

“Wisht, man. I hear enough of that from the council. Tell me something I dinnae ken,” came the terse reply from the Laird.

He had no wish to rehash the terrible events that had resulted in his father’s killing at Keegan’s hands, and the awful injury he himself had received. Yet, others repeatedly insisted he did so. At least, it seemed that way to him.

The track began climbing a shallow incline, where everything ahead faded into a vast, unending sky.

“How far now?” Dominic asked after a pause as they neared the crest of the low hill.

“Ye should start to see the smoke o’ their chimneys soon,” Archer said, amazed at having prized a whole sentence from his laird’s lips.

It was more than Dominic had spoken since issuing his commands for the castle’s protection in his absence on their departure that dawn.

They crested the hill. At the top, Dominic pulled up his horse, briefly scanning the country that lay ahead, where the moors began to change to grazing land and cultivated fields. Farm buildings peppered the landscape.

Archer stopped beside him. “There,” he said, pointing. “To the northeast.”

“Aye, I see it.”

Dominic had already spotted the faint grey trceries of smoke staining the sky, clearly rising from innumerable domestic fires burning in the hearths of Dalmuir below. From the sun’s position in the sky, he figured it was around noon, the time when the wives would be boiling up the morning’s left-over porridge for the midday meal.

He gently kicked up his horse and headed down into the broad, shallow valley before them, where the track itself echoed the spiraling smoke from above.

Archer followed.

“Are ye sure ye really want to go through with this cockamamie plan of yers, Dominic?” he asked, his honest face scrunched up with concern. “I mean, I dinnae see how ye think ’tis going to help ye.”

“Shut yer trap, Archer. Dinnae question me.” Dominic didn’t even spare him a glance.

“But what about Daisy, Dominic? What’s she going to say when she finds out?”

Dominic made a sound with his lips that expressed extreme irritation with Archer’s questions. “I warn ye, Archer, dinnae try to drag me sister into it,” he responded gruffly, his temper rising as he expected further argument. In truth, just the thought of how his younger sister had been acting around him since their father’s death, and his own misfortune, was enough to make him furious.

But to his relief, Archer fell silent as the village of Dalmuir finally hove into view less than half a mile ahead. His irritability abating, Dominic surveyed the village with some interest, excitement growing inside him.

It was the archetypal Highland village, a farming community, featuring the usual huddle of houses and cottages strung along a main street punctuated by a market square, with a spiderweb of back alleys running behind them, and fringed by an alehouse or two, a general store, a saddlery, a forge, and a kirk with a graveyard at the far end. Folk went about their business, small barefoot children, assorted dogs, and various fowl ran about unchecked.

Dalmuir was now part of Dominic's domain, with the conquered Clan Farlane now under McGunn jurisdiction. On the surface, it held no surprises. Yet, for Dominic, the new territory offered him an opportunity previously denied to him. Ordinary though the place seemed, hope rose within him that what he so urgently sought lay somewhere within it, as he had been assured it would.

Perhaps it was the excitement or the uncertainty, but as they approached the outskirts of Dalmuir, an all too familiar throbbing headache started up around his temples. He tried to ignore the pounding, clenching his jaw against the pain that had become his almost constant companion.

Not long now. Just hold out a little while longer, and all may be well.

“Ach, see them flinch from ye,” Archer said with a small laugh of satisfaction when their horses passed the first of the houses on the main street and some of the villagers cringed to recognize the heathery blue-green of the McGunn tartan. They doffed their caps and bowed before the pattern of their new, and greatly feared, overlords. “’Tis grand to see how they fear ye.”

“Respect is better than fear,” Dominic muttered under his breath.

“What was that?” Archer inquired, but Dominic ignored him, reigning in his horse next to a group of terrified-looking farmworkers.

“I want to ken where the village healer resides, for I’ve heard tell of their greatness and have a fancy to ken them,” Dominic said resoundingly in his deep, bass voice.

The group of men shoved one unfortunate forward to answer. His voice trembled as he bowed and said, “Her name is Violet Duncan, and she lives on the edge of the village with her family, M’laird.”

“Which way?”

The man pointed ahead. “Last cottage on the left, just before ye get to the kirk, M’laird.”

“Thank ye,” Dominic replied and turned his horse that way.

“But, M’laird—” the worker interjected bravely.

Dominic stopped. “Well, what is it?” he demanded.

“Are ye sure ye need Violet, M’laird?”

“Why nae?” the Laird asked, the pain in his head making him irritable once more.

“N-nae reason, M’laird,” the man stuttered, clearly thinking better of his question. “She should be at home about now, that’s all,” he finished, turning his cap nervously between his fingers.

“Well, then,” was all Dominic said before dismissing him and riding ahead, oblivious to the dark, threatening look Archer shot at the men as he passed by in his laird’s wake.

They rode on towards the kirk, with its quaint, square steeple, until they came to the last cottage on the left, where they reined in their horses and stood for a few moments, surveying the run-down building critically.

The cottage was large, but half the thatch was rotten and urgently needed replacing, while the window coverings were nothing more than oiled paper and rags. Smoke curled up from the chimney, and a cacophony of voices rang out from the interior.

Good. If they’re poor, with many mouths to feed, then all the better for me plan.

The ball of excitement that had been growing in Dominic’s belly expanded as he slid down from his saddle and approached the battered wooden front door. He raised his large fist and knocked against it, twice.

The clamor inside halted for a moment, then resumed as loudly as before. Dominic’s impatience nibbled at him as he waited for what seemed like an eternity for the door to be answered. When at last it opened, with a shrill creak, his eyes took a few seconds to adjust to the dimly lit interior.

Then, he took in a sharp breath of surprise, his heart suddenly thumping in his chest when he laid eyes on the person who was looking enquiringly at him from within. For before him

stood what was undoubtedly the most beautiful woman he had ever seen in his life.



Who are ye, tall stranger, and what is yer business at me door?

That was Violet's first thought when her eyes met those of the man standing outside her front door. Already fatigued by the chaos ensuing inside her home among the little ones, she had little patience left to spare for anything, or anyone else. It began to wear even thinner when the stranger said nothing, only stared at her intently with his dark, deep-brown eyes.

It was unavoidable that her attention should be drawn to the scarring that marred one side of his face; it was too obvious to ignore. The furrowed, reddened skin seemed to tighten with tension as he continued to observe her in silence. For some reason she could not explain, she shivered slightly, for his gaze stirred something inside her she had never felt before.

"Aye, what is it?" she ventured, her chin tilting as she stared right back at him.

Just then, she was taken by surprise when another man she did not recognize suddenly appeared at the tall stranger's shoulder.

"Good day to ye," he said, the expression on his square, weather-beaten face friendly enough. "Me name is Archer Chapman."

"Is that right? Well, good day to ye, sir," she answered, suddenly noticing neither of the men wore the Farlane tartan

but another, patterned in blue-green and black.

The scarred one wore a large silver pin in the shape of a thistle. There was something familiar about it, but she could not recall exactly what it was, with the stranger's eyes boring so unnervingly into her.

“And this here is the Laird of McGunn,” Archer went on, gesturing needlessly at the staring stranger.

Violet's mind went blank for a moment as she took in the words. The Laird of McGunn? The cruel monster who continued to inflict such harsh punishments on her clan since the killing of their own laird four years before? A shiver of fear went through her, but she refused to show it, lifting her chin instead.

What the devil does he want with the likes of us? Och, the Wee Man preserve us!

“Good day, to ye, M'laird,” she said as coolly as she could. Now, she recognized the unfamiliar tartan and attempted an inexpert curtsy, which was not aided by her gammy leg. “I'm sorry I did nae ken ye at first. Ye're welcome to our humble abode. Please, come in, come in, will ye?” she finally managed, her heart fluttering, partly with fear and partly with embarrassment at the mess inside the cottage's main room as she ushered them in and shut the door behind them.

Why is he here?

Her brother Aiden, a man of twenty-three, who had been sitting with his feet up on the old, scarred settle by the hearth, stood up at once when he saw the two men enter. He looked alarmed, but Violet tried to reassure him with her eyes before shooing him from the settle, to make room for the visitors to sit down.

To her shame, the twins, Rhea and Callan, continued to run about, screaming at the tops of their lungs, while their elder sister, Breagha, a slender girl of seventeen with a long plait, shouted at them in turn to shut up. To Violet's frustration, all three seemed oblivious to the presence of visitors. Meanwhile, she flew about the room, picking up the mess and tidying it away. All the while, she was supremely conscious of the scarred Laird's eyes burning into her, making her cheeks blush hotly.

She had just paused for breath when she noticed the Laird rubbing his temples as if he were in pain. She frowned, her caring instincts stirring.

"Be quiet, everyone!" she shouted, clapping her hands sharply. The noise stopped at once. "Cannae ye see we have visitors?"

The two children had the grace to look a little shamefaced, while Breagha bobbed a small curtsy at the two men. Archer acknowledged it with a nod, but the Laird's eyes did not stray from Violet.

"Good day to ye, sirs," Aiden said with a small bow, his brow creasing with worry as he stared at the visitors.

He was suddenly distracted when the pot of porridge heating over the fire hissed suddenly and threatened to boil over.

“Och, dammit!” he muttered, forgetting the company as he speedily snatched up a cloth and removed it, setting it on the stone hearth. He looked up then, his cheeks flaming red.

“Now, Breagha, I need ye to take the little ones out for a walk for a while. I’ll come and find ye later,” Violet told the young girl, who immediately nodded and ushered the twins, who were already starting to protest that they were hungry, outside.

After they had gone and Breagha had closed the door on her way out, Violet breathed a sigh of relief as silence fell. Rallying her courage, she turned to the two men and forced a smile as she gestured at the settle. “Now, will ye nae sit and take some tea, good sir, M’laird?”

She noticed Archer glance at his Laird, who gave a small but commanding shake of his head.

“That’ll nae be necessary,” Acher said.

All well and good, she thought, for they were almost out of tea. On the other hand, her trepidation increased.

So, what is their business here?

Briefly, she wondered if the Laird of McGunn was mute, for it seemed he could not answer for himself. But she dismissed the idea, realizing it was more likely he was choosing not to

speaking. She concluded he must have a tongue in his head, and a vicious one at that, to have ordered such cruelties to be enacted against her people for their former allegiance. As if it was their fault their old laird had overreached himself, with fatal consequences!

“*I* suppose ye’ve come for news about the bandits that have been attacking the village for the last few weeks, have ye, M’laird?” Aiden suddenly spoke up.

Amid the strangely disturbing feelings the scarred Laird had invoked in Violet in a few short minutes, she had not thought of that possibility. Now, she thought her brother must be right and awaited confirmation that was the reason for this odd visitation. She was surprised by the reaction.

“Bandits?” The deep, rasping voice of the Laird pierced the silence, and Violet both saw and felt it when he took his eyes off of her for the first time, to look searching at Aiden.

She could see Aiden was intimidated, but he answered bravely.

“Aye, they’ve attacked us three times in the last month,” Aiden elaborated.

“Who are they? Where d’they come from?” the Laird questioned.

Aiden shook his head. “We dinnae ken, M’laird. I havenae seen them meself, for they havenae troubled us yet. But talk says they’re a raggle-taggle bunch of riders, with no clan markings to identify them. They come at night, armed with knives, and some have pistols. They harry us cruelly, threatening our lives, stealing what little coin we have along with as much of our stores they can carry and driving away our beasts,” he explained.

“Describe them to me,” the Laird ordered, his lips a thin line.

“I cannae, M’laird, for as I say, I havenae seen them for meself, but some of the other villagers who have suffered at their hands could tell ye more,” Aiden continued. “The Farmer McTavish is one they’ve robbed from, and the Drew family has suffered mightily at their hands too, as well as others. McTavish can tell ye more.”

Violet watched in fascination as the Laird turned to Archer. “Go with him and talk to this McTavish and any of the others who have seen these bandits. Find out all ye can and report back to me,” he ordered gruffly.

“Aye, M’laird,” Archer replied, then looked at Aiden, jerking his thumb towards the door. “Come on and show me where I can find the man,” he said.

Violet felt a lump form in her throat as Aiden and Archer went out, leaving her alone with the scarred, taciturn Laird of McGunn. Again, she felt strange stirrings in her belly as his dark-brown eyes fixed upon her once more almost hungrily. But her curiosity overwhelmed her unease. She pulled herself up to her full height, which was, admittedly, only to about halfway up his broad, muscular chest, and met his gaze with a bravado she did not feel.

“If ye dinnae mind me asking, M’laird, if ye havenae come for news of the bandits, then why have ye come here?”

“I’ve come for ye.” His eyes seemed to darken further with his reply.

All at once, her heart began palpitating fast as the past flooded back to her. But she pushed it aside, balling her hands into fists and forcing herself to wait for him to explain further.

“I want ye to come to Castle McGunn with me, to stay for a twelvemonth,” he said.

Violet stared back at him in disbelief, wondering if she had heard aright. She was so shocked by the implication of his words, she was struck dumb for a few moments as thoughts ran wildly through her head. Her knees felt suddenly weak, and she badly wanted to sit down, but she was afraid to move. Finally, she managed to compose herself enough to speak.

“I dinnae want to offend ye, M’laird,” she told him, “but I must ask ye, why are ye proposing marriage to me when we’ve never even met before?”

The Laird appeared taken aback by her question, puzzling her further. But then it was her turn to be taken aback, as for the first time, she saw a glimmer of amusement soften his gaze. Despite his scars, his lips quirked upward at the corners. For some reason unknown to her, the small change sent tingles running through her whole body such as she had never experienced before. They increased when he let out a throaty chuckle. It resonated alarmingly within her.

“Nay, nay, that’s not it all at,” he declared in a softer voice, shaking his head.

“Then why?” she persisted, somehow wanting to hear him chuckle again.

“I need a new healer at the castle. Our present one is getting old and infirm. Her mind isnae what it used to be. She cannae manage things as she used to,” he explained.

Violet was mortified by her error, and she felt her cheeks blazing with embarrassment. Once again, he had sent her thoughts into a spin. She fumbled for words.

“Och, I beg yer pardon, M’laird. I understand now. But ye see, I have a family to tend to, and I cannae just up and leave them to fend for themselves. And also, me duties as the village healer mean I must stay here,” she managed to get out, annoyed to hear her own ramblings.

The Laird said nothing in response, but she saw his gaze travel meaningfully around the cramped, dilapidated interior of the cottage.

Now, Violet felt her cheeks positively glowing with embarrassment, knowing exactly what he was thinking; she and her family were living in a hovel.

“I ken yer concerns,” he went on, his eyes now back on hers, “and I have a proposal for ye. A deal.”

She stared at him, shocked.

“A deal?” she breathed.

“Aye. If ye’ll agree to come and live at the castle for a year as the clan healer, I’ll make sure ye’re compensated handsomely.”

His eyebrow quirked inquiringly, but she sensed he was already certain that she would not—could not afford to—refuse. And in truth, she knew he might be right. She looked around the shabby room, at the worn-out rags, at the windows where the breeze blew in, at the meagre pot of reheated porridge on the hearth that her siblings would fight over, and seriously considered his offer.



Dominic had to admit to himself that this little slip of a woman—for her luscious curves said she was very much a woman—attracted him *and* intrigued him. It was the best entertainment he had had in ages to watch the expressions pass fleetingly across her beautiful features as she considered his proposal. In truth, he would have been happy to stand there all day just looking at her.

Apart from her obvious attractions though, two things intrigued him the most: why was she not afraid of him? And why did she not show an inkling of revulsion at the sight of his scars, as so many others did? Especially women.

He had no answers, but his belly tightened with anticipation as the hope in his heart that she would come with him turned to a deep yearning.

Say yes, say yes.

If she did not agree, he was the Laird, was he not? He was perfectly entitled to pick her up and carry her off. Yet, something inside him told him that would not do. For some obscure reason, he badly wanted her to come of her own accord.

“But I dinnae understand why it has to be me?” she asked, startling him out of his steamy imaginings.

She has a quick mind, too, he thought, smiling inwardly.

He was unwilling to tell her the truth right away. Instead, he said, “That’s simple enough to answer. It has to be ye because I’ve heard such rumors of yer great abilities as a healer. There’s none like ye in the rest of me lands.”

Her eyes searched his face keenly, a small, doubtful line appearing above her small, straight nose.

“A healer for the clan, is that it? Hmm. Are ye sure ye dinnae want me to come to treat somebody in particular?”

He sensed her eyes raking his scars and shifted on his feet. “Nay, not at all,” he replied, clearing his throat, feeling she was probing his very soul.

“Some person, say, who’s in need of me special attention?”

He shook his head, her quizzing making him hot under the collar.

“Someone... specific,” she persisted, her green eyes boring into him.

Seeing she would not stop, he sighed, deciding he might as well tell her the truth. She would find out sooner or later, anyway.

“Ach, woman, will ye stop with yer questions? All right. I’ll tell ye. For years now, I’ve been having these terrible headaches. They come upon me all the time, day and night, wherever I am, whatever I’m doing. The pain is so bad, I cannae sleep, nor eat, nor work. And they’re growing more frequent, but no one can seem to come up with any concoction to help banish them. Nothing helps.”

“Hmm.” Her frown deepened, and he could tell she had listened attentively to his explanation without a hint of mockery for what he regarded as a profound weakness in himself. That was encouraging to him. It made what she said next all the more shocking.

“Are these headaches ye describe something to do with yer scars?”

No one, not man, woman, nor beast had ever had the temerity to speak of his scars so openly, save for his sister Daisy, and

Macie, the old clan healer back at the castle. He realized this Violet Duncan had grit. And he admired her for it.

“Nay. At least, I dinnae think so. I started to get the headaches after I got the scars,” he explained. If he thought that was the end of it, he was quickly proven wrong.

“That’s interesting. Can I examine them more closely?”

Fleetinglly wondering if Archer had been right to call this plan of his cockamamie, Dominic decided he might as well be hung for a sheep as a lamb.

“All right,” he said gruffly.

The wee woman walked towards him then, and he immediately noticed that she walked with a slight limp. He wondered if she had some sort of injury but the thought flew out of his head as she came to stand right in front of him. She was so close, he could feel the heat coming off her and smell the flowery perfume of her hair. Up close, she was even more beautiful. Her proximity was slightly intoxicating, like a good dram of whisky.

For the life of him, he could not take his eyes off her, and when she turned her gaze away from him briefly, a flash of excitement made his groin twitch to see her flushed cheeks. He knew he felt a strange pull towards her.

Is it possible she feels it too?

The notion excited him further, but he took care not to show it.

“Could ye bend down a little so I can look at them?” she asked.

He did as she requested, allowing her eyes to roam over the ravaged half of his face. Oddly, he felt no embarrassment, only a thrill at her nearness.

“Can I touch them?”

Ach, God save me!

“I suppose so, if ye must.”

She lifted her tiny hands, and he felt her cool fingers moving lightly across the ridged flesh, an expression of intense concentration on her features.

As Violet worked, during what seemed like an eternity to Dominic, unseemly thoughts invaded his mind like smoke. First, they led him to imagine the feel of her flawless, white skin beneath his touch, then to wonder what it would feel like to run his fingers through the long, wild tresses cascading down to her trim waist, shining as black as a raven’s wings.

His swallowed hard as his eyes fell to her small, finely shaped lips, the color of cherries, envisioning pressing his own to them, with her lying naked in his arms. Feeling as though he was falling under a spell, he was suddenly jerked from his

saucy imaginings by her withdrawal. He looked at her questioningly.

“Very well, M’laird,” she said firmly, her hands on her hips. I accept yer proposal. I’ll come to the castle with ye, for a year. And I’ll do me very best to help ye.”

A mixture of gratitude and relief washed through him, accompanied by a sliver of triumph. And something else too, a sort of thrilling vibration that thrummed in his veins, upon which he clamped a tight lid, being somewhat fearful of what might happen if he let it run wild.

Dominic wanted to get back to the castle before dark, so he could only give her half an hour to gather her things and say goodbye to her family.

Aiden returned alone, leaving Archer to continue with his enquiries about the brigands. Once Violet called in Breagha and the twins, she gathered her small family around her, sat them down, and told them what had happened.

“A whole year! But that’s ages,” Rhea cried out, her small face crumpling as she burst into tears. Predictably, her twin, Callan, followed suit. They were so young, only thirteen summers, and it tore at Violet’s heart to see them so upset.

She cuddled them to her, comforting them.

“It’s not so long, me pets. I’ll be back before ye ken it. And then, with what the Laird pays me for me services, we’ll live like kings and queens, I promise ye. Ye’ll have toys, and fine food, and clothes. Even shoes. What d’ye think of that?” She tried to smile encouragingly while holding back her tears.

“I dinnae want shoes,” protested Callan. “I want ye, Violet.”
The little boy wept, clinging to her.

“Please, Violet, say ye willnae go,” begged Rhea, tears running down her face, wetting Violet’s gown.

Violet looked up pleadingly at Breagha and Aiden for help, but they looked upset too. Aiden was clearly holding back his emotions, but the effort was visible to her. Breagha looked panic stricken, her face white with shock.

“Dinnae fret, me darlings. Aiden and Breagha are here to look after ye. Ye’ll hardly notice I’m away.” Violet ruffled the twins’ black curls, knowing it was hopeless trying to convince them. They had been babies when their mother had died, and she had been a mother to them ever since, despite her youth. But she was determined that they must all make the sacrifice in order to improve their lives. Her family meant everything to her, and this opportunity to give them a different life was simply too good to turn down, however sad she felt at leaving them all.

Once the painful goodbyes had been said, she gathered her medicine box and her few possessions. Then, ready to go, her heart almost breaking, she kissed and hugged Breagha.

“Ye’ll be fine, dear one,” she told her. “Ye’re more than capable of running the house.”

“I willnae, not without ye here, Violet. I’ll get everything wrong,” Breagha muttered through her sobs.

“Ye dinnae ken how clever ye are. Now, make me proud of ye, and when I come back, things will be very different. Better. Ye’ll see.”

Violet beckoned Aiden to see her outside. They stood close together, her meagre baggage on the ground as they clutched each other in a storm of emotion.

“Are ye sure ye’re doing the right thing in trusting this man?” Aiden asked softly, his face a picture of worry. “Ye ken he has a reputation for cruelty against our clan. What if ye get to the castle and ye displease him, somehow? What if he hurts ye?”

She shook her head, desperate to reassure him. “I dinnae fear him. He willnae hurt me, I’m sure of it. Dinnae worry, Braither. It’ll be worth it, ye’ll see.”

But Aiden pulled her closer and whispered urgently in her ear, “Remember what happened with Maither, Violet. People fear us, they fear ye for yer knowledge. Though folk in the village come to ye for help with their healing, they dinnae trust ye, nor any of us. Maither’s legacy hangs over us all the time, and ye ken how fear and suspicion makes folks do evil things. Dinnae fall into the trap of trying to be like her. Ever. Or ye’ll put yerself and all of us in grave danger.”

His warning resonated in Violet’s mind, but it was made up.

“I ken that too well, Braither. I swear to ye, I dinnae intend to do anything than heal the sick in the time-honored ways. I’ll dabble with nothing to raise suspicions that might hurt us.” She fervently hoped she was making the right decision. “I

have to see it through. Ye must see, I'm doing it for us. I want what's best for the family. That's all."

Aiden released her at last, and with a final kiss of farewell planted on his cheek, she picked up her belongings and went to find the Laird and Archer, to set off on her journey to a new life at Castle McGunn.

But when she came to the meeting point in the village square, she saw only the Laird. Archer was nowhere to be seen, yet two horses were grazing on the grass verge. As she neared the Laird, he came to meet her, taking her box and bundle of things from her before leading her over to the horses. He carefully stowed her things in the saddlebags of his gigantic black beast. It was a gentlemanly gesture she had not expected from the man with the reputation for cruelty.

Again, the Laird of McGunn had surprised her.

"Where's yer man?" she asked, looking nervously around to see if Archer was anywhere nearby.

The Laird shook his head. "He's staying here in the village, to deal with the brigands," he explained.

Instantly, Violet was gripped by a mixture of anxiety and excitement.

"So, it'll be just ye and me on the journey to the castle, then?" she asked, getting firm hold on her emotions as she awaited his answer.

“Aye.” He grasped the bridle of the brown mare and gestured for her to mount it.

For the first time, a realization struck her.

“Um, I never thought to tell ye before, but I cannae ride because of me leg.”

His dark eyebrows rose as he stared at her, and he appeared to think for a moment. Then, he said, “Is that so? Well, it’ll take longer than I want to arrange a carriage for ye. But nae matter.” He seemed to come to a decision. “Ye can ride with me.”

Violet quivered with fear as he slung the reins of the brown mare over the railing fence, clearly reasoning that its owner would come to collect it at some point.

With a powerful, fluid movement, he was suddenly in the saddle of the black stallion, towering above her. With butterflies of fear in her stomach—she could not recall the last time she had sat on a horse, let alone a beast so large and fearsome looking—when he leaned down, she gripped his proffered arm tightly. As if she were a mere child, he swung her up to sit behind him.

They had not even moved before her arms went around his waist, and she pressed herself against his broad back, holding on for dear life as the butterflies whirled in terror. She dared not open her eyes, for she feared she would fall, and it was an awfully long way to the ground!

They moved off slowly, as if the Laird sensed her fear and was trying to allay it. Once more, she was grateful for his thoughtfulness, but still she clung to him. The gigantic horse walked as docilely as a well-trained dog despite the tremendous power she could feel in its flanks as they rippled rhythmically beneath her. So, after a few minutes, though her grip on the Laird's waist did not loosen, Violet dared to open her eyes and look about her.

The familiar landscape looked very different so high up, she saw. She tried to crane her neck backwards, to see if she could see her home. The home and family she was leaving far behind. But she could not. Disappointed, already feeling a wave of homesickness, she turned back, trying to make herself interested in the scenery as they passed along the winding track and out into the open countryside.

It was then that she became acutely aware of their bodies being so closely pressed against each other, moving as one with the great steed's movements. The unfamiliar sensation suddenly consumed all her attention.

Though the Laird was tall and had not an ounce of surplus flesh upon him, his body was firm with the hardpacked muscle of a man who had trained with a heavy sword and weapons since childhood. In his way, she decided, he and his steed were well matched when it came to the sense of restrained power lying beneath the surface. Strangely, her fear began ebbing, for she instinctively felt safe.

The wide bands of muscle in his back and broad shoulders easily moved against her breasts as she leaned against him. The insides of her thighs tingled where they met his body, sending thrills through her. His arms, though his large, rough hands were so light on the reins, bulged with hidden strength.

She briefly wondered if they had been the ones to strike the heads from so many of her clansman in retribution for their former fealty. Aiden's warning came back to her: this laird with his reputation for cruelty could easily hurt her, cut her down like a flower if he so wished.

Yet, the warmth and power that emanated from him was not frightening, but comforting. So much so, she had to fight the urge to lean her head against his broad back.

In this way, without speaking, they traveled several miles.

The sun was starting to dip in the sky when they approached a group of pine trees, near which a shallow river babbled over large rocks. It was a picturesque sight which delighted Violet, who had never been so far from home.

"We'll stop here for a short while," the Laird suddenly said, pulling their mount to a gentle halt, "for Arran to rest and drink."

"All right," Violet replied, not looking forward to getting down from the saddle. But when the Laird slid effortlessly to the ground, he immediately turned and put his hands around her waist to lift her gently down.

His hands easily spanned her waist, and the effect of his touch when he lifted her was like lightning shooting through her stiff limbs. She stumbled a little, but he held her until she was steady on her feet.

“Thank ye,” she told him, once again touched by his gentle thoughtfulness.

She realized her initial fear of him had completely evaporated, to be replaced by a feeling of trust. Before she knew what was happening, she smiled at him in gratitude.

“Ye’re welcome,” he murmured, his voice strangely hoarse.

He did not exactly smile back, but there was an almost imperceptible softening of his hard features that made her feel warm inside.

Arran was set loose to drink his fill, while the Laird sat on a flat rock by the clearing, appearing to find the trees on the opposite bank extremely interesting. However, when Violet knelt by the water to refresh herself with a drink and wet her kerchief to mop her brow, she could not help but notice how he periodically glanced at her. The strange warmth inside her grew to a glow, and she had to admit to herself that she was enjoying his attention.

Just as she was musing over what a strange mixture he was, of strength, brutality, and gentleness, a series of bloodcurdling screams echoed from the wooded ridge at their backs. Violet whirled around, and to her shock, saw three men hurtling towards them down the shallow, wooded incline. She froze in terror, clutching her chest in panic, looking swiftly left and right for somewhere to hide.

Meanwhile, Arran, spooked by the commotion, whinnied and rose up on his front legs, his hooves waving dangerously close to her head. The horse landed with a tremendous splash in the

water and cantered a short distance away, turning and snorting, his eyes rolling to show his fear.

At that exact moment, Violet saw from the corner of her eye that the Laird was already on his feet, poised to meet the threat. The air suddenly rang with the metallic song of his sword as he unsheathed it. Before she could do anything, he moved swiftly in front of her, pushing her further behind him.

“Stay there,” he told her commandingly, as if she could do anything else but cower behind the wall of muscle he presented to their attackers.

He sprang up on the rock he had been sitting on, giving himself a slightly elevated position. She crouched, ankle deep in the water, shaking and praying he could deliver them from harm. He was much bigger than any of the disheveled-looking bandits, but she knew that three to one was not good odds.

The first man to reach the Laird was, she saw with dismay, also well-built, and he wielded a sword. With the momentum of his run down the incline propelling him forward, he raised his blade in attack, but the Laird stepped swiftly aside. The brigand skidded to a halt in the mud, winded, and whirled to continue his assault.

“Who the devil are ye?” the Laird demanded, his voice like gravel as he easily parried the man’s strikes with his own mighty blade. “What do ye want with us?”

The man with the sword did not reply, merely panting and grunting as he whirled on his feet, striking repeatedly at the Laird with the weapon. To Violet’s slight relief, she saw that

the ferocity of the fighting was preventing the other two attackers from making any inroads. They hung back, weighing their weapons in their hands, looking for an opportunity to harry the Laird.

“The saints preserve us!” Violet shrieked, fearful for his safety as the two men fought, but the Laird easily deflected the strikes, and the clearing rang with the clash of metal and low grunts. “Be careful!”

“Yer going to die anyway, so ye might as well tell me who ye are,” the Laird growled at his foe.

But still, the man said nothing.

“Answer me!” the Laird commanded, expertly parrying another blow.

“’Tis ye who’re going to die, that’s all ye need to ken,” the swordsman finally gasped out, his sword arcing high and clashing against the Laird’s once more.

As if dissatisfied with the reply, with a loud grunt, the Laird parried the strike, then suddenly kicked the man hard in the stomach, sending him staggering back. The sword slipped from the brigand’s hand, and the Laird was on him in a split second, the point of his blade at the man’s throat as he cowered on the ground.

“I’ll give ye one last chance before ye go to meet yer maker. Tell me who ye are! Where are ye from? Did someone send ye to do this?” he demanded, pressing the point of his sword

against the man's throat hard enough to produce a trickle of blood.

The man only spat contemptuously in reply.

"M'Laird!" Violet screamed, peeking through her fingers and seeing the stocky, swarthy knifeman closing in. "Watch out to yer left!"

"Aye, I ken!" the Laird panted, sidestepping the swarthy one's whizzing blade at the same time as he plunged his sword into the first attacker's throat.

Violet thought she would be sick as blood spurted everywhere and the man gurgled horribly, dropping like stone, clutching his throat.

"Ach, the saints preserve us!" she muttered under her breath as the knifeman, apparently unmoved by his comrade's death, stepped up his assault.

The Laird turned his full attention to him, and if Violet was not mistaken, there appeared to be a small, grim smile on his lips.

"Yer man cannae speak now," he said menacingly as he advanced on the knifeman, "and ye'll be dead too in a minute, so tell me who ye are, now!" He roared the last word so loudly that the rooks took flight from the trees, cawing in alarm.

"I'll tell ye naething," the man hissed defiantly through a clenched jaw, his blade feinting left and right.

It was then that Violet screamed as she suddenly felt a hand seize her hair in a tight, painful grip, and she was dragged upwards and pinned against a large, wet body. It was the third attacker, the thin one with strange, pale eyes. Evidently, she realized with dread, he had recovered from his fall.

“Ach, ye animal, let me go! Get off me!” she shrieked, madly scratching at his arm as he gripped her tightly around the throat with his arm so that she gasped for breath, her feet dangling in the air.

She kicked and fought, biting and scratching, but then she fell silent, feeling cold steel at her throat.

As darkness encroached on the edges of her vision and she struggled to breathe, she vaguely saw the Laird make a backhanded slashing motion with his sword and the swarthy knifeman’s body fold in on itself as the blade cut him almost in half at the midriff. Then, the Laird pivoted elegantly towards her, his hand at his belt, and something silver flashed in front of her eyes so fast, she could not make it out.

Suddenly, the steel and the terrible pressure at her throat disappeared. She staggered, taking in great, gasping lungfuls of air as she felt the man behind her fall backwards and into the water with a loud grunt of surprise.

She leaped away from him at once and rushed to the Laird, throwing herself into his arms. They instantly closed around her protectively despite the bloody, dripping sword still in his hand, and a feeling of great relief and comfort washed over her as she leaned against his chest, her ragged breaths joining with his panting.

“*T*hank ye, thank ye for saving me,” Violet said breathlessly against Dominic’s chest as soon as she had enough air in her lungs to speak.

“’Twas nae trouble,” he said, his voice surprisingly steady as it resonated in his chest against her ear.

He seemed to catch his breath more quickly than she could manage.

He kept one arm around her as he sheathed his sword. “Well, that was a wee diversion I wasnae bargaining on,” he added with a derisory sniff.

“Oh, God, I thought they were going to kill us both!” she exclaimed, hardly able to believe they had made it out alive, and all thanks to the Laird.

“Nay, lass. The likes of them are nae match for a trained Highland warrior. Ye werenae in any real danger,” he assured her. “Let’s look at ye, then. Are ye badly hurt?” He moved his arm from around her shoulders and took hold of her upper

arms instead, pushing her back a short distance, his eyes searching her face calmly.

“Nae, just bruises, that’s all, thanks to ye.”

“Aye, ye’ll have a bit of a sore throat, maybe,” he told her, apparently satisfied she was uninjured.

He left her for a moment, striding across to the man who had tried to kill her. Leaning over the corpse, he reached down and tugged a dirk from the man’s throat. He wiped the blade on his buckskin trews, then slid it away into its sheath near his waist before returning to her.

It was as he came back to her that she realized with shock that he was injured, that blood was pouring from a nasty gash on his arm and a slash on his left hand.

“Ach, ye’re hurt!” she cried, seizing his injured arm gently and trying to inspect the wounds. But he pulled his arm away with a short laugh.

“’Tis naething. A scratch or two, ’tis all.”

“But those wounds need cleaning and bandaging before ye lose too much blood or an infection sets in,” she said, sincerely worried for his well-being.

“I’ve had much worse than this,” he told her with an air of finality, staunching the blood with his plaid. “We’re losing the light, as it is. We cannae spare any more time. We must get

back to the castle before dark. Ye can tend to me wounds there.”

She had to be satisfied with that, but she frowned at him just the same. Just then, a loud whinny made them both turn around. Arran stood in the middle of the clearing, looking at them calmly as if nothing had happened.

Then, something amazing happened. As Arran slowly plodded towards them, shaking his head, looking almost sheepish, the Laird laughed out loud. To Violet, it was a wonderful sound, as if a new note had been struck in their relationship. She could not help laughing, too.

“Come on, ye cowardly beast.” The Laird chuckled as Arran approached them, nuzzling his master’s neck and ears. He stroked Arran’s velvety nose tenderly. “Ye’re a disgrace, ye ken that, dinnae ye?”

The horse whickered softly.

Violet watched them together, her heart warmed by the obvious affection between man and animal.

Once again, the Laird surprised her. She felt she was seeing yet another side to the man who lopped off men’s heads and ordered that everything they possessed be burnt to the ground.

As they continued their journey towards Castle McGunn, she held him tightly around the waist again and wondered how many more sides there were to this strange man. And she found she was longing to find out.



When the turreted battlements of his home and the flag bearing the McGunn arms appeared on the horizon, Dominic breathed easier. His arm and hand were throbbing from his wounds, but at least he did not have a headache. It made for a pleasant change. He wondered if the warm body pressed against him and the arms that clutched his waist had anything to do with it and smiled to himself. He had got what he wanted, and so far, it was exceeding his expectations, on all fronts.

“It’s huge,” came the gasped exclamation of wonder behind him.

“Aye. It’s a castle. They tend to be quite large,” he replied with gentle sarcasm as they approached the massive gates.

“D’ye think yer folk will be pleased to see me?” Violet asked with open curiosity in her voice.

“Of course. Why nae? I told ye, we need a new healer.”

“I cannae wait to meet the old one. I’m sure she has a lot to teach me.”

“Teach ye? Dinnae ye ken it all, then?” he asked teasingly.

“A good healer never kens everything. Ye have to be prepared to learn from those who can teach whenever ye can. Me maither taught me that.”

“Was she a healer too, then?”

“Aye, and a good one too,” she replied, suddenly falling quiet.

He put it down to the fact that they had arrived at the castle, and no doubt she was daunted by this big old place he called home.

Loud voices called from inside the walls as they came up to the gate, and he waited as the heavy portcullis slowly rose, the noise of the massive chains rattling as they lifted the enormous weight. The vast gates swung open, and Dominic guided Arran under the arched entrance to the gatehouse, the clatter of hooves echoing off the stone walls until they emerged into the cobbled inner courtyard.

As he dismounted and then lifted the clan’s new healer from Arran’ back and set her on the cobbles, he knew that his temporary, and surprisingly pleasurable, respite would soon end, for he did not expect things to have gone smoothly in his absence.

A boy rushed up to lead the horse away, and Dominic turned to the doors of the castle keep. He was unsurprised to see his councilman and friend, Leon McGuire, standing on the steps, obviously waiting for him, his red hair glowing in the dusky light.

“This way,” Dominic told the woman at his side and set off towards Leon.

“I’m glad to see ye’re back safe, Dominic,” Leon said with a smile, clapping Dominic on the back as they passed into the great hall. But when he noticed Dominic’s wounds, his expression changed to one of concern. “Ach, what happened? Those wounds look nasty. Did ye get into a fight or something?”

“Ye could say that,” Dominic replied, “but it’s naething important. Now, I want a report of what’s been happening while I’ve been gone.” He was simultaneously eager and reluctant to hear what Leon had to say.

“Well, it’s nae improved, to be honest with ye,” Leon said with a regretful look. “In fact, ye could say it’s worse.”

“Worse? What d’ye mean?” Dominic growled, feeling the familiar pain starting up in his temples.

“It’s Kian. I dinnae ken what’s come over him, but he’s grown so argumentative. It’s the same old argument from him; scourge the Farlanes, keep on punishing them as ye have been, and he willnae accept anything less. Since they killed his family, it’s like he burns for revenge. I swear, it’s taken over his mind. He wants ye to take harsher action against them. Of course, the others disagree, wanting to go in a different direction, as ye have said. In truth, there’ve been vicious arguments in the council chamber.”

Dominic said nothing; clearly, Kian was well out of line, and he was wondering how his father would have handled such insolence from one of his advisors. The pain in his head turned into the familiar pounding. He rubbed his temple in a gesture that was becoming second nature to him.

Somebody tugged at his sleeve. He looked down to see Violet looking at him anxiously.

“Ye need to get those wounds tended to before ye do anything else,” she told him urgently.

He noticed a change come over Leon’s face as she spoke.

“And who might ye be?” Leon asked, frowning and staring at her exasperatedly. “Curb yer insolent tongue, woman, and dinnae interrupt. This is men’s business.”

Despite his pain, Dominic almost laughed when Violet put her hands on her hips and stared right back at Leon, her green eyes flashing angrily.

“Do ye nae care about yer Laird? Are ye happy to let him bleed to death? He needs those wounded seen to. Now!”

Leon looked so taken aback at being addressed in such a manner, Dominic thought he had better put him out of his misery.

“This is Miss Violet Duncan,” he explained, “the clan’s new healer. She’s going to be staying here for a while and helping us, now that old Macie’s struggling to cope.”

Leon looked Violet up and down. “Is that so?” was all he said, his feathers obviously badly ruffled.

Violet tugged at Dominic's sleeve again. "Ye're bleeding all over the floor," she told him. "Come and let me clean and bind those wounds."

"Very well," Dominic said, knowing he would get no peace until he agreed to go with her. He turned back to Leon, saying, "I dinnae want ye to say anything to Daisy about me being injured. She'll only make a fuss."

Leon nodded. "If 'tis what ye want."

"It is," Dominic said, then looked at Violet. "Come on, then. I'll take ye to the healing rooms and introduce ye to old Macie. Then, ye can work on me wounds."

"About time," Violet muttered, and Dominic saw her cast a disapproving look at Leon before as he led her from the hall to the central staircase.

"Who is that?" she asked as they climbed the stairs side by side, with her hurrying to keep up with his long strides.

"That's Leon McGuire, me councilman and friend," he explained, slowing down a bit so she could keep pace with him.

"Some friend, letting ye practically bleed to death, just to listen to all his blether."

Again, despite his now-pounding headache, Dominic had to smile. She had a plucky spirit all right, and it only added to her

physical charm. Still, he felt he had to defend his friend somewhat.

“Ye dinnae ken him yet, ’tis all. Leon’s a good man, and I value his advice. Believe me, he’s got more important things to deal with just now than these few measly scratches,” he said, holding up his wounds for emphasis.

She shrugged in reply, but he noticed she looked skeptical when he glanced at her.

Och, she’s a feisty one, all right.

They reached the top of the steps and stepped into the wide landing, where several doors led off to various chambers, including his and Daisy’s bedchambers.

“I’ve had yer things sent up to yer chamber. This here’s the healing room where ye’ll be working,” he told Violet as they approached a large door. He pushed it open, gesturing for her to enter first, then followed her inside.

As soon as Macie saw him, she smiled and bustled over to him, appearing not to notice someone else in the room. As he greeted the old lady, Dominic watched Violet slip silently across to the crammed shelves lining the walls and begin adeptly picking out the items she needed to clean and bandage his wounds. Then, he went and pulled out a chair and sat down wearily by the table, laying his injured arm upon it.

“Ach, what have ye done to yerself, M’laird?!” Macie cried, following him, her wrinkled face aghast when she saw his

blood dripping and the angry cuts on his arm. “Why, they look nasty.” She took his arm and inspected his wounds, her old face a picture of worry. She shook her silver curls in dismay. “Both those wounds need tending right away. Ye shouldnae have lingered so long in coming to see me. What if they get infected, eh? We cannae afford to lose another laird, ye ken.”

Her innocent words felt like needles of ice in his heart, but he tried to push them aside. “It’s all right, Macie. Ye dinnae need to worry so much about me. The cuts are clean. I’ll be all right, ye ken,” he told the old woman gently, hating to see her so upset.

“Dinnae worry about ye? Of course, I worry about ye! Haven’t I been doing just that since the day ye were born?” Macie fussed about him like a mother hen, pulling at his clothing. “Now, come on with ye, off with these things.”

Obediently, he stood up, unbuckling his sword belt and laying it carefully over the back of a chair before unwinding the blood-stained plaid from his shoulder and handing it to Macie. She took it, eyeing it disapprovingly before dropping it on the floor.

“That’ll stand a good wash. And now the jerkin, aye, that’s right,” the old healer instructed, unlacing it for him.

Dominic shrugged it off and dropped it next to the plaid before sitting back down, rolling back the blood-drenched sleeve of his shirt, and laying his injured arm on the table.

“That’s it, dear, ye take the weight off yer feet while I...” Macie trailed off, suddenly touching her head in clear

confusion. “Now, where was I?” she muttered, looking back at Dominic as if surprised to see him there.

Seeing the blood as though for the first time, her brows flew upwards. She once more took hold of his injured arm.

“Now, what have ye done to yerself, M’laird?! Let me have a look at those wounds.” She inspected them again. “Ach, ye shouldnae have tarried so long before coming to see me. They must be cleaned right away, or ye’ll get an infection.”

Violet and Dominic exchanged a meaningful look as Violet approached them, depositing her finds on the table next to him. She began to bathe his wounds with soft rags and clean water from an earthenware bowl. Dominic felt sadness in his heart when Macie appeared to notice Violet for the first time.

“This is Violet, Macie. She’s come to live at the castle for a while, to help ye with yer work,” he told the old healer, squeezing her hand gently.

“Good day to ye, Mistress Macie,” Violet said, smiling warmly at the old woman as she worked. “’Tis a rare pleasure to meet ye.”

“Well, good day to ye, dear. ’Tis grand to meet ye too. Why, aren’t ye a pretty thing?!” Macie replied, her faded blue eyes twinkling. “’Tis thoughtful of ye, M’laird, to bring me some help. I’m grateful to ye. I do get tired easily these days,” she sighed, nodding her thanks to Dominic before watching with rapt attention as Violet worked.

Satisfied the introduction had gone off well, Dominic allowed himself to relax under the movement of Violet's soft, cool fingers as they deftly washed away the blood and dirt from his wounds. Her touch was entrancing, and, just as he had backed at her cottage, he felt himself falling under her spell.

When she applied a healing salve to his wounds, somewhat soothing the soreness there, he felt sure she could do the same for his aching head. In fact, under her gentle ministrations, the throbbing has already begun to abate somewhat. He was almost disappointed when she finally finished bandaging his injuries.

"There ye go," she said, smiling at him. "Hopefully, they should heal up nicely, and ye willnae get any infection."

"Thank ye," he replied gratefully, even as her radiant smile made his stomach flip.

"Well, that's a fine bit of work, me dear," Macie told Violet when she inspected the neat bandaging with an approving smile. "Ye have a very nice technique, I must say. Well done."

"Why, thank ye kindly, Mistress Macie. I count that as high praise," Violet said. She smiled before adding, "D'ye ken, Mistress Macie, ye remind me of me grandmither?"

Dominic was touched as Macie's face brightened. "Do I, me dear? Well, that's kind of ye to say."

"Aye. And ye ken, about this time of the evening, there was nothing more she liked than a little rest? Then, she'd wake up

feeling fresh as a daisy. Now, why dinnae ye go and rest yer bones awhile, eh? Ye dinnae have to worry about our Laird here. I'll look after him for ye while ye have a wee lie down. How does that sound?"

"Och, sweetheart, I am feeling a wee bit tired, it's true. I think I will go and have a bit of a rest. Thank ye, dear, for yer kind concern." Macie squeezed Violet's hand with her own. Then, seemingly happy, she went into the neighboring room, where she usually slept, and closed the door behind her.

Dominic and Violet looked at each other and smiled as they heard the bed creak and the old lady sigh contentedly.

The room was growing dim as the evening sky darkened beyond the windows. Even so, Dominic couldn't take his eyes off Violet as she took away the bowl of water she had used to clean his wounds and poured out the bloody liquid. Then, she washed out the bowl and refilled it with fresh water before depositing it on the table next to him. Next, she lit a lamp and brought it over, too. Its light formed a golden halo that made her eyes sparkle like emeralds.

With a small shiver of excitement, he wondered what she had planned for him now.

"Take off yer shirt, M'laird," she ordered in a tone that brooked no argument. "I need to check for any other injuries."

Somewhat embarrassed at the thought of being half-naked before her, Dominic hesitated before sighing, pulling the garment over his head, and letting it fall to the floor. Now clad only in his breeks and trows, his upper torso completely naked,

he quelled his embarrassment, reminding himself he was the Laird and had nothing to be ashamed of.

He glanced at Violet to see if she was looking. She was.

In fact, she was staring at him, her beautiful green eyes wide, her pink lips open. But when she saw she had been caught out, her cheeks turned crimson, and she hastily dropped her gaze to the table, busying herself. But not before Dominic saw her bite her lip, at which a flame of arousal flickered in his belly.

She feels it, too! I'm sitting half-naked in a room alone with the most beautiful lass I've ever seen, one who cares naught for me scars, and I dinnae ken if I can control meself much longer!

He closed his eyes, trying to concentrate on keeping his breathing even.

“Now, let’s look at ye,” Violet said in a strangely breathy voice that tightened his loins.

“All right, but I dinnae think ye’ll find anything,” he managed to say.

Beads of sweat broke out on his forehead as Violet moved behind him, and her soft little hands traced delicate patterns on his skin. He breathed deeply, struggling against the feelings she was eliciting in him.

Slowly, her hands moved over every inch of his back. She was so close that he could feel her warm breath upon him. His body tensed when she ran her palms over his shoulders, then lifted his hair to inspect his neck before letting her palms glide down his uninjured arm. Gently raising both of his arms, she searched the undersides in turn for hidden wounds.

“Aye, I think ye’re right. Thankfully, I cannae see anything else.”

Apparently satisfied, she bent to carefully examine his sides, palpating his ribs gently.

“Any pain there?” she asked, looking up at him questioningly, her lovely green eyes glowing in the lamplight.

“Nay,” he forced out, dying to grab her and kiss that sweet little mouth, wondering what she would do if he did.

Her skirts rustled as she moved in front of him, bending down, her face inches from his naked chest. Dominic acknowledged that he had slept with many women, but none had ever made him feel anything close to this. It was the most sensual experience he had ever had. He never wanted it to end.

Now having a good view of her, he watched in a trance as she traced her fingers through his chest hair. Her black hair shone like polished ebony, and her long black eyelashes caused shadows to fall against her flawless cheeks. Her smell, an intoxicating blend of summer flowers and warm rain, washed over him. He could partially see down the front of her gown, where the plump, pale globes of her breasts seemed to beckon him.

Ach, the Wee Man help me! I dinnae ken if I can hold out much longer!

Suddenly, she straightened and looked into his eyes. Something heated in her gaze told him she was feeling the tension too. As if to confirm it, the tip of her tongue flickered out to moisten her lips.

“There doesn’t seem to be anything else that I can see, though there’ll doubtless be bruises on the morrow,” she said in a breathy voice, not breaking their gaze, the tension fairly crackling in the air between them now.

Any second now, I’m going to kiss her...

Suddenly, the door flew open. The tension shattered as they both looked towards it, and Dominic’s sister stormed in, looking furious.

*H*er cheeks pink and her brow wrinkled with annoyance, the pretty young woman headed straight for the Laird. It did not take long for Violet to notice that her wavy brown hair and dark-brown eyes matched her patient's. This had to be the sister he had spoken of earlier.

Partly because she could see sparks were about to fly and partly to cover her palpitating heart and confusion after the tense interlude between her and the Laird before his sister's arrival, Violet thought it diplomatic to remove herself from the upcoming fray.

Silently, she glided to the other side of the room and began searching quietly among the shelves full of jars, bottles, pouches, and pots for the ingredients she needed to concoct a headache tincture to help the Laird. As she worked, keeping her head down, she had little chance to process the peculiar way her body responded to the Laird's proximity.

Nevertheless, she was quietly shocked at herself. Never in her life had she ever suspected herself capable of such lustful feelings. And certainly not towards the famously cruel Laird of McGunn!

But her introspection was cut short as soon as the row began.

“Ach, what have ye been doing, Dominic? Have I nae told ye time and time again to be careful, and now I find out ye’ve been in some sort of fight and got injured! Honestly, I dinnae believe ye, ye never listen to what I tell ye!” his sister reproved him angrily.

Violet saw from the corner of her eye that his sister was standing before him, her hands on her hips, her eyes accusing.

“Daisy, will ye hold yer noise?! Ye come barging in here, telling me what I can and cannae do, according to ye. Let me remind ye, I’m the Laird around here, not ye, and ye’d do well to remember that before yer mouth runs away with ye. I’m tired of yer nonsense. I just want ye to leave me alone!” roared the Laird in reply, so loudly Violet trembled.

Daisy bristled, clearly in high dudgeon now. “Well, that’s rich! Am I nae yer sister? Am I nae supposed to care for ye? I’m the one that’s been tending to ye all this time, doing me best to help ye, and this is the thanks I get!”

“I *allowed* ye to try to treat me,” the Laird growled, and Violet could not help but notice how he put a special emphasis on *allowed*. “And I’m grateful for what ye’ve done, Daisy, but this has got to stop! I will not put up with ye trying to fix me all the time and trying to tell me what to do!”

As the siblings continued to argue, Violet could feel his frustration coming off him in waves. While she ground some powdered iris root with a pestle and mortar for her concoction, she guessed that the situation had been going on for quite

some time. The Laird had clearly reached the end of his tether. But she also felt sympathy for his sister, who clearly cared greatly for him.

Could this conflict between them have something to do with him bringing her to the castle?

“I suppose ye’d prefer it if I hadnae bothered trying to help ye all this time,” Daisy shouted. “I should have just left ye to—” Suddenly, she stopped. There was a short pause. Then, in a lower tone, she asked, “Who is that?”

The question coincided with Violet completing the concoction she hoped would help the Laird with his headaches. So, she took the opportunity to return to her patient, with the medicine in a small cup made of horn.

“This might help,” Violet told the Laird, holding the cup to him. “But it may take a few tries before we come up with something that will do the trick, so ye must be a little patient,” she added as he took the cup from her and looked into it with a grimace.

“I hope it tastes better than it looks,” Dominic remarked before tossing the concoction down in one swallow and then wiping his mouth with his forearm, his face twisting with distaste. “Nay, it disnae. But thank ye.” He handed her back the cup.

“What? What is this? Dominic?” His sister stared at Violet open-mouthed. Violet smiled at her and bobbed her usual awkward curtsy.

“Good day to ye, M’lady,” she said. “Me name is Violet. I’m the new healer.”

“The new healer?” echoed the Laird’s sister, her fine features a picture of astonishment and confusion as she stared alternately from her brother to Violet.

“Aye. And, Violet, ye’ve no doubt gathered from all the fuss that this is me sister, Daisy,” the Laird put in gruffly. “Baby sister,” he added, shooting Daisy a meaningful look.

“But why is she here, Dominic? Why have ye brought in a new healer when ye have me to tend to ye?” Daisy asked, her voice rising an octave.

Violet felt sorry for her, watching her expression turn from confusion to hurt.

“Well, I was going to tell ye later, but since ye’ve barged in, ye may as well ken it now. Ye see, Sister, yer services as a healer are nae longer needed at the castle. Violet here is going to take over those duties. And since that’s the case, I want ye to consider moving in with Delilah or Dakota.”

“What?”

“I said, I want ye to—”

“I heard ye. I just cannae believe what I’m hearing,” Daisy responded in a choked voice, her eyes filling with tears. “After all I’ve done for ye, ye want to send me away?”

“Come now, that’s overstating it. It’s nae as if ye’re being banished to the ends of the Earth, is it, now? I just want ye to move in with one of our sisters. Think what a nice change it’ll be for ye,” Dominic argued, his words laced with impatience.

Violet was a little surprised at the harsh way he was treating his sister, and a little disappointed. Daisy looked absolutely crushed.

“Would ye mind if I suggested something here?” Violet put in, wanting to help resolve the situation.

“Aye, I would. Very much,” the Laird told her sternly, glowering at her. She held her tongue and backed off.

“I cannae believe ye want to send me away. And ye’ve clearly been planning this for a while, seeing as ye’ve gone to the trouble of engaging a new healer,” Daisy said, her pain evident in her stricken expression and the wringing of her hands.

Violet’s heart went out to her, but evidently, the Laird’s did not.

He suddenly stood up and looked at Violet. “I think we’re done here. Come on. I’ll show ye to yer chambers.”

With that, he swiftly crossed the floor and opened the door, leaving Daisy standing in the middle of the room, staring after them with glistening eyes, while Violet had no choice but to follow him out.

They walked a short way along a flag-stoned hallway lined with tapestry hangings until he halted by a door. Pushing it open, he ushered her inside.

“I’ll have some food sent up to you,” he told her from the threshold.

“Thank ye. Dinnae forget, I’ll need to check on yer wounds and see if that concoction helps with yer headache tomorrow,” Violet replied shortly, his harsh treatment of his sister still rankling with her. She had a feeling he knew it too, for there was a new kind of tension between them now, though it was totally different to that of earlier.

“I’ll try to find time for it. But I’ll come and find ye when I’m ready. Good night to ye.” His voice was flat, and he sounded weary as he turned back down the hallway.

“Aye. Good night.”

Violet stood in the doorway, watching him walk away and finally disappear around the corner, leaving her feeling a strange sense of loss.

With a deep sigh, she went into the chamber and shut the door behind her, realizing she was bone weary too, and famished. She had eaten nothing all day but a crust of bread early that morning. As if to complain, her stomach rumbled noisily. The Laird had promised her food, and she hoped it would be a generous serving of stew or thick pottage, perhaps. Her mouth watered at the thought.

Surveying the airy chamber allotted to her, she spotted an oil lamp on a nightstand next to the bed, with a tinderbox next to it. She crossed the room and lit the lamp. Golden light filled the room, revealing whitewashed walls and a large window. Above the window hung a prettily patterned curtain. She went to examine it, fingering the material and marveling at the absence of any rips or tears in it.

Exploring further, she saw two round-backed wooden chairs set by a small but sturdy-looking table. Brushing her fingers along their smooth tops as she passed, she came to a washstand. On it were a China bowl and a matching jug, which was full of water. A bar of soap sat in a small porcelain tray nearby, and clean washcloths hung from a handy hook.

Soap!

Violet shook her head in wonder at such luxury. Everything was clean and sparkling, and the soap smelled of roses when she held it to her nose. Wishing her siblings were there to share it all with her, she continued her tour. She kicked off her shoes to walk across the thick rug spread across the floor, which felt like soft, fresh turf beneath her feet. There was a small cupboard far bigger than was needed to house her meager wardrobe. And then, there was the bed. Her bundle of possessions and her medicine box rested on the coverlet.

To her, who had only ever slept on a lumpy mattress filled with cornstalks, it seemed like an impossible luxury to have a bed all to herself. And sheets and blanket too, and all so spotlessly clean!

“Ach, it looks too beautiful for me to sleep in,” she murmured.
“I’ll only mess it up.”

Nevertheless, she tentatively climbed on board. She wriggled down on the soft coverlet, laying her head on the plump pillow, and looked at the ceiling.

“What a day it’s been,” she murmured aloud.

It amazed her to think of all she had accomplished since the morning and that this would be her home for the next twelve months.

“I wish ye were all here with me to see all this, Aiden, Breagha, Rhea, and Callan. I’m missing ye all so much.”

Her heart ached, indeed, for this was the first time she had not put the twins to bed since her mother had died and there would be no Breagha to cuddle up to this night.

Suddenly, a knock sounded at the door, and she jumped up and hurried to open it.

“Yer dinner, Miss,” said a wee girl, holding a tray far too big for her small frame. With her round, red-cheeked face and dark curls, she reminded Violet of the twins, sending a pang of homesickness through her heart.

“Och, thank ye, dear, let me take that from ye. It smells so good. I’m starving, ye ken,” Violet told the lass with a smile as she took the tray. “I’m Violet, by the way,” she added.

“I’m Shona,” the girl replied, beaming at her.

“Well, I’m very pleased to meet ye, Shona. Maybe ye’ll help me find me way around this old place, since I’m new here.”

“Of course, I will,” Shona replied. “Whatever ye need, just come down to the kitchens to find me if ye need anything.”

“Bless ye, child. Now, I’d best eat this before me own stomach eats me. Good night to ye, Shona.”

“Good night, Miss Violet.”

Shona skipped off while Violet pushed the door shut with her foot and carried the tray to the table. She spent the next half an hour eating her way steadily through a large bowl of thick barley stew laced with kale and carrots and chunks of tender beef such as she had seldom tasted. She mopped up the gravy with the bread provided. Thoroughly sated, she washed it down with cold ale.

After that, she undressed down to her shift, gave herself a good wash with the soap, brushed out her hair, and rolled it in rags before finally kneeling by the bed to say her prayers.

“Dear Lord, thank ye for this day, and please, look after me family while I’m away. Keep them safe till I return. Amen,” she recited, deciding to cut it short because she was so tired and full of dinner. Then, she slipped into the bed, luxuriating in the softness of the covers, the plump pillow beneath her head, and the smell of fresh laundry.

She yawned, and her eyes closed, the events of the extraordinary day replaying in her mind. And the most extraordinary of all was the cruel Laird of McGunn himself, a strange man, who could be savage or commanding one moment and tender the next.

Something about that combination, and the hard, darkly handsome face behind the scars, thrilled her to her core. She wanted more of the heady excitement he generated within her, yearning for the morrow when she would see him again.

Her eyes closed, and she drifted off to sleep. In her dreams, she swayed gently, perched once more on Arran's back, her arms wrapped around the Laird's waist. But this time, her head lay against the warm, rippling muscles of his back, and it was sublime.

A lone in his chamber, Dominic's rest was not so peaceful. He tossed and turned for hours, sweating profusely, kept awake by the intensely throbbing pain in his head and the sting of his wounds. He was disappointed that Violet's concoction had not helped at all. But he reminded himself she had warned him there would be a period of trial and error while she tried different things to see how effective they were. She had promised she would find the cure, and strangely, he trusted that she would. He just wished it would be sooner rather than later.

When the birds started their dawn clamor outside his window, he briefly wondered if what she had given him to drink had bewitched him, for she would not leave his thoughts. The long day unfurled in his mind, from the shock of first laying his eyes upon her beauty, to the feel of her small warm body pressed to his on the long ride home, and the way she had stroked his scars and tended to him when he had been injured.

Her scent and thoughts of the shape of her body tormented him, arousing his excitement afresh. Never had he felt such a pull towards a woman, and he wondered what would have happened in the healing room if Daisy had not barged in at that precise moment.

Finally, desperate for sleep, for he knew the day ahead would be hard, he got up, poured himself a generous dram of whisky, threw it down in one go, and then got back into his damp bed. When sleep took him at last, it was amid visions of holding Violet, naked and warm, wrapped in his arms.

Despite his lack of rest, he was up early the following day. There were important things that needed sorting out urgently. At breakfast, he sought out Leon.

“I want to hold a council meeting this morning, after breakfast. Let everyone know,” he told him. “And come and tell me when ye’re all gathered. I’ll be in me study.”

“Aye, all right. It’s going to be a rough ride, though. Kian’s bound to kick off again,” Leon said warningly.

“Just make sure they’re all there,” Dominic told him and strode off to his study. He wanted a few minutes of peace to gather his thoughts. He had made a decision about how to handle the conflicts going on with the council.

Leon was right about one thing: it would be a difficult meeting—difficult for Kian, that was—for Dominic had decided that it was time the man felt the weight of his Laird’s displeasure.

Leon appeared at his door a short while later. “Right, we’re ready for ye,” he said.

“Good,” Dominic replied grimly and joined him, leading the way.

He shouldered the door to the council room open, and seeing his councilmen gathered around the table, talking in low voices, he swept a dark look over them. It ended when his eyes landed on Kian.

The heavy-set, middle-aged warrior had a querulous expression on his lined, bearded face as his eyes met the Laird's. His eyes widened slightly when Dominic glared at him, and he shifted in his seat, frowning.

Dominic took his seat at the head of the table.

“Right. Thank ye for coming. Now, I hear there was some conflict amongst ye to do with me new policy towards the Farlanes at yesterday's meeting. I thought I'd made meself very clear on the subject, but I'll repeat me intentions for any of ye who are hard of understanding.” He paused to glower at Kian at that point. The man's ruddy cheeks reddened further while defiance flashed in his eyes.

“There'll be no more retribution against the Farlanes. It's been over four years since I took over as their Laird, and I judge it time to bring them properly into the McGunn fold. Clan Farlane is a thing of the past. We're all McGunns now. That is me command.” Dominic looked around the table. “Anyone got a problem with that?”

As Dominic knew he would, Kian was the only one to speak up, though there were others on the council whom he knew sympathized with the man's views. However, they would not dare to cross him.

“Aye. Ye ken me thoughts on this, M’laird. Those Farlanes are murdering scum. To say they should be McGunns now, why, ’tis a stain on our proud clan’s reputation. Going soft on them is a big mistake.” Kian struck the table with his fist, his passion rising with his voice. “They deserve only death. They should be wiped out with fire and sword, not pandered to like bairns. If ye—”

Dominic banged loudly on the table with both fists, startling everyone and making everything rattle.

“Hold yer tongue!” he roared, pinning Kian with his eyes.

The man still looked defiant, and Dominic’s fury almost overwhelmed him. He felt like drawing his sword and lopping off the councilman’s head in one fell swoop. It was only with a supreme effort that he reigned in the urge.

“Ye ken as well as anyone in this chamber, Kian,” he growled, “that every one of the Farlane clan who participated in acts of treachery against us has already been slain. Yer wish to go on killing is madness, and it goes directly against me wishes as Laird.”

“I have a right to say me piece, me right as a councilman,” Kian stood up.

“Sit down,” Dominic yelled.

Kian sat down.

The clamor in Dominic's head by this time was tantamount to torture. He could no longer hold back his frustration, nor did he wish to.

“Yer right as a councilman,” he repeated with menacing softness before hammering his fists repeatedly on the table until the room reverberated with the sound. “Have ye forgotten who gave ye that right, man?! Yer Laird. I gave ye that right!” he thundered, glaring daggers as he stared Kian down.

Everybody jumped, startled, but nobody more than Kian, whose mouth dropped open in shock as the Laird continued to rail at him angrily.

“And yet, ye have the nerve to abuse that honor by laying down the law when I'm not here? Did ye think I wouldnae find out, man?” Dominic bellowed. Again, he pounded the table with his fists, the blows punctuating his speech. “Yer insolence, yer arrogance, to think ye can dictate to me what I do and say, and go about filling people's heads with yer nonsense, trying to undermine yer Laird's commands. That is disloyalty of the first water. I'll stand it nae more. Kian Johnston, ye're hereby dismissed from the council, by order of the Laird! And the same goes for any of ye who question me decisions. Get out, all of ye.”

A collective gasp of shock rippled around the chamber. The councilmen looked at each other in disbelief. Most could not remember ever witnessing the dismissal of one of their number before, and few had seen their Laird so furious. But no one appeared more shocked than Kian.

“But, M'laird! Ye cannae just dismiss me,” Kian protested. “I've always been loyal to yer family. I served yer faither all me life, and now I serve ye. Just because—”

“Silence!” Dominic bellowed, vaguely conscious somewhere in the back of his aching mind that he sounded exactly like his father. “Dinnae say another word. I command ye to leave this chamber now, and dinnae return. Ye’re finished, Kian. I dinnae want or need yer kind of loyalty. Now, get out!”

There were more shocked intakes of breath and mutterings as Kian did as he was told, the expression on his rugged face that of a man going to his execution. No one followed him out.

The silence that fell when the door creaked shut after Kian had left was so heavy that it pressed agonizingly on Dominic’s head, as tangible to him as a dead weight. He sat rigidly in his chair, determined not to show any sign of his suffering to the others. He picked up his tankard and drank deeply from it, hiding his grimace of pain.

Thank God, that’s over.

“Erm, is the meeting over now, M’laird?” Leon ventured.

“Is there any other business?” Dominic asked, scanning the worried-looking faces around the table. “Anyone got anything more to say?”

Heads were shaken, signifying a collective no.

“Well, in that case, I call an end to these proceedings.” He stood up. “I expect ye all to be here at the same time tomorrow. I wish to discuss ways to go forward with me plans

for the Farlanes, and I expect to hear some positive suggestions, this time. I bid ye all good day.”

With that, he strode out of the room and hurried to his study, locking the door before Leon could catch up with him.

His exhaustion was so great that he quickly fell asleep on the settle. When he woke up an hour or so later, he felt marginally better. The throbbing in his head had abated somewhat, but he knew it would not last. There was still work for him to do, however, so he composed himself and left the study, heading outside for some fresh air.

There, on the steps of the keep, he found Leon talking to a man he did not recognize. The man left as soon as he joined them. Leon immediately began talking to him about Kian’s expulsion from the council. Sick of the matter, Dominic was relieved when Archer came riding into the courtyard. Dominic and Leon went to meet him.

“Good to have ye back,” Dominic told his friend and loyal man-at-arms, clapping him on the back when Archer had slid from his saddle and handed over his horse to a stable man.

“’Tis nice to be home, all right,” Archer said with a small smile, wiping sweat and dust from his face with his forearm.

“Let’s go to me study and have a dram,” Dominic told him. “I’m eager to hear what ye have to report about the situation in Dalmuir.”

When the three men were comfortably seated, whisky in hand, in the comfort of the Laird's study a few minutes later, Archer gave his report.

“Well, they came all right, the night after ye left, harrying the people and robbing, just like the villagers told us.”

“Who are they?” Dominic quizzed him, but Archer shook his head.

“Nae man kens for sure. A bunch of criminals, from what I could see. Clan outcasts, no doubt. At any rate, there isnae any of them left alive to trouble anyone. I killed them all.”

“That's grand news, man. A good piece of work, to be sure. I kenned ye'd take care of it for me,” the Laird told his trusted friend with a grim smile of satisfaction. “But did ye find out anything before ye killed them?”

“Aye, I did. Before the last one died, he confessed to me that they were being paid by someone within the castle to deliberately stir up trouble for ye and the council,” Archer replied, tossing back his whisky.

Dominic and Leon looked at each other.

“Kian,” Leon said.

“Maybe,” the Laird replied. He looked at Archer. “Do ye have any proof of this?”

Archer shook his head. “Nae, just the word of a brigand, for what that’s worth. But if it’s true, it would certainly point to Kian, what with the way he’s been acting all this time.”

Leon nodded and said to Dominic, “Ach, it’s got to be him. Isn’t he the one who keeps pressuring ye to keep hammering the Farlanes, even though ye’ve made it perfectly clear ye want a change of policy in the way they’re treated?”

Dominic did not want to believe it. “He certainly stands out as a strong possibility, I agree with ye both. But I willnae act against the man without proof. He’s been loyal to me faither and to me for many years,” he said.

“Aye, he has, but ye both ken as well as I do that things changed with Keegan’s attack on the castle when Kian’s family was murdered by the Farlanes. Since then, he just won’t let up with his demands to keep punishing them.”

“Aye, and any time the council discusses a change of policy—I mean, it’s been four years now, and I think ye’ve made it plenty clear to the Farlanes who’s in charge by now, Dominic—it’s like the man becomes enraged,” Archer put in.

“Aye.” Dominic nodded. “D’ye ken, Archer, this morning, he all but outright accused me of going soft on them and betraying his family? I couldnae believe the man’s nerve. I dismissed him from the council.”

“Ye did?” Archer queried, looking taken aback.

“The Laird had nae choice, Archer. Ye ken yerself that Kian’s obsessed with vengeance,” Leon said. “The way he’s been ranting and raving, I think the man’s lost his wits.”

“But has it gone so far that he’d plot to destabilize me position by organizing these attacks by the band of brigands?” Dominic wondered aloud, massaging his temples with his fingers. His head was splitting again. “I admit, I find it hard to believe.” He shook his head in doubt and immediately regretted it because it sent needles of pain shooting through it.

“Well, we cannae do anything more, just now. We’ll talk about it at tomorrow’s meeting,” Dominic said, now in so much pain he felt he simply could not go on with the discussion.

When Leon and Archer had left, he decided he had to at least try and find some relief from the headache. That meant seeking out Violet, for even if her concoctions could not help him, her soothing company might well do so. So, he set off to find her.



While Dominic was closeted in his study with Archer and Leon, Violet was busy in the healing room with old Macie.

Macie was giving her a tour of where everything was stored when the door opened. To Violet’s surprise, Daisy came in.

“Good day to ye both,” she said, smiling at Violet as she approached them, kissing the old lady on the cheek affectionately.

Violet noticed that Daisy seemed much more cheerful than when she had last seen her the night before following the horrible scene that had played out between the two siblings. However, dark circles beneath the young woman's eyes spoke of a restless night.

"Hello, dear, what can we do for ye? Not hurt yerself, have ye?" Macie asked, starting to look worried again.

"Nay, nay, darling," soothed Daisy, patting Macie's arm. "I've come to find Violet." She turned to Violet, saying, "I wanted to apologize for that scene yesterday. What ye must think of us. But that's us, Winfreys, an argumentative lot. Isn't that right, Macie?"

The old healer chuckled. "Och, that's true enough, me pet."

"So, I wondered if Violet would like to come on a tour of the castle with me." Daisy looked hopefully at Violet, who was surprised by the invitation.

"I'd love that, if ye dinnae mind me going, Macie," Violet said diplomatically, looking questioningly at the old healer.

"Not at all, not at all, dear. Ye lassies go and have fun," Macie told them cheerfully, but then her brow wrinkled with confusion, and she took Daisy by the arm. "Have ye come for yer lesson, darling?" she asked.

"Nay, love, I'm going to take Violet here around the castle," Daisy said in a soothing voice once more. "Why not have a

wee rest for a while, eh? I can see ye've been working too hard, as usual."

"Aye, maybe I will. I'm a wee bit tired, it's true."

"And when I get back, I'll make us a nice pot of tea, shall I?" Violet volunteered.

"All right, me pet. That'll be grand."

So, the two young women left Macie to rest and set off for the tour.

“*I*’m so glad ye came to find me,” Violet told Daisy as they made their way, side by side, down the hallway and stairs. “I’ve never been inside a castle before, and I’m so excited to see everything.”

“Ye’ve never been in a castle before?” Daisy looked at her in amazement. “Forgive me if that sounds strange to me, for I’ve lived in one all me life. We were all brought up here, ye see, in this big, drafty old place.”

“Whist, ye call this drafty?” Violet said with a laugh as they descended the stone staircase to the ground floor of the keep. “In me family’s cottage, there isnae even glass in the windows, just rags and oiled paper. Believe me, that does nothing to keep the wind out. We always freeze in winter.”

Daisy looked at her sympathetically. “Och, I’m sorry to hear that, Violet. Perhaps there’s something we could do to help with that. I’ll ask Dominic about it,” she said.

Violet was touched by her concern, which appeared genuine.

“I wasnae complaining,” she told Daisy, feeling a little guilty about mentioning it. But then again, it was her life. “It’s just coming from a wee, ramshackle cottage to a grand place like this... well, it’s hard to take it all in.”

“I’m sure, though the old place hardly looks welcoming from the outside, does it? Most folk who dinnae live here fear it.”

“I think it’s wonderful,” Violet admitted, glancing around her as they came into the large hall.

Now that she could see it in bright daylight, it looked grander than ever, the walls studded with huge paintings of people and landscapes, ancient weapons, and wall hangings emblazoned with the McGunn arms.

“Well, the building we’re standing in is called the Keep. This is where most of us have our quarters. It’s pretty much impregnable, ye see. Once those doors are shut and bolted, nobody can get in. Or out,” Daisy explained, gesturing with her eyes at the great carved wooden doors, which presently stood open onto the courtyard and the castle green.

They spent the next hour or so navigating, what seemed to Violet, endless corridors and hallways, some grand and hung with rich tapestries and paintings, some dingy and lined with cold stone. Daisy showed her so many rooms that she began to feel dizzy.

“Och, I’ll never learn me way around,” Violet said with a laugh. “It’s like a maze, and ye could fit our cottage in the great hall.”

“Ye’ll soon pick it up,” Daisy replied, “and if ye do get lost, anybody will be happy to set ye right. Now, we haven’t been up the towers yet, but once ye’ve seen one, ye’ve seen them all.”

Violet soon found herself huffing and puffing her way up what felt like hundreds of steps to the top of one of the castle’s corner towers. They were both out of breath when they reached the top, and her leg was beginning to ache badly.

“Look,” Daisy bid her when they came out on the roof. “Ye can see for miles from up here.”

Violet gasped in amazement when she joined Daisy at the battlements and looked at the land below.

“The Wee Man preserve me!” She backed away from the battlements in alarm. “I dinnae think I like heights. I’ll look at it from back here.”

Daisy laughed. “I ken it’s a long way down, but ye’re quite safe. Ye cannae fall unless ye want to,” she added with a comical look. “Come, sit here beside me.” She patted the stone bench that ran around the inside of the walls, where the defenders would stand to rain death on those below during battle.

“All right. I feel better sitting down, as if I cannae be blown over the edge so easily,” Violet told her, joining her on the bench. She spread out her skirts and made herself as comfortable as she could.

“Violet?”

“Aye, what is it?” Violet asked, smiling at Daisy, whom she had come to like very much.

“Can I ask ye something?”

Violet turned to look attentively at Daisy. “Of course.”

Daisy hesitated a moment, then she asked, “Me braither... has he said anything to ye about me?”

Violet shook her head. “Nay, nothing at all.”

To her surprise and horror, tears suddenly appeared in Daisy’s eyes, and her mouth turned down.

“Daisy. Whatever is the matter?” she asked, taking the girl’s hands and squeezing them, trying to offer comfort.

“It’s Dominic,” Daisy choked out.

Violet still had a problem thinking of the Laird as Dominic, but she tried her best as Daisy continued.

“Ye saw how he was with me last night. Sometimes, it’s almost like he hates me, and I just dinnae ken why. No one has tried to help him more than me, not even Macie. Yet, now, he says he wants to send me away. He disnae want me to live

here anymore but wants to pack me off to one of our sisters. Dinnae misunderstand me, Violet, I love me sisters. I stay with them often. But to think he wants to be rid of me so badly that he asked ye to come and take me place when all I want is to make him proud by being the great healer at his side.” She broke down in sobs.

“Ach, please, dinnae cry,” Violet said, putting a comforting arm around Daisy’s shoulders. “I’m only staying here for a year, ye ken, Daisy. That was the arrangement I made with yer braither. I miss me family too, and I wouldnae want to be away from them any longer.”

“A year?” Daisy asked, sniffing and fishing for her hanky. She dabbed her eyes and blew her nose.

“Aye, and ye ken, in some ways, I think yer braither may be trying to help ye.” Violet removed her arm from Daisy’s shoulder and drew a little closer to her.

“Do ye think so?” Daisy asked, looking doubtful. “But how? When he says he wants me to leave?”

“Well, ye see, to be a really great healer, ye must gain knowledge from different sources. Ye must sometimes be prepared to travel, to meet other healers and learn from them. Just like ye and I can learn from Macie.”

“Aye, I see that, but I just dinnae want to leave Dominic. He disnae realize how much I worry about him. It’s just the two of us now, with Faither gone, and Dakota and Delilah away with their own families.”

Violet thought for a moment. “Well, I have an idea. Ye want to learn. I’d be willing to teach ye all I ken, all I learned from me maither.”

“Ye would really do that?” Daisy asked, her face lighting up.

“Of course. Ye could be me apprentice,” Violet told her, pleased to see her looking happier.

“Och, Violet, that would be wonderful!” Daisy cried. “Thank ye. I’m so glad ye’re here.”

“All right. That’s settled, then.” Satisfied they had found a solution to Daisy’s problem, Violet saw a chance to learn more about her employer. “Now, I want to ask ye something.”

“All right. Ask me anything.” Daisy sat up and looked at Violet attentively.

“I want to ken about yer braither. What’s his story? Has he always been this way, so stubborn and commanding?”

“Oh, that.” Daisy sighed, twisting her damp hanky between her fingers. “It’s a long story, and it’s a painful one. I dinnae even like talking about it, but I’ll tell ye what happened as best I can. Ye ken yer former Laird attacked this castle a few years back?”

“Aye. And yer braither took over the Farlane clan and has been punishing it ever since.”

“That’s right. He has. I dinnae agree with that, Violet, but ye ken I had nae power to stop it?”

“Aye, I ken that, Daisy. I dinnae blame ye at all,” Violet reassured her, badly wanting to hear more of the story.

“Ye have to understand, many of our people were killed that day—good people, including our faither, the Laird,” Daisy went on, her eyes misting at the memory.

“I’m sorry, Daisy. I didnae mean to remind ye of that,” Violet said apologetically, feeling guilty.

“No, it’s all right,” Daisy told her, recovering quickly. “Well, during the attack, Dominic was caught up in the fighting. Somehow, he was knocked out, and while he was unconscious, the fires set by the attackers took hold. Me braither-in-law, the Laird of O’Reid, found him lying with his face half in the fire and pulled him to safety. He was lucky to be alive, and that was how he got his scars.”

“I see,” Violet murmured, appalled to learn the horrible truth of the Laird’s suffering.

And to lose their faither like that too!

“So, ye see, after that, everything changed. Dominic became the Laird, and he changed too, almost as if he became a different person. He used to be so boyish and funny. But now, well, ye can see how he is.” Daisy shook her head sadly before asking, “But why do ye want to ken?”

“Och, I just wondered if his scars could have anything to do with these headaches he’s been complaining of, but probably not,” Violet replied, knowing she was not being entirely truthful. A good deal of simple curiosity was also involved when it came to understanding what made that enigmatic man tick.

“I never thought of that,” Daisy admitted. “Ye see, I’m learning something already!” She smiled, then sighed and said, “Well, I suppose we’d best get back. I cannae wait to find Dominic and tell him the good news.” She stood up and brushed down her dress. Violet followed suit.

“Aye. And I promised Macie that tea.”

Together, they went down the stone steps to the bottom of the keep, where they halted, ready to part ways.

“I’m so glad I came to find ye and we had this talk, Violet. And I’m happy ye’ve come to stay with us. To think I’ll be yer apprentice. Och, it’s so exciting,” Daisy squealed, squeezing Violet’s hand.

“Me too,” Violet told her, squeezing her hand back.

They bid each other a friendly farewell, agreed to see each other later, and then went their separate ways.

When Violet returned to the healing room, she found Macie fast asleep in her chamber. Not wanting to disturb the old lady, she decided to make her way to the great hall and see if she

could find something to eat, for all the activity had left her feeling hungry.

She managed to find her way there, thanks to Daisy's tour, and the first person she saw was little Shona, who was busily laying the tables. The lass was pleased to see Violet and only too pleased to bring her some food, so it was not long before Violet was seated at a table, tucking into a bowl of excellent chicken stew.



First, Dominic naturally looked for Violet in the healing room. But it was empty, and when he peeped into Macie's chamber, he saw she was fast asleep. He waited a while, but Violet did not appear, so he crept out, trying to think where she could have gone. His head was aching too badly to think much, so, on a hunch, he made for the great hall. And as soon as he entered the vast space, he saw he was right.

There she was, sitting alone at a table, eating with steady concentration.

"Anyone sitting here?" he asked, gesturing at the empty bench opposite her.

Violet looked up at him, and he thought he saw disappointment in her eyes. She finished her mouthful before speaking.

"Ye're the Laird. I suppose ye can sit where ye like," she said at last, buttering a hunk of bread and dipping it in her stew before devouring it.

Wondering about the slight chill in her voice and what had caused it, he nevertheless slipped into the seat opposite her and leaned his chin on his hands, watching her. If not for the clamor in his head, he would have laughed to see how studiously she applied herself to her meal, not missing a morsel. Instead, he rubbed at his temples again, trying to ease the pain.

Noticing it at once, she scrutinized him, her smooth brow crinkling with worry. She instantly dropped her spoon into the bowl and got up, wiping her hands on a napkin and rounding the table.

“Ach, yer head’s bad again, is it nae? Let me take a look at ye. Did that concoction I gave ye not help at all?”

He shook his head, regretting it instantly. “Nae. It made nae difference, but it’ll keep for the moment. Ye finish yer dinner first,” Dominic insisted with a wave of his hand.

“But—”

“I said eat. And that’s an order from the Laird.”

“Och, well, I’d best obey then, I suppose.”

She sat back down again and resumed eating her dinner as commanded. He watched, so fascinated with how she so ruthlessly hunted down every start morsel and consumed it he almost forgot his headache. He pointed to a bit of leek that was lodged near the rim of the dish.

“Dinnae let that one get away,” he said, “it might feel left out.”

Immediately, she swiped it up with her spoon and ate it, looking Dominic straight in the eye as she did so. He saw her eyes glimmer with amusement, and it tickled him.

“I had me eye on it,” she said after she’d swallowed, methodically scooping up the rest of the stew spoonful by spoonful, not missing a thing. “But I was saving it for last.”

“Ye certainly enjoy yer food,” he said when she finally wiped up the last of the sauce with a crust and popped it in her mouth. “They needn’t bother washing that up,” he added, pointing to the scraped-clean dish.

“Aye, well, I’ve saved somebody a job, then. I like to be of assistance,” she replied, pushing the dish aside and taking a long drink of ale. “I suppose that’s yer roundabout way of calling me greedy, is it nae, M’laird?” She leaned her elbows on the table and stared at him challengingly, echoing his pose.

“Not at all. It’s nice to see a woman eat so heartily. I’ve just never seen it, is all.”

Her lips twitched. “If ye had grown up with as many brothers and sisters as I did, ye’d ken that mealtimes were like a war. Whoever got to eat their fill first was the victor.”

Dominic found himself laughing out loud. “Ach, ye dinnae need to tell me. Believe me, growing up with three sisters was bad enough. The squabbling and rivalries that went on. The

fight for the last potato or the last fried egg was a terrible affair, I assure ye. And they had to have their proper turn to be served too, and if the servants got it wrong, there'd be hell to pay," he told her, chuckling at the memory despite his throbbing head.

"That sounds like the twins, Rhea and Callan. Everything has to be done strictly by turns. So, say, on Monday, it's her turn to pull the water pump handle. On Tuesday, it's his. And, if one of them gets there first and does it out of turn, why, they'll sulk for days, complaining about each other endlessly." Her face crinkled into such a merry smile that he laughed again.

"I remember one time when Delilah accused Dakota of stealing her favorite hair ribbon. Dakota flatly denied it, but Delilah was convinced. She tore Dakota's room apart looking for it—ye can imagine how that went down—Faither had to come up and separate them in the end."

"Did she ever find it?" Violet asked.

"Och, aye. Apparently, it had gotten tangled up in her pillowcase and was taken down for the wash with the dirty linen. The maid found it there a few weeks later when she was changing the bed."

Violet laughed. "And did Delilah apologize?"

He sat back and looked at her as though she'd said something ridiculous.

“Nay! Our Delilah would have rather died than admit she was wrong. But I believe Dakota did find a new ribbon in her room shortly after, though, and nobody kened where it had come from, especially not Delilah.”

They laughed together at the memories, and Dominic felt a stirring inside him to see her lovely smile and the way her green eyes glowed with mirth. It was surprisingly easy to talk to her. In fact, he could not remember when he’d had such a carefree conversation. It must have been before he had got his scars, he supposed.

“Right, I’m done,” Violet declared after she had finished off her ale and wiped her lips with the napkin. “Shall we go to the healing room?”

“Aye.”

They both got up and were just about to leave when Dominic spotted a familiar dark head peeping from behind a curtain and stopped. Violet stopped, too, and looked at him in confusion.

“I spy Daisy,” he told Violet, gesturing with his eyes at his sister, who was doing a very bad job of concealing herself. “I’d best see what she wants. Ye go ahead. I shan’t be long.”

Violet nodded and turned to leave. “All right. I’ll see ye shortly. I’ll try some things out while I wait for ye.” She went off.

Dominic went over to Daisy, who dived behind the curtain again when she saw him coming.

“Ye may as well come out. I can see ye perfectly clearly. No wonder ye always lost at hide and seek when we were bairns,” he told her laconically.

“That’s not fair,” Daisy protested, popping out from her hiding place. “I was the littlest. I didnae ken how to hide.”

“Aye, even so, ye’ll never make a good spy, that’s for certain. Now, I’m guessing ye want to speak to me.”

He was surprised when she clapped her hands like an excited child and laughed in response to his comment.

“I do. I want to tell ye the good news. I willnae be moving out.”

His face fell. “Why’s that?”

“Because there’s nae need. I’m going to be Violet’s apprentice. We’ve agreed on it. She’s going to teach me everything she kens so that I can be a great healer one day too.”

Anger boiled up inside him. Somehow, the two women had colluded to thwart his carefully laid plans.

Damn Violet for her meddling!

All trace of his former good mood evaporated, he leaned forward and pinned Daisy with a glare. Her smile vanished.

“Now, listen to me, little sister. Dinnae ever go behind me back, changing me plans to suit yerself again, d’ye hear me?”

Daisy, plainly scared, nodded, her eyes filling with tears. His anger was so intense that he did not care that he was making her cry. There was no possibility that he was going to tell her the real reason why he wanted her away from the castle.

“Ye are leaving the castle, and if ye dinnae make a choice soon of where ye’re going to go, I’ll make it for ye,” he ground out, and with that, he stalked off, leaving her standing, staring after him, white-faced, tears rolling down her cheeks.

Violet was in the healing room, humming a merry tune to herself as she worked on making the concoction that she hoped, this time, would cure the Laird's headache. Her mood was light, for she had greatly enjoyed their time talking together in the great hall.

It had been interesting, learning more about him and his sisters. Perhaps it was growing up with three sisters that had formed his gentler side, lifting her on and off Arran so carefully, opening doors for her, being sensitive to her fears. Others called him cruel, but there was more to him than that.

So it was that when she heard the door open and he came into the room, she turned and smiled, genuinely pleased to see him. But when she saw the thunderous look on his face, her smile fell, and her heart began pounding.

"What is it? Has something happened?" she asked, worried now and wondering what could have caused this drastic change in his mood in such a short time.

"I think ye ken very well," he told her in a cold voice.

“Nay. I have nae clue what ye mean. Have I offended ye in some way?”

“Well, let’s start with the fact that ye’ve completely disregarded me wishes and commands as Laird.”

“Disregarded yer wishes and commands?” she repeated, mystified, beginning to bristle from his tone.

“Ye and me sister. Ye’ve concocted some plot for her to stay at the castle. She says ye’ve offered to teach her all ye ken of healing, that she’s to be yer apprentice.” He glowered at her.

“Aye, that’s true enough. We talked about it earlier. She’s very upset that ye want to send her away. She disnae understand it, so I thought this would be a good solution for her.” Violet drew herself up, her tone now as chilly as his.

“But it’s me wish that she should leave. She kens it, and so do ye. By yer meddling, d’ye not see ye’ve gone against me specific wishes? It’s nae up to ye to offer her a way to get out of following me commands. Ye had nae business interfering, when I’d already made me decision.”

“I dinnae understand. Can ye nae see how upset she is about it? She was in tears, I tell ye. Why would ye wish to be so cruel as to turn yer sister away like that?”

Apart from taking umbrage at his tone, Violet was also deeply disappointed by his behavior. It hurt more because she had just been thinking what a good man he was.

The Laird started towards her, but she refused to move, standing her ground.

He came up to her, towering over her as if to intimidate her. But she refused to show a trace that he was succeeding, even if he was. He stood so close to her, she could feel his warm breath on her face. Besides that, she could feel the tension rolling off him. She noticed his fists were clenched, as was his jaw, and he was almost vibrating with fury.

“Who d’ye think ye are, to presume to ken what a laird wants?” he growled, his eyes flashing.

However, despite his apparent anger, Violet could not help but notice with a small shiver how he kept staring intently at her lips.

Violet tilted her chin up to look into his eyes. “Ach, I ken what the Laird of McGunn wants well enough,” she told him defiantly. “I can see it in yer eyes as clear as day, even if ye dinnae speak the words.”

He came closer, but still, she refused to back down.

Let him say or do his worst.

“Ye can, can ye? And what might that be?” he breathed menacingly, staring down at her, his eyes almost black.

She swallowed hard, trembling at her own daring and wondering what on earth she thought she was doing. But it

seemed as if a devil had gotten inside her because she didn't care what the consequences might be when she finally answered his question.

“Me.”

She had the small satisfaction of seeing his surprise, but it lasted only seconds. Before she could do or say anything further, he moved swiftly, grabbing her around the waist with one arm, while the other seized the back of her head, and she found herself being crushed against the length of his body. Alarmed, she craned her head upwards, meeting his gaze. They stared at each other for a few intense moments, which Violet thought might be the longest of her entire life.

Her heart raced to see the naked hunger in his eyes. Her chest rose and fell rapidly as she struggled to catch her breath. And when his mouth came down upon hers, she was ready, meeting his lips with her own with a fiery passion that ignited somewhere deep inside her and burned her like a flame.

She stood on tiptoes, her arms weaving around his neck, her fingers tangling in his dark curls, pulling him closer as their tongues met, twining together in a tantalizing dance. It was as if her entire body was alight, every particle of her quivering and newly alive in a way she had never dreamed possible. The kiss grew in intensity until she was dizzy with pleasure. And she did not want it to ever stop.

When their lips finally broke apart after what seemed to her like a small eternity of delirium, she felt completely dazed. The kiss had changed her; she felt it in her bones. Slowly, they separated and stood as if frozen, their eyes locked together.

He was the first to break the silence. “That shouldnae have happened,” he muttered.

“Nae, I suppose not,” she whispered. It was all she could manage to formulate, for her thoughts were so scattered. Her fingers went to her lips, for they still tingled from his touch and felt slightly bruised.

“It was me fault. I was angry. I took it out on ye.” He looked apologetically at her.

“Um. That’s nice of ye to say, but I dinnae think ye were entirely to blame. I didnae exactly fight ye off,” she told him, still shocked at the way her body had responded to him so wantonly. And would again, she realized, if it had the chance.

“It willnae happen again.”

“If ye say so, M’laird,” she answered, feeling a twinge of disappointment at his declaration.

“I do say so. And it changes nothing about what I said before. Daisy is still going to move out. And dinnae meddle further in me plans.” His warning lacked its former bite, but she nodded anyway.

“If that is yer wish.”

“It is.”

An awkward silence fell between them. After a while, it became so oppressive that she simply had to break it.

“So, then, there’s still work to do. I’ve made up a new concoction that I hope might help with yer headaches better than the last one. Ye say it didn’t work at all.”

“Nay,” he confirmed, and she saw him start to relax, clearly as grateful as she was to return to some semblance of normalcy, even if they both knew nothing would ever be normal between them again. “And I think they’re getting worse.”

“Och, I dinnae like the sound of that,” she said, her caring instincts kicking in and overcoming her embarrassment.

She went to fetch the small cup containing the concoction and brought it back to him.

He took it, inspected the contents, and grimaced as before. “God, this looks worse than the last one. Why is it that color?”

“It’s medicine. It’s not supposed to look or taste nice. If it did, it wouldnae do ye any good. At least, that’s what me maither used to tell me.”

The atmosphere lightened with her little jest, and she saw the corners of his lips turn up.

Those lips!

“Och, well. Nothing ventured, nothing gained, I suppose,” he said, swallowing the mixture. “Ugh! That is truly foul,” he told her with a shudder as he passed the cup back to her.

“I hope this one will work better for ye, but if not, we’ll just keep trying,” she promised.

“Aye, thank ye. I hope so too.” He paused. Then, he said, “’Tis getting late. I have things to do. I’ll leave ye to yer work.”

She nodded.

Just then, the door to Macie’s chamber slowly creaked open. With a last look at Violet, he silently slipped out of the door and was gone.



In light of what had happened in the healing room, the next few days were rather unsettling and frustrating for Violet. Trying to behave normally, each day, she had dutifully mixed up a new concoction for Dominic’s headaches and, as before, gone to find him.

She needed to keep track of the cures that had not worked, as well as anything that had. At least, she told herself that was all it was. But a part of her knew there was more to it, that she simply craved his company.

So, she was rather hurt and confused to discover that instead of greeting her warmly, he treated her dismissively, almost coldly. If she went into his study, he would order her to simply leave the concoction for him to drink later, appearing not to

wish to speak with her at any length. She had gone away feeling sad.

One day, while on the way to his study with a new concoction, she saw him deeply engaged in conversation with the man called Leon and some other men—councilmen, she supposed—in the hall of the keep. Wishing to see him, she stationed herself by the staircase to wait patiently until he had finished.

The talk went on for at least a quarter of an hour before the knot of men broke up, and she saw the Laird heading down the corridor towards his study. Seeing her chance, she hurried after him.

“M’laird,” she called.

He stopped and turned around. Immediately, as she drew level with him, she saw he was frowning. There could be no doubt that he was not pleased to see her. She wondered if he was growing tired of her attempts to cure him and was losing faith in her abilities.

“I’m sorry to interrupt ye—” she began.

“What is it?” he asked, his tone impatient. “Can ye nae see I’m busy?”

Violet was taken aback. “Have I done something to offend ye, M’laird?” she asked hesitantly, needing to get the bottom of this change of behavior towards her.

“Why d’ye say that? I have a lot to do, that’s all.” He sounded defensive and irritable. His fingers went to his temples, massaging them in the manner that had become familiar to her. “Can ye nae come back later?”

“Yer head’s aching again,” she observed, ignoring the question. “Did what I gave ye yesterday make any difference to the pain?”

He merely shook his head, then grimaced.

The pain must be bad.

“I have something new here for ye to try.” She held up the small horn cup. “Shall we go into the study and try it?”

“Nay,” he said hurriedly as if that was the last thing he wanted. It stung Violet.

“Very well. Then will ye take it here?” She held out the cup, and he took it, looking at the contents grimly.

“I’m nae going to ask what’s in it,” he said gruffly, then threw the concoction down his throat. He sounded disgusted as he passed the cup back to her.

“This could be the one that works,” she reminded him, wanting to make him feel better despite his cold demeanor.

He handed her back the cup and said, “Thank ye, and good night to ye.”

To her stunned surprise, with that, he walked off to his study and went inside, shutting the door firmly behind him.

She spent the evening in her chambers, trying to figure out what she had done wrong to make him change so. All she could think of was that he was tired of her failures to cure his headaches. And though it was painful for her because she had settled into the castle, made friends, and enjoyed living there, she mentally prepared herself to be sent home at any moment.



Dominic was sitting at his study desk, once more holding his throbbing head. He was conscious of having done nothing useful for the past half an hour since his return from once more discussing the unrest within the clan with Leon and a couple of the other councilmen.

That was when the headache came on again, for trying to keep track of everything that was going on was difficult, to say the least. He had expected some protests about the change in policy towards the Farlanes, of course, but nothing like this disruptive rumor-mongering that appeared to be going on within his own walls, which he seemed powerless to stop.

The finger of suspicion pointed to Kian all right. But Dominic wanted proof of it before acting, and it was up to him to figure out some way to obtain it. So far, he had come up with exactly nothing except to keep a close watch on Kian and anyone he associated with.

He was startled from his thoughts by two quick knocks on the door. He knew it was Violet, for she always knocked that way. But he was not sure he wanted to let her in, uncertain if he was strong enough to cope with her magnetic presence in his current state. Especially not after what had happened a few nights ago in the healing room.

But she likely had a new concoction for him to try, so he decided he had better let her in. He would just have to get rid of her quickly.

“Come in,” he said finally.

The door opened, and she stepped into the room and approached him. Despite his best efforts, he was unable to take his eyes off her as she came towards him, smiling tentatively, the now familiar horn cup clasped in her hand.

“How are ye today, M’laird?” she asked, her eyes assessing him.

“The headache’s bad just now,” he admitted, rubbing his temples again.

“Ach, I’m sorry to hear it. I’ve brought some new medicine for ye to try.” She came around the desk to his side and proffered the cup. He took it with a grimace, thanking her.

“’Tis best nae to look at it before ye drink it, I’ve learned,” he muttered before tossing down the liquid in one swallow, then making a disgusted face.

“I sincerely hope it works this time,” she said, eyeing him sympathetically, her hands on her hips.

“Naething seems to help,” he answered, immediately distracted by the warmth emanating from her body and the familiar stirrings of desire she always managed to elicit from him.

Covertly, as she continued talking, his eyes took in the graceful arch of her neck, the all-too-tempting curve of her breasts, and her narrow waist that he could so easily span with his hands.

Not hearing a word she was saying, he mentally undressed her and planted her in his bed, imagining how she would toss her raven hair and moan as he made love to her.

He found himself becoming mesmerized by a long tendril of inky black hair that had come loose from its fastenings. It bounced about her neck and shoulders with every tiny movement she made as she talked. The urge to catch the silky length and curl its softness between his fingers overwhelmed him. Hardly knowing what he was doing, he moved his hand, ready to reach up and grasp it. At the last second, he stopped himself and stood up suddenly, clearing his throat to hide his mortification at his own lack of control.

“Right. I’ve taken yer concoction. Now, I must ask ye to leave, for I have much work to do here.”

He felt a little guilty for being so brusque, especially when he thought he saw disappointment flash in her eyes. But he told himself he was mistaken.

“Very well,” she said, eventually. “We’ll see if it does any good on the morrow.”

“Aye. I’ll let ye ken when I have time,” he told her, wishing she would go and release him from his torment. But when she finally did, he felt strangely bereft and only yearned to see her again.

His mouth tasted vile from the concoction, so he took a dram of whisky to wash it away before returning his aching mind to the problem of finding proof that Kian was behind the brigands’ attacks.

Leon appeared a while later, bringing more disturbing news. “I’ve found out that, apart from his troublemaking over the Farlanes, Kian’s been giving his opinion on the new healer,” he told Dominic, his face rapt with worry.

Dominic’s ears pricked up at the mention of Violet. “What d’ye mean?” he demanded.

“Well, it seems he’s been taking quite an unusual interest in her since she arrived, saying she’s a malign influence and that she should be watched carefully.”

Dominic clenched his fists. “That man is asking for a beating,” he ground out.

“Ach, I ken. It seems like he’ll do anything to undermine yer decisions,” Leon replied. “I ken ye want proof against him, but

I have to advise ye that I think ye'd be best off acting against him before he can do any more damage."

Dominic let out a low growl. "I want ye to tell me at once if there's any more of that talk about the healer from him," he instructed. "At once! Now, leave me in peace, will ye?"

With Leon gone, he rested his throbbing head in his hands again and struggled to overcome the anger rushing through him at his councilman's words. Fresh hatred for Kian's gall burned within him.

How dare Kian call Violet a malign influence?! What's his game? What does he ken about it, the ignorant fool? She was me choice, and she's staying, everyone else be damned!

The following day, Violet began her lessons with Daisy, determined to teach the girl everything she knew about the healing arts despite the Laird's objections.

Daisy was an excellent pupil, paying attention and learning fast, carefully writing everything down. Violet was impressed and reasoned that even if Daisy was going to be sent away at some point, why should she not learn as much as she could beforehand?

Surely, that's nae going against his wishes, is it?

However, the task of teaching, though it came naturally to Violet, for her mother had taught her in the same way, was proving more difficult than she had imagined. The problem was that whenever she was deep into an explanation for Daisy of a particular item's medicinal properties or demonstrating how to prepare a certain ingredient before use, her train of thought would frequently be interrupted by a vivid vision of what had happened in the healing room just a few evenings before.

“But tell me again about the hawthorn leaves. Do ye steep them once or twice after boiling them and then mash them at

the end?” Daisy was asking Violet one afternoon following their morning lesson.

They were sitting at the table, rolling up clean bandages for storage. Violet’s mouth opened to form a response when she found herself distracted by the sight of her hands rolling up a bandage. Instantly, she was transported back to a few nights ago.

She had finished bandaging the arm of the half-naked Laird. Now, they were poised inches apart, their breaths mingling as they stared into each other’s eyes. Her whole body quivered with desire for the large, scarred man sitting before her. Strength and power oozed from him, weaving their spell around her as her fingers brushed his soft, warm skin, and she grew dazed from breathing in his musky scent.

“Violet? Did ye hear me?” Violet vaguely heard Daisy asking.

“Hmm? Er—” Violet mumbled, her cheeks burning at the memory of that passionate kiss.

What would have happened if Daisy hadnae barged in like that?

The answer came as clear as day.

We would have kissed again. At least, I wanted to kiss him so badly, to feel his mouth on mine again. And, with the wanton way he makes me feel, perhaps even more.

“Violet, can ye hear me? Are ye all right? Yer cheeks look hot!”

Daisy’s cool palm against Violet’s cheek brought Violet back from her daydream. She looked at Daisy and gave herself a mental shake, telling herself that if she carried on like that, people would start to think she was mad.

“Aye, I’m fine. Just a wee bit tired. Sorry, ye were asking me about something?” she hedged as she composed herself.

“I was asking about the preparation of the hawthorn leaves,” Daisy said before repeating her question.

Violet explained the process once more while Daisy took notes. When they had finished, Violet decided it was as good a time as any to ask Daisy the question plaguing her ever since the intimate interlude with her brother.

“Can I ask ye something, Daisy?” Violet ventured.

“Hmm?”

“What is the true reason why the Laird wants to send ye away?”

Daisy shook her head sadly. “I wish I kened meself, Violet, but I really have nae idea. It’s like he just fixed it in his head without asking me.”

“I wonder why he’s being so secretive about it,” Violet wondered aloud.

“I ken! I mean, if he would at least try to explain his reasons to me, then perhaps I would understand and wouldn’t mind so much about him sending me away,” Daisy said in an aggrieved tone.

They were interrupted by Macie’s arrival. She had a basket of roots in her arms. Violet sprang up immediately and took it from her, putting it aside, while Daisy pulled out a chair for the old healer to sit on. Violet came back with a cup of tea for Macie and set it in front of her before resuming her own seat. She immediately noticed that Macie looked worried.

“What the matter, Macie?” she asked. “Has something happened to upset you?”

Macie shook her silver head sorrowfully. “Ach, I’m a silly old woman, no doubt, but I dinnae like to see the Laird so angry.”

“He’s always angry these days,” Daisy scoffed.

“He’s angrier than ever today, lass.” Macie sighed, then added, “I fear for him. ’Tis nae good for him.”

“I wonder what’s set him off this time,” Daisy said with audible dismay.

“Um, well, I think it might be something to do with me,” Violet put in, feeling a pang of guilt if that was the case. “We

had a misunderstanding, ye ken?”

“A misunderstanding, eh?” Marcie looked at her questioningly. “If that’s what’s troubling him, do ye nae think ye should go and see him? Talk it out, whatever it is?” she suggested, patting Violet’s hand encouragingly.

“I suppose so,” Violet agreed. “But I dinnae think now is the right time, what with him being so angry and all. I’ve been trying to speak to him for days now, but he just turns me away, saying he’s too busy to spare me any time. I honestly dinnae think he wants to speak to me at all,” she confided, remembering how hurt she had felt when he had dismissed her so shortly the previous evening.

“When he’s like this, just remember, all ye have to do is corner him and dinnae let him get away before ye’ve said yer piece,” Daisy advised. “Go and see him now, and get it over with.”

“I cannae see that working. Och, I dinnae think it’s wise,” Violet began, but then an idea occurred to her. “All right, I’ll try. I think I might have a way to get him to talk to me, after all,” she said, going to the shelves and reaching for a pestle and mortar and a bowl. “Now, what do I need?”

While Daisy and Macie chattered and rolled bandages, Violet worked diligently. After half an hour or so, she had a bowl of thick, yellowish paste to show for it. She let it cool and put a cloth over it as she tidied up. Then, she picked up the bowl carefully and took a deep breath.

I’m ready.

“Right,” she told Daisy and Macie as she crossed to the door, “I’m off to beard the bear in his den. Wish me luck.”

“Good luck!” Daisy said with a small wave.

“Where’s she going?” Macie suddenly asked, frowning in confusion, as she now did several times a day.

“It doesn’t matter, me darling,” Daisy told her tenderly. “Violet has an errand to run, and she’ll be back in a little while. Here, drink yer tea while it’s hot, eh?”

“Thank ye, dear,” Macie said, sipping her tea, oblivious to the look the two girls exchanged as Violet left the room.

Her heart beating almost painfully in her chest, Violet forced her feet to move and headed to the Laird’s study, figuring it was the best place to start. When she got to the door, it was closed. She paused, listening for any sounds coming from inside. She thought she heard him clear his throat.

Steeling herself for a stormy—or icy reception—if he was, indeed, inside, she raised a hand and knocked twice.

“Come in.”

His voice sent a shiver up her spine. Taking another steadying breath, she opened the door.



Just as Dominic rubbed his temples to ease the pain in his head, the familiar two knocks sounded at his study door. It was Violet again, wanting to see him. He paused for a moment, wondering what to do. He told himself sternly that he simply could not afford the distraction that her presence offered.

On the other hand, he supposed he had better let her in, or she would just keep coming back, and she likely had a new concoction for him to try that, this time, might just get rid of his headache.

“Come in,” he said with a sigh.

The door creaked open, and she stepped inside, closing it behind her. Instantly, as always happened with her, he felt the change in the atmosphere as the tension in the room began to rise. He had to get her to leave, or things could go awry again.

“Just leave the medicine on the desk there, will ye?” he said, with no warmth to his voice.

She came over to the desk and stood in front of him, eyeing him sympathetically. He saw she had a covered basin in her hands, which she placed on the desk. He supposed it was the concoction of the day.

“I can tell yer head’s bad again,” she said, her hands on her hips as she inspected him. “Did last night’s concoction nae help?”

“Nay. Now, just leave that there, and I’ll drink it when I’m nae so busy,” he told her, gesturing with his thumb at the bowl.

“Have ye been avoiding me?” she asked suddenly, taking him by surprise.

He shook his head impatiently, regretting it at once, for it amplified the pain. “Nay. I’m the Laird, remember? I’ve just been busy with clan work, ’tis all.”

“Oh, I see.” She nodded but made no move to do as he had asked.

In fact, he noticed she was fidgeting, moving from one foot to the other. Though he wondered why, he knew he had to get her to leave as soon as possible.

“Now, if ye dinnae mind, I have work to do. As I said, ye can leave the medicine there.” This time, he stabbed a finger at a point on her side of the desk to demonstrate.

“I dinnae have a potion for ye today,” she said.

That took him aback. “Ye havenae? Then why are ye here?”

“Well, since we’ve had no luck so far, I thought we should try something new.”

“Is that so?” he asked, feeling the now familiar heat rising from his belly as she came around the desk and stood right in front of him, pulling the basin nearer.

She whipped off the cloth, and he saw a thick, yellow paste inside.

He turned up his nose. “That looks horrible. If ye think I’m going to drink that—” he began, but she cut him off with a shake of her dark hair.

“Nay. ’Tis nae to drink.”

“What then?” he asked, rubbing his temples again, for her pert breasts were now level with his eyes, and his quickening pulse only made the pain in his head worse.

“This,” she told him, indicating the contents of the basin. “It’s a paste I’ve made up for ye, to massage into yer temples.”

“Massage into me temples?” he repeated dully, closing his eyes.

Ach, God, why are ye torturing me like this? D’ye nae see what she does to me?

“Aye. Are ye willing to try it?”

Reluctantly, he opened his eyes and looked at her. The determination in her gaze told him he would have a fight on his hands if he refused.

He sighed. “All right.”

“Good.”

She smiled before taking another step towards him. He tried to avoid her eyes as she reached up and gently brushed his hair back from his forehead. Her subtle touch sent tremors through him, and the only way he could prevent himself from acting on them was to stay completely still, his fingers gripping the edges of his chair tightly.

He watched as she took a small scoop of the paste in each hand and applied it to his temples, massaging it into the skin with a gentle circular motion. It was cool and soothing, as were her fingers as they worked. He closed his eyes again, pushing away the steamy thoughts threatening to invade his mind as her heady perfume filled his nostrils. Slowly, after a while, he felt the pain starting to abate, and his body began to relax.

“What is the real reason why you’re so determined to send Daisy away?”

The question came out of the blue. Dominic, now in a state of deep relaxation, was caught unawares. He opened his eyes and looked into hers. Their gazes locked. He could not lie to her.

“Because ever since I was burned, the only thing that’s been on Daisy’s mind is how she has to find a way to *fix* me.”

“Isn’t that natural, though? I mean, she’s yer sister, and she has some skill with healing.”

“That may be so, but I dinnae want her to dedicate her life to a disgusting monster like me.”

He heard Violet’s sharp intake of breath, and the fingers working at his temples stopped. She dropped her hands and stared at him, anger making her green eyes flash like marsh lightning.

“And that’s how ye see yerself, is it nae? A disgusting monster?” she demanded.

He shrugged. “I dinnae ken how else ye’d describe it. Look at me.” He lifted a hand and rubbed the scarred side of his face. “What else is that but a horrible, revolting monster?”

“Why, Laird or nae, that is the stupidest thing I think I’ve ever heard!” Violet exclaimed, clearly furious.

His own anger flared. “Are ye calling me stupid?”

“I didnae say that. I’m saying it’s a stupid thing to say. Why, calling yerself a monster like that. De ye think yer sister, who cares for ye greatly, by the way, has ever seen ye that way?” she demanded.

“Why should I nae believe it, for it’s the way everybody else looks at me?”

“That isnae true. Daisy would certainly be very upset to hear ye saying such things.”

“Ach, ye dinnae ken what ye’re talking about. How can ye?”

Her eyes flared once more. “Oh, so I dinnae ken what I’m saying, is that right?”

“Nae, ye cannae, so ye may as well hold yer tongue!” he shouted, losing all his patience.

“Well, I’ll show ye something, shall I, M’laird?” she angrily retorted.

He was momentarily confused, wondering what she was about to do, when she suddenly turned sideways and raised her leg, putting her booted foot on the rung of his chair right next to him. When she began to raise her skirts and her bare flesh came into view, he swallowed hard.



“So, look here, M’laird.”

Her blood pounding with righteous anger, she raised her skirts higher until he gasped in shock. He stared at her naked leg, where the creamy skin was disfigured by a long strip of ruced, reddened flesh that ran down the outside of her thigh to her ankle. She saw the recognition in his eyes when he touched his scarred cheek again, clearly realizing that her scars matched his and were the result of being burned.

His face a picture of astonishment, he looked up at her. She nodded at him emphatically.

“Aye, that’s right. Ye see it now. Ye’re nae the only one here who’s been marked with fire!”

He shook his head. “Violet, I never kenned—”

“Of course, ye never kenned. Because I never showed ye. ’Tis nae something I show to just anybody. So, Monster, de ye find me disgusting now?”

“Violet!” he protested, his face creased with distress, “I wouldnae ever say—”

“Och, but ye still call yer own scars disgusting, eh?” she pointed out, cutting him off. “The way ye say it, anyone would think we asked to be burned like this, but we didnae, neither of us. It just happened by accident, ’twas all, and it disnae make us disgusting.”

She stopped suddenly, realizing what she had just said.

Ach, why can ye never hold yer tongue? He’s going to ask ye how ye got burned now, and ye’ll have to tell him about Maither!

Her heart beating fast, she waited on tenterhooks for the question to come. But it did not. She looked at him. He was still examining her scars.

Perhaps he willnae ask, after all. Perhaps he kens from his own experience how annoying it is when anyone asks that.

He appeared mesmerized by her scars, his hand reaching out to touch them before hesitating at the last moment. He looked up at her.

“Can I touch them?” he asked softly.

“Aye.”

With an almost trance-like expression, his fingertips slowly approached the angry-looking, ridged skin and settled upon it as lightly as a butterfly. Then, his fingers traced a path from the top of her thigh, where the scarring began, all the way down to the bottom near her ankle. His touch set her whole body shivering.

“Does it still hurt?” he inquired, meeting her gaze once more.

“Only sometimes, like when I walk too far and me leg gets tired. Then it aches,” she explained, her insides turning to warm honey as his fingers moved up and down her leg again. “That’s when I limp a bit.”

“I’m truly sorry, Violet. I didnae mean to make ye... I mean, I wouldnae have said those things if I thought it would hurt ye so much.”

“Ye didnae hurt me,” she murmured, her words faltering as her breathing quickened at his touch.

She knew full well she should put her foot down now and cover her leg. But she could not, though she felt her other leg

turning to jelly. Wanting against her better judgment for him to keep doing what he was doing, she instead turned towards him and placed her hands on his shoulders to steady herself. His eyes shot to hers then, and the look of wonder and trust within them played on her heartstrings like a harp. She bent closer to him.

“But I dinnae like to hear ye talking that way, calling yerself a monster. Ye’re only hurting yerself, and ye dinnae deserve that because ye got those scars in a noble cause,” she told him softly, reveling in the feel of his breath warming her cheek.

“Thank ye for letting me see, Violet,” he replied hoarsely, raising his hands from her leg and covering her wrists with his palms. “It means a lot. Ye ken, when we first met, I couldnae understand why ye didnae seem to be repulsed by me face like everybody else. Now, I understand.” He lifted her hands from his shoulders and turned her palms upward, pressing a tender kiss to each one in turn, making them tingle. “Thank ye.”

The caress was too much for her. Her body took control, and before she knew what she was doing, she was cradling his cheeks in her hands and placing tiny, delicate kisses on his scars before her lips finally moved over his. Softly, she brushed hers against them, relishing the exquisite feeling as his lips met hers with equal gentleness. Opening her mouth, she deepened the kiss, and he answered at once, his tongue entwining with hers in a slow, sensuous dance.

The flame within her ignited as he groaned and pulled her onto his lap, his arms encircling her waist as he drew her close to his chest. She sighed and nestled into him, the heady feeling of wanting washing over her in delicious waves as she wound her arms around his neck and reveled in the feel of his thick, dark locks entwined in her fingers. The world and all its troubles

faded away as their kiss grew in intensity, and they settled into a deep and satisfying embrace she wanted to never end.

How long they had been kissing when their lips finally separated, she did not know. It felt both too short and not long enough. They remained in their embrace, stroking each other's hair in silence for a few moments. She guessed from the way he was looking at her that the kiss had affected him as much as it had her.

“Um, I think I promised this wouldnae happen again,” he murmured into her neck as she leaned against him.

“Well—” She chuckled. “Ye cannae just blame yerself. Clearly, neither of us can be trusted.”

He laughed, and that was when he realized something.

“Ach, me headache's gone!”

She looked at him curiously, resting her fingers on his temples. “Has it, now? Well, that's interesting. Do ye think it was because of massaging in the salve?”

He shook his head, amazed. “I dinnae ken, but me head feels clear for a change.” He looked at her with a grin. “Maybe it was yer kisses.”

“That's a nice thought, but I think it's unlikely,” she replied with another chuckle. “I never heard that kisses have medicinal properties.”

“Well, stranger things have happened, eh?” he asked, brushing a long tress of hair behind her ears.

“True enough, but I reckon it’s the treatment. We must try it again over the next few days, to see what happens,” she suggested.

“All right, we will. But for now, much as I hate to say it, we’d best say goodnight, for I still have lots of work to do here,” he told her with a sigh as he lifted her from his lap when it was really the last thing he wanted to do.

“I suppose so,” she agreed with a smile, smoothing down her dress and hair. She glanced back at him, and it warmed her soul to see his dark eyes dancing with mirth for a change instead of filled with pain. “At any rate, we’ll see if that had any effect later on. Ye can tell me on the morrow,” she added, picking up the basin and covering it with the cloth again.

“Tomorrow’s treatment,” he mused, smiling back at her. “I can hardly wait.”

“Good night, then. I hope ye have a better sleep tonight.” She crossed to the door and opened it.

“Aye. Me too. Good night, Violet. And thank ye again.”

He shot her a look that melted her heart afresh as she went out and closed the door. Then, she dawdled along the corridor on her way back to the healing room, wanting to hold the memory of what had just happened fresh in her mind for as long as she

could before she had to break the spell by speaking with anyone.

Just as she was climbing the stairs to the healing room, however, questions and doubts began to crowd her mind.

Whatever this attraction is between us, it's getting harder and harder to resist. But surely, naething can come of it but heartache for me. We agreed I'd stay at the castle for a year, that's all. Then, I'll return to me family—as I promised the twins I would.

Reluctantly telling herself to safeguard her heart more carefully, she struggled to push aside her secret concerns. Coming to the door of the healing room, she plastered on a smile before opening it and going inside.

The next morning, Dominic, Leon, and Archer were talking in the corridor just outside the council room. The conversation was mainly about Kian and whether the watch they had stationed on him had produced any results.

“Nay, the man has hardly left his house since ye dismissed him,” Archer said.

“And naebodys called on him. So, if he is passing messages, only the Wee Man kens how he’s doing it.”

“That’s curious,” Dominic said, frustrated at the news.

If not Kian, then who?

“Ach, it means naething,” Leon insisted with a scoff. “He’s still our best bet. Maybe the men ye’ve set to watch arenae watching close enough. I’ll put one of me men on him, and we’ll see what happens.”

“I doubt that,” Archer said with an annoyed huff. “But aye, ye go ahead and see if yer man can do better.”

“Go ahead, Leon. All right, I have things to do, so I’ll see ye both later,” Dominic told them, hoping to take a ride down to the nearby village to have a chance to think about what had happened between him and Violet the night before without interruption.

But it was not to be, for as he turned around, Leon spoke.

“Dinnae hurry off, M’laird. We have something to tell ye that may be of concern. It’s to do with what I mentioned the other night, about Kian’s interest in the new healer.”

Curious, Dominic turned back, anger flooding him once more. “Violet. Her name’s Violet,” he snapped. “What’s he been saying, now?”

Leon looked at Archer, who looked suddenly sheepish as he said, “It isnae so much what he’s been saying as the rumors going around the castle.”

“Rumors? Dinnae waste me time with gossip,” Dominic said shortly, disguising his concern.

“About ye and... Violet.” Archer’s cheeks reddened with obvious embarrassment.

Dominic paused to take that in. He was sure he and Violet had been discreet. “What rumors?” he asked finally, half dreading the answer.

“Some folks are saying that since she came to the castle, ye’ve been making bad decisions,” Leon began.

Dominic’s eyebrows shot up. “What?!”

“Aye, and that it’s happening because... she’s bewitched ye.”

Dominic snorted, half in amusement, half in anger. “Is this Kian’s doing?” he demanded.

“I dinnae ken,” Leon told him. “I’ve only heard this rumor is circulating, that’s all.”

Dominic scoffed. “That’s just stupid talk—superstition—to be expected from ill-educated folks. They dinnae like strangers, ’tis all. I told ye not to waste me time, ye two. Violet’s skilled, and she’s doing a grand job.”

“That may be so, M’laird, but rumors like this can be dangerous, especially at a time of unrest like this. Ye ken, some folks are looking for any way to show ye as unfit to rule because they say ye’ve gone soft on the Farlanes. Calling her a witch and ye under her spell could be a powerful way to do it. Me advice is to get her out of the castle as quick as ye can and put paid to this talk,” Leon told him, his expression serious.

“Aye. I like the lass, but I have to agree with Leon. Get her away, then there can be no more of that sort of gossip,” Archer said, nodding.

Dominic stared at them in disbelief. “Have ye both lost yer wits?” he snapped. “I chose Violet for her skills, and I had to pay her handsomely to come here to work for me, and ye expect me to dismiss her because some idiotic folks chose to believe—nay—spread about stupid nonsense about me being bewitched? Why, ye should both be ashamed of yerselves. I trust ye to put an end to that rubbish when ye hear it and nae bother me with it again.”

Without further ado, he stalked off, leaving them looking after him worriedly. As he walked away, anger boiled afresh within him, and his head began hurting again. There were times, he had to admit, when being Laird meant putting up with a lot of superstitious claptrap. His father had had no time for it, and neither did he.

Bewitched, me backside! Well, I may be bewitched by her, but not in the way those fools think. I willnae be doing with it, and I'll certainly nae be sending Violet away any time soon.

Determined to spite the gossips, he paced down the corridor, furious thoughts whirling in his aching head, heading for his study. But at the last minute, he changed course and took the passage leading to the kitchens instead. He had an idea that excited him, causing the fury to drain away, and he wanted his plan to go into effect straight away.

I'll ask her to dine with me tonight, just the two of us. Let's see what spell we can weave, then.

“M'laird!” exclaimed Roger, the castle cook. “What a pleasure to see ye in me kitchens. What can we do for ye?” The rotund man with the ginger whiskers smiled broadly, turning to greet Dominic and putting down the ladle he was using to stir an enormous vat of something that smelled delicious.

“Good day to ye, Roger. I’ve decided to invite a lady to dine with me this evening, and I want to order some, shall we say, special dishes to please her,” Dominic said, his idea hardening in his mind as he spoke.

Roger grinned. “A lady, is it, now? Well, that’s good news, M’laird. I hope she’s a pretty one,” he jested.

“Ach, she isnae pretty,” Dominic replied. *She’s the most beautiful lass in the world.* “But she’s important, ye see, and I want to make a good impression all the same,” he added.

“Right enough,” Roger said, nodding vigorously. “We must show her all the hospitality that the McGunns are famed for.” He cast about for something. “Now, where’s me book? Ah, there it is.”

He crossed to the vast table that took up half of the room, where several of his minions were working hard, chopping, grating, slicing, mashing, and peeling various vegetables and fruits. Another was rolling out a pie crust of pastry as big as a barrel lid.

Roger pulled a chair for Dominic, and the pair sat down amid the orderly chaos. The cook whipped a stubby pencil from behind his ear and opened a dogeared notebook to a fresh page.

“Now, M’laird, what shall ye have to start? Does the lady like a bit of smoked herring or mackerel, perhaps? We have some smoked salmon too if ye would prefer, and fresh oatcakes to go with it.”

“Oysters,” Dominic declared.

Roger nodded approvingly while Dominic waited for the inevitable joke about the aphrodisiac properties of oysters. It did not come, but he noticed the small, curious twinkle in the cook’s light-blue eyes as he scribbled in his book.

“Oysters, is it? Very good. We have some fine ones in, fresh from this morning’s catch. Right, and for the next course? I have some good mutton,” Roger suggested, looking up.

Dominic shook his head. “Nay. Nae mutton. Something lighter. What was that dish ye made when I was made Laird? It was chicken, with lots of shallots, mushrooms, and greenstuff.”

“Ah! With a creamy wine sauce?” Roger asked.

Dominic nodded. “Aye, that’s the one. Can ye do that again? With some potatoes. Mashed potatoes.”

“Naething simpler,” Roger intoned. “Chicken in white wine sauce with herbs, with mashed potatoes. Anything else to go with that?”

“Nay. I’m saving the rest for the pudding,” Dominic told him, rubbing his hands gleefully. He was enjoying himself now, the pain in his head merely a dull ache.

“That’s right, M’laird. Sweeten her up, eh?” Roger grinned at him, his pencil poised. “What shall it be? A syllabub? A meringue? A nice fruit tart, perhaps? We’ve lashing of fresh cream, and the berries are coming in nicely too.”

“Strawberry shortcake,” Dominic said emphatically.

Roger nodded sagely. “Of course. I should have guessed. Yer favorite. Very good. Strawberry shortcake, it is, with plenty of cream.

“And make enough for three,” Dominic told him.

“Will do, M’laird. Now, what are ye going to drink?”

They discussed the wine at length, and it was mid-morning when Dominic got back to his study, his dark mood completely gone. Instead, one of excited anticipation had settled in.

With a renewed vigor for work, he formulated his ideas for commencing proper trade with the Farlanes, a scheme that would mean paying for their goods and services instead of simply taking them. It was to be the basis of a harmonious and prosperous future for them all.

And I’ll make certain everybody sees it that way.

When he finally set down his pen, he was pleased with what he had produced. With a sense of achievement and no small excitement, he locked away the papers and left his study,

intent on finding Violet to invite her to dine with him that evening.

He found her with Daisy and Macie in the healing room. The trio were drinking tea at the table, discussing some strange-sounding recipe. They were laughing and joking, apparently in high spirits, and Dominic felt a bit bad for interrupting their enjoyment when he pushed open the door and stepped inside.

He met Daisy's eyes, not entirely happy to see her there, obviously having just finished a lesson with Violet. But she nodded at him cheerfully enough and seemed happier than she had in months, so he found he could not begrudge her. The three women stopped talking and looked up when he came in. Macie got up to greet him, her old face lighting up.

"M'laird, good day to ye," she said. "Yer visit is timely because we need to check those wounds for ye. Will ye nae come and sit down?"

"Good day to ye, Macie. Very well," he replied, allowing himself to be gently steered to the table.

He sat down next to Daisy and opposite Violet, allowing him to look at her head-on. She gave him a shy smile that turned his insides to water. He felt himself brimming with excitement at the prospect of them being alone again that evening.

I cannae wait to see her face when she sees what I have planned. If she accepts me invitation, of course.

“I’ll do it, shall I, Macie,” Violet asked, “while ye pour the Laird a cup of tea?”

“All right, lassie,” the old woman nodded. She picked up the teapot and poured as suggested, passing the cup with shaking hands to Dominic, who thanked her.

Daisy stayed quiet, apparently absorbed in scribbling in a notebook.

“Let’s have a look at yer arm, then, M’laird,” Violet said, looking expectantly at him.

Once again, the appeal in those green eyes of hers was so strong he could not refuse. He shrugged off his coat and laid his arm on the table, feeling tingles running up its length as she undid his cuff and rolled back the sleeve to reveal the bandages covering his wounds. Carefully, she undid them until the sore flesh was exposed. She examined both wounds closely, then turned to Macie.

“What do ye say, Macie? I cannae see any infection,” she noted.

Macie had a good look and nodded her head. “Aye, that looks well on the way to healing. Ye did a good job there, lassie.” She smiled, then added, “A lighter bandage is all that’s needed now, just to keep the dirt out, and so it doesnae rub against the shirt.”

“I’ll do that now,” Violet agreed brightly, getting up and fetching a clean basin and fresh bandages.

Dominic drank in her neat little figure as she busied herself. Her curvy, warm body had felt so good when she had been sitting on his knee the night before, and they had held each other so close while kissing. He longed to explore those promising curves in more detail.

He watched her until she came and sat down again, removing the old wrappings from his arm and putting them in the basin, then binding the wounds afresh. Her fingers worked deftly, and she was soon tying off the ends neatly and tucking them in.

“Thank ye,” Dominic muttered, entranced by her air of concentration and the way her tongue moistened her lips as she worked.

“There ye go. They can stay on for a day or so. We’ll check on them again then,” Violet told him with another shy smile. “I’ve prepared another concoction for ye. Would ye like to take it now?”

“All right.” He nodded. “Me head’s clear just now, as a matter of fact, but I might as well get it out of the way.”

Violet nodded and fetched the horn cup, handing it to him with a smile. He drank the bitter-tasting liquid and gagged.

“Each one tastes worse than the last,” he said with a sniff of derision, handing the cup back to her.

Daisy looked up from her book then. “Is that all ye came for?” she asked him outright, putting him on the spot.

“Nay.” He glanced at Violet, hiding his bashfulness under an assertive tone. “I came to see if ye would like to join me for dinner this evening, Violet. There are some things I’d like to discuss with ye.”

He had the delight of watching as her eyes widened and her cheeks turned pink. However, he was distracted when Daisy shot him a pointed look. He was not sure what it meant, but he sent her one back that told her to hold her tongue. His eyes went back to Violet, who was still blushing and clasping her hands before her on the table so hard that he noticed her knuckles turn white. A crackle of energy passed between them as their eyes met.

“Och, ye’ve taken me by surprise, M’laird,” Violet admitted, ducking her head demurely. “Thank ye. Of course, I accept yer invitation to dine with ye if that is yer wish.”

“Good. I’ve arranged for dinner to be served in me study at seven o’clock. I’ll see ye there,” Dominic told her with a small smile, secretly thrilled to have gotten his wish. He got up, his mission accomplished. He wanted to prepare himself to meet her.

“Good night to ye, M’laird, rest well,” Macie told him with a farewell smile.

“Aye, good night, Braither,” Daisy drawled, shooting him another pointed look, which he ignored as he strode to the door.

“Well, ladies, thank ye for the tea. I’ll leave ye to it.”

With a last glance at Violet, he took his leave.

When Violet arrived at the door of the Laird's study at seven o'clock that evening, she quickly ran through a checklist concerning her appearance. The invitation to dine with him had been so unexpected, it had sent her thoughts into a whirl. Suddenly, there had seemed to be a hundred things to do to prepare: bathe, clean her teeth, change her dress, brush out her hair. So, she had soon bidden Macie and Daisy a good evening, then rushed to the kitchens to see Shona and arrange for hot water to be brought up for her to bathe—a luxury she was still getting used to.

Once clean, her hair held back with a red ribbon, she donned a clean shift and her best dress. There had not been many times when she had wished for a prettier, more fashionable one, but this was definitely one of those times. She knew it was silly, but she wanted to look her best, even if all they did was talk. Donning the simple, pale-pink gown with its square-cut neck, she had frowned critically at herself in the looking glass.

Ach, it'll have to do!

Now, standing at his door, she took a deep breath and knocked twice.

She waited for his command to enter. Instead, the door was flung open, and there he was, standing before her. She looked up at him, and they stared at each other like strangers for a few moments. He wasn't exactly smiling, but his usually hard expression and the look in his eyes were softer than usual. Enough to make her heart beat faster.

As if that was not enough to fluster her, he looked breathtakingly handsome. His wavy dark hair appeared freshly washed and combed, and he seemed taller than usual. She realized this was an illusion created by his outfit: a midnight-blue velvet coat with a silver thistle pinned to the lapel, an embroidered waistcoat, a white ruffled shirt, and a dress kilt, the whole finished with soft leather boots. It showed off his muscular, manly figure perfectly. He looked every inch the Laird. And it thrilled her to know that he had done it for her. At least, she hoped so.

Suddenly fearing her expression was betraying her thoughts, she averted her eyes, staring down at the flagstones instead. But to her utter surprise, he reached out and grasped her chin, tilting her head up, looking deeply into her eyes, as if commanding her to look at him. Her head swam, and her legs turned to jelly. She struggled to remain composed as his dark eyes regarded her hungrily.

“Come in,” he said, his deep voice raspy.

He stood back and gestured for her to enter. She passed him by with an involuntary shiver as goosebumps rose on her skin. Inside, the room was bathed with golden lamplight, but a pair of beeswax candles stood on the table as well, their flames flickering in the warm air. It was enchanting. Once more, she was touched that he had taken so much trouble for her.

“Thank ye. Mmm, something smells good,” she observed, sniffing the air as she looked around the cozy room, heading at once for the table.

“Aye, dinner’s already arrived,” he said, shutting the door behind him and following her to the table. He stood next to her as she admired it.

“Och, ’tis grand. I’m nae used to such finery. I hope me table manners are up to it,” she joked as a way to calm her nerves, taking in the white linen and gleaming glass and silverware. And a small vase of wildflowers.

“It’s only ye and me, so nae man’s going to be watching,” he assured her, this time giving her a small smile.

“The flowers are a nice touch,” she said, peeping shyly up at him.

Flowers!

“Shona picked them for ye,” he told her quickly, and she noticed a slight flush on his cheekbones as he spoke. “Would ye like to sit?”

“Aye, thank ye.”

She could not help smiling as he gallantly pulled out a chair for her, a gesture she could not recall anyone ever performing for her. Feeling like a lady, she sat as gracefully as her bad leg would allow and enjoyed every second as he pushed in her

chair and then took the only other seat at the table opposite her. They were now barely a yard distant.

“Will ye have some wine?” He gestured at a bottle standing nearby, one of a pair.

“Aye, I’d love some,” she admitted, her excitement growing as he lifted the bottle and filled their glasses with the ruby-hued liquid.

She watched as he concentrated on the task, mesmerized at the way the candle flames flickered like golden sparks in his eyes and danced across the hard angles of his face, even gilding his scars into some exotic mask.

His scent enveloped her, a heady mixture of musk, woodsmoke, and heather that was so delicious it made her shiver beneath her clothes.

“Thank ye,” she murmured, unable to stop smiling at him as he handed her the glass.

“A toast. To the scarred ones. Long may they live and thrive,” he said, raising a quizzical eyebrow as he lifted his glass.

She laughed and quickly followed suit, repeating his words before they clinked glasses and drank the first sip of the evening.

“Och, ’tis nectar,” she murmured, feeling the cool, silky trail of the wine going down her throat, running her tongue around

her lips to catch the fruity taste. “I dinnae think I’ve ever tasted the like.”

“I’m glad ye like it. It’s one of the wines our faither put down years ago, but he only opened a bottle on special occasions.”

Her ears perked up at that. “Oh? Is this a special occasion, then?” she asked, slightly surprised by the light, teasing tone of her voice.

“Maybe,” he replied, his lips curving at the corners. “That depends on what ye say when ye see the food.”

“Well, it smells good, for sure, but I cannae see it with all these covers on.” She eyed the china covers of the many dishes set out before them.

“Well,” he said, leaning over and taking hold of the lid of a fancy silver dish. “This is the first course.” He lifted the lid with a flourish and set it aside.

“Oh! Oysters! I love oysters,” she cried, unable to prevent herself from clapping her hands with almost childish glee upon seeing the pile of silvery-grey shells flanked by slices of lemon and sprinkled with parsley.

“Tuck in,” he told her, taking up a tiny silver knife and skillfully cracking open one of the shells and then sprinkling it with lemon juice and salt before handing it to her. She took it eagerly.

“Me mouth’s watering already,” she confessed with a chuckle, tilting back her head and upending the shell so the juicy morsel slid down her throat. “Mmm, delicious. Och, I could eat these all day.”

“I ken. There’s nothing quite like them,” he agreed, preparing one for himself and eating it. “They taste of the ocean.”

They made short work of the rest of the oysters, washing them down generously with the wine. By then, she could feel the tension in the room easing, and her nerves had abated. In fact, she was enjoying herself.

“And now, the main course,” the Laird announced eventually, his mood visibly brightening.

“Oh, good. I dinnae ken how it’s possible, but I feel even hungrier now, after those oysters,” she confessed, a little embarrassed.

“Ye have a good appetite, I ken.” He chuckled and whipped the lid off a deep tureen. Fragrant steam billowed out from inside.

Violet leaned over and breathed it in deeply. “That is—” she began. “That is ... amazing. I dinnae have words to describe it, but I dinnae think I’ve ever smelled a dish quite so good.”

“Wait till ye taste it,” he told her, picking up the small ladle provided.

“Should it nae be the lady that does the serving?”

He shook his head. “Nae tonight. I’m the host, so I’m on serving duties. Are ye worried ye willnae get a big enough plateful?” he taunted her, eliciting a giggle as he ladled the rich, creamy chicken dish onto a China plate for her until it almost overflowed. He placed it carefully before her. “Go on, try it. I want to ken what ye think.”

“I’ll wait for ye. I may be greedy, but I think I ken how to mind me manners in the presence of the Laird,” Violet joked, feeling her cheeks heating up from the wine, the luxurious food, but most of all, the very agreeable company.

“I cannae say I’ve noticed,” Dominic countered, his smile growing as he served himself a plate of the chicken. “Och, I almost forgot. Pass me that dish there, will ye?”

She did as she was bid. He set down the dish and took off the lid to reveal a mound of fluffy, light yellow stuff.

“What is that?” she asked, mystified.

“That is mashed potatoes,” he told her, scooping a generous helping onto her plate and then his own.

“Potatoes? I’ve never eaten them. That’s food for rich folks,” she said, poking curiously at the mound with her fork.

“Come on, then, fill yer belly. There’s plenty left if ye want seconds, and dinnae stint yerself with the bread either.”

He nodded at a cloth-covered platter, so she leaned over with her free hand and lifted the cloth. Beneath was a pile of golden-brown rolls and a dish of butter.

“Yer spoiling me, I think, M’laird,” she murmured as their eyes met across the table.

“That’s the idea,” he said, his face so relaxed and boyish that the change was almost shocking to her.

“But why? What have I done to deserve all this? And after I made ye so angry about Daisy and all,” she asked, buttering a roll and passing it to him before selecting one for herself.

“Thank ye,” he said, dipping the roll into the rich sauce. “Och, for everything ye’ve been trying to do for me, treating me wounds, and me headaches. Ye think I haven’t noticed how hard ye’ve been trying? I just wanted to find some way to thank ye properly. And I had a good idea this would be something ye’d appreciate.” He took a big bite of the bread, chewed, and swallowed with a look of satisfaction. “Och, the Wee Man, that’s tasty.”

“Heavenly, I’d say,” she agreed, having just finished her first mouthful and already spooning up a second. She ate it and swallowed, then added, “Ye ken I love a good feed. And ye’re not wrong. I could get used to this.”

“And ye will get used to it, Violet. Did I nae promise ye I’d compensate ye handsomely for agreeing to come to work for me and leaving yer family behind for a whole year?” he asked.

“Aye, ye did,” she said, sitting back in her chair, chewing a succulent morsel of chicken. “The others would be over the moon to eat like this for an evening, to be sure.”

“They will, I’ll make sure of it,” he assured her. “Do ye miss them much?”

“Aye, but I’ve plenty to keep me busy. That helps a bit. But sometimes, I wish they were here to see it all. The castle, I mean,” she explained between mouthfuls of creamy chicken.

“Ye’ve certainly been busy brewing yer concoctions to find a cure for me headaches. I dinnae think that salve really helped, though. The headache came back after ye left and kept me awake again,” he told her with a regretful look.

“Oh, that’s a shame, but I havenae tried everything yet. It’s still early days. I promise ye, we’ll find the answer.”

He nodded, then asked, “Ye ken when I came to yer cottage?”

“Aye, of course.”

“And when I mentioned the headaches, ye looked at me scars. Do ye think there’s a connection between them and the headaches?”

“There could be. It all depends on how deep the burns were.”

“They were pretty deep. I mean, I cannae feel anything there.” He touched his scarred cheek thoughtfully. “I havenae told ye how I came by them, have I?”

Violet was tempted to let him go on without admitting she already knew. But she did not want to mislead him, so she simply told him the truth.

“Daisy said it was during the attack on the castle by the Laird of Farlane.”

“That’s right. A black day that was.” He paused, staring at his plate for a moment.

Seeing it must be painful for him to talk about, Violet put down her spoon out of respect and took a drink of wine.

“Aye. It must have been terrible. I’m sorry about yer faither.”

“Thank ye.” He noticeably brought himself back from his reverie. “How much did Daisy tell ye, about how I got me scars?”

“Um, not much, really, just that ye were fighting and got burned when the castle was set afire.”

“Aye. I was fighting a Farlane, I recall that clear enough. But all I remember afterwards is waking up on the castle green, with half me face burned off, and Daisy and Delilah crying over me.” Again, he paused. Then, looking her straight in the eye, he said, “And watching that murdering dog Keegan kill

me faither right in front of me eyes, and I couldnae do a thing to stop him.”

Instinctually, Violet reached across the table and briefly laid her hand on his, wanting to comfort him.

“I’m so sorry, M’laird. The Laird of Farlane was an evil man who deserved to die.”

“Aye, right enough. But I couldnae save me faither, d’ye see, Violet? And he was a good man who certainly didnae deserve to die at the hands of that fiend! It wasnae a fair fight.”

“What happened?” she asked, having never seen him so animated.

He shook his head. “It was a surprise attack, and the castle was quickly overrun by Keegan’s men. They killed everyone they met and set the place afire with burning arrows. As I hear it, Faither fought with Keegan out on the castle green. Somehow, Faither was mortally wounded. He was trying to defend me sisters when Keegan killed him in front of them. Then, me braither-in-law, the Laird of O’Reid, killed Keegan. But it was too late for Faither.”

“Tell me about him,” she coaxed, curious, but also hoping to distract him from the horrible memories of that time. “What was he like?”

She leaned forward, listening intently as he began to speak, noticing how his face suddenly brightened at her enquiry, as if dark clouds were fleeing before sunshine.

“Stubborn as hell!” he suddenly blurted out with a rueful laugh. “He was the stubbornest man ye ever could meet. And he had such a temper on him as well at times. But he was clever, and just, and a wonderful faither to us children. We thought the world of him, though he drove us mad at times. And he was a good laird too. Ask anyone around here. They’ll tell ye. He taught me everything he kenned about what it is to be a good chief. I’ll always be grateful to him.”

“He sounds a fine man. I wish I could have met him.” Violet sighed. “Me Faither left us a couple of years after Maither died,” she explained. “He couldnae cope with all of us bairns by himself. ’Twas the grief, I suppose.”

“I’m sorry to hear it. What happened, then? Ye cannae have been very old yerself when he left ye all.”

“Nigh on sixteen. I was the eldest, so I had to step in and care for them. The twins dinnae even remember any other maither than me, for they were still babies then,” she told him matter-of-factly before mopping up the remaining sauce with a piece of bread and popping it in her mouth.

“That’s a lot of responsibility for a young lassie. How did ye manage? Make yer bread and all?” he asked, pushing his empty plate aside and sipping his wine, his eyes full of curiosity.

“Well,” she said reflectively, pushing her plate away also and picking up her glass again. She chose her next words carefully, not wanting to give too much away about the real circumstances of her mother’s death.

She did not wish to see suspicion and disgust etched on the Laird's face when he learned the truth, as she had on so many others. And she certainly did not want to be painted with the same brush as her mother, for if that should happen, she would be lucky to leave the castle with her life.

She took a long sip of her wine.

"I was Maither's apprentice. Ye ken I told ye she was a healer?" He nodded, and she continued, "She was a loving woman, who cared greatly for the suffering of others, and she was very skilled at the healing arts. I seemed to share her talent from an early age, so I suppose it was natural for me to follow in her footsteps. So, that was how I supported me family after Faither left, healing folks in the village, along with Aiden doing farm work when he was old enough."

"It sounds like a hard life."

"Aye, it was at times, like when I couldnae earn enough to fill the children's bellies. But dinnae get me wrong, we had plenty of good times too. I suppose ye could say adversity made us closer than ever. And ye dinnae always need to be rich to be happy," she finished, drinking deeply of her wine again after the long speech.

Thankfully, so far, the Laird had not asked more about her mother.

"Now ye've said all that, I think I understand a bit better why ye were so reluctant to leave them."

She nodded. “Aye. And why I decided to come with ye. ’Tis likely the only chance I’ll have to do something to make their lives better.”

They looked at each other across the table, and she felt again the sense of some deep current passing silently between them, some sort of buried connection linking them inextricably, which neither had ever known before.

The Laird seemed to shake himself and smiled at her. She had never seen him looking so young and relaxed despite the heavy conversation, and the sight warmed her further. She smiled back.

“Well, thank ye, that was a delicious dinner,” she said at last.

“Ach, I forgot,” he muttered, “we have pudding too. Pass me that platter, will ye?”

She nodded, doing as he bid her.

“What do ye say to this, then?” Lifting the lid, he revealed the centerpiece of the meal he had planned so meticulously.

“Och, the Wee Man be praised!” Violet cried with delight, her eyes devouring the tower of shortbread, strawberries, and thickly whipped cream before her. “We cannae eat that, it’s too bonny to mess with,” she declared, laughing.

“I assure ye, that is exactly what we’re going to do,” the Laird insisted with a grin, seizing a cake slice and brandishing it over the elaborate confection. “Now, pass me a clean plate.”

The next quarter of an hour was spent with them sharing the cream-laden desert, as excited as two children.

“These strawberries are the sweetest I’ve ever tasted, I’m sure,” Violet said at last when the final spoonful had been swallowed, and both plates and serving dish had been scraped clean. “In truth, I’ve never tasted anything like it.”

“Aye. Roger has done us proud, all right. That’s me favorite pudding, ye see, and he kens how to make it just right,” the Laird told her with an approving grin, finally putting down his spoon.

“Och, ’tis yer favorite, is it nae? I think it’s mine too, now that I’ve tasted it,” she said laughingly, sitting back in her seat and patting her belly appreciatively. “But I feel as stuffed as a Hogmanay goose. I dinnae think I’ll be able to move for the rest of the evening.”

He laughed. “Same here. Luckily, we dinnae have to. We can just stay here and finish this wine off instead.”

They had already drunk half of the second bottle. Now, he topped up their glasses with the last of the wine. He raised his glass in a mock toast, so she did the same.

“What are we to toast this time?” she asked.

“To strawberry shortcake!” he declared, making her giggle uncontrollably.

“To strawberry shortcake!” she managed to repeat when she had recovered somewhat.

When the wine had gone and the clock on the mantel had chimed midnight, Violet decided it was time to take her leave.

“I think the wine and all the excitement has made me tired,” she confessed, feeling herself drooping in her chair.

“Aye, ’tis late. Ye’d better go to bed. I hope ye enjoyed the dinner, though.” He smiled across at her before getting up and coming around the table to pull out her chair.

“I cannae remember a meal I’ve enjoyed so much. Thank ye again,” she replied, getting to her feet a little unsteadily. She caught his arm to right herself. “Whoops! I think I’m a wee bit tipsy. I suppose I’m not used to the wine. It’s strong!”

“Dinnae worry,” he assured her, tucking her arm in his, “I’ll escort ye to yer chambers.”

So, down the corridor they tottered together, with her thrilled to feel the Laird so big and strong at her side. She felt utterly protected. They drew a few interested looks as they passed through the hall to the staircase and slowly made their way up it.

Finally, they were at her door. She did not want to let go of him, but she gave herself a mental shake and told herself to be sensible. Much as she wanted to hurl herself at him and taste his lips once more, she knew it could not happen again.

Besides, ye've had enough excitement for the night.

“How's yer head feeling?” she asked him, suddenly remembering her duties as she opened the door to her chamber and lingered on the threshold, fighting the urge to pull him inside.

“It's fine, actually,” he replied, shaking his head slightly and looking somewhat surprised. “I'd forgotten all about me headache.”

“That's interesting,” she said, resolved to think about what it might mean in the morning despite her befuddled brain. “I have a good idea for another concoction that might help. I'll make it up and bring it to ye tomorrow if that will suit ye. And ye can tell me if the one ye drank earlier has any effect.”

“Aye, that'll be grand, thank ye. Good night, then. Get some rest.” He smiled down at her, his eyes dark liquid in the dim light.

She had to resist the urge to plant a kiss on his lips. Instead, she forced herself to go into her chamber.

She turned to face him, her heart full of longing. “Thank ye for the wonderful dinner. 'Twas the best I've ever had. Goodnight. Sleep well, M'laird.”

She was just about to shut the door when he suddenly blocked it with his boot, preventing her from doing so. As she looked up at him questioningly, he leaned casually against the doorframe and bent his head until his lips were close to her ear. His breath, warm and deliciously wine-scented, caressed her bare skin, sending tiny flames of desire rippling over her entire body.

“When it’s just me and thee, it’s Dominic,” he whispered raspily into her ear, his lips brushing her cheek, making the tiny flames ignite into a searing fire within her.

Violet’s breath hitched in her throat as it seemed to leave her body. She felt so near to swooning that she had to grip the door handle tightly to stay upright.

He moved back a little, staring into her eyes in a way that was doing nothing to aid her in her struggle to resist the clamor of her body.

“Good night, then... Dominic,” she managed to whisper back eventually, his name like sweet music on her tongue.

She forced herself to back away despite the burning urge to fling herself into his arms and kiss him again. He peeled his long length from the doorframe and stood up to his full height, smiling at her one last time before making his way down the hallway to his chambers. Violet’s heart ached with loss as she watched him through the crack in the door until his tall frame disappeared around the corner, and she shut it at last.

In bed, lulled by a full belly and all the wine she had drunk, she soon fell asleep, her dreams a colorful whirl of eating delicious mashed potatoes, demolishing a strawberry confection covered in cream, and most vividly of all, the sound of the Laird's carefree laughter.

“*W*hat’s this one got in it?” Dominic asked a few days later as they stood once more at the desk in his study in what had become a daily ritual. He turned his nose up at the grayish liquid sloshing about in the horn cup Violet handed to him.

“Valerian, orris root, feverfew, sweet fennel, amongst others,” she told him, watching intently as he drank the contents of the cup and banged it down on the desk.

“Ugh!” He swiped his mouth with the back of his hand. “So bitter.”

“I ken. I’m so sorry to have to keep putting ye through this, but until I find the right mixture, we just have to keep going. I’m determined to find a cure for ye.”

“Aye, and I dinnae mean to sound ungrateful, ye ken? But they do taste bad.” He looked up at her as if concerned he might have upset her.

But she merely nodded. “Nae. I understand completely. Hopefully, we won’t have to do this many more times before

we hit on something that does the trick. I must say, I'm very disappointed that nothing else has worked so far. I've never been at such a loss before. But, as Maither used to say, ye cannae just give up when someone's in pain. Ye have to keep trying."

"Good advice," he said. "Now, how are things going with ye and Daisy?"

"Ach, she's the perfect pupil, listens to everything I say, and works hard," Violet replied. "Without blowing me own trumpet, I feel quite proud of how much she's learned in such a short time. She has a knack for it."

"Well, it's always been her passion ever since she was small, making us swallow pills made from spit and paper if we said we had so much as a twinge," Dominic said with an affectionate chuckle.

"Hmm, spit and paper. We havenae tried that one yet. It might just work!" Violet joked.

"I think I prefer yer concoctions," he retorted, making a funny face that made her giggle.

"Well, I must get back to the healing room. I promised to help Macie by pounding some roots for her. It hurts her hands these days," Violet said after a short pause.

She always found it hard to leave him. They seemed to have such interesting conversations, and she enjoyed gradually learning more about him.

“I’ll see ye later.”

“Aye, off ye go, then. I have things to get on with. I’ll let ye ken if this medicine does any good,” he promised before they said farewell and Violet left the study.

She hurried along the corridor, still racking her brain as to why her concoctions were not curing his headaches, when she could not help but notice that some of the servants appeared to be watching her closely as she passed. Usually, they were a cheerful lot and greeted her respectfully. It worried her to see that some of the looks did not seem particularly friendly.

She would not have thought much of it if it had been on just one occasion, but it had been happening over the last four or five days, each time she visited the Laird to try out a new cure. And if she was not mistaken, the looks seemed to multiply and grow less friendly by the day.

Then, she noticed a familiar man standing on the other side of the hall, staring at her stonily. It was the councilman, the one Dominic called his friend, Leon McGuire. She frowned. Irked by the unfriendly looks she had been getting from the servants, she bristled to find him staring at her. Pulling herself up to her full height and lifting her chin, she boldly approached him.

He looked surprised when she confronted him.

“Good day to ye,” she said, staring back at him.

“Er, good day,” he replied with a look of distaste, which irked her even more.

“Care to tell me what it is that ye find so interesting about me?” she demanded. He looked at her blankly, so she continued, “Did ye nae think I would notice ye staring at me?”

He looked down his nose haughtily and said, “I’d have thought ye’d have kenned the reason, and it isnae just me staring at ye.”

That caught her unawares, and her confidence faltered a little.

“I dinnae ken what ye’re talking about,” she replied, folding her arms across her chest.

He inclined his head to the side and gave her a sarcastic smile. “I see. So, the Laird hasnae told ye, then?”

Violet frowned. “Told me what, exactly?”

“About the rumors going around. About ye and him.”

The man looked so pleased with himself, she could have slapped him but for the fact that she was truly perplexed by what he was saying, and a little fearful.

Rumors about me and the Laird. Could someone have seen us kissing?

“I have nae clue about any rumors. Are ye going to enlighten me?”

“Certainly.” Leon rubbed his hands together. “So, ye havenae heard what folks are saying around the castle and the villages?”

“Nay.”

“That ye’ve bewitched him, that ye’ve charmed him, and that ye’re influencing the decisions he makes—highly unpopular decisions with some, I might add.”

For a few moments, she could not even speak, she was so shocked. It was far worse than she had expected.

“Bewitched him? The Laird? And I’m supposed to be influencing his decisions, is that what ye’re saying?” she eventually managed to ask, hating the trembling in her voice.

“I’m nae saying it. I’m just telling ye what ye wanted to ken—the reason why folks are staring at ye.” Leon gave a horrid little smile, clearly enjoying himself at her expense.

Despite being badly shaken, she still had some fight in her. “’Tis naught but stupid lies,” she spat out.

His eyebrows rose. “That may be so, and evidently, the Laird agrees with ye, for he didnae see fit to tell ye about it.” He gave her a warning look. “But in me view, ye’d be foolish to dismiss the danger these rumors pose to the both of ye.”

Her heart lurched at his words, the terrible past forcing its way to the forefront of her mind so that anxiety flared within her.

“Danger? What d’ye mean?” she demanded.

He appeared almost pitying as he explained as if to a young child.

“Well, clearly some folks are suggesting ye have some sort of power over our Laird, power to influence his political decisions to do with the McGunns and the Farlanes. In their eyes, that’s meddling in clan affairs, when ye’ve no right to and yer intentions are unknown.”

Violet’s hand went to her mouth as she gasped, cut to the quick by the implication of his words. “But I would never—”

“It disnae matter what ye say if folks believe it. I’ll tell ye for free. I advised the Laird to send ye away, back to that village ye came from. That would be the safest thing for both of ye, mark me words.” He paused to frown at her, his brows beetling before adding hollowly, “But he refused to even hear of it.”

That knowledge gave Violet strength. “Aye, because he isnae a superstitious fool,” she retorted, her hands on her hips.

“Nae everyone who’s superstitious is a fool, lassie, and folks around here dinnae take kindly to anyone they think is manipulating the Laird for their own purposes. Ye must see

that yer presence here is undermining him, affecting his ability to command.”

“But I tell ye again, these rumors are nonsense! I have nae wish to do anything but help folks, help the Laird,” Violet insisted, boiling with frustration. “And I’m nae going to leave him when he came all the way to fetch me himself.”

Leon shook his head despairingly. “Wisht, child, can ye nae understand? Let me give ye a wee warning, as the Laird’s closest friend. If ye care anything for him and his reputation, the best thing ye can do is leave the castle as soon as possible. That’s the only way these rumors can be stopped. If ye dinnae go, they’ll only grow worse, and who kens what may happen then?

“The longer ye stay, the more harm ye’re doing to him,” he spoke with an air of finality, drawing himself up and gathering his tartan around himself. “Now, ye must excuse me. I have important business to attend to.” He turned his back on her and walked off, leaving her standing alone, shaking with fury, frustration, and fear.

Noticing she was being watched again and now knowing what was being said about her, instead of returning to the healing room, Violet went straight to her chambers. There, she sat on the bed, her head in her hands, just restraining herself from throwing all her belongings into a bundle and leaving the castle right away.

She did not want to leave Dominic, and she knew he would be very angry if she left like that. He would probably come and find her and drag her back. But Leon’s words rang in her ears.

“If ye care anything for him and his reputation, the best thing ye can do is leave the castle as soon as possible... The longer ye stay, the more harm ye’re doing to him.”

There’s more to it as well, for few folks ken how such talk can get out of hand quickly and end with terrible tragedy, as it did with Maither. Could I suffer the same fate as her if I stay?

It was only after some time that Violet raised her eyes and saw a letter lying on her nightstand. She picked it up, immediately recognizing Breagha’s writing. Needing a distraction from her fears, she ripped it open and began to read the news from home. She was thankful that everyone was well, but the next few lines caught her attention.

... and the day after ye left us, a whole cartload of things arrived at the door. We thought the driver had come to the wrong house at first, but he assured us that the things were bound for the Duncan family, all sent by the Laird. And when he started to unload the cart and we carried the things inside, Violet, you’ve never seen the like!

We all have new clothes and boots that fit, and soap to wash with, and bags and bags of corn and flour, and packets of tea and sugar, and all sorts of lovely delicacies like cakes and different meats. Och, we’ve been dining on it ever since. We even have glass in the windows now, for another man came and fitted it. And he promised to come back and fix the roof soon too!

Violet could not help but smile and put a hand to her chest to feel Breagha’s excitement fairly leaping off the page. And Dominic’s generosity warmed her, for he had done exactly what he said he would. And this was only the start of the better life she wanted for her family, it seemed. Her gratitude knew

no bounds. If he had been there, she would have flung her arms about him and kissed him to Kingdom Come.

The news from home conflicted with her fears over what Leon had told her about the rumors. After thinking about it for some time, she decided he was most likely lying since he clearly disliked her, and she was determined he would not scare her away. At least, not before she had shown her appreciation to Dominic for everything that he had done for her family.

Putting her fears aside, she began to ponder what she could do for him, wanting it to be a surprise. Then, it came to her. It was high summer, the perfect time of year for a picnic. That was it, a picnic! She resolved to go and see Shona the following day and start putting her plans in motion, in secret.



“Why all the mystery?” Dominic asked a couple of days later as he followed Violet through the castle grounds and towards the river. “Will ye nae at least tell me where we’re going?”

“Just wait and see,” Violet told him, her face alight with excitement. She looked like a mischievous child, and he found it adorable.

“Ye said ye have something to show me. What is it? Can ye nae just tell me about it?” he asked, unable to stop smiling even as he grumbled.

“Och, ye’re so impatient,” she told him, laughing. “Come on. It’s only a little bit further.”

They came to the riverbank, and she turned left along the path, seemingly quite sure of where she was heading. They approached a clump of weeping willow trees, whose dangling branches brushed the surface of the water.

“We used to play under here a lot when we were younger,” he told her, getting excited himself as he followed her in. “I think I ken where ye’re taking me now.”

He well recalled the little gravel beach where they had used to paddle as children, spending hours messing about on the riverbank and in the water. It all seemed such a long time ago.

“This way.” Violet ducked under the low branches, holding them aside for him to come after her. Once through the trees, she turned and pulled the last of the branches aside for him so he could step through. The sight that met his eyes was so unexpected and delightful that he burst out laughing.

“Och!” he exclaimed, genuinely surprised, surveying the spread that had been laid out on a large plaid blanket, along with some cushions. “A picnic!”

“Aye. It’s for us to share,” she explained, beaming at him while looking a little anxious. “Do ye like it?”

“Of course, I like it,” he told her, deeply touched. “It all looks splendid. Ye’ve obviously gone to a lot of trouble to organize it all. But I dinnae understand the reason behind it. I mean, what made ye arrange all this? And be so secretive about it into the bargain, luring me out here under false pretenses,” he added with mock severity.

She clasped her hands and smiled somewhat bashfully, looking so girlish it made his heart glow.

“I wanted to find a way of thanking ye for all ye’ve done for me family while I’ve been at the castle. Breagha wrote to me about it,” she confessed. “They’re all over the moon, and all because of ye. I want ye to ken how much I appreciate ye keeping yer word.”

“Did ye think I wouldnae? Ye have nae faith in the word of the Laird o’ McGunn, is that it?” he demanded, keeping up the pretense of severity as he sat down on the plaid and leaned on a cushion, looking up at her. To his eyes, she looked good enough to eat.

“Nay, but I didnae expect ye to do anything like that so soon,” she told him, sitting opposite him across the sea of dishes and plates arranged before them. “No one has ever been so kind to us before.”

The sun struck her eyes, and he noticed they were shining with unshed tears and that she was trying to hide the fact from him. He decided to distract her.

“Now, what have we here?” he asked in a playful tone, lifting lids and unwrapping mysterious packages to reveal what lay beneath. “Roast chicken, sliced roast beef, ham—why, ye ken a way to a man’s heart, Violet!” he laughed.

She followed suit. “Boiled eggs, pork pie, with a nice shortcrust, and mustard too. A selection of cheeses, fresh oatcakes, and...” She unveiled the last large platter.

“Strawberry shortcake!” they cried in unison, then burst out laughing.

“Ye need to get the wine,” she told him as she doled out clean plates and a pair of robust goblets.

He looked around, confused. “Where is it, then? I cannae see anything resembling wine.”

“It’s in the river, just there, tied to that tree root with a string.” She pointed.

“Of course, it is. Why did I nae think of that?” He sighed, getting up and retrieving the bottle.

Violet held up the goblets while he poured generous servings of the fizzy, golden wine into them. They clinked glasses and drank.

“Ach, the bubbles are tickling me nose,” she complained with a small sneeze, followed by giggling from both of them.

As they sat in the sun, eating and drinking their fill, watching the river go by, and talking and laughing about nothing in particular, Dominic stared at her, mesmerized. He knew he was smiling like a loon, but he simply could not help himself.

She was beautiful and desirable, funny and clever, and she had a sweet, sweet soul. He counted himself extremely lucky to have Violet in his life. No one had ever made him feel as

happy as he did at that moment in a very, very long time, and he wanted it to last forever.

“*A*ch, I’ve eaten so much! I think we should go for a stroll to walk it off,” Dominic said with a groan, patting his belly.

He was leaning back on a cushion next to Violet, looking more relaxed than she had ever seen him. Her cares had slipped away in his company, and she glowed with inner happiness to see him smiling and laughing—the usual tension had completely evaporated. The picnic had been a grand idea.

“Very well, let’s go for a walk. In fact, I ken just where to go.” She rose and brushed down her skirts.

“Oh? I hope ye realize I ken me way around this place better than ye,” he said, also getting to his feet. “Ye cannae surprise me.”

“I surprised ye with the picnic, did I nae?” she countered mischievously.

“I’ll give ye that one, I suppose, but I meant *places*,” he pointed out.

“Well, Macie has told me about a pretty place that I would like to see, so I thought we could go there. It’s a little hidden glen somewhere along the riverbank near here, to the west, I think.” Putting up a hand to shield her eyes from the sun, she looked in that direction.

The picture she presented to him then, with her vivid coloring, her trim shape outlined by a nimbus of light, he knew would be seared in his heart forever.

“I think I ken where she means. Come on, then. I’ll show ye the way.” He suddenly grasped her hand, which surprised and delighted her, and she grasped his back firmly, loving how his much larger one swallowed her hand. “It’s this way.”

They strolled along the path, hand in hand, with the rushing river on one side and an area wooded with pines on the other.

“It’s so beautiful here. It must have been wonderful growing up here as a bairn,” she remarked as they admired the pretty scene.

“Aye, but I suppose that’s just it; if ye’re born here, ye kind of take all this for granted, somewhat. And, of course, then ye grow up, and there are other things to occupy yer attention.”

“Ye sound a wee bit said when ye say that,” she observed, looking up at him.

“There are days when I miss the freedom, aye.” He nodded.

“Aye, I ken what ye mean. Childhood’s too short,” she agreed.

They reached where a small track led into the now thickening woods.

“We have to go this way,” he told her, pulling her behind him and into the shadows, where the scent of pine filled the air. Violet breathed it in happily, invigorated.

They walked for a little while, following the track through the tree trunks, until it turned a sharp left, and they entered a hidden green bower.

“Och, it’s so pretty, just like Macie said!” she exclaimed, admiring the cushiony turf lining the floor of the miniature glen, a snug little hollow nestled between tree roots and rocks.

Rays of the sun struck through the canopy overhead and to the side facing the river, igniting the vivid oranges, yellows, and greens of the mossy outcroppings within. It was completely private, for the surrounding woods provided a screen that shielded them from prying eyes. All that could be heard was the rushing water, birdsong, and the soughing of the breeze in the trees.

“We used to call this Fairy Hollow,” Dominic told her, letting go of her hand at last and pulling her down to sit beside him on a log while looking around with interest. “It must be years since I’ve been here.”

“It is magical, indeed. I wouldnae be surprised if a fairy popped up in front of us,” Violet agreed with a small laugh.

“They’re probably watching us right now.”

“We’d best be on our best behavior, then,” he warned with mock gravity. “Ye dinnae want to annoy a fairy.”

“It’s turning out to be quite a magical day,” he said, turning to her with a smile. “Thank ye for bringing me here, reminding me of this place and the happy times we used to have here as bairns.”

“I’m glad ye’re enjoying the surprise.”

“It’s perfect. Thank ye, Violet, for arranging all this.” He looked serious for a moment.

“Nay, it’s me that’s supposed to be thanking ye, do ye nae remember?” she asked, a sudden wave of nervousness making her tremble slightly, wondering if this was the right moment to tell him what she knew.

Or will it ruin everything?

“Ach, ye’re trembling!” he cried, taking her hand again and rubbing it between his own. “Are ye cold?” he asked solicitously, searching her face with his eyes.

She shook her head, liking the sensation of him rubbing her hand even as she steeled herself for what she wanted to say.

“Nay, I’m nae cold, but there’s something I want to talk about with ye that’s making me a wee bit anxious. I wanted us to be away from the castle, so nae one can hear us.”

His eyebrows shot up. “Naebody’s been unkind to ye or hurt ye, have they, Violet? Because if they have—”

“Nay, nay, ’tis nothing like that.” She squeezed his hand to reassure him.

Though Leon had been rude and nasty, looking down his nose at her, she was not about to tell tales about the Laird’s friend and advisor.

“Well, come on, say yer piece, then. I’m all on tenterhooks now, ye ken?”

She pulled her hand from between his and folded her hands in her lap, gathering her thoughts.

“De ye ken, there are rumors going about the castle?”

He laughed. “There are always rumors going about the castle. I dinnae concern meself with them.”

“Ye might want to concern yerself with this, though.”

He stared at her for a moment as if gauging her seriousness. “Come on, out with it,” he said at last, his eyes locked on hers. “What’s the latest gossip about this time?”

“Us.”

He was visibly startled, his eyes widening. “Us? What do ye mean exactly?”

“I heard that some folks hereabouts are saying that... that I’ve put an enchantment on ye.” As she spoke, she noticed a strange look pass across his face, but it was so fleeting, she could not make out what it was.

“And?”

That sounded ominous, but she forced herself to continue. “That I’m wielding some sort of power over ye, to influence yer decisions.”

“Ye’re influencing me decisions,” he repeated flatly.

“Aye, to do with the Farlanes,” she elaborated, glad to have got it out.

All his smiles had vanished, and the lines of concern had reappeared around his eyes. Yet, he did not seem as surprised or angry as she had expected he might be.

“Have ye truly nae heard of it?”

“Aye, I’ve heard of it, but as I say, I dinnae listen to rumors and superstition,” he spoke firmly but earnestly. “And ye

dinnae need to concern yerself with that sort of nonsense, Violet. There are, sad to say, troublemakers at work in the clan just now. They'll do and say anything to make me life as Laird more difficult. Pay no mind."

"I only wish I could," she told him, saddened that their lovely time together was likely about to come to an abrupt end.

"What d'ye mean?" he asked, frowning.

"I have to pay mind to such rumors, for they can be very dangerous for the likes of me—a healer," she explained. "Surely, ye can see that? I mean, folks saying I've bewitched ye, cast a spell over ye to influence what ye say and do. Ye ken what it means."

"What?! That ye're a witch and ye've put a spell on me? Come on, Violet, that's just childish superstition. Ye ken what folks are like at times. I tell ye, ye just have to ignore them, and they'll go away."

"I wish it was as simple as that, Dominic, but there's grave danger in such rumors for me."

"But why? What dangers?" he asked with some exasperation.

There was a pause. Then, she said, "I never told ye how I got me burn, did I?"

He looked nonplussed. "What's that got to do with what we're talking about?"

“Everything. Now, listen. I told ye Maither died when I was sixteen, and I took over raising the bairns.”

“Aye.”

“I need to tell ye how she died.”

“All right. If ye must. But I still dinnae see—”

“I got that burn trying to save our maither when she was being burned at the stake for, allegedly, being a witch.”

The silence that fell between them was so crushing, Violet could no longer hear the birds nor the water. She had never spoken the words aloud before, and they had felt cold, like stones, as they left her tongue. She felt a dull ache in her chest and a faint buzzing in her ears. She dared not look at Dominic for fear of the repulsion she was sure she would see in his face, knowing she would not be able to bear it.

Now, all this will come to an end. I'll be lucky to be packed off home in one piece. But I dinnae want to leave...

“I had to tell ye meself before things get any worse, what with these rumors going around the place,” she said eventually, staring down at her fidgeting fingers.

“What happened? To yer maither, I mean. How?”

She looked up, and her heart leaped to see sympathy and sorrow written across his handsome features rather than anger and disgust.

“Well, Maither always wanted to do her utmost to help anyone who was sick. She was always making new cures, and eventually, after a lot of work, she made one that would work as an antidote to Belladonna—ye ken, what they call the Deadly Night-Shade. It’s a commonly-used deadly poison derived from the foxglove plant. Ye only need a tiny bit to kill someone,” she explained.

“Aye, I’ve heard of it,” Dominic said with a nod.

“Eventually, Maither came across a patient who’d been poisoned in that way. It was certain he would die, for there was no known antidote. The priest had administered the last rites and everything. But Maither begged to be allowed to try one last thing to save him, for the family’s sake. Ye see, she’d been trying to make an antidote for that poison for years, and she’d arrived at a recipe she thought might work, but she had nae way to test it. Until then, that was. So, she made it up and dosed the patient with it, and it worked. He recovered completely.”

“Well, that’s grand, is it nae?” Dominic asked, clearly listening intently to her tale.

“Nay, ’twas quite the opposite. The family and the physician said it was unnatural, that the patient should have died, for the dose of poison was lethal, and his death was according to God’s will. By curing the patient, they said, Maither had gone against God’s wishes. They claimed the only way she could have performed such an unnatural act was if she was in league with the Devil. Therefore, she must be a witch.”

“Och, God help her! That’s terrible!” Dominic cried, taking Violet’s hands once more and holding them tightly as he gazed at her with open horror. “The sheer ignorance of it!”

“Aye. They dragged her away and locked her up, held some farce of a trial. Never mind that she’d saved half of them at one time or another, and their children and elders too. All that was forgotten. They were only too pleased to see her burn.”

A sob escaped Violet’s lips as she spoke of that bitter time.

A large, comforting arm went around her shoulders as Dominic pulled her to his chest and cradled her there while she sniffed back tears.

“I can hardly believe it,” he said, his deep voice rumbling against her ear as her head lay against his chest. “I’m so, so sorry for all of ye, Violet. For yer poor maither to be treated that way after she’d only tried to help and saved her patient too. Why, it’s too cruel. But ye too have suffered, and the wee bairns too.”

“Aye, it was hard, right enough,” she mumbled, finding solace in his voice and the rocking motion of his arms.

“Do ye remember seeing yer maither’s death and running into the fire to save her, then?” he asked, looking at her intently.

She shook her head. “Nay, I dinnae remember a thing. And I thank God for that mercy.”

He held her more tightly, nodding. “Aye, that’s a blessing, I suppose.”

“It is in some ways, but I’m reminded of it every day when I dress or undress. Me leg never lets me forget,” she admitted.

“’Tis the same for me with me face. Every time I look in the looking glass, I see Faither being murdered by that swine. Ye’re right, our scars dinnae ever let us forget what’s been torn from us by cruel fate.”

Violet twisted her neck so she could see his face better. A mixture of sorrow for him and relief washed through her.

He understands the pain because he’s lived through it too.

Dominic met her gaze, his brown eyes melting her with the whirlwind of emotions they contained. She felt the urgent need to reassure him.

“Ye ken I’m nae a witch, Dominic, d’ye nae? Ye ken I would never hurt ye,” she said softly, her hands against his chest.

He held her closer, gazing at her face. “I ken it well, Violet, I ken it well,” he murmured. “I trust ye completely.”

They stayed like that for a moment until their heads moved inexorably closer, and their lips finally met in a tender, lingering kiss.

The kiss deepened and intensified until all other thoughts fled Violet's mind. She was in heaven as Dominic's arms enfolded her, pressing her against his chest, her body singing in response to his questing tongue.

Without breaking the kiss, she wriggled and pushed herself up, turning herself so her thighs were hooked over his and she could face him directly. He pulled her onto his lap, and they kissed some more, their breaths becoming more urgent and ragged as their excitement increased. She gasped aloud to feel Dominic's hands begin to slide over her form, as if he were a blind man committing the curve of her hip, her waist and, finally, her breasts to memory.

She threw back her head, vibrating with wanton pleasure as his mouth traced a hot trail of kisses from her lips all the way down the soft flesh of her décolletage to the neck of her dress. His hands cupped her breasts, squeezing them and rolling them in his palms with increasing fervor. Pleasure shot through her until she felt weak with desire, unable and unwilling to deny herself the novel and exquisite sensations he was making her feel.

Dominic lifted his eyes and looked at her, the hunger in his gaze turning her insides to water.

He wants me as much as I want him!

The thought had her doing something she never thought she would ever do; she reached up and eased down the neckline of her dress, inch by inch, teasing him. Giving a low moan deep in his throat, Dominic nuzzled the emerging plump globes with obvious enjoyment. She watched through slitted eyes as his lips smiled against her skin, and she arched her back for more when his tongue joined his hands to skillfully tantalize her sensitive peaks, making them harden into points as he sucked, licked, and nibbled at them, until her entire body trembled with want.

Violet felt as if she might swoon, for the sensations possessing her were so powerful, they robbed her of strength.

“I think I’m going to faint,” she murmured, her fingers tangled in his hair, thrusting her breasts into his face, urgently craving more of his attention.

“I’ll soon remedy that,” he whispered hoarsely, lifting her bodily as he stood up before laying her gently down on the soft turf beneath them and stretching out beside her. “Ye should have nae fear of falling now,” he added, leaning over her on one elbow and sliding her dress down to her waist.

His appreciative look fanned the flames of Violet’s desire in a way she had never imagined possible—that was until he returned his attention to her naked breasts more enthusiastically than ever.

Violet writhed beneath him, offering her exposed flesh up to him with abandon. With a slight shock, she suddenly felt his manhood pressing hard against her hip. She was amazed that she had the power to make him so aroused, and it enflamed her passions further.

“Och, Violet,” he breathed against her, “ye dinnae ken how beautiful ye are.”

“It’s nae me who’s the beautiful one,” she gasped, moaning and arching her back further as he knelt beside her and began trailing burning kisses down her belly, grasping her by the hips.

He laughed against her skin. “Ach, ye’ll be telling me I’m pretty next, with me dashing scars and all,” he joked.

“Ye’re beautiful to me,” she told him, stroking his cheek and gazing at him as he continued to torment her excited flesh with his mouth.

She wriggled and moaned, still getting used to the sensations he was causing her to feel when she suddenly felt his hands beneath her skirts.

Mesmerized, her eyes widened as he slowly pushed them up so that she felt the warm summer air play against her skin as he exposed her legs. The ingrained reflex to push her skirts down again evaporated when his large, rough palms glided sensually up and down her legs, making them tremble. When he raised her leg and his lips touched her scarred thigh, peppering the injured flesh with tiny, tender kisses, she knew

she was undone. She lay back, parting her thighs, her hands in his hair, and gave herself up to this unknown pleasure.

She moaned as Dominic nibbled and sucked his way luxuriously up her inner thighs, the secret folds of flesh between them now burning with desire for his diligent caresses. With some surprise, she felt herself growing moist there, and when she felt his warm breath on her and his tongue parted her soft hair to flick repeatedly across the sensitive nubbin of flesh at the head of her sex, the warm wetness throbbing there was like a cry urging him on.

His fingers parted her legs further and brushed across her rosebud as they delved into her hot, secret folds and explored them intimately in a way she had never imagined possible, making her gasp with pleasure. She pressed her sex against him wantonly, all her inhibitions flown to the wind.

Wanting more, she opened herself further to him, determined he should know all of her. It was like fireworks going off in her body, like nothing she had ever felt. Loud moans spilled out of her lips, and her fingers gripped his locks tightly when he cupped her behind and lifted her closer to his lips, his darting tongue teasing her entrance, his mouth devouring her as if she was some sweet, exotic fruit.

Her head rolled back, gasping, her eyes narrowing when she felt him slide a finger inside her. She glanced down at him to find he was looking up at her, and though he had his face buried between her legs, his eyes were smiling. It made her even bolder, and she pressed him into her so he could pleasure her further. He added another finger, and she moaned as they dived in and out of her rhythmically, pounding her harder, spreading her nether lips wider.

Jolts of intense pleasure turned into a wave of irresistible compulsion like she had never felt before, which rose from her melting core and moved up her body, making her thrash her head and writhe beneath Dominic's mouth. She rode the wave as it grew in intensity, urging him onwards until, finally, she reached the top of a precipice. The fireworks exploded inside her, shaking her body with such intoxicating pleasure, she could not imagine anything could ever feel more wonderful.

They lay like that for a long while, panting and getting their breath back, staring into each other's eyes. Eventually, Dominic lay beside her and cuddled her whole length against his, putting his arm around her so she could snuggle into his shoulder. She pushed down her skirts and put her arm across his chest, resting her head on him. She felt utterly content.

"I never kened it could be like that," she whispered, peeping up at him almost shyly.

He smiled at her, warmth shining out of him. Once again, she marveled at how young and relaxed he appeared.

"Neither did I," he told her, kissing the tip of her nose.

"Thank ye for showing me."

"Och, Violet. 'Tis ye who are showing me, but ye ken it."

"What d'ye mean?" she asked, puzzled. "I'm still a maid. I ken nothing of men—" She paused, groping for the right words. "Nor love, nor this sort of thing."

“Aye, I ken. All I’m saying is that ye dinnae ken what ye do to a man. To me. ’Tis a pleasure for me to touch ye this way, to see ye enjoying it. I’ve longed for it.”

“Ye have?” she asked, filled with wonder, leaning up on her elbow to look at his face.

“Ye ken it, surely? The way we’ve been kissing and all. There have been times when I thought I might explode if I couldnae kiss ye,” Dominic admitted, making her smile at her own powers.

“I wasnae sure. I havenae been in any situation like this before. I only ken I want to be with ye. To be near ye. To do... this.”

“I ken. ’Tis the same for me.” He paused for a moment, then added, “But we have to be careful.”

“I ken that too,” Violet said, sitting up with a sigh and tidying her hair. “Ye’re the Laird, and I’m just the humble healer. ’T’ll will nae do, I see that.”

“Nay, I dinnae mean that. D’ye really think I care for any of that? Nay, it’s just with what ye’ve told me about what happened to yer maither, I see now that these rumors going around could be dangerous for ye. I need to find out who’s responsible for spreading them and put a stop to it.”

“Och, I see. Thank ye for worrying about me, Dominic.”

Despite his worrying words, she preferred to focus on the comforting fact that he had claimed to be unphased by her lowly status. The thought of him eventually being wed to some other, much grander, lady was painful to her.

Perhaps there is a chance for me?

“Well, it’s getting late,” he said, squinting as he looked up at the sky.

Violet looked up too, and she could see through the branches that the sun was midway to the horizon already.

“We’d better get back to the castle. Come on.” He stood up and offered her his hand, pulling her up next to him. “Here, ye have grass in yer hair,” he told her with a chuckle, picking out the fronds for her and smoothing her hair.

“Thank ye,” she murmured, reveling in his innocent attentions. “I dinnae really want to leave here,” she admitted as they made their way hand in hand from the little glen back down the track through the pines.

“Me neither,” he told her as they emerged at the picnic spot by the river.

It was still sunny and warm, and their picnic things were still there, spread out on the blanket in disarray.

Violet knelt on the plaid and began packing the things away into the basket.

“I dinnae ken who ate all this food,” she jested as she worked. “I’m sure it wasn’t just us.”

“I ken where it all went—into those hollow legs of yers,” he said teasingly, kneeling to help her. “Ow! That hurt,” he cried when she threw a piece of bread at him in revenge.

“Och, there’s still some wine left!” he exclaimed, picking up the bottle and inspecting it. “We might as well finish it up. Hand me one of those goblets, will ye?”

Violet did as she was bidden, passing over a goblet so he could pour the last of the wine into it.

“Here, ye drink some first,” he said, handing her the goblet.

She drank thirstily, the wine sweet on her tongue.

“Mmm, thank ye. I think I like wine,” she admitted. “I never tasted it before I came here.”

Dominic drank the rest, shaking out the goblet before packing it into the basket with the rest. Once everything had been cleared away and the basket was full, they each took an end of the large plaid and married the corners together, moving back and forth as if in a complicated dance until it was neatly folded.

With that done, they came together again, his hands linked behind her waist and her hands around his neck.

“It’s been a wonderful afternoon, Violet. I’ve enjoyed every second of me surprise. I’d like to thank ye once again for thanking me,” he told her, gazing down at her and planting a kiss on her forehead. “In fact, ye can thank me like that anytime ye like.”

She laughed, standing on tiptoes to kiss his lips. “Aye, it’s been the best day of me life. I’m so glad ye enjoyed it.”

“It’s the best day I’ve had for a very long time. Since I was a bairn, probably. But it willnae be the last time we do something like this, I promise,” he assured her with a cheeky wink as they drew apart at last.

She laughed and blushed, while he easily hoisted the basket, and she tucked the plaid beneath her arm. Reluctantly, wanting the afternoon to last forever, they set off, walking slowly, side by side, back to the castle.

As they approached the looming building, Violet suddenly remembered something important. “Ye havenae had yer medicine today!” she exclaimed. “It went out of me head completely, what with the picnic.”

“I wondered when ye’d notice,” he told her, flashing her a carefree smile. “Ye took yer time.”

“I’m sorry,” she said, feeling a little guilty at being so remiss.

He shook his head and laughed. “I cannae believe ye havenae noticed before now.”

“Noticed what?” she asked, puzzled.

“That I havenae had a headache since we left the castle earlier.”

She stopped, and he stopped, too.

“So, ye’ve had no pain at all while we’ve been out?” she asked, just to make sure.

“Nay, naething. Me head’s as clear as a bell. Well, not counting the effects of the wine, of course,” he said with a chuckle.

“That’s wonderful! Now ye come to mention it,” she told him, scrutinizing his face with interest, “ye have a good color in yer cheeks, and yer eyes look clear and bright. Must be the fresh air.”

“Maybe. Or maybe it’s the change of company.” He waggled his eyebrows at her comically, making her laugh.

“I dinnae ken about that,” she said modestly. “But I’d say getting away from those stuffy old council meetings for a while and all yer responsibilities as Laird has done ye the world of good.”

“Aye. I certainly feel better for being out of all that, but what can I do? I’m the Laird o’ McGunn. Now, when we get back, I dinnae want ye to worry about any stupid rumors. I promise

ye, I'm going to track down the source and, whoever it is, they'll be punished. All right?"

They were coming up to the east gate now, about to slip back into the day-to-day life of the castle.

"All right, I'll try not to worry," Violet told him with a final smile, wishing they did not have to leave their magical time together behind. For as soon as she passed through the gate and saw Leon and Archer talking to some other men on the green, all the fears that had flown away during those carefree hours by the river all came flooding back.

The following morning, Violet was in the healing room, standing at the workbench beneath the shelves, pounding the ingredients for the latest concoction for Dominic's headaches. Daisy was by the table, treating one of the young stable boys who had injured himself on a rusty hay hook. Her soft voice comforted the lad as she cleaned and dressed his wound. He was putting on a brave face but was clearly holding back the tears.

Violet worked steadily, lulled by the gentle ebb and flow of Daisy's voice. Now more than ever, she wanted to find something to help Dominic with the pain of his terrible headaches, for it hurt her heart to see him suffering. But while her hands automatically moved through the well-practiced steps of a healer, her mind was consumed with thoughts of him and, more specifically, the time they had shared by the river the previous day.

Her body still trembled to recall the intense pleasure he had shown her, a pleasure such as she had never known could exist between a man and a woman. In truth, though she was a little shocked at her own wanton response to his intimate caresses, she could not regret an iota what had happened between them. In fact, it seemed momentous, and she felt profoundly changed by what, she freely admitted to herself, had been the best experience of her life.

Yet, at the same time, it was a little frightening because she also had to admit that she was slowly falling in love with the Laird Of McGunn.

Vaguely, she heard the door open and close somewhere in the background, then sensed Daisy at her side.

“A penny for yer thoughts, Violet,” Daisy said as Violet turned and smiled at her. “Ye seem to be caught up in a dream today. Who has stolen yer thoughts away?” she asked teasingly, returning the smile, mischief glinting in her eyes. “Is he handsome?”

What would she say if I told her the truth?

Violet gave a small laugh, buying some time as she carefully poured the finished concoction into the little horn cup, covered it with a cloth, and set it aside for later.

“Come on, Violet, tell me. Have ye got a beau somewhere in the castle? I can keep a secret, ye ken,” Daisy teased.

Hiding a faint sense of panic, Violet started to wonder if her apprentice had guessed about her relationship with her brother, and her cheeks grew hot with embarrassment.

“I was thinking about you, actually,” she lied, thinking fast, “though I wouldnae describe ye as handsome, Daisy.”

Daisy giggled, crossing to the fire to check the kettle for water before hanging it over the fire to boil.

“Oh? And what have ye been thinking about me?” she asked in a lighthearted tone, setting out the teacups and teapot on the table. “What an excellent pupil I am and that I shall one day be a great healer like yerself and Macie?”

Violet breathed an inner sigh of relief that her attempt to distract Daisy from her quizzing had succeeded.

“Naturally, but ye ken that already,” she replied, tidying up her work surface before washing and drying her hands.

She went to sit at the table just as Daisy took the boiling kettle from the fire and brought it over to the table, where she poured the steaming water over the tea leaves in the teapot and popped the China lid on with a gentle chinking sound.

Violet waited, breathing in the fragrant steam that filled the air, while Daisy returned the kettle to the hearth before coming to sit with her.

“What I was thinking was that I’ve taught ye all I can about being a healer,” Violet lied again, her conscience pricking her. But she forged ahead, painful as it was. For despite Dominic’s assurances, at the back of her mind, Leon’s warning words about the rumors circulating in the castle still resonated with her.

She decided it was no bad thing to prepare Daisy should Violet be forced to leave the castle.

“Already? Are ye sure?” Daisy asked, her face a picture of disappointment as she presided over the teapot, filling their cups with the steaming gold liquid.

“Aye. Ye ken, ye’d already learned a lot from Macie before I got here, and from yer studies, so there’s little more I can teach ye meself,” Violet pointed out, accepting the proffered cup of tea. Suddenly, a memory of her mother flashed before her eyes.

There’s one more thing I could teach ye, but I’ve sworn never to use it, and I willnae be teaching that to anyone.

“Well, that’s a shame, for I’ve loved being yer apprentice, Violet. I’ve learned so much, and it’s been fun. I cannae tell ye how grateful I am for all ye’ve done to help me. With all yer help, I really feel as if I’m on the road to being a great healer,” Daisy declared, her eyes twinkling. “Now, I have some news for ye too.”

“Oh?” Violet said, taken aback while at the same time relieved that Daisy had accepted the end of her apprenticeship better than expected.

“Aye. D’ye remember when ye first came to the castle, and I was upset because Dominic kept telling me he wanted me to leave?”

“Of course, I remember it perfectly.” Violet nodded and blew on her tea to cool it, her eyes on Daisy.

“Well, something ye said that day stuck with me. I asked ye how I could become a great healer.”

“Aye, ye did.”

“And ye told me that ’tis all about ‘getting knowledge from different sources in order to become great.’ Those were yer exact words.”

Violet had to smile. “I cannae argue with ye on that,” she said.

“And ye said that great healers have to travel and work with other healers to keep learning more about their art.”

“Aye, that’s the truth.”

“And so, since Dominic keeps on at me to leave, I’ve been thinking about going to stay with me sister Dakota and her husband for a while, to learn from their healer. What d’ye say to that idea?” Daisy’s face shone with excitement as she looked enquiringly at Violet.

“Ach, Daisy, I think it’s a wonderful idea.” Violet smiled. “I’m pleased ye feel confident enough to branch out on yer own now.” She leaned across and pressed her hand to Daisy’s in encouragement, looking into her lovely, dark-brown eyes that were so reminiscent of Dominic’s. “I dinnae want to lose ye, of course, but in our profession, we have a responsibility to keep learning. That way, we can help more people. I think it’s a grand notion.”

“Och, thank ye, Violet. That means a lot to me. I’m going to write to Dakota tonight and ask her. I’m sure she’ll say yes.” Daisy’s voice dropped slightly as she added conspiratorially, “I havenae told Dominic yet, though. No doubt, he’ll be glad to hear I’m leaving. He’s been trying to get rid of me for so long.”

Violet paused to take another sip of tea before saying diplomatically, “I’m sure he’ll be glad to hear ye’ve found yer purpose.”

Much as her heart was urging her to soothe Daisy’s raw feelings on that subject, she knew it was not her place to tell her why Dominic wanted to send her away.

“If ye go, I shall miss ye very much, though,” she added.

“And I shall miss you. And Macie, of course. But just think of all I’ll be learning!” Daisy clapped her hands gaily, and Violet was pleased to see her so happy.

The door opened then, and Macie entered the room, beaming at them both. She had been to visit one of her old friends in the castle who was under the weather.

“Good day to ye, Daisy,” the old healer said, coming up to the table and eyeing the teapot. “I’ll have a cup of that if ye dinnae mind,” she added, sitting down with a weary sigh before smiling at Violet. “I see we have a visitor. A good day to ye too, young lassie,” she said, clearly having forgotten who Violet was.

The two girls exchanged worried looks. Macie had definitely been getting more forgetful lately, though the intricacies of her art never escaped her.

“It’s Violet, darling,” Daisy told the old lady as Violet went and fetched another cup and set it down on the table. “Ye’ll remember in a minute, I’m sure. Now, let me pour ye a nice cup of tea.”

Violet remained in her chair, drinking her tea as the pair chatted quietly, but she soon became absorbed in her thoughts again, which turned inevitably to Dominic.

What is he doing? And, whatever it is, is he thinking of me too?



“I’ll nae have that man in the room!” Dominic shouted as he leaned over the council table, stabbing a finger towards Kian. “He’s been dismissed from the council, by me order.”

“I ken that, but I agreed to let him come because he said he wanted to speak with ye, M’laird,” Leon told him, looking pained. “It’s only reasonable that a man who’s served yer family so well should have his chance to argue his case,” he added placatingly.

“He’s done far too much arguing already. I willnae have him here,” Dominic insisted, filled with righteous anger.

“Kian’s only saying what the rest of us think, M’laird,” put in Robert Keenan, another of the councilmen. “Nae one should

be punished for saying what he sees is the truth.”

Dominic had always valued Robert’s ability to speak plainly, but at that moment, he wished fervently that the man would shut up.

In fact, he wished they would all shut up or go to the Devil, for his head was thumping. He thought he might burst a blood vessel when Kian piped up again.

“Most of the men around this table, trusted men, loyal to ye to the death, simply cannae see why ye’re insisting on this slackening of retribution when it comes to the Farlanes.”

“Aye, it makes us look weak,” another councilman further down the table said. “The dogs deserve everything they get after what they did.”

“That was Keegan’s soldiers who attacked the castle, not the farmers and village folk. The more we punish them, the more we’re losing out on valuable trade from what they produce. Why can ye nae see what’s plain to all?” Dominic argued for what felt like the hundredth time.

“’Tis not plain at all, M’laird, if ye dinnae mind me saying so. If we dinnae keep hammering the Farlanes, then other clans will look at us as if we’re fools, thinking they can take advantage of us,” remarked another from further down the table.

Dominic growled with frustrated fury, clenching his fists to prevent himself from throttling Kian, in his mind, the source

of all this trouble. He looked to Leon for support and was inwardly shocked when the man would not meet his eyes. It was a huge blow, and Dominic intentionally hardened his expression to conceal how the realization he could no longer depend on his friend and advisor had shaken him.

“We’ve had four years of yer retribution,” he shouted at Kian, then cast a black look around the table. “And it has gotten us precisely nowhere. All it has done is satisfy yer bloodlust and lose us valuable income. What’s the point of having these profitable lands if the clan doesnae benefit financially from them? When do ye suggest the retribution ends, then? In five years? Ten years? Or maybe never?!”

“Our honor as a clan is worth more than gold!” Kian exclaimed, eliciting murmurs of agreement from the rest of the company.

“But ye seem to have forgotten that I am the Laird of McGunn,” Dominic roared, banging his fists on the table while feeling as if his head was splitting in two. “I give the commands around here. ’Tis for ye to obey them. ’Tis a good thing me faither isnae here to see such disloyalty. And ye a part of it, Leon...” He shook his head at his friend to convey his disappointment at his betrayal, but Leon kept his eyes down.

Seeing he was getting nowhere and exhausted by their refusal to see sense, as well as the worsening pain in his head, Dominic quickly dissolved the meeting. Unusually, Leon did not linger but left with the rest. For once, Dominic was glad. He was sick of the conflict, sick of the disloyalty. Standing alone in the otherwise empty council chamber, he rubbed at his temples, desperate for respite from the pain.

Perhaps prompted by the headache, a vision of Violet suddenly popped into his brain. Even the thought of her soothed his aching head a little. Pleasurable memories of their shared intimacy in the fairy glen the day before washed over him, and he decided he had to see her right away. He knew she would try her best to help him with the pain, and that she would also bring comfort to his troubled mind.

A few minutes later, he arrived at the healing room to be warmly greeted by Macie, who was on her way out to visit with her sick friend again.

“Let me have a quick look at those wounds of yers, M’laird,” she demanded.

Dominic sighed but obediently did as he was told, rolling up his coat sleeve and pulling back his cuff to reveal the neat white scars on his wrist, all that was left from the attack on the way back from Dalmuir.

While Macie examined them, Dominic’s eyes met Violet’s over the old healer’s shoulder. She smiled a little shyly at him, her cheeks pinking adorably. With a twinge of lust, he wondered if she had been thinking about what had happened the day before too.

The way she had responded to him had been so passionate, it had taken an almost superhuman effort not to simply ravish her there and then, so great had his need for her been. But he would not take her maidenhood on a mere whim. She was worth far more than that in his eyes.

“Och, ye’ll do,” Macie announced after a few moments of examining his scars, letting him have his arm back. “A fine job of healing done there. Now, I must bid ye farewell for a time, M’laird. If ye’ll excuse me,” she added.

Dominic gave her leave to go, and she soon toddled off out of the room, leaving him and Violet quite alone.

He was surprised when Violet came up to him, reached up on her tiptoes, and planted a small, sweet kiss on his lips.

“Yer head’s painin’ ye again, is it nae?” she asked, placing her cool palm on his forehead as he nodded. “Ach, ye’re hot. Come and sit down and rest a while. I’ve prepared another concoction for ye to try. No, not there, over here.”

Instead of going to the table and the hard, wooden chairs, she led him to the couch they used for patients to lie on. She pushed him down until he lay full length and placed a pillow under his head. When she was sure he was comfortable, she brought over the little horn cup of medicine as well as a bowl of cool water and a clean cloth. Taking the nearby stool for herself, she proceeded to help him drink the concoction.

“Ugh! Ditchwater,” he grumbled after swallowing it.

“Well, it may do some good. Now, rest yer poor head. Close yer eyes, and I’ll bathe yer forehead,” she told him, pushing him gently down again.

He made himself comfortable against the blanket, heeling off his boots. Violet then proceeded to bathe his forehead with the

damp cloth.

“Hopefully, this will bring yer temperature down a little while we see if the medicine works.”

“Ach, that feels good,” he murmured, for the water was instantly cooling.

With a sigh, he gave himself up to her ministrations without protest. The tension he had felt only minutes ago, and the pent-up fury from dealing with the council, began to drain from his body. Slowly, he relaxed.

Violet hummed a little tune in her sweet voice as she tended to him. It soothed him like a mother’s lullaby. He felt her warmth next to him, and her light, lavender perfume enveloped him like a scented cloud. His pain and his cares gradually drifted away as he sank into a kind of trance where he felt completely comfortable and at ease.

When he awoke from his doze, the first thing he saw when he opened his eyes was Violet’s lovely face looking at him with concern. Then, she smiled and felt his forehead again.

“How are ye feeling now?” she asked.

Dominic pushed himself up on his elbows. “Much better. The headache’s gone,” he told her. “Thank ye, Violet.”

“Ach, I’m glad for it. I put a wee sleeping draught in that concoction. I thought it might help if ye could sleep for a

while.”

“How long have I been asleep?” he asked, sitting up and stretching, glad to be free of the pain.

“Only about half an hour or so, but I think it’s done ye the world of good. Ye look much better. Ye’ve more color in yer cheeks. Ye were as pale as a ghost before. I was worried about ye. Now, I’ll make ye some tea with plenty of honey in it.”

She got up and brewed the tea, spooning honey into Dominic’s cup before pouring out the tea. She brought it over to him and resumed her seat once more, resting her cup on her lap.

“I feel like I’m back in the nursery again,” he joked, sipping the sweet drink. “Macie used to give us tea with honey whenever we were ill as bairns.”

“Aye. Maither used to say it was soothing to the soul, whatever ailed ye,” Violet replied, giving him a look that sent a wave of heat running through him. He groaned inwardly as the familiar stirring in his loins began again.

“Ye’re sweeter than any honey,” he told her, chuckling at his own daring comment and the look on her face as his words sank in.

Her cheeks reddened, and her green eyes glowed while a bashful smile curved her lips. It secretly thrilled him to know he could make her look that way. She tried to hide it behind her cup, but he could see it clearly.

In fact, her lips looked so tempting that he was not sure how long he could go without kissing them again. And more, he thought, his eyes roving the curves where his hands had been the day before. He told himself he really ought to leave before anything else happened. But he did not move.

“Dinnae be silly,” she said with a giggle.

Needing to touch her, to show his appreciation for her help, he grasped her hand and kissed her palm softly before releasing it. Once again, she appeared radiant.

“’Tis true. And ye have healing hands.”

She laughed, a full-throated sound he was coming to love.

“I think the medicine has made ye feel better, not me hands,” she told him. “I dinnae seem to have done such a good job at curing ye so far, but this concoction seems to have had some effect in relieving yer headache, judging by yer cheeky remarks.”

“Maybe it was the medicine,” he relented, looking into her eyes and feeling as if he could happily drown in them. “But maybe it’s just the effect ye have on me.”

He could feel the temperature in the room rising again, as it always seemed to do whenever they were alone together. His mind was filling with steamy thoughts once more as he looked at Violet when they were rudely interrupted by the chiming of the clock on the shelf.

“Ach, Daisy!” he cried, suddenly remembering. Hurriedly, he handed Violet his tea and jumped to his feet, grabbing his boots. “I promised to meet her for dinner. I’m late!” He turned to her and planted a small kiss on her lips. “I’m sorry. I have to go. She says she has something important to tell me,” he explained, crossing the floor in a rush and opening the door.

He looked back at her, and she smiled at him, but she looked somewhat downcast. Somehow, that pleased him a little.

“Dinnae worry,” she said. “We’ll see each other later, perhaps.”

“Aye, we will.”

He forced himself to hurry out of the room, missing Violet before he had even taken two steps down the hallway. As he hopped along, stuffing his feet into his boots, he resolved to see her again as soon as he could.

Even in the little time they had been together, she had made him feel better again. He marveled at the soothing effect she always had on him, unable to fathom the reason for it. Whatever it was, he wanted to explore it further in every way possible.

In the meantime, he headed to his study, where he was to meet Daisy. He could not help but wonder what she had to tell him this time.

Dominic sat across from Daisy, who was delicately nibbling at a piece of chicken. He buttered a piece of bread and ate it slowly, waiting patiently for her to tell him whatever it was she had to say. He feared it would be something that would make him angry and bring back his headache, so he was eager to keep the peace as long as possible.

“How did things go with the council today?” she asked when she had swallowed the chicken and was spearing a carrot.

“The usual insubordination,” he told her, playing down the serious unrest. “The whole lot of them seem to have forgotten what it means to be a loyal clansman and obey their laird’s commands.”

“Mmm, they often gave Faither a headache. D’ye remember?”

“Aye,” he replied laconically.

“And now they’re giving ye headaches instead. What will ye do?”

“Come down hard on them. Teach them who’s the Laird. Make them understand that I give the orders around here.” The thought had him taking a deep draught of ale.

Daisy looked across at him speculatively as she popped the carrot into her mouth and chewed it. “Well, I hope that goes well,” she told him, eventually. “’Tis a pity I shallnae be here to see it.”

Dominic stiffened in his chair. “What d’ye mean? Are ye planning on going somewhere?” He felt a little guilty at the way his heart leaped to think she might at last be about to obey his wish for her to depart the castle.

“Aye, I am, as it happens.” Her eyes flashed at him a little tauntingly, and her lips curved into a smile as she polished off the last morsels on her plate, then leaned her elbows on the table.

“Explain.”

He sipped his ale and watched her over the rim of his tankard. He knew she enjoyed stringing him along, and he was willing to play her game if it amused her.

“Well, Violet says she has taught me everything she kens about healing.”

“Oh, aye?”

“Aye. And she says that to be a really great healer, ye have to travel to other places, meet other healers, and learn new things from them.”

“That makes sense,” he said, resolving to show his gratitude to Violet at the earliest possible opportunity.

“And since ye’ve been nagging me for ages to leave the castle, trying to get rid of me—”

“’Tis not like that, Daisy.”

“Aye, it is. But it disnae matter now. Because I’ve decided to go away to learn how to be a truly great healer, just like Violet’s maither was.”

He had to admit, he was taken aback.

“Go away where?” he asked, mildly concerned now.

“To stay with Dakota and William. I wrote to her, and she says I can come any time I like and work with their healer there, who happens to be very skilled. I shall learn a lot from her, and when I come back, ye’ll be amazed at how I’ve improved.”

Dominic breathed an inward sigh of relief and smiled at her. “Well, that’s grand news, Daisy. Ye’ve really put some thought into this, I can see. I’m proud of ye.”

“Nonsense.” She pouted, frowning at him. “Ye’ll just be pleased to see the back of me.” He opened his mouth to speak, but she stopped him with a hand. “Dinnae try to deny it, Dominic, for ’tis true. Ye’ve been trying to get me to leave for months, so dinnae try to pretend ye’ll not be happy to see me go.”

He shook his head. “Ye dinnae understand, Daisy. I ken ’tis me fault ye see things that way, but ye dinnae ken the truth, the real reason why I wanted ye to leave the castle.”

“All right,” she said with a challenging air, “why do ye nae tell me the real reason, then?”

Dominic let out a long breath as he sought the words to explain.

“Daisy, since Faither was killed, and I got this—” He paused to point to his scars. “What have ye been trying to do?”

She frowned. “How de ye mean? Helping ye? Trying to cure ye. Is that what ye mean?” she asked.

“Aye, ’tis exactly what I mean. Until Violet came, ye devoted all yer time trying to help me with me scars, then trying to cure me headaches. Day after day, it was all ye thought about for ages. Am I right?” He looked at her frankly, wanting her to understand that he was speaking the truth.

She nodded. “Aye, I suppose it is. But is there something wrong with that? Yer me braither, me only braither. Why should I nae wish to help ye and make ye well again?”

Dominic leaned across the table, covered her small hand with his, and gazed at her. “Aye, there is something wrong with it. D’ye think I liked seeing ye wasting all yer days on me? Spending hours poring over yer medicine books, all the time worrying about me? I dinnae want ye to spend yer life doing that, Daisy. I want ye to have a life, to be happy. Not be stuck here with a—” He broke off. He had been about to say “monster,” but then he remembered what Violet had told him when she had challenged him about the term and shown him her scarred leg.

“I dinnae want ye to be stuck here with me, trying to fix me. I want ye to have fun and enjoy yerself, like a girl of yer age should be doing. That’s why I’ve been trying to make ye leave, not because I want to be rid of ye. Far from it. Ye’re one of the few precious things I have left in life. Can ye understand that?”

He looked over at her and saw that her eyes were welling up with tears, and her mouth was turning down. She clasped his hand tightly. “Is that true, Dominic? Was that the real reason?”

“Aye,” He nodded. “That’s the real reason.”

Suddenly, she sprang from her chair and rushed around the table, throwing herself into his arms. He held her tightly while she sobbed into his shoulder.

“There, there, dry yer tears,” he told her tenderly, almost moved to tears himself. His heart glowed with love for his little sister. “I hated seeing ye so upset when I kept telling ye to leave, but I couldnae think of what else to do,” he

confessed, hugging her. “And ye wouldnae listen to me when I tried to tell ye to stop trying to cure me.”

“They’re happy tears,” she mumbled into his jerkin. “Thank ye for telling me the truth. Ye dinnae ken how much better it’s made me feel. I really thought ye’d started to hate me,” she snuffled as she pulled away to look at him.

“Nay, nay, how could I ever hate ye, Daisy? I love ye, ye silly lass.”

She dashed her tears away with her hand and grinned at him, her eyes red and puffy.

“And I love ye, Dominic, with all me heart.” She let him go, her eyes lighting up as if she had just realized something important. “So, that’s why ye went and got Violet. Ye wanted to stop me from spending all me time trying to cure ye, so ye needed another healer. One more skilled than me. Why, I never guessed.” She shook her long hair in amazement, looking happier than he had seen her in months.

The tension between them had vanished. She looked at him and began to laugh, her hands on her hips. “Why, ye crafty devil, Dominic Winfrey!”

“Ach, that’s me, craftier than a fox,” he joked, shooting her a crooked smile. “But it didnae do me any good, did it, for ye did just what ye wanted anyway.”

“Aye, of course. Ye may be the Laird, but ye’re still me braither. But ye did hurt me feelings something awful. Ye

should have just told me the truth.”

“I ken that now, and I’m sorry. But ye understand now why I wanted ye to go. And I am proud that ye’ve decided to go and stay with Dakota and learn more about yer healing arts. I have nae doubt ye’ll be a great healer one day, renowned throughout the land!”

“Whist! Now ye’re teasing me!” she cried happily.

“Maybe just a little,” he joked, feeling as though a great weight had been lifted off his shoulders.

He knew she would be safe with Dakota and William, and she would enjoy learning alongside their healer. It had all turned out as he wished, though he had to admit it had little to do with him. In fact, he owed Violet a debt for guiding Daisy to make her decision. He would have to find some way to reward her.

“What about pudding?” Daisy suddenly asked, breaking into his thoughts.

“What? What are ye talking about?”

“Well, we’re supposed to have dinner, are we nae? Well, where’s the pudding?” She sat down opposite him again, looking at him expectantly, and he could not help laughing at the expression on her face.

“Aye, I think we have a custard tart. It’s under there.” He jerked his thumb at a covered dish on the side table.

“Well, nae point in wasting it,” she declared, fetching it and whipping off the lid. “Now, say when.” She maneuvered a knife above the tart.

“That’ll do for me,” he told her, suddenly reaching across and snatching the dish from her, hugging it to himself.

“Dominic Winfrey, hand that custard tart over at once!” she cried in mock horror, dissolving into laughter.

Dominic soon joined in, happy to see the light of happiness back in his little sister’s eyes, at last.

A couple of hours later, feeling tired but lighter of heart now that he had repaired his relationship with Daisy, Dominic retired to his bedchambers. Wearily, he kicked off his boots, slung off his sword belt, placed it next to his bed, and shed his plaid. He undressed down to his shirt, sighing with relief to be free of his clothing.

He sat on the edge of the bed in his bare feet, marveling that his headache still had not returned. Idly, he wondered if he would be better off dismissing the whole council and replacing them with Violet and Daisy. Surely, they could not do a worse job than the lot he was forced to deal with.

Pouring himself a dram of whisky, he leaned back on the pillows with a sigh and sipped at it, suddenly thinking of Violet and wishing she was next to him. Delicious thoughts of what had happened between them in the fairy glen once more drifted into his mind, but he forced his mind back to the issues facing him with the intransigent council.

He gazed up sightlessly at the ceiling, thinking back to all the times he had sat at his father's side in the council chambers, trying to pour oil on troubled waters when arguments broke out. He thought of Leon, his lips twisting with derision, but he had to admit he was disturbed by the fact that his closest friend and ally on the council, whom he thought had his back, was siding with the rebels.

Rebels. That was what they were. And he knew from his father's lessons how to deal with them.

He finished his whisky and set the glass on the nightstand before snuffing out the lamp and laying down his head. Before long, he drifted off to sleep, with comforting visions of Violet dancing in his dreams.

He awoke with a start. A sudden sound had jolted him from sleep into instant wakefulness. He did not move, just listened, his ears straining in the silence for the repeat of the sound. It replayed in his mind, and he recognized it as the sound of the door closing.

There was the sound of breathing somewhere nearby in the pitch black. Someone had come into the room. Making no noise, he reached out for his sword belt, intending to slip his dirk from its sheath. But he sensed someone next to the bed before he could locate it. A shape blacker than the darkness loomed above him.

He rolled to one side, off the bed, gaining his feet immediately, groping for his weapon.

“Who’s there?” he shouted, finally gripping the handle of his dirk and brandishing it in front of him.

There was no reply, but the inky black figure leaped across the bed and lunged at him. He could just make out the shape of a blade descending towards him in the darkness, and he jumped backward, narrowly avoiding the blow. His attacker cursed softly and sprang towards him, his blade raised again.

Dominic parried the blow with his forearm and slashed at the man with his dirk. He yelped in surprise as his assailant’s blade glanced against his arm, but he knocked it aside and bore down on the man, grabbing him by what he thought was his neck, pressing his own blade to it as he forced the man to the floor. He placed his foot hard on the struggling man’s neck until he heard him gurgling for breath. He groped for his sword and unsheathed it in a fluid motion before replacing his foot with its point.

“Stay down, ye bastard,” he hissed as the man cried out.

Dominic shouted for help as he scrambled for the matches he knew were on his nightstand. After what felt like an eternity, he struck one and lit a candle. But before he could drag his attacker to his feet, there was a commotion in the corridor, and the door flew open. Servants holding lamps rushed into the room.

“What is it, M’laird? Is all well?” shouted Finlay, one of the castle’s most trusted servants.

“Nay, ’tis not. Get the guards, and fetch Archer, will ye? Someone’s tried to kill me!” Dominic cried, seizing his

assailant by the hair and dragging him to his feet, forcing him to turn and meet his eyes.

But he did not know the man. He shoved him away, keeping him at sword point until the guards arrived, but all the fight seemed to have gone out of him.

“Take him to the dungeons,” he commanded, and the man was dragged away. Then, he sat down on the side of the bed, suddenly feeling dizzy.

Archer rushed into the room, dressed only in his shirt and breeks, his feet bare. His sword was unsheathed, and his face was full of alarm.

“What’s happened, M’laird?” he asked urgently, hurrying to Dominic’s side.

“Some bastard tried to kill me in me sleep,” Dominic told him, his vision suddenly blurring. He reached out and put a hand on Archer’s arm to steady himself, overcome with nausea. He felt hot and cold at the same time.

“Ach, ye’re bleeding,” Archer declared, inspecting Dominic’s arm.

“’Tis but a scratch,” Dominic said, but he found it hard to get the words out because his throat was closing up, and he could not seem to get enough breath into his lungs. A horrible numbness was spreading throughout his body, his limbs becoming stiff, and sweat began pouring down his face.

“The blade,” he managed to choke out, his eyes flicking to the floor.

Archer laid Dominic’s arm down gently, then bent down and retrieved a wicked-looking dirk from the floor, holding it up to the light. His face creased in puzzlement as he looked at it.

“What, this? That’s nae yer blood. ’Tis some sort of blackish substance. Ach, God!” he cried out, holding the knife away from him by the fingertips.

“Watch yerself,” Dominic gasped, doubling over as excruciating pain gripped his insides. “The blade, ’tis poisoned.” With that, he collapsed, writhing in pain on the bed before falling unconscious.

“The Laird’s been wounded by a poisoned blade!” Archer shouted, eliciting gasps of shock from the small crowd that had gathered by the door. He scooped Dominic up in his arms and ran as fast as he could, the onlookers parting before him, down the corridor and to the healing room.

Violet was back at the cottage, playing a spirited game of tag with the twins. Their laughter rang out, joining with hers, as they raced about the untidy room. But then, she heard someone calling her name. It came again, a bellowing sound. “Violet! Violet! Come quick!”

Even in her sleep-befuddled mind, she recognized the voice. It was Archer. But what was he doing in her dreams?

The door burst open, and light from the lamps in the hallway spread throughout the room, outlining a strange, bulky figure that filled the doorway of her chamber.

“Get up, Violet!” it cried, blundering into the room. She squinted, just making out Archer’s contorted features, but what was he carrying?

“What-what are ye doing here?” she muttered, confused.

“’Tis the Laird, he’s been poisoned!” Archer shouted.

She sprang out of her bed, instantly wide awake.

“Put him down here,” she said, gesturing to her bed, her stomach dropping through the floor.

Archer laid Dominic down as instructed and backed off.

“Can ye do anything for him?” he asked, panting with exertion, his voice full of fear.

Her heart now pounding in her chest so loudly, she could hear it in her ears, she leaned over Dominic. Though he was unconscious, he nevertheless still groaned and writhed in agony. She listened intently to his breathing. It was shallow and erratic, and his skin was pasty, dripping with sweat, so his shirt stuck to him. She checked his pulse. It was weak. She lifted his eyelids and looked into his eyes. They were blank and glassy. He continued to squirm in obvious pain.

She turned to Archer.

“What happened? I mean, how was he before he went unconscious? I need to ken so I can tell what poison it is,” she rapidly explained.

Archer rubbed his hair distractedly, clearly trying to remember.

“I dinnae ken, he didnae say much, just that the blade was poisoned. But he could hardly speak, as if he was gasping for air, and then he collapsed on the bed, clutching his stomach, and then he passed out,” he told her, his words slurring in panic.

“Monkshood,” she muttered to herself, fighting to control the panic rising inside her, knowing that she had to keep her wits about her now more than ever.

“Monkshood!” Archer exclaimed, clearly horrified. “But that’s deadly. He willnae survive that. He’ll die for sure!”

Violet glanced at him, kicking herself or speaking aloud. Her thoughts raced as she stared down at Dominic. She knew that what Archer said was not true. There was a way to save Dominic, but it was the same method that saw her mother burned as a witch. She had vowed to herself and Aiden never to use it.

But if I dinnae use it, Dominic will die!

“I’ll go and inform the council so they can take swift action. And Daisy too. She’ll want to be here if he’s dying,” Archer told her, rushing out of the room, leaving her alone with Dominic, who was clearly sinking fast.

The skin around his lips was turning blue, and his breathing was growing weaker by the minute.

She had to act now if she wanted to save the man she loved. She sprinted to the healing room and grabbed the jar she needed from the shelf. She rapidly spooned several lumps of the black, coal-like substance into a beaker and steeped it with water. She stirred it as she raced back to her chambers, then stood by the bed, waiting restlessly for it to dissolve in the water, making a black, gritty mixture.

Then, holding her breath, she lifted Dominic's head and forced his mouth open, trickling the liquid down his throat painstakingly, trying not to spill a single drop until he had swallowed it all. It was difficult because he continued to writhe and groan all the while. Setting the beaker aside, she lowered his head gently to the pillow.

Once that was done, she breathed again. Pushing aside her fears for her own safety, she sat by his side, her palm against his forehead, praying hard to all the angels in heaven to bring him back to her.

After some minutes, Dominic stopped writhing. For a moment, she panicked, thinking he had slipped closer to death, that she had been too late in her attempt to save him. But she pressed her ear to his chest and heard that his breathing was beginning to improve, growing slowly steadier. And he seemed to have fallen into a peaceful sleep.

A huge wave of relief washed over her.

It is working!

She took a few minutes to pull on a dress and stockings against the chill of the night, light some lamps, bringing light to the room, before returning to Dominic's side, willing him to recover.

As expected, within a few minutes, the sound of raised voices and rushing footsteps echoed in from the hallway, the voices growing louder and louder. Violet, her heart clamoring in her chest, looked up and saw several figures appear in the

doorway. Leon, wrapped in a night robe, and Archer were the vanguard. A small crowd of men, also in their nightclothes, whom she recognized as the other council members, pressed in behind them.

All of them stopped, open-mouthed, to stare silently at the figure on the bed. One of them pushed to the front. Violet recognized him as Kian, the one who had been making so much trouble for Dominic lately. She was surprised to see the stricken look on his face, considering the circumstances.

A sudden vision of her mother appeared in her mind's eye, sending a shaft of fear through her heart like a well-aimed spear. Her hands shook, and her throat went dry. Once again, she inwardly berated herself for her foolishness in speaking the name of the poison aloud in front of Archer.

For he had surely told them all. And now, they had come, all of them knowing that poisoning by monkshood was a death sentence. All of them, she knew, expected to find their Laird either dying or dead.

What will they say when they realize he's neither of those things? That he's sleeping peacefully and will recover? That I've saved him?

Leon shot her a look as he advanced to the opposite side of the bed but said nothing. His face looked like a marble slab, drained of color, his expression unreadable. Archer, too, rushed forward, taking up a position next to Leon. In contrast, his face was red and sweating, his mouth already contorted with grief, as though he believed the Laird was already dead.

Leon stooped over Dominic, examining him closely.

“Is he gone?” Archer asked her in a cracked voice.

But before Violet could say anything or even shake her head, there was a flurry of activity by the door. It was Daisy, in her nightclothes, her face wet with tears and twisted with anguish.

Violet stood aside, feeling the tension in the room ratcheting up, vaguely aware of the whispers of alarm and confusion exchanged by the other councilmen as they looked on with pale, drawn faces.

“Let me through, will ye? Where is he? Is he alive?” Daisy cried, elbowing her way through the gathered men and running towards the bed.

Violet, her heart full to bursting with a maelstrom of emotions, longed to console her. Instead, she got up and moved aside so Daisy could easily reach her brother.

As Daisy laid her eyes on her brother, she gasped, a loud sob escaping her lips. She took his hand, wringing it between hers and kissing it, pressing it close to her cheek.

“Dominic, Braither, it’s me, Daisy,” she whispered in a tear-choked voice, slipping into Violet’s former spot on the side of the bed.

She leaned over Dominic’s supine form, her other hand stroking his brow. She looked at Violet, her eyes wild with

anxiety and fear, and questions. Her face was pale and waxen.

She turned back to her brother, shaking him gently as if trying to wake him. “Dominic, speak to me, please!” she moaned, tears running down her cheeks.

“Ye say it was monkshood?” Leon suddenly asked in a voice that seemed very loud in the room while Daisy continued to look over her brother.

“Violet says so,” Archer told him before Violet could speak for herself, “and she kens about these things.”

“Aye, I ken she does,” Leon said, glancing at her across the bed, a strange note in his voice. Again, fear sent her heart racing. “Where’s the blade?” Leon added, looking at Archer.

“Here.” Archer pulled a thickly wrapped, knife-shaped bundle from his breeks and handed it to Leon. The councilman unwrapped it carefully. Without touching the eight-inch blade, he inspected it closely.

“Let me see it,” Kian said suddenly, coming forward. “I’ve seen the evil stuff before.” Leon allowed him to look at the blade, and Kian’s face fell even further. “That’s monkshood, all right,” he said, his voice catching with emotion. “And that’s enough to kill a horse in minutes, let alone a man. The Laird cannae survive that, I tell ye!”

“So, why is the Laird nae dead?” Leon asked, wrapping the blade up once more.

“He must be close to dying,” Kian insisted, going closer to the bed and looking at the Laird. His face scrunched up in obvious puzzlement to see Dominic lying peacefully asleep. Leaning down, he laid an ear on the Laird’s chest and listened for a few moments. Then, he stood up and said, “I dinnae understand it. He should be dying!”

“Let me see, ye fool,” Archer demanded, pushing Kian aside to observe Dominic more closely.

Violet watched in anxious silence as he bent over Dominic. The color was returning to his face, and he snored gently, clearly fast asleep.

Archer stood up. “He isnae dying,” he declared, looking confused yet also relieved. “He’s sleeping!”

“Aye, Archer’s right.” It was Daisy. Her tears had dried, and she sounded hopeful. “I ken the symptoms of monkshood poisoning, and me braither isnae dying of them.” She paused to look up at Violet, her smooth brow creased by a frown. “But how can that be? ’Tis nae possible.”

Violet felt like a deer in a huntsman’s gunsights as every set of eyes in the room turned to her, but she forced herself to remain calm.

“’Tis possible,” she asserted firmly despite her fear. “He was lucky. Only a very little of the poison got into his system. The wound is small.”

Kian shook his head. “Nay, nay. I tell ye all, there’s enough poison on that blade to kill a damned horse! Even a nick would let in enough to kill him.”

“Then how has he survived, Violet? Please, tell me?” Daisy begged, her eyes imploring as she looked at her former teacher.

“Is Kian here a trained healer?” Violet asked, standing her ground. “Nay, he is not. I am, and I’m telling ye, he was lucky. Archer got him to me quick enough for me to flush the poison out of his system.”

“Kian’s right,” Daisy put in. “He should be dead by now.” She looked at Violet, a mixture of gratitude and wonder in her eyes. “’Twas ye, Violet, ye saved him!” she exclaimed.

“Aye, Violet saved him,” Archer agreed, staring at Violet in the same way as Daisy. “She must have done something when she was alone with him.”

“What did ye do, Violet?” Daisy asked.

Violet, shaken by the turn the discussion was taking, scrambled to find a believable way of explaining what she had done to save Dominic, but before she could formulate her answer, Kian darted around the bed, pushed past her, and seized the empty beaker from the nightstand. He peered inside it, then took it to Leon, who followed suit. Then, both men stared at her with accusing eyes.

“’Tis a witch’s brew,” Kian declared loudly, drawing gasps from the assembled company. “Look at it. The Good Lord kens what’s in it, but it isnae natural, that’s for certain. The Laird shouldnae be sleeping as peacefully as a babe like that. He should be dead. It was God’s will, and she’s gone against it with her black magic!”

Again, all eyes turned to Violet, but this time, they all held suspicion and malice. She began to tremble, her mother’s terrible fate coming back to her, struggling to keep her composure. From across the Laird’s supine form, Kian stared at her with hate. Leon, too, regarded her with suspicion, his brow deeply furrowed. That frightened her more than anything else, for he held the power while the Laird was indisposed.

“It smacks of witchcraft, to be sure,” Leon announced, agreeing with Kian, who appeared triumphant as he glared at Violet. “Nobody wants the Laird to die of this foul poison, but if it was God’s will that he should be poisoned in this way and die, it must be accepted. To bring him back from the brink of death must have required unnatural acts such as cannot be countenanced.”

“Why, that’s ridiculous!” Archer cried, clearly frustrated by their twisted logic. “Violet’s a skilled healer, she kens things ordinary folks dinnae. If she’s saved the Laird’s life, ’tis nae witchcraft, but because of her skill and knowledge. We should be rejoicing that he’s alive. She should be rewarded and nae pilloried for a witch.”

“Aye, I agree,” Daisy said, still sitting next to the sleeping Dominic and holding his hand tenderly. “Violet is a good person and nae a witch. Kian, ye should hold yer tongue, and ye too, Leon. It sounds like ye’d both rather Dominic was dead. I, for one, am grateful for whatever Violet did to save

him, and I dinnae care what it was as long as me braither's alive."

"Me too," Archer agreed with a vehement shake of his head. "The Laird's alive, and that's all that should matter to any of ye."

While this argument was going on, the beaker was being passed around the room for all to inspect, though all that was left was the black, grainy dregs of the mixture.

"It smells like a foul witch's brew," one of the councilmen said, sniffing it with an expression of distaste.

"Because that's what it is," declared Kian, glaring at Violet malevolently. He raised his arm and pointed at her. "She's a witch, and she should be thrown in the dungeons straight away and face trial for her dark crimes against God!"

There were nods and mumbles of agreement behind him.

"I'm nae a witch," Violet declared, determined to maintain a calm façade, scared as she was. "I just ken a cure for that kind of poison, 'tis all. 'Tis naething to do with witchcraft. 'Tis medicine, a simple cure."

"Ye see," Daisy shouted at Kian, clearly reaching the end of her patience. "'Twas a simple cure, ye ignorant fool, with yer superstitions! Ye ken naething about the healing arts."

“How can she claim to have a cure for a poison that always kills, according to God’s laws? Whatever she did to the Laird to save him, it cannae be godly. Therefore, it must be the work of the Devil,” Leon put in, his voice as cold as ice as he too stared with malice at Violet.

“She’s in league with the Devil!” Kian shouted.

“She’s a witch, all right,” came another voice from behind.

“Aye, throw her in the dungeons!” said another. “Let her face a trial.”

“No!” Daisy cried. “She isnae a witch, I tell ye. Leave her be!” She turned to Violet. “I willnae let them take ye, Violet, Dinnae worry.”

But though she clearly meant to reassure and comfort, Violet saw with sinking heart the look of awe on Daisy’s face. It said that she may not believe Violet was a witch in league with the Devil, but she possessed unnatural powers that other mere mortals did not. Should not. But she was willing to overlook that because Violet had saved Dominic.

In deep despair now, Violet glanced at Archer, her only other supporter in the room, it seemed. But she saw he had the same look of gratitude mixed with awe on his face, and she knew she was in deep trouble. She looked at Dominic, the only one who could save her from what seemed like her inevitable fate, but he was still sleeping peacefully, unaware of what was going on around him. She prayed fervently that he would wake up, but he showed no signs of doing so.

“The good book says, ‘Nae suffer a witch to live,’” cried Kian venomously, pointing a finger at her.

More mutters of agreement followed, louder this time.

“Leave her be, I tell ye,” Daisy shouted, frantic now.

“I willnae let ye take her away,” Archer cried, moving around the bed to stand before Violet protectively. “The Laird would never agree.”

“Call the guards,” Leon pronounced sonorously as if neither had spoken.

Violet cowered behind Archer as she heard swift footsteps run down the hall and echo down the staircase. The others moved back, as though she was contaminated with some terrible disease they might catch.

“Nae! I willnae stand for it!” Daisy jumped up and stood beside her in defense. But it did no good. Within minutes, the heavy tramp of hurrying boots sounded in the hallway. A bevy of armed guards appeared in the doorway.

“Take this woman down to the dungeons and lock her up,” Leon ordered.

The guards forced their way through those gathered near the doorway, heading straight for Violet.

“Stand back,” Archer warned them fiercely, his sword poised for attack. But the guards rushed past him and manhandled him aside, giving him no room to swing his weapon.

Two guards grabbed Violet roughly by her arms and dragged her out of the room.

She struggled, drenched in terror, shouting, “Let go of me, ye fools, leave me be. I’ve done naething wrong!”

“Be gone, witch!” Kian shouted as she was frog-marched through the doorway and out into the hall.

“Let go! Get off!” she screamed in desperation as they lifted her off her feet and practically carried her away, down the stairs, and to the dungeons deep beneath the keep.

She reeled in terror as the heavy wooden door swung open, coughing as a fetid stench overwhelmed her. The guards showed no mercy as they dragged her down a steep set of stone steps and into the dim, freezing cold area lined by cells with thick doors and only a small barred window to admit light.

The jailor, surprised, got up from his table, where he had been eating his dinner. He was filthy and bent over, shooting Violet a snaggle-toothed, malicious grin as the guards flung her into one of the cells. He locked the door with a huge key, laughing at her when she leaped up and banged on the door.

“Let me out! I’m innocent,” she cried. “I’m nae a witch!”

“Ach, they all say they’re innocent, lassie,” he told her, waddling away, back to his dinner, while the guards, their duty fulfilled, departed.

The door slammed behind them with a sickening thud that sounded to her like the crack of doom.

Alone in the filthy cell, where there was hardly any light to see by and just a pile of foul-smelling, rotting straw to rest upon, she burst into tears.

“Maither!” she sobbed. “Help me!”

*D*ominic was lost in a mist. Whatever he did, he could not seem to find his way out. No sword or dirk could aid him against this mysterious foe. He merely thrashed and stumbled, directionless, in a darkness that was made of light and surrounded him like a suffocating blanket. And it felt like he had been trapped there for an eternity.

Lost and alone, with no choice but to keep moving, he could only pray that he would eventually find a way to escape his prison.

Am I dead?

Is this heaven or hell?

Think, man, think! What happened? How did ye get to this godforsaken place?

The more he struggled to order his thoughts, the more he became overwhelmed with the sensation that he was dead. Bizarre thoughts began surfacing in his mind, shattered pieces of a puzzle he could not quite fit together into anything that made sense.

He wandered on blindly through the blanketing mist until, at last, the puzzle pieces began to coalesce into some kind of whole that he could understand. They were memories coming back to him, slowly at first, then with bewildering speed.

I was sleeping in me bed. There was a noise, a fight, a blow struck, a poisoned blade... an assassin!

The realization burst upon him like the sun coming up over the hills. Someone had tried to kill him!

At last, the mist began to thin, and he saw a bright light ahead. His heart leaped with hope, and he struck out towards it, feeling as if he was swimming upwards from the bottom of a loch towards the light.

And suddenly, he reached the surface and burst through, knowing immediately that he was back.

With a supreme effort, he forced his eyes open. Soft light poured in, and his vision swam. But he could make out the blurred outline of a slender figure leaning over him, and a woman was crying softly. A small, soft hand was holding his tightly. He squeezed it.

A loud shriek startled him. "Ye're awake! Ye're awake!"

Instantly, he recognized Daisy's voice. His vision began to steady. Within seconds, he could see her clearly. It puzzled him to see her face red and her eyes puffy. He realized it must

have been her who was crying. But now, she was beaming at him, laughing and crying at the same time.

“Thank the Lord,” she breathed, gently kissing his cheek and smoothing his brow with her palm. “Ye’re alive!”

“Was I dead, then?” he croaked, but hardly any sound emerged because his throat was parched.

“Ye need water,” Daisy said, letting go of his hand briefly to pour some water into a glass from a jug on the nightstand. She helped him sit up against his pillows and sip it.

“That’s better than the finest whisky I’ve ever tasted,” he said with an approving sigh, his voice returning as he lay back. His limbs felt like lead, and he was exhausted, as weak as a babe.

“Was I dead?” he asked, still regaining his senses.

“Almost,” Daisy told him, taking his hand once more and holding it to her lips. “Someone tried to kill ye.”

“Aye, I remember. A man. I was asleep in me chambers. He struck me with a poisoned blade when we were fighting.”

She nodded. “That’s right. Ye were poisoned right enough. The blade was covered with monkshood. Whoever attacked ye meant to kill ye.”

He grunted in assent, pushing himself up on his elbows, casting his eyes about the spartan chamber. It seemed somehow familiar, but he could not place it.

He frowned. “Monkshood? That’s a death sentence. How is it I’m alive?”

“Violet.”

He shot up suddenly and began searching the room with his eyes.

“Violet!” he called, the urge to see her overwhelming.
“Violet!”

“Hush, she isnae here,” Daisy told him, and something in her voice alerted him that something was not quite right.

“Where is she, then?” he demanded. “She should be here.”

It felt wrong that Violet was not at his side, and him being at death’s door. A surge of strength went through him, and he swung his legs around and sat on the side of the bed, his head swimming, feeling suddenly nauseous.

“Whisht, what are ye doing? Lie down, ye must rest,” Daisy chided gently, trying to push him back down. But he brushed her hands aside and got up on his feet.

It took him a few moments to regain his balance, but once he did, the nausea passed, and he began searching the room. He knew he had been there before. The fact niggled at his brain as he went into a small washroom. Violet was not there, so he came out into the main chamber again and opened a cupboard. As soon as he opened it, the scent of lavender enveloped him. He looked at the meager number of dresses hanging there and recognized them instantly.

He shut it and turned to Daisy. She was standing behind him, as if to catch him if he fell.

“This is Violet’s room,” he said with utter conviction, almost angry now. “Why am I in Violet’s room, and she isnae here?”

Where is she? I need her!

“Will ye sit down, and I’ll tell ye,” Daisy said, giving a low sob.

“Why are ye crying again?” Dominic asked irritably. All he wanted was to see Violet. Was that so hard to understand?

“Sit down, I tell ye!”

This time, Daisy’s voice told him he had better do as she said if he wanted to know what was going on and where Violet was. With a deep sigh of impatience, he went to the bed and sat down again.

“Now, will ye tell me?”

To his surprise, Daisy came and sat next to him. “After ye were poisoned, ye collapsed and went unconscious. Archer picked ye up and carried ye here, to Violet. I dinnae ken how to say this, Dominic,” she began, her voice giving way to tears.

“She quickly realized from yer symptoms that ye’d probably been poisoned by monkshood. Well, everyone kens that’s fatal. We all thought ye were going to die.” She paused to scrutinize his face anxiously.

“Well, go on, then,” he commanded, on tenterhooks.

“It seems that when Archer went to inform the council members, and to fetch me, to tell us the news, he left ye alone with Violet. And when we got here, expecting ye to be dead or dying, ye were neither, but lying peacefully asleep.”

It took a few moments for Dominic to take in the implications of her words.

“She saved me. She did something that saved me,” he finally said, filled with wonder.

Daisy nodded. “Aye, she did. Thank the gods. I couldnae have lost ye as well as Faither, Dominic.”

“Mmm,” he murmured, reflexively reaching out and patting her hand. “So, where is Violet now? Has she gone to get something to eat?”

Again, his sister shook his head. “I dinnae ken how to tell ye this, Braither, but Leon and Kian, well, they said ye should have been dead, that it was God’s will, and that Violet must have been in league with the Devil to bring ye back from certain death.”

“What?” he asked, sure he had misheard her.

“They accused her of using witchcraft to save ye,” she told him.

“Tsch! The bloody fools,” he muttered. “Ye still havenae answered me question, Daisy. Where the hell is Violet!?”

“She’s-she’s in the dungeons. Leon gave the order to have her locked up until she can be tried as a witch.”

The words had hardly left her mouth before Dominic was out of the door.

“Dominic,” Daisy shouted after him, “ye’re still in yer nightshirt!”

She ran after him as he strode along the hallway to his own chambers. She watched in silence, knowing it was no good arguing with him, as he threw off his soiled shirt and grabbed a fresh one, pulling it hastily over his head. He yanked on his breeks and boots and tucked in his shirt. Grabbing his sword belt, he strapped it around his hips as he strode quickly out of the room.

Daisy followed him out into the hallway. There, she stopped, helplessly watching as he stomped rapidly down the hallway. She heard his boots descending the stairs two at a time, knowing exactly where he was going. With a sigh, she turned and went into her own chambers, shutting the door behind her.

Dominic thought he had known fury, but now, he knew he never really had. As he leaped down the stairs, his insides burned and churned with white heat. He was a volcano, ready to obliterate whatever stood in his path without mercy or remorse. His sword arm itched to mete out his fury most savagely to those who crossed him.

Down in the great hall, several clansmen, including some councilmen, stood about in knots, talking in low voices. Dominic cut a swathe through them like a sword cleaving flesh as he strode across the floor, heading for the doors. A shattering silence fell. The clansmen stared, their jaws dropping collectively as if they were watching some dread phantom pass them by.

“M’laird,” one of them dared to call out hesitantly, “should ye nae be in yer bed?”

“Aye, M’laird, ye cannae be recovered yet,” said another, having the temerity to stand in front of Dominic as if to block his path.

“Get out of me way,” Dominic snarled, shouldering the man violently aside on his way to the doors.

“M’laird, where are ye going? Ye arenae well at all,” the first man said, gesturing for some of his comrades to follow the Laird, lest he be taken ill again.

They swarmed after Dominic like flies as he kicked open the heavy doors and went out into the courtyard, taking a sharp left turn around the wall and following it until he came to the door leading down into the dungeons. A number of clansmen followed behind him, anxiously conferring in anxious whispers.

“He’s off to the dungeons to free the witch,” one murmured.

“Aye, we’d best stop him,” his companion said, running up behind the Laird. “M’laird, ye arenae going to let the witch out, are ye?”

Dominic had flung open the heavy door and was halfway down the steps by that time.

“M’laird, dinnae let her out, she’s dangerous, she’ll bewitch us all!” a councilman called down the steps.

Others followed suit, following him partway down, trying to dissuade him from freeing the witch. But he was already gone.

Dominic descended into the main area of the prison and immediately saw the jailor asleep at his post. He kicked him awake.

“Where is she?” he demanded, his voice like sand.

“In-in here, M’laird,” the cringing dungeoneer stuttered, stumbling over to one of the cells, fumbling with his massive bunch of keys to locate the right one to open the door.

“Hurry up, damn ye!” Dominic roared, his patience exhausted.

“Aye, M’laird—beg pardon, M’laird,” the wretch mumbled, finally managing to unlock the door. It swung open with a creak.

Dominic stooped, about to enter the stinking cell, when something shrieked his name and flew out from within, flinging itself at him, its limbs encircling him like the tentacles of an octopus, as if it would never let go. It sobbed wetly into his shoulder, murmuring, “Dominic, ye’re all right. Thank God, ye’re all right,” over and over.

“Aye, I’m all right, thanks to ye. Ye’re safe now, I promise ye,” he crooned, holding Violet close and rocking her. “Ye’re safe now.”

Swiftly, he carried Violet up the steps of the dungeon, barging through the small gathering of clansmen by the door as if they were ninepins. She clung to him like a child, crying uncontrollably as he swept back through the great hall of the keep and up the staircase. Once in the hallway, he headed for his own chambers, entering and kicking the door shut behind him with a resounding bang.

With the utmost tenderness, he laid Violet on his bed, slipping off her shoes and setting them carefully on the floor. He locked the door and lit a lamp by the bed. Then, he kicked off

his own boots and lay beside her, facing her, wrapping his whole body around her so she was nestled into his chest. Her body was still wracked with sobs, and she felt so small and fragile lying against him, all he wanted to do was to protect her.

His earlier fury had turned to cold steel inside him, and he set it aside as he would his sword, for later use. The burst of almost superhuman energy that had enabled him to rise from his bed and fetch Violet from the dungeons drained out of him, and exhaustion took its place.

For now, he wanted only this, to hold Violet against him, to whisper soothing words in her ear until her sobs quietened, to make her feel safe and secure, and know that he would protect her, always.



Violet awoke to find herself warm and comfortable, pressed against something that was both hard and soft, and smelled deliciously of woodsmoke and musk. She stirred, suddenly realizing she was lying wrapped in Dominic's arms, and he was sleeping. The memory of the reeking dungeon and the bone-chilling fear she had felt at being imprisoned was banished by the knowledge that he was alive and that she was lying next to him. She felt utterly safe and protected.

Wanting to look at him, she wriggled slowly upwards until her face was level with his, looking directly at him. In the soft amber light of the lamp, she rested the tip of her nose against his, breathing in his breath as he gently exhaled. As she examined the face she knew she loved, his eyelids fluttered open, and their eyes met.

For several moments, they lay looking deeply into each other's eyes, a wealth of emotion passing silently between them like an underground river. Then, their lips pressed together in a tender kiss.

“Am I dreaming?” she whispered at last. “Am I really lying here with you?”

“Aye,” he murmured softly, brushing the loose locks from her face. “I needed you.”

“Thank ye for saving me,” she told him, caressing his scars with the back of her hand.

“Thank ye for saving me,” he echoed, and they smiled at each other.

“I cannae tell ye how happy I am that ye're well. I didnae want to leave ye, but they took me away and put me in the dungeons. They called me a witch because I cured ye of the poison.”

“I ken. I'm so sorry I wasnae there to protect ye. Forgive me.”

“Hush, 'tis nae ye who needs forgiving,” she assured him softly, her heart bursting with love for him. “'T'was the cure I told ye about, the one they burned me maither for using. D'ye remember?”

He nodded. “God bless yer maither for teaching it to ye. Otherwise, I'd be a corpse now.”

“Wisht, dinnae say such things.” She pressed a finger to his lips, and he kissed it. “I need to check ye over, make sure ye’re fully recovered from the poison. Sometimes, it leaves its effects behind.”

He sighed and smiled. “Feel free, but I feel all right, considering I was at death’s door. It was a strange experience, to be sure. I really thought I was dead.”

They rolled lazily apart, and Violet rose to her knees. Leaning over him, she took his wrist and felt his pulse.

“Nice and strong and steady,” she told him after a few moments. Then, she lifted his eyelids and gazed deeply into his eyes. “The whites are clear, so that’s a good sign there’s no lasting damage.” Gently, she laid her ear against his chest and listened intently for a few minutes. “Chest sounds clear, and the heartbeat’s strong.”

She moved down his body. “Any nausea? Weakness of the limbs? Pain?” She palpitated his arms and legs, looking at him questioningly with each inquiry.

“Nae, not now,” he assured her, his eyes watching her every move, a slight smile curving his lips. “I’m hungry, though. Starving, in fact.”

“Well, that’s the best sign of all,” she told him with a smile of satisfaction. “In me professional opinion, I think ye’re fully recovered, thank the heavens,” she pronounced, her heart buoyed by the discovery.

“Well, I trust yer opinion completely, Miss Duncan, and I have ye to thank for me miraculous recovery from certain death. Now, what can we eat?”

“I dinnae think I should risk going down to the kitchens. They might try to lock me up again,” she told him with a small frown of worry. “But there’s some oatcakes and butter and cheese and apples in the healing room. Macie’s secret store. Shall I fetch them?”

“I’ll fetch them,” he said, levering himself up.

“All right. They’re in the big cupboard under the shelves, the one nearest the door.”

He unlocked the door and went out while Violet allowed herself a few moments to savor the comfort of his big bed, reveling in the scent of him that permeated the covers. Within minutes, Dominic was back, carrying the small feast. He deposited the haul of goodies on the bed, then went to lock the door again before joining her on the bed. They sat cross-legged, facing each other, buttering the oatcakes and cutting generous slices of cheese with Dominic’s knife, accompanied by crisp apples.

“We need something to drink,” he announced, having eaten heartily. He leaned over to the nightstand and retrieved a decanter of whisky and a small glass, which they shared as they drank the fiery amber liquid.

Finally, the feast was finished, and they leaned back. Sated and happy, Violet’s insides were warmed by the drink, and she felt deliciously languorous.

“I dinnae think they would have fed me so well in the dungeons,” she remarked, yawning.

She saw Dominic’s face darken, suddenly wishing she had not mentioned what had happened, but he grasped her hand in his and looked at her fiercely.

“They’ll pay for that, Violet. Never fear,” he assured her, his dark eyes flashing in the lamplight. Her eyes welled up, seeing the strength of his emotion in his gaze.

“I dinnae care about that, as long as ye’re well,” she told him. She stretched luxuriously. “I suppose I’d best go to me chambers and let ye get some rest. But I think ye should lock yer door, just in case,” she added, reluctant to leave him alone but knowing he needed to recuperate properly.

She moved to slip from the bed and find her shoes, but once again, Dominic caught her wrist.

He pulled her gently to him, gazing into her eyes, making her melt.

“Dinnae go, Violet,” he whispered huskily. “I want ye to stay here with me tonight.”

Her heart began racing as she saw the hunger in his eyes, and the familiar wanting began to burn inside her.

“All right,” she whispered. “I’ll stay.”

I want to stay.

He pulled her closer until their faces were so close, their breaths mingled into one. She closed her eyes as their lips collided, savoring the taste of him, which she had thought she would never taste again. Slowly, delicately, they explored each other's lips and mouths, their tongues entwining in a leisurely, erotic dance.

Dominic's arm slipped around her waist, pressing her against him, and she felt his manhood pressing against her. The feel of him, the excitement she was capable of driving him to, spurred her on in her own passion. She cleaved to him, pressing her hips and breasts against him as their kisses deepened. She was emboldened by his evident need for her. He made her feel beautiful, desirable, and she wanted to give him everything and take everything he had to give.

Sliding her hands beneath his shirt, she shivered to feel the soft, springy dark hair covering his broad chest. Reaching down, she painstakingly pulled out his shirttails, until she could grasp the hem of his shirt and gather it up to pull it off over his head. Dominic raised his arms, allowing her to undress him. His wolfish smile encouraged her to take liberties with his body.

He lay back, relaxed but with a gaze that burned her skin. Now that his upper torso was exposed, she was at last able to explore it as she had wanted to for so long. There were no wounds to dress, no injuries to examine, just his smooth, unblemished skin to run her hands over.

Relishing the opportunity, her fingers wandered freely through his thick, dark locks and down his neck, then across his broad shoulders and arms and the corded muscles that flexed beneath. Intoxicated by the power and strength he exuded, her breath quickened as she marveled at his sheer magnificence.

On an impulse, she lifted her skirts and straddled him, whereupon he groaned and pulled her into him again, cradling her head, his kisses growing fiercer, more demanding. She returned his passion, holding his head between her hands, kissing him more deeply, not holding back.

She was both delighted and amazed at the feel of his rock-hard manhood as she straddled his lap and pressed her secret parts against it through the material separating them. His groans of pleasure only made the flame of her passion burn higher. The thought of what he would feel like inside her urged her on to greater heights of abandon.

She arched her back and moaned as he transferred his lips to her neck, trailing hot kisses and tiny, teasing bites down to the neckline of her dress. Desperate for more, Violet found herself shimmying out of the top of her dress, offering her breasts to him. She cried out, her fingers entwined in his hair as he cupped her already excited peaks in his large hands, rolling them and squeezing them, his mouth growing urgent as he feasted on them hungrily, driving her to the edge of delirium with pleasure.

Wanting more of him, desperate for him to satisfy the burning need between her thighs, she reached behind herself and pulled her dress over her head, flinging it aside heedlessly. The low groan in his throat and the look of appreciation in his eyes emboldened her further.

Her stays were the next to go, flying off to the corner of the room. But she left her shift for him, reveling in the sensation as he lifted the hem over her head, revealing her body in all its nakedness. She felt like a goddess being worshipped as he gasped to see her, his eyes drinking her in.

“I want ye so much, Dominic,” she breathed, pressing her naked breasts to his face so he could kiss and tantalize them with his tongue and teeth in ways that made her moan and thrash her head from side to side. “Make love to me, please. I need you.”

“Och, I will, dinnae ye worry about that,” he whispered huskily, his eyes and lips devouring her.

She almost screamed to feel his fingers parting her nether lips and rubbing at the now throbbing, sensitive bud at the head of her sex. She could feel the hot moisture gathering where he touched her, and she moaned, thrusting her hips to receive his caresses all the better, moving rhythmically against his questing fingers. Thrills ran up and down her entire body as his fingers entered her, driving her ever closer to the dizzying peak he had previously shown her. But this time, they would be going all the way.

“Make love to me, Dominic,” she begged him again, vibrating with rising pleasure at his hands.

He grinned at her and briefly ceased his caresses to slide his breeks down his hips. Eager to see him, she helped him pull them off, sitting back on her heels, gasping with wonder to observe him in all his glory.

Of course, being a healer, she knew what a naked man looked like. But none so far had looked anything like Dominic. His masculine beauty was beyond compare, and as she stared at him, she wanted him more than ever.

He gripped her around the waist and rolled her over so she was beneath him, nudging her legs apart with his knees as he leaned on his forearms above her. He looked down at her with a tense but concerned expression. “This might hurt a wee bit, Violet, but it should only be the one time because ye’re still a maid,” he explained. “Are ye sure ye want this?”

“Och, Dominic, I’ve never wanted anything more!” she exclaimed, her arms encircling his neck, feeling a huge rush of love for him as she smiled into his eyes.

“Me neither,” he told her, positioning himself so she could feel the head of his manhood at her entrance.

Slowly, he pushed into her, groaning deep in his throat, until he met a slight resistance. He pushed on gently, watching her expression carefully, until she felt a stinging sensation as her maidenhood broke. She moaned, for he felt huge inside her, feeling a little soreness as he pressed on, allowing his full length to linger in place for a few moments before pulling back slowly, repeating his slow thrusts at first, carefully regulating the rhythm of his movements as he watched her face, clearly concerned for her pleasure.

“More,” she breathed, thrusting her hips up to meet him, her hands on his shoulders now as she smiled into his eyes.

Needing no second bidding, Dominic smiled back, gradually increasing the speed of his thrusts, until they were moving together in harmony.

Violet moaned and thrashed as hot flames of desire moved up her body in waves, spurred on by Dominic's groans of pleasure. Their movements quickened as they began chasing the pinnacle of their mutual passion together, until finally, they peaked at the same moment, clutching each other, their lips clashing, sweating and panting, before they came floating down from their high.

In the afterglow, they lay tangled together on sheets dampened by their passion, content and sated, sharing kisses and gentle laughter. Their troubles simply did not exist. Violet could not recall a time when she had felt so happy and complete as she did, lying in Dominic's arms. Now that they had shared their bodies with such intensity, something had fundamentally changed within her, she knew.

I am a woman now because of what Dominic has shown me.

She did not remember exactly who fell asleep first, but it did not seem to matter, for she felt as though they were one body, one spirit, one soul, and that was all that seemed important.



The following morning, Dominic awoke and opened his eyes, to discover that the softness he was feeling beneath his fingers was Violet's cheek. It amazed him to realize he had been stroking it in his sleep. He lay quietly for a few minutes, watching her beautiful face in repose as she slept, her jet-black tresses streaming across the pillow like spilled ink. He knew he would never have enough of her.

It was not just a matter of looks. She was kind, clever, talented, funny, and down-to-earth in a way he had come to realize he needed in his life. Best of all, she cared nothing for his scars. He smiled, thinking of the silly toast they had made during their dinner together in his study: they were the burned ones.

May we live and thrive!

Unfortunately, urgent matters had to be attended to that morning, so he had to leave her to her sleep for the time being. He kissed her softly, rose from the bed, and dressed as quietly as he could. Then, he slipped out of the door, locking it behind him, before making his way along the hallway to Archer's chambers.

He knocked, calling to his friend softly through the door. It opened suddenly.

Archer stood there, dressed and ready for the day.

“Good day to ye, M’laird. How are ye faring today, now that ye’ve been to the brink of death and back?” he asked, stepping out into the hall and shutting his door.

“Surprisingly good, thank ye, me friend. Now, I want ye to keep a watch on Violet for me while I go and talk with the council. I’ve important business to do,” Dominic told him. His vice dropped menacingly low as he added, “And I must be sure she’s safe after what happened.”

“Aye. Dinnae worry. I’ll keep her safe,” Archer assured him. They walked back to Dominic’s chamber door.

“Here’s the key. Keep the door locked and dinnae let anyone else in except Daisy or Macie.” Dominic dropped the key into Archer’s hand, and Archer went straight into the room, locking the door behind him.

At least I ken I can always trust Archer. Which is more than I can say for some.

Squaring his shoulders and lifting his chin, Dominic headed for the council chamber, ready for a fight. On his way through the great hall, he spotted Kian talking to some other clansmen. On his way past, he seized him by the collar and literally dragged him to the council chamber, where he threw him in a chair. The others were already there and hastily took their seats, exchanging worried glances. Dominic scowled to see Leon pretending to be reading a document, knowing the man was avoiding meeting his eyes.

With good reason.

He did not sit down as usual but instead folded his arms across his chest and walked slowly around the table, doing his utmost to instill an atmosphere of uncertainty and unease among them. He lingered behind the chairs of the worst of the rebels, enjoying their discomfort as he stood silently behind them. He bestowed his darkest glare on them all as he passed.

He paused behind Kian’s chair, his eyes boring into the man’s head, hoping he was sweating.

“I can see ye’re all sad to see me here today, walking around among ye, alive and kicking, when almost to a man, ye wanted to see me dead,” he finally announced in a voice of soft menace.

A chorus of shocked denials rippled around the table.

“That isnae true, M’laird,” Leon said. “Ye cannae imagine—”

“Shut up. I havenae finished speaking,” Dominic told him in a voice like gravel. “Now, where was I? Och, aye, ye all were pleased to think me dead. For that is the only reason I can think of why ye saw fit to throw Miss Duncan into me dungeons, the very person who saved me life with her cure for the poison inflicted upon me during an assassination attempt in me own chambers.”

“Please, M’laird, will ye allow me to speak?” Leon asked reasonably.

“Nay. I want to hear what this one has to say.” With that, Dominic stepped forward and seized Kian by the hair, whipping out his dirk and holding the blade to the rebel councilman’s throat.

Kian gasped, as did everyone else in the room, except Leon.

“D’ye think I dinnae ken ye’re behind all this, ye treasonous dog? ’T’was ye who tried to have me killed, with a poisoned blade, no less. A coward’s resort. And when ye didnae bargain on Miss Duncan having the expertise to save me life, ye couldnae stand it, so ye had to punish her by calling her a

witch, whipping up hatred and suspicion, just as ye've been doing all these months past over the Farlanes."

"M'laird," Kian croaked, his eyes full of terror. "T'was nae me who tried to kill ye. I wouldnae betray ye like that. I'm loyal, I tell ye. And when they told me ye were dying of monkshood poisoning, why, I couldnae believe it. I swear, I dinnae want ye dead! But what that woman did is unnatural, it's against God. She's a witch, and she had ye spellbound. 'Tis why ye cannae see it. Ach!" He hissed in pain as Dominic pressed the blade harder against his throat.

Leon stood up and said placatingly, "M'laird, there's nae need for this violence. Kian was only saying what we all believed. Ye cannae really think we wanted ye dead. I'm yer friend, for God's sake! But if it is God's will that any of us should die, then it must be so, and any other outcome is unnatural. We ken ye cannae see it, for she's bewitched ye, but that Violet is a wicked woman, wedded to the dark arts. She cured ye by witchcraft. That cannae be allowed to stand."

Kian squeaked as Dominic's blade pressed closer still against his throat. Eyes widened and faces blanched around the table.

"Dominic, please," Leon pleaded, "ye must see reason."

"Violet isnae a witch, and I am nae bewitched. None of ye will lay a finger on Violet, not now nor at any time in the future. She's under me protection, and I'll kill anyone who hurts her." Dominic tugged on Kian's hair, making him squeak again. The others winced. "And anyone who disnae obey me commands to the letter from this moment on is likely to find himself minus his head."

“I am the Laird o’ McGunn,” he bellowed, shaking the room. “I demand loyalty, and loyalty means obeying me orders without question.” With a gesture of disdain, he released Kian, shoving him forward violently.

The man gasped for breath, rubbing his neck, looking terrified.

“That is yer prerogative, M’laird, of course. But I think I speak for the whole council when I say that we must insist the witch is confined to the dungeons again for her crimes and that she faces a proper trial,” Leon said. “Please, try to see reason, M’laird.”

“Aye, Leon speaks for all of us,” said another of the councilmen, eliciting general agreement around the table. “The witch must be tried.”

Dominic stared at them in disbelief for a few moments, the white-hot fury coursing through him. He felt like he was sitting in a room with a bunch of madmen. Either that or he was mad himself. He suddenly realized that the only way to deal with the situation was alone.

Violet was talking to Archer in Dominic's chambers when Dominic returned from the council meeting. As soon as Archer unlocked the door and let him in, she got up, flooded with relief to see he was in one piece. However, she could tell from his expression that it had not gone well. Despite her fears for her own safety, her heart went out to him for all he was having to deal with. She wished she could be of more help to him.

"Archer, could ye give me and Violet a wee bit of privacy, please? But can ye wait out in the hall? We willnae be long," Dominic requested.

"Aye, of course. Just give me a call when ye need me," Archer told him, unlocking the door and opening it. "Here's yer key," he added, giving it to Dominic before stepping out into the hallway and shutting the door behind himself.

As soon as they were alone, Dominic and Violet drew close.

"I can tell by yer face the meeting didnae go well," she noted, her heart heavy.

“Nay, it was a disaster.” He gently took hold of her upper arms and looked into her eyes. “Violet, I dinnae want to say this, and I ken ye’ll be disappointed, but things being the way they are just now, I’m thinking it’s better if ye go back to Dalmuir for a while.”

“What? Nay! I dinnae want to leave ye to face all this trouble alone, Dominic.”

“It’ll only be for wee while, just to give me time to sort out the situation here. Then, ye can come back. Things are serious, and it isnae safe for ye here. Please, Violet, for me own peace of mind, ye have to go home for a while. Anyway, will ye nae like to visit with yer family?”

“Of course, I will, but they arenae expecting me,” she protested, hoping to change his mind, but even as she asked, she could see it was no good, and her heart sank even further.

“Nay. It isnae safe, ye have to go. I care about ye too much to put ye at risk,” he told her with an air of finality. “I’m going to arrange for Archer to escort ye back to Dalmuir as soon as ye can be ready today.”

He embraced her, and they kissed tenderly, but it did nothing to raise her spirits. The thought of being separated from him, even for a short time, was heartbreaking. But if he said it had to be endured, and it would stop him from worrying about her, then it had to be so.

They said their goodbyes, and then Dominic called Archer back into the room, quickly firing out his orders. Archer

nodded, promising to look after Violet and deliver her home safely.

Later that day, Violet and Archer took two horses from the stables and set off from the castle back to her home village. Since Violet's scarred leg meant she had to ride with Archer, he decided it would be best to take a spare mount. They left quietly when everyone was having dinner. Only the sentries guarding the walls observed them as they left, but Violet paid little attention to who was watching, for her heart was in pieces at having to leave Dominic behind to face all the trouble alone.



Now he had secured Violet's safety and his own peace of mind, Dominic could think more clearly about his next course of action. He called a council meeting for the following morning, planning to put an end to the councilmen who were defying him, once and for all. For that reason, he had given orders for Kian to attend, whether he wanted to or not.

However, there was still the matter of finding out who had tried to have him killed in his own castle. There could be little doubt it was an insider, and Kian had always been the main suspect. With the would-be assassin locked up in the dungeons, he figured it was time to find out.

He headed there now, intending to interrogate the man and find out who his paymaster was before dispatching them both quickly.

He arrived at the dungeons, ordering the jailor to open the cell of the would-be assassin.

“Get him out,” he commanded, unwilling to enter the stench-filled cell.

The jailor entered and shuffled over to the figure lying on a pile of rotten straw. He kicked at the lump. “Get up. The Laird wishes to speak to ye,” he said, but the figure did not move. The jailor kicked him again. “I said get up, ye cur.” Still, the man was motionless. The jailor reached down and shook the man roughly. “Wake up!” he shouted, then he cried out and abruptly stepped back, an expression of panic on his face.

“What is it, man?” Dominic asked, losing patience.

“He’s-he’s dead, M’laird,” the jailor stuttered. “His throat’s been cut.”

“What? But how could that have happened? Has anybody been in his cell since he was locked up?”

“N-no, M’laird. Not to me knowledge.”

“Ach, that isnae saying much, is it? When I came down here the other day, ye were asleep on yer watch. Likely ye didnae even notice someone sneaking in and killing yer prisoner. Consider yerself out of a job, man.” Thwarted, but with no time to waste, Dominic snorted in disgust and left.

So much for that. I’ll just have to find out another way.

He braced himself for the council meeting, drawing on some of that cold steel now lodged in his heart after finding Violet thrown in the dungeons on Leon's orders. But when he got to the meeting and sat in his chair at the head of the table, everyone else was there, including a terrified-looking Kian. Only Leon had not arrived.

It was annoying, as Dominic had wanted him to be present when he announced there would be no witch trial. Plus, he had planned to enforce, with violence if necessary, his decisions as Laird regarding the future treatment of the Farlane clan. But after another ten minutes or so of waiting, Leon had still not arrived. It was most unusual. As his senior advisor, he was seldom absent.

As the minutes ticked by, a feeling of deep unease began to seep into Dominic's bones, along with the certainty that Leon was not coming.

"Does anyone ken where Leon is?" he asked, but no one seemed to know. Or they were not telling.

His sense of unease deepened, and a sick headache began to burgeon, making him feel nauseous. Something was wrong, he could sense it. With a sense of trepidation, he looked at Kian.

"Kian," he barked.

Kian shot up in his chair, white-faced and anxious-looking. His hand moved to his neck in a protective gesture. "Aye, M'laird" he said, eyeing Dominic warily.

“Were ye the paymaster behind the assassin who tried to kill me?” Dominic had not meant it to come out that way. It should have been more subtle. But Leon’s absence had changed all that, requiring a rapid change of plan.

Kian shook his head vehemently as all eyes turned to him. He seemed genuinely shocked by the suggestion.

“M’laird, I ken ye’ve been angry with me, and I may be hot-headed at times, but as I’ve said many a time, I’m loyal to ye and yer family. I would never wish to harm ye. And I certainly wouldnae stoop so low as to use poison.”

Something in the man’s face told Dominic he was being truthful. The realization set something clicking into place. He suddenly recalled when Leon had told him about the rumors going around the castle, saying that Violet had bewitched him, supposedly the reason for him making *bad decisions*—decisions about the future policy towards the Farlanes. It had not struck him before that nobody else had heard the rumors.

“This meeting is adjourned,” Dominic said quickly, then left the room.

He walked briskly along the corridor towards the great hall, asking people if they had seen Leon. No one had. He went out into the courtyard and began questioning the sentries. After asking several of them, he came across one who told him he had seen Leon leaving the castle at dawn with a dozen men.

Upon hearing that information, a feeling of cold dread settled over Dominic as his worst suspicions were confirmed. Nevertheless, he snapped into action. Running back into the

castle, he briefly gave orders to secure the castle in his absence. Then, he went to the guard house and gathered some armed men. In less than an hour, the party set out apace for Dalmuir, with Dominic riding determinedly at its head on Arran, knowing Leon had at least a two-hour head start on them.



Violet was finding it strange being back at the cottage with her family after living in the castle for many weeks. It was not just that; the place had changed a lot. The thatched roof was brand new, and rain no longer leaked in. There was glass in the windows and pretty curtains, too. There were thick rugs on the floors, a new settee and chairs, piles of chopped wood stacked outside under the new porch, and a full larder, amongst many other improvements. Best of all, there were comfortable new beds for everyone. It was quite a palace.

And every bit of it reminded her of Dominic.

On top of that, as wonderful as it was to be reunited with her family, she felt she had lost her role as head of the family. With better food, more money, and improved living conditions, Aiden had filled out into a braw-looking man, capable of much more lucrative work than before. He had gotten himself apprenticed to a smith, a respected profession.

Under the same conditions, young Breagha had also blossomed. A natural pride in her improved surroundings—she enjoyed having pretty, new things—had turned her into a hard-working homemaker and fair family cook. Her once stick-thin figure had rounded out nicely into attractive curves, and her bonnie looks had apparently been attracting much attention among the eligible bachelors of the village.

Thus, it was that, upon her return, Violet found herself somewhat displaced, spending most of her time with the twins.

“’Tis me turn,” complained Rhea, looking very pretty in her new dress despite her sour expression.

The three were sitting together at the tea table, playing a board game that required shaking dice and small colored counters to traverse the board of small counters.

“Nay, ’tis mine,” Callan insisted, shaking his black curls vehemently as he shook the little beaker containing the dice and threw them. “Five!” he shouted triumphantly. “That means I’ve won.”

“Ye only win because ye cheat,” Rhea accused him, sticking her tongue out.

He made a face at her.

“I hate ye,” Rhea told him, grabbing the dice and throwing them at him.

“Ow! Violet, look what Rhea did, she hit me in the face,” Callan protested.

“Wisht yer fussing, ye two, will ye? Why can ye nae stop arguing and just get on, eh?” Violet told them, temporarily roused from her gray torpor.

Breagha, who was by the hearth, minding a pot of stew, and Aiden, cleaning his boots nearby, exchanged a meaningful look.

“She hasnae been the same since she came back. What d’ye think happened at the castle?” Breagha whispered to her older brother.

Aiden shook his head, regarding Violet sadly. “I dinnae ken. She hasnae said anything about it to ye?” he whispered back.

“She hardly speaks at all. I wonder if—” Breagha’s words were interrupted by a loud knock at the cottage door.

“Ye get it, Aiden,” she told him, seeing Violet appear indifferent.

Aiden rose and set his boots aside, wiping his hands on a rag before crossing to open the door. Everyone looked up, even Violet, at the commotion as several armed men forced their way into the cottage.

“What’s this? What d’ye want here?” Aiden began, but the men pushed him aside.

“Get out of me way, lad,” said a well-built man with red hair and brown eyes, walking into the room. He looked around, and his eyes settled on Violet, who was now standing behind the table, having pushed Rhea and Callan behind her. “That’s her,” he said, gesturing towards her with his hand. “Seize her and secure the others.”

“Leon McGuire,” Violet said, seeming to wake up. “What are ye doing here? What do ye want with me and me family? Ye have nae right to just come barging in like this and—”

“Och, but I just have,” Leon told her, giving her a smile that made her blood run cold. “’Tis me duty to mete out punishment to those who transgress God’s laws.”

Rhea began to whine in fear, clinging to Violet’s skirts as one of the armed men tried to pull her while another seized Violet’s arm and tugged her out from behind the table and into the center of the floor.

“’Tis all right, Rhea,” Violet told the little girl in a shaking voice, “go to Breagha now.”

“Leave Violet alone!” shouted Callan, bunching up his fists as if to fight the men. They pushed him aside, and he burst into tears, running to Aiden. “I’m sorry, Violet, I cannae fight them, they’re too big for me.” He sobbed.

“’Tis all right, dear, ye’re very brave, but there’s too many of them,” Violet called to him, trying to smile even as tears fell down her cheeks.

She sent heartfelt glances at them all as they cowered by the hearth. The expressions of fear and confusion on their faces tore her insides like knives.

“Dinnae be afraid, me dears, ’tis a mistake, ’tis all.” But her shaking voice gave her away, and the children began bawling

inconsolably.

“Dinnae hurt them,” she begged Leon. “They’ve done nothing.”

“I dinnae punish the innocent. Only the guilty,” he told her. “Tie her securely to the chair there,” he ordered two of his men, pointing at one of the chairs next to the table where Violet and the children had been sitting only minutes before.

Another man came in with a coil of thick rope slung over his shoulder and gave it to the others. They thrust her roughly into the chair and began tying her up.

“What are ye going to do?” she questioned him. “The Laird himself freed me. Does he ken ye’re here, doing this?”

“What am I going to do? It is nae obvious to ye after what happened back at the castle? Ye’re witch, and since ye’ve bewitched the Laird, bending him to yer will, influencing the decisions he made, he was becoming far too lenient with the Farlanes, for example. So, I must take responsibility on his behalf and take the correct action.”

Violet’s heart turned to ice. “What d’ye mean? Correct action? What correct action?” But she had a horrible feeling she already knew.

“Since the Laird cannae punish ye, I will. We dinnae need a trial. Ye’ve proved ye’re a witch by bringing the Laird back from death’s threshold. That should never have happened. That poison would have killed him for sure if not for ye. Ye

should have let him die. He was a good man once, before ye got yer hooks into him.”

A dreadful truth dawned on her. “’Twas ye who sent the assassin! Ye tried to kill yer own Laird with deadly poison!” she cried.

He nodded, completely unphased by her accusation. “Aye, ’twas unfortunately necessary. With the Laird under yer malign influence, he was as good as dead anyway. I was just giving him a helping hand, liberating him from yer wicked enchantment. He was no longer worthy of the title of the Laird of McGunn.”

Violet was aghast, hardly able to believe what she was hearing. The horror was turning her insides to water. She felt like screaming, but what good would it do? He would just hurt her family, and she’d rather die than let that happen.

“Yer a mad man!” she shouted, sobbing, wrenching at her bonds, but the men had done a thorough job securing her to the chair.

There was no hope of escape. No hope for her at all. The only thing she could do was protect her family before he killed her.

“I dinnae care what ye do to me,” she lied, “just dinnae hurt me family.”

“I told ye,” Leon said patiently, “I dinnae punish the innocent. They’ll be safe enough, but they’ll have to watch ye burn, to

teach them the lesson never to follow in their sister's footsteps as resort to the evils of witchcraft."

"No!" she screamed, horrified at his cruelty.

Suddenly, she was back at that terrible night, a young girl, screaming for her mother, the echoes of her siblings' cries and screams mingling with the crackling roar of the fire consuming her mother. She was running into the fire to save her, her dress catching alight and burning her leg, leaving her with the permanent reminder. She was being dragged back forcibly, held, and made to watch as the flames consumed her beloved mother.

"All is ready. Take them out and clear the cottage," Leon ordered, pointing at her siblings. They were hustled outside, the men left, and Leon added, "Ye had better renounce the Devil, witch, or yer soul will burn in hell for all eternity." With that, he left her, closing the front door firmly behind him.

Giving way to her terror, Violet cried and trembled, struggling against her bonds. But it was no use.

"Dear Lord and all the angels in heaven, please, help me, save me, ye ken I am nae a witch!"

She continued praying frantically, even when the smell of smoke drifted up her nostrils and slowly filled the room, pooling about her feet. When she heard the first crackling flames, she closed her eyes and thought of Dominic, wishing with all her might that he might come and rescue her.

Dominic and his men galloped up to the crest of the hill and saw Dalmuir lying spread out beneath them. Dominic spied smoke billowing into the sky. His heart clenched to see it was coming from the vicinity of Violet's cottage.

"Over there!" he shouted, urging Arran down the hill at a frantic gallop, arriving at the cottage a few minutes later ahead of his men.

The sight that met his eyes was astounding and alarming in equal measure. Leon was standing outside the cottage with a group of armed men. Dominic recognized Violet's siblings, who were forcibly restrained by some men.

He realized with horror that the cottage had been purposely set on fire, for flames were beginning to leap across the freshly thatched roof, and smoke was now rising into the sky in thick, gray columns. Suddenly, he understood; Violet's siblings were forced to watch their home burn. The twins were screaming and crying while Aiden and Breagh were doing their best to comfort them, yet they, too, appeared distraught.

Just then, Leon noticed him. He smiled at Dominic, whose heart turned cold to see the manic glint in his old friend's eyes. Leon looked happy. And mad.

“Ach, M’laird. Ye’ve come just in time for the main event.”

“What’s it all in aid of, Leon?” Dominic asked.

“Why, d’ye nae ken? I’m burning the witch for ye.” Leon stood back and watched the fire grow as a doting parent looks at their favorite child.

“Ye mean to say Violet’s in there?”

“Of course!”

Dominic’s blood turned to ice despite the heat the blaze before him was putting forth on everyone and everything as it gained momentum. For a few moments, he was frozen in place, unable to move his limbs in the way he knew he needed them to if he was to save Violet. The roaring and crackling of the flames engulfed him as his mind and heart struggled with the almost overwhelming feeling of terror and dread that came with the thought he might once more fail to save a loved one from death—just as he had failed his father.

He clenched his fists and jaw, forcing himself to think rationally. The clear thought came to the forefront of his mind; act now or Violet will burn to death.

Something released within his body then, and energy suddenly infused his frozen limbs, hurling them forward towards the cottage door, where flames blossomed like roses.

But when he got within a few yards of the door, several of Leon's men caught him by the arms and dragged him backward, holding him back by force as he bucked and snarled against them.

As he did so, Dominic shot a look of pure hatred at the maniac he had thought was his right-hand man, who was surveying the blaze with the content expression of a man relaxing by his own fireside.

Seconds later, when he heard the sound of horses' hooves and saw his men ride up to the cottage, he shouted for them as he fought against his captors.

“Over here! Free me!”

Two of his men rode over instantly, and the men holding him back knew they did not stand a chance against the mounted soldiers, releasing Dominic and backing off at once.

“Finish them, lads!” Dominic commanded, inciting a vicious battle between his men and Leon's. As the men fought and, knowing precious seconds had been wasted, Dominic once more made for the doorway of the cottage. His horror only grew as he took in the blazing thatched roof, which was not a halo of orange, giving off choking gray smoke.

I have to save her! I have to!

But at the last moment, Leon stepped in front of him, drawing his sword and taking a fighting stance. Dominic did the same, and their blades clashed as they fought to the death.

“Ye want to save the witch, is that it?” Leon taunted him, laughing cruelly. “Ye have nae honor, Dominic. Ye’ve dishonored yer family’s reputation and yer faither’s memory by letting a witch influence ye.”

“Ye’re a mad man, Leon. I wish I had time to tell ye how wrong ye are, but I dinnae,” Dominic cried, lunging forward and stabbing Leon through the chest.

Leon clutched at the sword where it pierced his chest, and when Dominic pulled it out, he crumpled like an empty sack to the floor, blood pooling around him, his expression one of astonishment.

Without looking back and bloody sword in hand, Dominic at last entered the cottage. The smoke was thick and choking, but, somehow, though the outer thatch was burning, it was packed so tightly, the flames had not yet reached the underlayer, and the ceiling inside the main room was still intact.

He stumbled forward, his arm covering his mouth and nose, his eyes stinging. Struggling to hold his breath, snatching glances through streaming eyes, he looked around and thought he could just make out what he knew must be Violet. She was slumped in a chair in the center of the chamber and appeared tied to it with thick ropes. Once again, as he pushed towards her, he damned the man responsible to hell.

Incredibly, sweat broke out on his brow as a rush of fear drenched him on seeing her immobile form. His heart hammering in his chest, suspecting he was too late, he plunged fearlessly forward, determined to reach her. When he did and tried to get a response from her, calling her name and shaking her, her head lolled forward.

No! No! No!

Was she alive or not? He could not tell.

Pulling out his dirk, he desperately sawed at the ropes but quickly realized they were too thick and knotted even to cut through. Meanwhile, unable to hold his breath any longer, he was becoming overwhelmed by the smoke, too.

I have to get the both of us out of here, nae!

He sheathed his sword, picked up the entire chair with Violet in it, and raced for the door. Just as he burst outside, a large burning beam fell from the edge of the roof, sending a huge cloud of embers and ashes up into the sky.

Dominic ran with the chair until he was far enough away from the fire to breathe properly. Then, he set down the chair and began trying to revive Violet, calling her name urgently as he sliced away the ropes with his dirk. He pulled her into his arms, but she was as limp as a ragdoll, and he feared the worst.

“Violet! Violet! Come on, it’s me, it’s Dominic!” he cried, peppering her face with kisses. “Come on, dinnae die, please!”

He pressed his lips to hers and breathed into her lungs in desperation.

When she coughed and retched, it was the best sound in the world, and he laughed with relief, lifting her off her feet.

“Och, thank God, ye’re alive!”

She gave in to a fit of hacking and coughing. “The smoke,” she wheezed, struggling for breath, her arms around his neck.

Thinking quickly, he carried her over to a nearby rain barrel full of water and splashed water on her face. She opened her mouth, greedily swallowing the cool liquid and quickly reviving under its influence.

“Och, Dominic, I prayed ye would come,” she whispered in his ear, clinging to him. “Thank ye for saving me again. I love ye, Dominic. I love ye with all me heart and soul. I thought I would nae have the chance to tell ye that, so I’m taking no chances and telling ye now. I shall love ye till the day I die.”

“Oh, me bonnie lass, I love ye too, with all me heart, with every part of me. I cannae live without ye. I want ye to be me wife.”

“If that’s a proposal, then the answer is aye,” she whispered, pressing her lips to his.

They held each other tightly, kissing with all the passion they could muster despite the circumstances.

“Violet! Ye’re safe. Oh, me God, ye’re alive!” It was Breagha, running towards them, holding the twins by the hand.

The children flung themselves ecstatically at Violet. Dominic released her so she could reunite with her family. Aiden came running up behind them to embrace his sister. Everyone was black with soot from head to foot.

Then, something truly extraordinary happened. As if from nowhere, large raindrops began to fall, slowly at first, then harder and harder, until the sky opened and a deluge fell, putting out the fire and drenching everything and everyone. All Violet, Dominic, and her siblings could do was laugh as the cooling water ran down their faces and soaked them to the skin.

Finally, the talk turned to practical things.

“The cottage will have to be completely rebuilt,” Violet said as they all stared silently at the smoking pile of rubble and straw that had once been their home.

“That’s nae problem,” Dominic told her, holding her hand and smiling. “Will ye nae come back and live at the castle again, Violet? We still need a healer, ye ken?”

“I’d love to, but what about this lot?” She gestured towards her siblings.

“Ach, there’s plenty of room for them too,” he told her. “Would ye nae all like to come and live with yer sister in me

castle?” he asked them.

“Aye, we would!” the twins shouted in unison.

“I think that’s an aye,” Aiden said with a grin, and Breagha nodded enthusiastically.

“Well, that’s settled, then,” Dominic announced. “We’re all going back to the castle.”

So, that was what they did.

EPILOGUE

TWO MONTHS LATER

There was no doubt in Violet's mind that this was the best day of her life. How could it not be? She was marrying Dominic, and she was going to be the Lady of McGunn. Who would have ever imagined such a thing?

The merry band of women and girls that either was or would soon become her family had gathered in Daisy's bedchambers at Castle McGunn early that morning for a hot breakfast of porridge, drop scones, eggs, honey, and freshly baked bread, amongst other dishes designed to keep their stamina up during what promised to be a very long, albeit enjoyable, day.

The day had been spent gossiping, eating and drinking, bathing, and generally primping, but the most important part had been making sure the bride looked her best. When Violet looked at her reflection in the looking glass, she could hardly believe the vision in the ice-blue dress with its pretty lace train and the roses in her hair was actually her.

"Right, shall we make our way downstairs, ladies? The ceremony is due to begin in ten minutes," Dakota said, opening the door and heading up the procession as they went down the hall, descended the stairs, and moved gracefully along the corridor towards the door of the great hall.

Violet's heart was hammering in her chest, and it was hard to breathe. They halted by the doors to the great hall.

"I'll peep inside and see if Dominic has arrived," Delilah said, approaching the door and doing exactly as she said. She came back looking excited. "He's there, with Archer. They're by the altar. The priest is there too."

Her words sent a bolt of fresh excitement through Violet, whose insides turned to water.

"Let me just make sure the bride looks perfect," Daisy said, smiling at Violet as she inspected her, adjusting a small ringlet before nodding her approval. "Beautiful."

Archer's face appeared around the edge of the door.

"Is it time?" Dakota asked him.

"Aye. Whenever the bride is ready," Archer said, his admiring eyes passing over the bevy of beautiful ladies and settling on Breagha a little longer than necessary before he smiled encouragingly at Violet.

"Right," Dakota said, "we have Rhea at the front as the flower girl, then the bride, then Elise and Daisy holding the train, then meself and Delilah bringing up the rear. I think we're all set. Are ye ready, Violet?"

“Aye,” said Violet, her voice trembling, wondering if her legs would carry her up the aisle.

At last, they set off at a regal pace, with little Rhea strewing dried flower petals from her little basket to mark the bride’s path to the altar. The other ladies followed gracefully behind like a flotilla of swans.

When Violet spotted Dominic’s tall, broad figure standing by the makeshift altar, his eyes looking back at her with an expression of wonder and admiration on his handsome features, her pulse began racing in her chest, and she could not stop smiling at him. He smiled back, and her heart did a somersault.

As she came up to him, they exchanged loving looks, gazing deep into each other’s eyes. They had agreed to tie the matrimonial knot with two ribbons, one in the McGunn tartan and one in the Farlane tartan. They wore the ribbons around their wrists until they made their vows, when Archer pulled the knot tight, joining their hands, the knotted ribbons a symbol of their union to be treasured forever.

Once they were pronounced man and wife, Dominic caught her in his arms, and they kissed in front of the assembled congregation of distinguished clan families, the allies and friends of Clan McGunn.

Now married to the man she adored with all her heart, Violet’s nerves dissipated, and the fun began as they embarked on the wedding breakfast. There were traditions to follow, of course, like drinking the whisky from the quaich, the two-handled cup that signified unity, from which all must drink after the bride and groom.

Then, before the feast opened, Dominic had to pay the piper his due, a dram of whisky. They were then piped into dinner and guaranteed good luck their whole lives through. The party passed in a blur of wine, whisky, food, laughter, chatter, dancing, being whirled around the dancefloor by her husband, stealing kisses, more wine, more whisky, and sitting on Dominic's lap, stealing more kisses, before they were both chased by a good-natured, well-oiled crowd up to their newly appointed wedding chambers.

“Ach, I've been waiting all night to get ye alone,” Dominic murmured, grabbing Violet around the waist and dancing a little jig with her over to the enormous bed, where they fell onto the coverlet side by side, giggling like children.

They lay facing each other, nose to nose.

“I love ye, husband,” she whispered.

“And I love ye, wife,” he whispered back as they stared into each other's eyes.

“This has been the happiest day of me life, Dominic. Thank ye, for everything.” She stroked his face tenderly, her heart bursting with love for him.

“And the same for me. I feel blessed to be married to me lovely lassie. And now, I'm going to make love to ye all night long.”

“Are ye? Is that a promise?”

“Aye. Well, maybe we’ll just have a wee nap first, eh?” he told her with a grin, snuggling close to her and wrapping his arms around her. “I must admit, I feel a wee bit tipsy. ’T’was all that drinking that did it.”

“Mmm, I ken. I feel a bit sleepy too.”

So, they fell asleep on the coverlet, like babes in the woods, perfectly contented to be cuddled up together after a very busy, very important day.

But wine and whisky have a way of wearing off. In the wee small hours of the night, when the lamp was burning low, they wriggled out of their clothes and cleaved to each other, exploring every inch of each other’s bodies with their lips and mouths and hands, rolling naked like two dolphins in the surf.

Dominic buried his face in her breasts, groaning with pleasure, already hard, and Violet gasped and moaned with pleasure as his fingers explored her soft, secret folds, caressing her most sensitive parts with his tongue, opening her until she was soaking wet and could bear it no more.

Giving way to her deepest desires, Violet climbed atop her husband, lowering herself onto his manhood until he filled her to the brim, taking her to the edge of delirium. They moved in perfect rhythm together, leisurely at first, then, as their excitement increased, she bounced as he thrust faster and more urgently, chasing together the peak of pleasure they knew they could give to each other.

Finally, it came, a rushing wave of ecstasy crashing over them in unison, and they fell against one another, breast to breast, panting for air, and smiling as they kissed and slowly floated back to earth as one.

There they lay, naked and pressed together, sated and perfectly content in each other's arms before they drifted off once more into a gentle slumber.

The End?

EXTENDED EPILOGUE

Would you like to learn how **Violet and Dominic's** relationship evolved? Then enjoy this complimentary short story featuring our favorite couple!

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Turn on to the next page to read the first chapters of *Her Vow with the Highlander*, one of my best stories so far!



PREVIEW: HER VOW WITH THE HIGHLANDER

Here you will find the first 3 Chapters of my previous book

“*F*inally, the moment has come!” Hunter Winbury, the Laird of the O’Neill clan, exclaimed, as he and his man at arms, Cohen Boyle, ventured deep into the forest that surrounded Hunter’s ancestral castle. “I cannae believe it, honestly,” he added as they trudged through the undergrowth, their steps softened only by the blanket of fallen leaves.

“Aye, M’Laird.” Cohen nodded as he mirrored Hunter’s stride.

While Cohen was not as imposing in stature as his laird, there was a very good reason why this man was Hunter’s man at arms. There was an undeniable air of confidence about him, and his eyes proved intelligence and wit. His lean frame assured anyone that what he lacked in strength he surely made up for in agility.

“Our new alliance with the Crawfords has been long in the makin’,” Hunter continued as he gripped his bow in his hand, ready to aim and strike at any given moment. “That is why this feast we will hold in their honor must be perfect in every way. Nothin’ can go wrong. Nothin’.”

“I shall see to it that it doesnae,” Cohen assured him, and Hunter knew that it was a done deal.

Hunter’s face bore the marks of a life lived without many confidantes. Life had taught him that, sometimes, those closest to him would be the first to stab him in the back. So, he realized it was easier to have as few trusted people around as possible. The lines etched around his eyes and on his brow,

despite his young years, served as a testament to the challenges he had been facing continuously as the Laird.

“If I may advise ye,” Cohen suddenly added pensively.

“Always, old friend.” Hunter stopped so that he could turn to Cohen and listen to his words intently. “What is on yer mind?”

“Ye have been tryin’ yer hardest all these years to revive our clan, and ye’ve been successful in that endeavor,” Cohen reminded him of something Hunter was very well aware of. “Perhaps now might be the time to take it a wee bit slow.”

“Slow?” Hunter raised an inquisitive brow. “What do ye mean?”

“I mean, ye should focus on yerself,” Cohen spoke cautiously, knowing that Hunter didn’t like to talk about himself. For him, his life was his clan, and that was that. “Work less and just... well, focus on yerself.”

“I cannae focus on meself, dinnae be absurd,” Hunter scoffed, although he knew that his friend meant well.

“Aye,” Cohen answered playfully in a manner that only the closest of confidantes were allowed to do. “The Heartless Laird can only focus on his clan and no one else.”

“Heartless Laird?” Hunter chuckled amusedly. “I really hate that darn nickname. Whoever came up with it should have his beard torn off, one hair at a time.”

Cohen couldn’t resist laughing. Over the course of the past several years, Hunter seemed to have grown into this rugged, commanding figure, earning him the nickname of Heartless Laird, as he focused on rebuilding his clan from the ashes, not even flinching when it was required of him to trample over his enemies. He was adamant about getting what he wanted, for which he was also deemed ruthless. However, he always considered himself fair, in all situations. His broad shoulders and sinewy muscles stood as a symbol of his skills as a hunter and leader, yet another reason behind his nickname.

“Dinnae worry, old friend, I’m healthy as a horse. I need to focus all that energy on making our clan greater than ever.”

“Ye have already achieved that,” Cohen said admiringly.

“We have to make a list of the guests for the feast,” Hunter mused, changing the topic intentionally.

Although, this was his least favorite part. Before, if there had been any social gathering to be organized, he had left it to one of his sisters to deal with such details. Now, he had to take care of it on his own, for there was no woman in his life, and he wanted to keep it that way.

“There is Laird Connelly, Laird O’Shaughnessy...” Hunter started to list names he could not omit as they ventured deeper into the forest, their voices blending into each other’s, filling the atmosphere with camaraderie based on deep-rooted friendship. After all, they had known each other for quite a long time, and Hunter trusted no man more than Cohen himself.

Despite his mind being focused on the matter at hand, his gaze, ever vigilant, surveyed the area with the intensity of a skilled hunter. They never liked returning home with empty hands. Cohen kept adding names to the list, his voice laced with genuine care for his friend and master. Hunter always felt that Cohen truly understood the weight he had to carry, the years of struggle and resolve that had brought their clan back from the brink of total destruction. Cohen always knew what to say, his playful nature coming to the surface at exactly the right moment, and this time was no exception.

“Havenae ye forgotten someone?” Cohen suddenly asked, sounding oddly amused.

“Who?” Hunter wondered aloud as the two men kept walking.

“Laird Crawford has an unmarried daughter,” Cohen reminded him, and those words were enough for Hunter to know exactly what Cohen was referring to.

Whether he was aware of it or blissfully ignorant, everyone knew that Laird Crawford would offer his daughter’s hand to any laird with whom he couldn’t make an alliance through any other means. This situation would always be extremely awkward, especially for the poor lady in question, as her hand

would be offered to someone she had just met and didn't even know well.

The laird in question would feel equally awkward refusing such a sweet young woman, mostly for the reason that it was simply not how things were done. Yet, Laird Crawford himself kept being blissfully ignorant of what he was doing to his only daughter and her peace of mind.

"I think I may be the only laird to whom Crawford hasnae made an offer to marry his daughter." Hunter laughed, although he did feel a tinge of sympathy towards the young woman.

It couldn't be easy dealing with such a father. Then again, it was better to have a father who cared too much and sometimes overdid things than to have a father who did not seem to care one bit.

"She is a bonnie lass," Cohen returned to him with a mischievous smile.

"I'll let her be bonnie to someone else, then." Hunter nodded, a flicker of vulnerability in his eyes revealing the weight of responsibility he bore towards his clan as the Laird. His dedication to his clan was absolute and unyielding. A woman would only diminish his focus and concentration.

Suddenly, the forest became deafeningly silent. It was eerie. His instincts, sharp as the tip of his arrow, suddenly flared to life. Somewhere in the distance, a sound was heard. Hunter stopped, motioning for Cohen to do the same. With a commanding pointing of the hand, Cohen was urged to head in the same direction. Cohen's eyes met Hunter's. *What is it?*

A sudden rush of the underbrush made them both look in the same direction. Without even thinking, Hunter's hand gripped the hilt of his hunting knife, prepared for whatever was certainly about to come their way. His entire body tensed. He feared it might be a bear because although they were rarely spotted in these woods, it was not impossible to stumble upon one.

At first, Hunter thought that whoever jumped out of the dense foliage was an assailant sent to assassinate him. But this couldn't have been further from the truth, for a vision of ethereal beauty appeared before them.

A most delicate female form emerged before them, swathed in dirty and torn garments, her long flowing hair disheveled and filled with leaves and small branches. She stumbled towards them, disoriented and about to faint. Her eyes, the color of emerald forests, immediately found his, sparkled in a glimmer of sheer desperation as she pleaded for assistance.

"Please..." she managed to muster, her voice down to a barely audible whisper. "Help..."

The sound of her voice was enough to jolt Hunter into action, despite the fact that he was momentarily mesmerized by her bewitching presence. He ran towards her without thinking, sensing that she might fall down at any moment. She was teetering on the border of consciousness.

He wrapped his strong arms around her, holding her in a secure embrace. Without even knowing what happened, a strange tidal wave of protectiveness washed over him. Something assured him that he needed to keep her safe from whatever it was she was running from.

"Quick, Cohen!" Hunter turned his attention to his friend with confidence, although he couldn't hide his concern for them all. "Go check if anyone is following her."

Immediately, Cohen did as he was told. He darted through the thick shrubbery the mysterious woman had emerged from, looking for any signs of pursuers that might be behind her. Once left alone with the woman in his arms, Hunter focused his attention fully on her. He had never seen anyone so breathtakingly mesmerizing as she was.

Her porcelain skin bore a pallor of exhaustion and distress, but that did not diminish her beauty in any way. The fiery cascade of curls fell down her back, framing her delicate features. As he inhaled deeply, he could detect a faint scent of wildflowers in the air around her, as if her untamed spirit oozed right out of her essence.

For a few precious moments, her eyes were open, then she leaned heavily against him for support, gripping his shoulders. He cradled her even more strongly, refusing to stop looking at her even for a single moment. For a brief moment, he contemplated the mystery regarding her sudden emergence from the woods that surrounded his castle and, even more, the urgency of her plea.

Please... Help...

Why did she need help from him? Did she need to be protected from someone? But from whom? Had she done something? Or had something been done to her? A million questions started to swarm inside his mind, until the moment Cohen returned with just a single shake of his head.

That was enough.

Without any hesitation, a decision formed inside Hunter's mind. And nothing felt more right. Something assured him that he needed to protect this woman at all costs. That was why he resolved to bring her back to his castle with him, where he could ensure that she was well taken care of. Then, he might be given the chance to uncover the enigma of this mysterious woman and what she was running away from.

"Come, lass," he said, lifting her up into his arms as if she were the lightest of feathers. "Let's get ye to safety."

He didn't know why he said that when she was obviously unconscious. But somehow, he hoped she was able to hear him. He wanted her to hear him. He wanted to her know that she was safe.

Carefully, he moved through the forest, with the woman in his arms, cradling her like a fragile treasure, and Cohen by his side. She was so light, so petite, and this realization only strengthened his determination to shield her from any harm.

"Who is she?" Cohen asked the question that was on both of their minds.

"I dinnae ken," Hunter replied honestly. "But I ken that we must take her back to the castle. Maybe then we'll get some answers."

Now, it seemed they really weren't returning home emptyhanded. Only, they weren't bringing home an animal, but a woman, whose secrets were enshrouded in uncertainty.

Without even knowing it, their fates were now intertwined, setting them on a path of unforeseen mysteries, one of which was why he had been so instantly attracted to this stranger, who seemed to mesmerize him with the very sight of her beautiful eyes.

She hands were around her neck, the long branchy fingers digging into her soft, swan-like neck with a ferocity that wouldn't allow her to breathe. Her field of vision became blurry. She couldn't see the face of the man the hands belonged to, but she didn't need to see him to know who he was.

She screamed loudly, a sound that brought her back from her nightmare, plunging her into the real world, as her heart pounded against her ribs violently. Fear surged through her veins like venom. Panic gripped her as she tried to gather both her breath and her thoughts.

She clutched her neck. The only fingers around it were her own. She could breathe more easily now. But that was only for a single moment because she realized that she was in an unfamiliar room. Panic coursed through her entire body. She was in an unknown chamber, lying on an unknown bed, surrounded by three unknown men. Their presence only seemed to make matters worse.

“Who are ye!?” she exclaimed loudly, scurrying to the wall, still on the bed, but to her utter horror, there was nowhere left to run, nowhere left to hide, as one of the men was sitting on the bed by her side, the second one was pacing about the chamber, and the third one, who seemed most familiar, stood by the door as if to guard it.

“Calm down, lass,” the man on the bed assured her. “Ye are amongst friends.”

Her gaze locked on him. His voice was that of an aged father, and his weathered face was carrying a kind expression. It was because of him that her fear diminished, but only a little. She locked her eyes on him, waiting to hear more.

“I am Angus Fulton, the healer of the O’Neill clan,” the man continued, his words providing a glimmer of comfort to her aching body and mind. “I am here to help. How do ye feel, lass?”

She swallowed heavily, unable to form words for some reason. Also, she wasn’t able to tear her gaze away from the tallest of the three men, the one who stood by the door. His face stirred a flicker of recognition deep inside of her.

“I suppose we’d best introduce ourselves before we flood ye with questions.” Angus smiled at her reassuringly, his eyes glistening with warmth and sympathy, something she hadn’t seen in ages. “That is Cohen Boyle, and that striking man ye see over there is Hunter Winbury, Laird O’Neill.”

Hunter.

The name echoed in her mind. She couldn’t explain it, but she knew him from somewhere. A spark of familiarity ignited within her the moment their eyes locked. There was something about him she could not pinpoint, an intensity of his presence that was both comforting and unsettling at the same time.

He had that unusual blend of rugged charm, dignified features, and a distinctive Highland allure. His hair, a shade of rich chestnut brown, was swept back, with a few loose strands framing his face, giving off an untamed visage. His strong, well-defined jawline complemented his high cheekbones, which only seemed to add to his strong presence.

She felt her lips go dry at the sight of his broad shoulders and muscular build, which was concealed beneath a well-tailored waistcoat and jacket. She pointed at a pitcher of water with her finger. Angus, the healer, rushed to pour her a glass. After drinking it as if she had been walking in the desert for days, she felt bold enough to introduce herself.

“I am Iris Sinclair, the—” she started, but she bit her tongue before she could continue. Maybe it wasn’t safe to share too much about herself. Maybe these men knew *him* and they would tell *him* where she was. The thought was petrifying.

“It is nice to meet ye, Iris.” Angus smiled benevolently. “What a bonnie name ye’ve got.”

She weakly smiled back, not saying anything. Her mind struggled to find sense in this situation and how she had ended up here. Still, one soothing thought managed to pierce through the veil of fear. If these men worked for *him*, she would know it already. They wouldn’t be so worried about her, acting as if they truly wanted to help. But she still had to be on the safe side. No place was safe from *him*.

“Where am I?” she asked, remembering that the healer had mentioned Laird O’Neill. Was it his castle? She was desperate for answers.

This time, the second man spoke, but not before exchanging a meaningful glance with the Laird. “We stumbled upon ye in the woods,” he clarified. “We brought ye back here to help ye recover. Are ye in danger?”

“I...” She didn’t want to say. Angus seemed to understand it immediately.

“Ye look like ye’ve been through a lot, lass,” Angus spoke tenderly, his voice carrying the weight of his experience. “And we are but strangers to ye. It is normal that ye dinnae wish to open up to us. We understand.”

She smiled at him, despite the whirlwind of emotions she felt raging inside of her. Although she had no answers yet, she couldn’t help but feel a glimmer of trust towards these men. Still feeling an amalgamation of trepidation and hope, she allowed herself the right to feel reassured that she was safe and that she would find the shelter she had been looking for.

At that moment, the Laird spoke. “Leave us.”

Angus immediately got up, but not before he patted her hand cordially. “Ye’ll be fine, lass.” He beamed at her, and she

could feel her strength filling up again, just because of those words.

As soon as the doors closed, she was alone with the Laird, and for some reason, that made her heart beat a million times faster.



“I ken ye have no reason to trust me, but what Angus said is true,” Hunter spoke as softly as he could.

There was something so delicate about her, like a porcelain figurine he had to be careful with so as not to break it.

“Ye really are safe here.”

Her eyes told him that she still didn’t fully believe him. He could understand that. It was not easy to put himself in her shoes, but he tried.

“When ye stumbled upon me, ye asked me for help,” he reminded her. “I dinnae ken if ye remember that.” She shook her head, her green eyes wide and focused. “That could only mean that someone was followin’ ye with the intention of harmin’ ye. Is that true?”

She looked away, lowering her gaze at her bare feet, which were peeking from underneath the covers. That was enough for him to conclude that he was right, only she didn’t want to admit that.

“If ye cannae tell me that, can ye tell me why ye were runnin’ in the first place?” He tried to formulate the question in another way, in the hope of making her open up, because until she did that, he felt as if his hands were tied. He could not help her in any other way than to keep her here under his roof, safe and sound. But he could only do that for a certain amount of time.

She inhaled deeply. He watched her bite her lower lip before she started, “I was bein’ forced into a marriage to someone I didnae want to marry, so I ran away.”

He listened intently to the harrowing reason behind her plight. He had to admit that it wasn't what he was expecting to hear. The sheer weight of her words lingered in the air, bearing heavily upon him, as his own mind stirred with a mix of concern and contemplation at what he had just heard.

“Who is this man ye dinnae wish to marry?” he asked, although he doubted that this crossed a certain line. But curiosity was eating him up alive. He had to know.

She didn't say at first, and he thought that her silence was answer enough. He didn't want to push her. He respected her boundaries.

“Laird McPhee.”

Her answer struck him like thunder and lightning out of a clear blue sky. At the sound of that name, he felt a chill run through his veins. The recognition in his eyes betrayed the knowledge he possessed of this wretched man.

Laird McPhee, a name that was synonymous with darkness and terror, notorious for the strangely inexplicable tragedies that somehow seemed to befall all of his wives. Not to mention his unpredictable temperament.

Needless to say, Hunter could understand why she was running. If the rumors were true, and in this case, he was absolutely certain that they were, for several of the man's wives had died in mysterious circumstances, that meant that Iris's life was in danger.

The magnitude of her plight was evident. She knew well the path that she would be forced to take. She knew the dangers that awaited her if she entered such a union. Now, he could understand that plea for help.

There was a battle inside of him now. On the one hand, he wanted to help her. What if one of his sisters was in such a position? What if she needed help from a stranger and he turned her away? Never.

But on the other hand, there were numerous perils involved here. Laird McPhee was a vengeful man, a man who was used to getting his way and was adamant to destroy anyone and

anything that stood in his way. Hunter himself had never liked such people and didn't think such clan connections were beneficial. At least, not to him. He wanted to be connected to lairds whose reputation didn't include the murder of their wives.

"Ye can stay here for as long as ye like," he told her, meaning it fully, despite the weight of the risks that might befall him and his clan if she chose to go against Laird McPhee.

"Nay, nay." She shook her head quickly as she rose from the bed, determination etched on her face. "I cannae ask ye to do that. Ye dinnae ken what this man is capable of. Nay. I will leave, and he will have no reason to do ye any harm."

Despite her brave words, he could see fear and determination in her eyes. There was tender vulnerability underneath that fierce façade. He couldn't help but be in awe of this little woman. He could see the strength of her spirit, the unwavering resolve to fight for her life, without bringing anyone else down with her or putting them in any peril. He could understand that desire, the trait of a true warrior. His heart swelled with admiration for her bravery.

"Whatever that man is capable of, he is still just a man," Hunter reminded her.

"An evil man." She shook her head. "Ye dinnae ken some of the horrible stuff he's done."

"I may nae," Hunter could agree that much. "But I also ken that people tend to exaggerate sometimes."

"Not about Laird McPhee," she said with a trembling voice, which proved to him that what she knew about the evil Laird went far beyond mere hearsay from other people. Something must have happened to her or someone close to her. He could not justify such fear with anything else. "It was a mistake to have come here. I can see that now. I apologize for puttin' ye all in danger. I shouldnae have done it."

"Ye were lookin' for shelter, and ye found it," he reminded her, trying to make his voice as tender as possible.

“Me presence here is a direct threat to ye all,” she kept pushing on.

“Yer presence is anythin’ but a threat to any of us,” he scoffed. “It is the man who tries to come after ye that might be a threat. But I assure ye that I have dealt with worse threats in me life. Such people dinnae frighten me.”

“Ye are a brave man, then,” she said, much to his delight. “But nae. I cannae let ye risk everyone’s lives. Nae.”

“I also say nay.” He smiled. “Ye shallnae face this fate alone. I have sisters. I wouldnae let somethin’ like this happen to them, or to any woman.”

He didn’t want to say that he especially didn’t want this to happen to her, but he kept it wisely to himself. His voice carried a vow to protect her, and he hoped she could hear it.

*H*unter could see that Iris still wasn't convinced. He stood in a state of utter bewilderment at this brave little woman who had decided to take fate into her own hands and refuse a path that someone else had chosen for her. His gaze locked onto hers as he struggled to comprehend the length of the sheer bravery that emanated from her.

Despite Laird McPhee's volatile nature and the dangers that surrounded him, she still made the utterly mad decision to flee. It was astonishing. He doubted that he had ever stumbled upon a woman who had dared to do something riskier than that. And now, she was refusing his help. He couldn't fathom why such a small-statured, delicate-looking woman would not grip the opportunity for refuge within his castle's protective walls.

"Yer sisters are fortunate to have ye," she told him, with a weak smile.

He could tell how exhausted she still was, despite the several hours of sleep she had had since they had stumbled upon her. The truth was that while her body rested, her mind did not. She slept like a rabbit, with one eye constantly open, her body twitching barely noticeably as if she were having horrible nightmares. He could imagine what they were about.

"I'm nae sure they would wholeheartedly agree," he said mischievously, remembering how he had arranged for his sister Hannah's marriage against her will. Fortunately, now she was a happily married woman, as it turned out that she and her husband were meant to be. Now, he considered it one of his

finest moments in life, to have been an active participant in his sister's happiness.

"Then, they dinnae ken what it means to have a loving family to rely on," she said, and he felt that there was so much more to her story, but he didn't want to pry. After all, he was a stranger to her.

"Why dinnae ye let me help ye?" he asked, returning to the matter at hand.

Her intention to leave was clear and evident, although he could not fathom why. He just couldn't bear the thought of letting her go back out into the world and facing Laird McPhee's wrath all on her own. His utter concern for her well-being outweighed his own confusion and hesitation regarding the risks that her presence here would bring.

She got up from the bed, but it was obvious that she was in no condition to go anywhere. He could not let her. Not under any circumstances.

"Wait," he urged, his voice tinted with genuine concern despite them being nothing but strangers to each other. But now that he had saved her, he felt responsible for her. "Ye arenae fully recovered. Why dinnae ye stay here just a wee bit until ye feel better?"

He wanted her to stay here until this whole worrisome issue of her marriage was resolved. But it was evident she would not accept that. So, he tried another strategy by shortening the length of time, in hopes that, eventually, she would see reason, that she was safest here, under this roof... with him.

She met his gaze with resolute determination. There was so much fire in this little woman, so much courage. What she told him next evoked a sense of admiration in him, for her voice bore the semblance of someone who was afraid but at the same time knew his responsibilities.

"I cannae be so selfish," she told him. "If anyone were to discover me presence here, it could mean trouble for the O'Neill clan. That means that innocent people might be

harmd because of me. I cannae live with that one on me conscience.”

Her warrior spirit shocked him. And not only that but there was also a growing sense of respect in him for the fire in her spirit, for her unselfish willingness to put others before herself, even though those others would be mere strangers to her. This not only further fueled the desire to protect her, but awakened something else, the sort of emotion he knew nothing about and didn't even want to ponder on.

“Stay,” he heard himself say before he could even think about the words that were crossing the threshold of his lips. “I am very capable of protectin’ me own clan. I can keep ye safe as well.”

She seemed taken aback by his words, her eyes sparkling with a mixture of unexpected surprise and gratitude at having found shelter in the most unlikely of places. However, she didn't say anything. He hoped that her silence meant that she had accepted his proposition. He found it difficult to fight the thoughts and emotions swirling inside of him.

“Just dinnae say nay now,” he urged her as he started towards the door, his mind consumed with the weight of the decision he had just made, the repercussions of which he had yet to see.

However, just as he was heading towards the door, she called out to him.

“Laird O’Neill!”

Not only that, but her hand gripped his arm. The touch, though lasting but a single, miniature second, sent a jolt through his veins, sparking a completely unexpected sensation that both thrilled and unsettled him.

She hesitated for a moment, then she said, “Thank ye.” Her voice was soft, melodious, and colored with genuine gratitude.

She released him from her grip almost instantly, as if the touch of his skin scorched her. He knew that sensation, for he felt the same. His mind was now swirling with a myriad of conflicting emotions, and he wasn't even aware of what he had done.

“Ye’re welcome,” he murmured swiftly as he grabbed her before she could do anything and squeezed her hand softly. It all lasted yet another second, but the bolt of excitement that shot through him would last a million times that long.

Finally, he opened the door and let himself out. Just like him, she needed some space and time to gather her thoughts and contemplate their new arrangement. He himself needed it desperately. But deep within, the memory of her touch lingered, leaving him grappling with a realization that this encounter had awakened something within him that he had long kept dormant.



Iris wasn’t left alone for a long time, for a knock on the door interrupted her storm of thoughts, something she was grateful for.

“May I enter?” Angus asked, standing politely in the doorway, with his long white beard and mustache hiding most of his face and mouth. However, that only seemed to make him more approachable and welcoming, like an old grandfather who hadn’t seen his grandchildren in ages and was now welcoming them back home.

“Of course.” She nodded with a genuine smile. She had taken an instant liking to him the first moment she had seen him.

“Have ye decided to stay?” he asked, taking a seat next to her on the bed.

With anyone else, it might have seemed imposing to force himself into her personal space in such a manner, but with him, she didn’t see it like that.

Amidst their conversation, a resolute realization crystallized within Iris. The truth of her situation became undeniable. Laird McPhee’s relentless pursuit would not cease until he found her. It was a matter of life or death, and her choices seemed limited and fraught with peril. However, she couldn’t bear the thought of remaining on the run, living in constant fear and isolation.

The decision became clear to her. If she were to face her impending fate, she would do so here, within the safety of Hunter's castle walls. Her heart beat with a mix of trepidation and newfound determination. Staying meant potentially putting innocent lives in danger, particularly Hunter's, but she found solace in the belief that he possessed the strength and courage to confront Laird McPhee's wrath head-on.

"Yer smile tells me everythin' I need to ken, lass," Angus finally said.

She didn't even know she was smiling, but she was certain that Angus was very experienced in reading body language.

"I'm just afraid that me presence here will put everyone in danger," she admitted.

"What did the Laird say to that?" Angus asked.

"He claimed that he is perfectly capable of defendin' his clan and anyone in this castle," she said as succinctly as she could. "He has guaranteed me safety within these walls."

Angus smiled. "And there is yer reassurance, lass. Laird O'Neill has given ye his word. Ye dinnae ken him yet, but ye will, and ye will see that he is a man of his word."

"I'm nae doubtin' that," she clarified. "I'm afraid I might cause unnecessary risk."

"Rest assured." He smiled at her. "Ye are safe here. That is all ye need to ken, while ye focus on gettin' better. And for that reason, I have ordered the maid to bring ye some chamomile tea."

"Oh, that sounds lovely."

The very idea of a hot chamomile tea soothed her beyond description.

"But this is me own brew of chamomile tea." He smiled proudly. "Ye shall see in a moment what I'm talkin' about. I mean, have ye ever seen a plant so delicate yet so powerful?" He paused, although it was a rhetorical question. "Chamomile has remarkable calming properties. It can soothe even the most restless of souls."

“Aye.” She nodded cheerfully. “It is, indeed, a gift from Nature itself.”

At that moment, a knock sounded at the door. It was the maid, bringing the previously mentioned tea. Iris looked with eagerness as Angus took it upon himself to pour the scorching hot water over the concoction, which smelled divine, filling the entire chamber with its heavenly aroma. Then, he handed it to her tenderly.

“Drink this, lass,” he urged. “I promise ye that ye will feel renewed.”

She inhaled deeply, the aroma enveloping her in a comforting embrace. She brought the dainty cup to her lips, blowing softly several times. He watched her do it intently until she took the first sip.

“This tea is delightful,” she said, eyeing him from over the edge of the cup, which was still inches away from her lips. She savored the taste that still lingered on her tongue.

Angus smiled gratefully. But there was one thing lingering in her mind.

“What is he like?” she asked.

“He?” Angus inquired. “The Laird?”

She nodded silently and eagerly.

Angus smiled again as if he knew more than he was willing to let on. “Well, he is a good laird.”

“Ye would say that, wouldnae ye?” She chuckled, and he joined in.

“I dinnae say things I dinnae mean, lass,” he replied playfully. “Ye’ll come to find that out about me. So, if I say he is a good laird, I mean it, and I think everyone here means it as well.”

“But what makes him a good laird?”

“Hmm,” he murmured. “That is a good question.” He paused for a moment. “I suppose ye can say that he is a man of his word. In these days of uncertainty, that counts for a lot.”

She nodded, for she truly agreed with him.

“Not only that, but he values hard-workin’ folk,” he added.

His words suddenly gave her an idea. Maybe if she stayed here, she would be able to show him that she was a hard-working person as well, and put her healing skills to good use. It was something to ponder.

“He is a... well, a good laird, like I said.” He smiled. “It is difficult to describe the man in mere words. It is best to see him as he is, and then form yer own opinion of him, lass.” He looked at her in a way as if there was something else, something he wished to keep to himself for the time being.

Iris took another grateful sip, feeling the tension in her shoulders slowly starting to dissipate, replaced by gentle serenity. The chamomile tea seemed to caress her senses, offering respite from the worries that had weighed heavily upon her. But the tea as well as the conversation comforted her.

“It is good to form yer own opinion of everythin’,” Angus spoke wisely. “For when we rely on other people to do the thinkin’ for us, we realize that we lived someone else’s life.”

Someone else’s life.

Those words struck a chord with Iris. The last thing she wanted to do was live someone else’s life. She wanted to live her life on her own terms, although there seemed to be very little left of it. Still, even that little was precious.

“That is a good thing to ken.” She smiled.

“And remember to live every day as if it were yer last,” he continued, savoring their tea and the quietude that surrounded them. “Ye young people often tend to forget this. But when ye come to me age, a ripe old age, ye realize that not much is left. Ye start wonderin’ what ye’ve done with yer life. Regrets come back to haunt ye. Dinnae let that happen, lass. Live. Live out every breath, whether or nae it is yer last one. That is the only way to live a good life.”

Iris was absolutely overwhelmed by the power of his words. They were exactly what she needed to hear right now, and she was beyond grateful to him for that.

“Ye dinnae ken what yer words mean to me right now,” she admitted, still feeling overwhelmed.

“Sometimes, this old fool says the right things.” Angus laughed, partaking again in his tea.

Each sip brought them closer to a state of inner calm as if the chamomile’s essence infused their very beings. Iris couldn’t help but feel grateful for Angus’s presence and the warm companionship they shared. At this moment, the chamomile tea served as a bridge, connecting their shared love for healing and reinforcing their bond.

During their conversation, Iris pondered for a long time. She couldn’t get what he had said out of her mind.

Live every day as if it were yer last.

She could see light at the end of this long, dark tunnel. Before she had ventured into these woods, she had believed that her life was over, that it was just a matter of time before Laird McPhee would find her and exact his vengeance for her insubordination. Now, she believed that there was still hope, and this time in between should be put to good use. For if her time on this earth was truly limited by this wicked man’s whim, she would seize every opportunity to experience the joys she had always yearned for.

A list. A list of desires.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Maddie McKenna had always been passionate about Scotland. It all started with an old picture of her grandfather wearing a kilt and a sporran. She used to look at that picture and imagine stories taking place in the mysterious Highlands...

When she visited Scotland for the very first time, it was love at first sight. Both the country's breathtaking landscape, and the warmth and liveliness of the locals made her realize why her distinctive red hair was not the only thing that made her blend with them. She took her motherland's memories back home to Minnesota, holding them forever in her heart while using them as an inspiration for her novels.

Maddie McKenna has a degree in English Literature and Creative Writing. She started writing articles for travel magazines but soon the romance world won her over. When she isn't writing, Maddie loves painting and taking long walks with her hubby.

Join Maddie in the unforgettable world of brave Highlanders and their bonnie lasses—a world full of passion, intrigues and steamy lovemaking, that will make you feel like you are part of the story yourself!

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